Professionalizing and Profiting: The Rise of Intermediaries in the Social Media Influencer Industry

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Abstract
This study examines the relationship between travel influencers (e.g., bloggers and social media personalities) and destination marketers within the changing travel and tourism industry. Through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, we explore the tensions between travel influencers and destination marketers that shape the way travel is promoted, labor is compensated, and professional structures are negotiated. We examine a new breed of travel and tourism worker—intermediaries who seek to professionalize and formalize the relationship between influencers and destination marketers while simultaneously solidifying their own role within the industry. Intermediaries promote and facilitate relationships based on structured flexibility—formalized agreements designed to satisfy a brand’s campaign goals yet open enough for influencers to pursue their unique needs. By examining the relationships between digital content creators, destination marketers, and third-party intermediaries, this article provides insight into how digital media industries negotiate the tension between participation and control.

Keywords
influencers, social media, risk, blogging, travel and tourism

At the 2017 Women in Travel Summit (WITS), Wanderful, the conference organizer, worked with Visit Milwaukee, the local destination marketing organization (DMO), to offer attendees opportunities to experience the city’s sights and sounds. The conference treated aspiring and established social media influencers to local food, museum and brewery tours, and sunrise yoga at the picturesque art museum in addition to the conference’s scheduled networking events, mentoring sessions, and presentations like “How to seal the deal with a kickass media kit.” For a US$300 registration fee, Wanderful, who seeks to “support women who build careers in travel and increase the pipeline of female travel entrepreneurs and digital influencers” (Wanderful, n.d.), connected travel influencers with destinations and with each other, maintaining a dual role as conference host and matchmaker. As such, Wanderful exemplifies a new breed of intermediaries within the social media influencer industry who position themselves as a necessary bridge between influencers and brands by facilitating, professionalizing, and profiting from these complicated relationships.

In this study, we examine the norms and practices of social media influencers and their relationships with DMOs within the travel and tourism media industry. Although some have noted the existence of influencer networks and marketing firms that work with lifestyle influencers (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Duffy, 2017), our study critically examines the emergence of these and other new intermediaries who manage relationships between influencers and brands through a case study of travel influencers and DMOs. Despite our focus on the travel and tourism industry, our study provides insight into the working relationships between brands and influencers across industry lines. Through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, we explore the tensions between influencers and DMOs that shape the way travel is promoted, labor is valued, and professional structures are negotiated.

Intermediaries, we argue, seek to resolve tensions between influencers and brands by professionalizing and formalizing this changing industry while simultaneously solidifying their role within it. Thus, intermediaries function as brand

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managers, employing “a variety of techniques that all aim at controlling, pre-structuring and monitoring what people do with brands, so that what these practices do adds to its value” (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 82). Such techniques include vetting influencers, drafting contracts, monitoring campaigns, and administering payment; yet, intermediaries also profit from aspiring influencers by hosting conferences, selling e-books, and offering courses that promise aspirants insider knowledge about becoming successful travel influencers. In addition, we introduce structured flexibility as an organizational framework that intermediaries employ to balance a brand’s need to accomplish specific campaign goals with an influencer’s commitment to authenticity and audience engagement. Structured flexibility demonstrates one way intermediaries seek to address the gap between the dialogic goals of brands and the monetary ambitions of influencers (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). This case study therefore provides insight into how digital media industries negotiate the tension between participation and control as well as who benefits from these negotiations.

**Literature Review**

**Destination Marketers**

DMOs like Visit Milwaukee, NYC & Company, and London & Partners, are “non-profit [typically government-funded] entities aimed at generating tourist visitation for a given area” (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O’Leary, 2006, p. 116). They are key players in the tourism industry for a particular destination because they actively promote the location and provide information to consumers (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002). These efforts attempt to set destinations apart from their competitors to drive money into local economies from outside sources (Pike & Page, 2014). DMOs serve a crucial purpose for local economies. In fact, the travel and tourism media industry accounts for 10% of the global gross domestic product (World Tourism Organization, n.d.), making travel and tourism an essential component of economies worldwide.

Pike and Page’s (2014) analysis of 40 years of destination marketing research argues that DMOs operate under strict confines such as an inability to change the name or offerings of the geographic location they represent, lack of control over the actual visitor experience, little contact with visitors, and little control over the host community’s acceptance of tourism. Due to these and other constraints, branding destinations is more difficult and complex than branding consumer goods (Pike, 2005). Unlike most consumer goods, DMOs can only help consumers conceptualize the idea of the product (the destination), rather than directly affect the actual product or services received (Horrigan, 2009).

