


# Chapter 8


## Effectiveness (and Failures) of DMOs' Marketing Strategies on Instagram Using Virtual Influencers

**Maria Pilar Pascual-Fraile**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8768-5430>

*Rey Juan Carlos University, Spain*

**Rebeca Suárez-Álvarez**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0102-4472>

*Rey Juan Carlos University, Spain*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Travel virtual influencers (TVI), computer-generated influencers that resemble human social media influencers (SMIs), are the latest trend for Destination Marketing Organisations' (DMOs) marketing strategies on social media to potentiate tourists' travel intention. This research analyses the marketing strategy of the two current DMOs using TVIs worldwide – @venereitalia (Italy) and @lizzie.dayz (Korea) – and their respective audiences' reactions, compared with two human travel influencers (HTI) – @mylifesatravelmovie and @ wen\_travel\_begins. The research was conducted through quantitative content analysis of Instagram posts to examine DMOs' marketing strategies and sentiment analysis to observe audiences' responses. Results show a better response to human travel influencers (HTIs) and the human-like DMOs' TVI than to the one with a non-human appearance. The research provides practical insights for DMOs' future marketing strategies on Instagram using TVIs aimed at*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9939-2.ch008

*generating positive parasocial interaction with their followers that contributes to boosting tourists' travel intention.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past years, DMOs have used collaboration with SMIs as a marketing strategy to potentiate tourists' travel intention towards their respective destinations. SMIs are considered a powerful source of information that can affect visitors' travel decision-making (Kapoor et al., 2022). This is achieved through the parasocial relationships and emotional bonds built between audiences and SMIs, which are based on credibility (Ong et al., 2024). For destinations, Instagram has consolidated as the preferred social media for DMOs' marketing strategies with SMIs, (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022).

Lately, the irruption of virtual influencers (VI) has radically changed the landscape of influencer marketing on social media in the tourism sector. VIs are similar to human influencers: they disseminate content and interact with their followers (Ameen et al., 2024). These computer-generated influencers may vary in appearance to resemble human ones, have a great reach and influence their audiences through content creation and curation on social media, especially Instagram (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, et al., 2023). Furthermore, followers tend to trust more in VIs than in human influencers (Xie-Carson, Magor, et al., 2023).

Contrary to the extended academic literature on SMIs related to the tourism and their engagement with audiences, TVIs' engagement with their followers – as well as their possible failures when interacting with them – remains understudied (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). This research aims to cover this gap of knowledge with the study of the two current (November 2024) existing TVIs created by DMOs worldwide. The investigation was based on the study of the Instagram profiles of @venereitalia – the Italian TVI created by the Italian Ministry of Tourism –, and @lizzie.dayz – created by Visit Korea, the Korea National Tourism Organization (NTO). The analysis focuses on comparing how the two DMOs decided to show both TVIs' appearances and emotions on Instagram posts and the reactions of their respective audiences. Besides, these two DMOs' TVI strategies were compared with two human travel influencers (HTIs) – @mylifesatravelmovie and @wen\_travel\_begins – with a similar number of followers (@mylifesatravelmovie and @venereitalia, and @lizzie.dayz and @wen\_the\_travel\_begins, respectively). This study aims to provide practical guidelines for DMOs in their future marketing strategies on Instagram using TVIs. Those organisations may learn from previous failures and are encouraged to monitor audiences' responses to their strategies, which can help detect those possible failures.

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