The image of a particular location is a combination of word-of-mouth reviews, visits to the destination, and other forms of information gathering (Horrigan, 2009). It is essential for DMOs to coordinate efforts to maximize impact while also creating a consistent and relevant image of their destination (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002). DMOs’ main activities focus on developing and leading collaborative marketing communication strategies, matching the destination with opportunities within the market (Pike & Page, 2014). These practices occur through sales of conventions, partnerships with local businesses, and marketing to visitors. DMOs connect with consumers through media via film (Horrigan, 2009), travel journalism (McGaurr, 2012), and travel blogging (Pirolli, 2017).

The collaborative marketing techniques employed by DMOs reflect efforts in other industries to move away from traditional advertising and toward new carriers of brand messages (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Pike & Page, 2014). While some scholars have discussed how DMOs use the Internet as a marketing tool (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Pike & Page, 2014), little research has examined how DMOs work with digital content creators to promote their destinations.

**Travel Influencers**

Influencers are a type of microcelebrity who document their lives in exchange for compensation (Abidin, 2014). They engage in “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity on the web using technologies like video, blogs, and social media” (Senft, 2008, p. 25). “Influencer” is an encompassing term that includes bloggers, activists, comedians, sketch artists, and other social media users who view their followers as fans (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Lewis, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Influencers are sellers, buyers, and commodities: they consume products and services; promote products and services; and sell themselves as a brand to be consumed by audiences (Abidin, 2016; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008). Influencers can shape public opinion, and many engage in financial and contractual relationships with product advertisers and brands directly or indirectly through intermediary agencies or third-party networks (Abidin & Ots, 2016).

Influencers produce social media content to serve niche audiences interested in fashion, beauty, gaming, comedy, politics, and travel, among other areas. One way influencers make money is by partnering with traditional brands that are eager to use an influencer’s relatability and credibility to sell a product or service (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Duffy, 2017). These collaborations, often described as campaigns, occur for varying lengths of time and include diverse content strategies. While some influencers use intermediaries like influencer agencies to negotiate the parameters of campaigns (Abidin & Ots, 2016), many influencers receive little to no compensation when working with brands, hoping that “exposure” might lead to paid work in the future (Duffy, 2017). While many influencers contribute this “aspirational labor,” few are able to create sustainable careers through this work, continuing a history of devalued, gendered labor (Duffy, 2017).
Research shows influencer marketing leads to stronger connections with audiences than traditional advertising methods, and influencers’ social and cultural capital make them effective brand endorsers (Chu & Kamal, 2008). Travel influencers visit destinations to promote the location as well as specific businesses or experiences at the destination. Aspiring influencers do this with their own money (Daly, 2016), but established influencers may have some combination of their hotel, transportation, dining, and entertainment provided by destinations and their partners as well as occasional payment for their services (Saltzstein, 2013). While travel influencers’ work routines are similar to lifestyle influencers, the amount of money required to travel and perform their work is typically greater than lifestyle influencers who discuss less expensive items like clothing and makeup, often from their own homes. Little research has focused on the travel influencer industry despite the important differences in the products, audiences, and businesses with whom travel influencers work and the potential for these influencers to sway expensive decisions.

With this in mind, we examine the relationship between influencers and destination marketers within the changing travel and tourism media industry. Because travel influencers are now key contributors in this industry, DMOs are wrestling with how to adapt their long-standing professional norms and practices to this new form of digital work. Due to the complex relationship between travel influencers and DMOs, a third “intermediary” sector, consisting of professional organizations, educational outlets, and third-party marketing networks has attempted to bridge this gap through a process of professionalization that provides structure to the industry. At the same time, intermediaries capitalize on inefficiencies in the existing market and the surplus labor of influencers by formalizing their role as a necessary agent in the industry.

Methods

Data for this study come from observations at a travel industry conference; interviews with travel influencers, destination marketers, and intermediaries in the travel industry; and analysis of Social Travel Summit (STS) Think Tank reports. First, two researchers attended WITS in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in April 2017. The weekend event drew aspiring and established social media influencers, destination marketers, representatives from travel brands, and others interested in the travel industry. We participated in the conference, attending keynote, panel, and breakout sessions during the event. In addition to participating in the conference, we recruited participants for interviews by distributing fliers and business cards.

Next, we conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with travel influencers, intermediaries, and destination marketers between May and October 2017. Our sample includes 14 women and 6 men. In addition to recruiting at WITS and through the Wanderful network, interview participants were recruited through referrals. Many participants fill multiple roles (e.g., some destination marketers also work as travel influencers), so for clarity, and to maintain anonymity, interviewees are referred to using an interview code and their primary role in the industry (e.g., “Interviewee 1, intermediary”).

Researchers conducted interviews via phone or Skype. Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 58 min with an average length of 42 min. Interviews with travel influencers started with a conversation about the participant’s professional background, work in the travel industry, and their professional brand. Next, we explored sponsored content production and the relationship between travel influencers and brands. The interview then turned to a discussion of audience relationships and the ethics of producing paid content. The interview concluded with a discussion of future challenges facing the travel and tourism media industry. Interviews with destination marketers followed a similar format but focused on their relationship with travel influencers, while interviews with intermediaries focused on key issues relating to their role in the industry.

To triangulate our data and get a broader view of the evolving travel and tourism media industry, we also analyzed four White Papers from the STS, a conference sponsored by iAmbassador, an influencer marketing agency. At each annual conference since 2014, the STS has convened a “think tank” session dedicated to discussing challenges facing the travel and tourism industry. The sessions are attended by a preselected group of professionals including successful influencers, destination marketers, and intermediaries. Following each conference, the STS produces a report that summarizes the session.

Our results draw primarily from the interviews but are informed by our observations and document analysis. To analyze our data, four members of the research team open coded the interview transcripts for themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). During this phase, two members read and coded 10 transcripts so that two researchers coded each transcript. After this initial coding, researchers met to discuss and refine themes that included tensions between influencers, destination marketers, and intermediaries; influencer labor and the politics of work; and the relationship between ethics and authenticity in sponsored content. Open coding was followed by focused coding in which each member of the research team coded five of the 20 transcripts.

Because little has been written about travel influencers, the first two sections that follow discuss changes in the industry with the introduction of social media influencers and intermediaries, while the final section considers how intermediaries complicate power dynamics within the industry. In short, we argue that although intermediaries help professionalize and formalize this industry during this time of tremendous change, they also recreate power relations by legitimizing previously successful influencers while
profiting from emerging influencers’ aspirational labor. In addition, by placing the onus on influencers to prove their worth to DMOs by paying for conferences, online courses, and resources, intermediaries reinforce neoliberal notions of individual success as tethered to ambition and self-work while profiting from this formulation.

From Travel Journalists to Travel Influencers

For years, DMOs have worked with travel journalists to promote destinations (Hanusch, 2009; McGaurr, 2012). The relationship with travel journalists frequently involves a DMO pitching a story to a news magazine and planning a specific agenda for the journalist. As one head of a DMO explained, they “invite journalists on a press trip to the city and have a prearranged program ready for them [and] guide them through the program” (Interviewee 12). DMOs provide journalists with press releases and photos, while journalists stay at the destination for a few days and then return home to produce their stories, sometimes republishing the press releases and images. These trips are highly structured and predictable. Journalists are “there to get a specific story and we’ve got a specific message and they’ll get it, because it’s got to please their editor, and this is how media trips have always been done” (Interviewee 19, destination marketer).

DMOs have begun to recognize that potential visitors use a variety of outlets to inform their travel decisions. As one destination marketer explained, the public now views new media tools and voices as more trusted sources of travel content: “What we found with platforms like TripAdvisor, Expedia, Facebook, all the social media channels, is that travelers would rather get the information from peers, from friends, from relatives, from their trusted travel bloggers” (Interviewee 12). This realization combined with a declining interest in content produced by DMOs has led many destination marketers to start working with social media influencers who have built close relationships with audiences through affective, unpaid labor (Baym, 2015).

Despite producing similar content, travel journalists and travel influencers have important distinctions. Most significantly, travel journalists for publications like Travel and Leisure work for institutions that are rooted in journalism and adhere to journalistic standards (Hanusch, 2009). Few of the travel influencers we interviewed had any experience in journalism before launching their travel sites. For example, one award-winning influencer and photographer said that when he started his blog in the 1990s, “I had no background in publishing, journalism, writing, photography, nothing. I knew the internet really well... It was natural for me to start a website, so I did” (Interviewee 3). His experience reflects testimonies of many early travel bloggers whose work started as a hobby connected to their interests in technology and travel.

Another early travel blogger who now runs an influencer marketing agency said the bloggers he met during the early days of travel blogging came from a variety of professional backgrounds (Interviewee 20, intermediary). The early bloggers we interviewed reported leaving behind jobs in finance (e.g., Interviewee 20), technology (e.g., Interviewee 14), law (e.g., Interviewee 4), entrepreneurship (e.g., Interviewee 3), and marketing (e.g., Interviewees 6, 8, 9) to pursue travel blogging full-time. For these “accidental entrepreneurs” (Neff, 2012), financial success in their previous careers afforded them the privileged ability to pursue travel blogging for extended periods of time without having to earn a sustainable income. For example, one successful influencer said being financially secure gave him an advantage over others who were starting to produce travel content:

The fact that I sold a house and a business, that let me go for several years without having to worry too much about the money aspect of things, that was a big advantage and what kind of separated me from a lot of people. (Interviewee 3)

Another influencer who previously worked as a lawyer said she needed a break and decided to take a trip to Siberia, which “morphed into a year-long sabbatical” (Interviewee 4). She started a blog so friends and family could follow her travels, knowing that she could continue to live off savings for the year. Eventually, that blog turned into something she could monetize, and she never returned to practicing law.

This difference in institutional background between journalists and influencers is evident in their professional norms and practices in terms of content production, financial models, and professional ethics. For one, travel journalists produce content guided by journalistic standards and published through journalism outlets, while travel influencers produce blogs and social media content that reflects by their personal brands, individual ethics, and audience relationships. WITS, for example, offered several sessions on building and sustaining brands that are “memorable” and “command attention.” This focus on brand-building is critical for content creators trying to get a foothold in the industry. Second, travel journalists are paid through salaried or freelance work by the outlets that publish their work. Most travel influencers are entrepreneurs and are responsible for generating their own income through ad revenue, partnerships with brands and destinations, or through the sale of merchandise.

This difference in financial model shapes how each profession defines ethical work. While travel journalists consider it a breach of journalistic ethics to receive compensation from those they cover (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014), most travel influencers believe they can receive payment from a brand and still produce ethical content as long as it reflects their own opinions. In other words, travel influencers are less rooted in the norms and practices of travel journalists than in the experiences of the few who were able to pursue travel blogging as a hobby while experimenting with content creation. Thus, travel influencers constitute an emerging profession simultaneously connected to a range of...
existing professions and disconnected from its logical predecessor, travel journalism.

Initially, many DMOs struggled to adapt to these differences between influencers and journalists, often relying on old models when first working with influencers:

The first [influencer trip] we produced a very, very tight program, very packed itinerary, full of activities and all that. They had almost no time for working, no time for creating content live ... So that was a big mistake. (Interviewee 10, destination marketer)

DMOs are accustomed to organizing highly structured press trips. This regimented approach clashes with the needs and expectations of travel influencers, who seek both greater flexibility to visit attractions that align with their niches and more time to produce content while at the destination. Influencers take their own photos and videos, and they post on various social media channels while they are traveling. These “live” content practices require additional unscheduled time. Thus, influencers seek greater flexibility than DMOs typically allot journalists. As one influencer explained, “One of the really important things is that I can have some time to just not have plans and to go out there and to get to see these destinations for myself. Flexibility is really important for me” (Interviewee 8).

Other destination marketers and influencers told similar stories about their early partnerships. For example, one former destination marketer who now works for an intermediary said the first trip he planned for a group of influencers followed the old model:

The program was tailored pretty much like a traditional press trip, like it used to work with journalists. But then there we discovered [influencers] needed a bit more time and flexibility, compared to traditional media. (Interviewee 11, intermediary)

Eventually, DMOs realized they needed to approach influencers differently: “We learned that we need to give them free time. We need to give them more connections. We need to give them more special time for them to produce, maybe a free day or whatever” (Interviewee 10, destination marketer). Several destination marketers noted that they now appreciate the benefits of increased flexibility:

The old work was quite predictable, because it was a preset program. We led them through this program, so you basically knew what to expect from the articles which are going to be produced. Working with bloggers is more independent, so you really don’t know what comes out. (Interviewee 13, destination marketer)

For some destination marketers, influencers are better at connecting with audiences because they operate outside the norms of journalism. Influencers build relationships with their followers, and DMOs see these relationships as a valuable marketing resource.

Resolving tensions between travel influencers and destination marketers has been challenging. The 2014 STS Think Tank report describes this process:

The growth of blogging fundamentally changed the relationship between travel writers and the travel/tourism industry to such an extent that, at first, neither party really understood how it might work. So both parties have been finding their way and developing protocols from scratch as they go. (p. 18)

Although DMOs are adapting to the norms and practices of travel influencers, their protocols are rooted in their prior relationships with travel journalists. The gap between these two groups has since been filled by new entrants in the travel and tourism media industry: intermediaries.

**Intermediaries and Structured Flexibility**

In recent years, several new businesses have emerged to connect influencers and brands. These entrepreneurs, which we refer to as intermediaries, offer a variety of products and services for both influencers and brands, including recruiting and vetting influencers for branded campaigns; negotiating payment and logistics for influencers; offering educational services on becoming an influencer; selling niche travel experiences for specific influencers; and hosting travel conferences and meetups. These intermediaries seek to formalize and professionalize the relationship between travel influencers and DMOs by connecting them, educating them, and facilitating their relationships. As one influencer-turned-intermediary explained:

I kind of made it my mission to educate the travel industry about the value that travel bloggers can bring to the table ... to build bridges with the industry ... about what influencers can do and to find new ways of working together. (Interviewee 20)

In addition to facilitating partnerships between influencers and DMOs, his business sponsors yearly conferences, which he called “platforms for us to really get industry and influencers together and to find new ways of working together” (Interviewee 20). As DMOs learn to adapt to the new work routines and norms of travel influencers and as the travel influencer continues to develop as a new profession, intermediaries purport to provide a structure wherein these two parties can work.

Intermediaries aim to connect influencers with DMOs through formalized partnerships. According to one intermediary, brands contact her employer in search of influencers. Her employer, in turn, introduces brands to influencers who have been vetted by the network and match the brand’s campaign goals. The network then works with the brand to formalize the campaign and communicate the terms of that campaign with influencers:
I’ll send [influencers] an agreement that says exactly, this is what we’re expecting from you. This is what the goals are of the brand. They don’t have to deal with any kinds of negotiation or going back and forth to do all this work that we’re doing to figure out what the brand is really looking for. (Interviewee 8)

These services fill a gap in knowledge between influencers and DMOs that range from vetting influencers and brands for quality to navigating differences in transnational law.

Intermediaries also monitor campaigns for DMOs and influencers, as a marketing chair for an influencer network explained:

[My partner] and I would work together to develop the campaign, and then, from my side, I would keep that going throughout the duration of the campaign with the brand. So, checking in, providing analytics, making sure that if the message is changing, that we’re changing with them, monitoring everything for the brand side and then [her colleague] would monitor everything from the blogger side. So, making sure that bloggers were following through on the deliverables and that they were sharing each other’s content and making sure everything in the contracts were being completed. (Interviewee 18, intermediary)

By facilitating each step of the campaign, intermediaries accomplish two things. First, they ease the working relationships between influencers and brands by managing expectations and guiding the practices of both sides. Because DMOs are still adapting to influencer work and many influencers lack formal training in the industry, intermediaries help strengthen and professionalize these relationships. Second, intermediaries formalize and cement their own role within the industry. Recognizing a market inefficiency—the gap between DMOs and influencers—they have placed themselves firmly within that space.

Intermediaries operate by promoting and facilitating influencer-brand relationships based on structured flexibility—formalized agreements in which a brand provides an organizational scheme designed to suit its campaign goals yet open enough for influencers to satisfy their unique needs. These flexible, yet structured, arrangements afford influencers the ability to create content that reflects their individual brands while also allowing destinations to benefit from influencers’ existing relationships with their audiences. Through partnerships rooted in structured flexibility, influencers are contractually bound to produce specific deliverables while being afforded the freedom to produce “on-brand” content and to chart their own paths. Having the autonomy to choose attractions that match their audiences’ interests leads influencers to produce more favorable content for brands, meaning destinations and experiences are framed in a more positive light in posts designed with the audiences’ cultural tastes in mind. This process assures that the brand will have access to audiences that influencers have cultivated through affective labor (Baym, 2015). While ensuring high-quality deliverables for brands, structured flexibility also seeks to create preferable working conditions and guaranteed financial value for some influencers.

An example of structured flexibility in practice is a project facilitated by an intermediary that works with destinations to provide a living space where travel influencers can stay while visiting a destination. The DMO and the intermediary solicit applications from travel influencers, arrange accommodation and logistics, and then welcome influencers to the destination with an open, flexible schedule. As the marketing director of the agency explained, “[participants] have the chance to experience the destination like a normal traveler would do, like a tourist; and to live like a local there and gather information for their own website and all their social media accounts” (Interviewee 11, intermediary). One influencer who participated in the program appreciated the flexibility it afforded:

You can explore, totally free, kind of as a tourist, as unbiased as possible, to see what you want to do, what is interesting for you, and experience the city instead of the normal traditional press trip where there’s usually someone from the tourism office who will guide you from place to place, and you have a fixed schedule. (Interviewee 14)

A destination marketer who worked on the project said her DMO organized and paid for one activity a day, “and for the rest of the time [influencers] were totally free to do and discover whatever they wanted to” (Interviewee 13).

In this example, the intermediary serves both influencers and DMOs while solidifying its place in the relationship as the mediator and facilitator. The intermediary works with destinations to review applications and select participants based on the destination’s campaign themes. Selected influencers then have the opportunity to participate in the project, thus building their portfolio and brand further. During their stay, influencers receive educational resources including “tips on how to grow certain social media channels or on how to improve their SEO [search engine optimization] on the blog, stuff like that” (Interviewee 11, intermediary).

While it is difficult to measure return on investment, one destination marketer said her DMO has received more feedback from this project than they typically receive from press trips. Unlike travel journalists, influencers can provide DMOs with metrics and other specific forms of audience feedback:

[Influencers] forward me emails of readers . . . asking them some questions about the trip they had, or also comments under the blog posts. Like, “thank you for sharing this, it made me so curious,” “I just booked a holiday,” or “I just booked this specific activity.” And that’s the kind of feedback that helps us to evaluate. (Interviewee 13, destination marketer)

This project illustrates what a working relationship based on structured flexibility looks like in practice: an open framework set by DMOs and intermediaries that is adaptable to the
needs of influencers to authentically serve their audience, which Abidin and Ots (2016) argue is a core norm of influencers. This project also demonstrates how intermediaries work to formalize and professionalize the travel and tourism media industry while solidifying their role as a bridge between influencers and DMOs.

**Gatekeeping, Legitimizing, and Educating**

Since the first STS think tank in 2014, there have been ongoing conversations about the value of influencer labor. From basic inquiries like, “Should [bloggers] always be paid? What should they be paid for?” (2014, p. 18), at the inaugural session to more nuanced discussions like, “How to better articulate the value of working with travel influencers beyond the statistics” (2016, p. 13), the industry has wrestled with how to evaluate and compensate influencer labor. As the 2014 STS Think Tank report notes, influencers believe “some DMOs/PRs see them as a source of cheap labour” (p. 6). Successful influencers argue that they create value for brands that exceeds what destinations offer with free trips and amenities. For example, one influencer pointed out that a complementary hotel stay is insufficient compensation for the work it takes to produce a quality hotel review:

> Even if [the hotel costs] $300 a night, if my time is worth $75 or $100 an hour, that one hotel stay, I’m going to end up doubling the amount of the hours. It’s going to take me six hours to craft the post, post it, edit the photos, all that stuff. (Interviewee 5)

While successful influencers said they only partner with destinations that are willing to pay, new entrants to the industry are more likely to work without financial compensation. These influencers view their efforts as aspirational labor that might lead to future paid opportunities (Duffy, 2017). For example, one blogger who was eager to start working with brands said:

> I’m such a newbie that I, honestly for my first job I wouldn’t mind “complementary” to get my foot out there . . . And the second time around, yes, I would definitely ask for compensation. Because it’s literally like a second full-time job for us. (Interviewee 16)

This new blogger understood that she lacked the experience to demand payment from DMOs but recognized it was unfair to work “a second full-time job” without being compensated for her labor. Consistent with Duffy’s (2017) research on lifestyle bloggers, the aspirational labor of influencers who are unable to demand adequate compensation produces surplus value for destinations.

Yet, DMOs argue it is difficult to determine the value of influencers. Not only is the concept of paying influencers new to them, there are no concrete models for assessing an influencer’s worth. DMOs worry about wasting time and resources on content creators who will not provide a satisfactory return on investment. One destination marketer said influencers flood her email seeking free trips, yet many requests fail to indicate what the influencer plans to offer in return. “It’s like, OK, well everyone wants a trip to [her city], it’s a two-way relationship” (Interviewee 19). Another interviewee who co-founded a small travel agency was hesitant to work with influencers because she believes many of them are more interested in free travel than in generating value for her company: “a lot of them are just looking for free trips and just want to travel the world and live these fabulous lives” (Interviewee 1, intermediary).

Some influencers practice self-exploitation by overdelivering on contractual obligations to make themselves more appealing to DMOs. According to one influencer:

> You want to make sure that that company is happy to work with you again in the future . . . is going to recommend you to other people, and is going to be satisfied with the work that you’ve produced. So, if I promise one blog post on social media, I’m going to do two or three blog posts actually. (Interviewee 8)

Other influencers reported similar experiences, such as one who said that following a sponsored trip, “I produced three or four pieces of content, which was in excess of the number I had contractually agreed to do. I promoted them like crazy on social media” (Interviewee 9). Due to the profession’s precarious nature, influencers frequently seek to impress brands by exceeding contractual obligations. Yet, in making themselves more attractive to brands, these influencers devalue their work and create the expectation that others will volunteer unpaid labor. In the process, intermediaries also benefit. They are often responsible for matching influencers with brands, so it is not in their best financial interest to encourage influencers to stop over-producing.

DMOs look for evidence of audience engagement and impact when evaluating influencers. For example, one European destination marketer said she looks for reader comments as well as interactions with followers on social media (Interviewee 13). Another destination marketer said she can tell if someone is “professional or . . . just feeding his website or his social media channels with some information to keep up with his relatives and friends” by looking at the engagement on social media (Interviewee 12). Yet, as Duffy (2017) argues, audience engagement requires affective labor distinct from the creative labor of posting on a blog or social media. Cultivating, communicating with, satisfying, and retaining an audience requires an always-available, always-positive, and always-on-brand form of affective labor that often is rendered invisible (Duffy, 2017). By evaluating audience engagement, destinations not only judge influencers on their ability to create quality content but also on their mastery of affective or “relational labor” (Baym, 2015). These forms of labor are typically undervalued and undercompensated, yet destinations and intermediaries benefit from...
influencer content distributed directly to an audience developed through affective labor.

One way intermediaries justify their inclusion in the industry is by providing an answer to the question of influencer labor value. According to a successful travel influencer who later founded an intermediary dedicated to influencer marketing, at first DMOs did not value influencers:

I was actually shocked, I mean coming from a business background, to see that bloggers were actually creating a lot of value. They were creating content. They’re promoting your destination or your product through their blogs, through their social media channels, engaging with their audience about your product and they’re not getting paid for it. (Interviewee 20)

He said his company offers guidance on how to compensate influencers, noting that several DMOs have taken his price sheet for influencers “and basically copy-and-pasted it” (Interviewee 20). In his view, intermediaries resolve the tension between influencers and destination marketers by ensuring that influencers are compensated appropriately and that DMOs are matched with suitable influencers who can contribute value for destinations.

While intermediaries may ensure appropriate compensation for some influencers and locate suitable brand advocates for DMOs, they also serve as gatekeepers that restrict who is able to break through in an increasingly crowded industry. When intermediaries work with destinations to screen and select influencers for particular campaigns, they filter out a large number of aspiring and “off-brand” influencers, excluding many digital content creators from paid work. While screening influencers may be a normal part of any campaign, this process reduces risk for destinations—intermediaries ensure destinations are matched with influencers of appropriate fit, quality, and influence—while increasing risk for many influencers. Thus, the entrance of intermediaries has been a positive development for established and successful influencers by reducing the precariousness of their work but has simultaneously made it more difficult for aspiring influencers to find paid opportunities to work with destinations and brands.

According to intermediaries and destinations, influencers must establish themselves by producing high-quality content and cultivating relationships with audiences while also branding and selling themselves professionally. Consequently, some intermediaries purport to teach hopefuls how to do just that. Several intermediaries now offer online courses and products like e-books for paying customers eager to learn how to turn their passion for writing and travel into more than a hobby. At the 2017 WITS, Wanderful organized panels to inspire and educate attendees, with titles such as “Kick Your Business in The Butt: Launching, Growing, and Thriving as an Entrepreneur” and “Negotiate! How to Make More Money By Showing You’re Worth It.” Online courses, e-books, and travel conferences teach influencers that it is their responsibility to create media kits that highlight their audience demographics and calculate “engagements” so they can demonstrate their value to brands, putting the onus on the influencer. This approach underscores the competitive individualism that permeates the influencer industry in which success is attainable if you work hard and pay the right people for the necessary insights. This framework ignores systemic and structural barriers that make success difficult, while bolstering certain individuals and keeping intermediaries in business.

Intermediaries offering online courses, e-books, and travel conferences profit from aspiring influencers by selling products and services that promise successful entry into the industry. According to one intermediary who offers educational services, a quarter of members who pay his US$300 annual membership fee do so before publishing any content. He said that these members “have the mindset, which I can relate to, of wanting to get help from the very beginning” (Interviewee 2). His company has since merged with another started by a top travel influencer. In an email announcing the merger, the top influencer appealed to those wanting to enter the industry:

Like you, I had no idea how to turn my love for travel into something more. But I learned how to make my blog a business and grew it into a mid-six-figure website with employees, books, tours, and more . . . I want to teach you everything I’ve learned so you can succeed too. (Personal Communication, January 7, 2018)

While a small number of hopefuls may learn from these services and launch successful careers as travel influencers, most will struggle to distinguish themselves and reach financial stability in what interviewees agreed is an already saturated market. By offering paid educational content, intermediaries further entrench themselves as gatekeepers in the industry, simultaneously encouraging and excluding aspirants.

The precarity of the travel and tourism media industry places entrepreneurial risk squarely on influencers. As Neff (2012) argues,

risks and rewards at work are not new, of course, but changes in the organization of work mean that individuals now bear most of
the costs of flexibility and are responsible for activities previously thought of as within the purview of companies. (p. 16)

Risk is increasingly individualized and travel influencers are particularly vulnerable. According to one influencer, work that combines travel and entrepreneurship is full of risk:

There are people like us who live risk in a way that other people don’t. You can take risks with your job. You can take risks with your private life. When you’re a world-traveling entrepreneur, your whole life is risk. (Interviewee 5)

The individualized nature of becoming a travel influencer means aspirants must make a significant investment of capital and labor to enter the industry. Aspiring influencers assume the entrepreneurial risks inherent in these efforts without any protections or workplace assurances (Neff, 2012). Because influencer brands are intimately entwined with influencers’ personal lives, the risk of becoming a travel influencer permeates the professional and personal. Thus, while intermediaries offer financial stability for some influencers, they perpetuate a power imbalance in the industry by reducing risk for destinations and some established influencers while increasing precarity for influencers who are not yet established in the industry.

The emergence of intermediaries in the travel and tourism media industry indicates an effort by entrepreneurs, many of whom are current or former influencers, to exploit market inefficiencies and benefit from the surplus labor of inexperienced digital content creators. Intermediaries function as a legitimating force that reconstitutes existing power relations in the industry by continually providing business opportunities for successful influencers while excluding aspiring influencers. As Bourdieu (1993) writes, “every critical affirmation contains, on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which it occasions, which is thus designated as a worthy object . . . and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy” (pp. 35-36). Therefore, intermediaries simultaneously reassert the continuing success of established influencers while legitimizing their own existence as both adversaries and educators for aspiring influencers. Some intermediaries earn income through contracts with DMOs and the membership fees they receive from in-network influencers, while others make their money from aspiring influencers eager to break into the industry. Thus, intermediaries have positioned themselves as important gatekeepers in the industry while also profiting from the aspirations of those interested in becoming influencers.

**Conclusion**

The shift from travel journalists to travel influencers means audiences encounter a different style of content that appears more authentic because it is produced by “regular” travelers. This content is often less journalism-oriented and more brand-oriented—sponsored by DMOs, overseen by intermediaries, and designed to build an influencer’s brand. While it would be easy to decry such a shift, the reality is more complicated. Although travel journalists presumably value journalistic independence, they often depend on DMOs to organize their travel experiences. Operating under a framework of structured flexibility means influencers produce content that is more closely aligned with a commercial brand’s interests, yet also demonstrates greater autonomy. In other words, travel influencers produce content that is more branded yet potentially more independent.

Within this changing industry, intermediaries emerged to bridge the gap between travel influencers and DMOs. These intermediaries are not exclusive to the travel and tourism industry; rather, they increasingly structure the relationships between brands and influencers across industry lines. Intermediaries seek to formalize and professionalize the social media influencer industry by facilitating working relationships between influencers and brands while solidifying their role as a necessary broker of these relationships. In essence, intermediaries serve as what Arvidsson (2006) terms “brand managers.” Arvidsson (2006) argues a brand derives its value through “the exploitation of a number of communicative and affectual processes that transpire among consumers and among employees,” (p. 90) and brand managers ensure these activities ultimately increase the brand’s value. While influencers engage in various forms of self-exploitation, such as over-producing content, working without fair compensation, or writing sample posts to demonstrate value, intermediaries further reduce risk for DMOs by exploiting the communicative (e.g., posting, commenting) and affective (e.g., authenticity, audience engagement) resources of travel influencers. Intermediaries also promote formalized relationships between influencers and DMOs wherein intermediaries determine who participates and how labor is valued, further entrenching themselves as necessary go betweens in the social media influencer industry without addressing its underlying power differentials.

This study expands on existing social media influencer scholarship by exploring the emergence of intermediaries in a growing media industry. We introduce structured flexibility as one type of working relationship between brands and influencers while examining ongoing issues of exploited labor within digital content creation. Our findings rely on self-reports from those currently pursuing or actively succeeding in the travel and tourism industry. Future research should incorporate the contributions of influencers who left the industry voluntarily or out of financial necessity. In addition, audience perspectives will make a key contribution to understanding the social impact of these shifts. Future studies of digital media industries should continue to examine the role of intermediaries who facilitate and benefit from the tension between participation and control in the digital era.
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Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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