The Contribution of Social Media Influencers to Sustainable Travel Behaviour: The Mediating Role of Inspiration and Involvement in Sustainable Travel Practices

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Abstract

Purpose:

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the perceived influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on inspiration towards sustainability, involvement in sustainable travel practices, and sustainable behaviour of travellers. Furthermore, the current study investigates the mediating role of inspiration towards sustainability and involvement in sustainable travel practices based on persuasion theory and stimulus organism response (S-O-R) theory.

Design/methodology/approach:

The study employs purposive sampling and collects data from 242 Chinese tourists who viewed SMIs' travel content on platforms like BiliBili, Douyin, WeChat, and Weibo. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was utilised to evaluate the direct and indirect associations between the variables.

Findings:

The current study results confirm that the perceived influence of SMIs positively influences travellers' inspiration towards sustainability, involvement in sustainable travel practices, and sustainable travel behaviour. The study demonstrates that inspiration towards sustainability and involvement in sustainable travel practices significantly mediate the effect of SMIs on sustainable behaviour.

Originality:

This study contributes to the existing body of tourism literature by offering a comprehensive

understanding of how SMIs influence sustainable behaviour. It provides a holistic insight on the role of SMIs in promoting sustainability, thereby contributing to research gaps in current studies. The research offers significant insights for tourism marketers and policymakers on leveraging SMIs to promote sustainable travel practices.

Social implications:

Policymakers, tourism groups, and SMIs can all benefit from the results of the present study. Strategic partnerships between SMIs and sustainable enterprises can help spread the word about sustainable travel alternatives and encourage more environmentally conscious vacations. Furthermore, sustainable travel practices can be promoted, and environmental awareness can be increased through well-executed media campaigns on the internet.

Introduction

While tourism significantly boosts economic growth, it also sparks debates surrounding its environmental footprint, effects on social dynamics, and challenges to cultural preservation in communities worldwide (Bao, 2023). With growing public awareness of ecological issues, industries like hospitality and tourism now prioritise sustainability as a core objective(Oriade et al., 2021). Social media platforms like social media have become powerful tools for encouraging eco-conscious travel habits (Chatterjee and Dsilva, 2021). Influencers, in particular, have transformed into key advocates for sustainable tourism, using their wide audience reach to reshape how people view and engage with travel experiences (Kilipiri et al., 2023).

In recent years, sustainability has become a central theme worldwide (Caradonna, 2022). Sustainability is generally defined as the practice of fulfilling present societal needs, while maintaining the conservation of opportunities and resources for future generations (Ahmad et al., 2022). Further, Mosammam et al. (2016) emphasised the significance of inter-generational equity as a fundamental component of sustainability. Accordingly, the primary objective of sustainability is to achieve a balance between three major interests: (1) optimal utilisation of natural resources; (2) economic expansion, and (3) cultural/social wellness (Hsieh, 2012; Wan et al., 2017). Even though globalisation brings many benefits, a range of concerns faced by the world have also emerged in the last few decades (Wan et al., 2017). One of the key problematic questions to worldwide sustainable development is the emission of carbon dioxide and the proliferation of plastic waste, both of which engender climate change (Dube and Nhamo, 2021). Several industries have significantly contributed to climate change, with travel and tourism being among the most notable. Therefore, the travel industry must prioritise an environmentally sustainable agenda

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(Nuryyev et al., 2020). The UNWTO highlights the essentiality of sustainable development by emphasising the need to account for tourism's "current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" (UNWTO, 2021, p. 1). Consequently, sustainability should be comprehensively integrated into tourism management and policy directives (Torkington et al., 2020). Moreover, environmental sustainability has emerged as an essential issue that needs to be addressed during travelling (Nuryyev et al., 2020). Thus, the development of eco-friendly and community-conscious tourist destinations is vital (Semwal, 2023; Teshome et al., 2021).

Recently published research highlighted generational differences in responses to SMIs, particularly among Millennials and Gen Z. For instance, Gen Z perceives SMIs as knowledgeable individuals from whom they seek advice and opinions (Singer et al., 2023). This generation is more inclined to be influenced by short videos on social media platforms, which significantly impact their travel intentions and foster responsible tourism practices (Xue et al., 2024). Both generations consider authenticity as an essential component of the SMIs persuasive narrative, but they develop their perceptions of authenticity differently (Singer et al., 2023).

Research also emphasises SMI's role in promoting environmentally conscious consumption, commonly referred to as the 'green purchase intention' (Bedard and Tolmie, 2018) and their ability to amplify sustainability awareness using different digital platforms, for instance, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, allowing SMIs to practice shared values and interests (Li et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2021). For instance, Instagram has become an important platform for the promotion of sustainable tourism destinations as geolocation data and storytelling enhance users' engagement with the identification of options related to eco-friendly choices (Kilipiri et al., 2023). As outlined by Abbasi et al. (2024), digital media content generated by tourists positively

impacts brand awareness. In pro-environmental travel decisions, the effect of SMI has been identified as significant (Boerman et al., 2022; Levin and Anning-Dorson, 2024), especially as SMIs are individuals who act as independent endorsers and have the ability to shape viewers' attitudes. SMIs post on social media about the brand based on their previous experiences and personal judgements. Social media content, produced by such platforms as vlogs, blogs, images, and text (Ge and Gretzel, 2018), is an effective and popular form of communication as it provides awareness about unfamiliar tourism destinations and promotes travel-related content (Tham et al., 2020). According to Lindh and Johnstone (2018), the existence of influencers has a substantial effect on improving sustainability awareness among younger users. Thus, prior research explains that social media can positively affect sustainable purchase intentions (Bedard and Tolmie, 2018; Jacobson and Harrison, 2022). In recent years, SMIs have become the motivational drivers that engage users in different activities (Yesiloglu and Was, 2020). Past studies highlight that motivations significantly impact involvement (Kyle et al., 2006). Moreover, SMIs online media communication plays a critical role in choosing sustainable travel destinations (Kilipiri et al., 2023). While SMIs as discussed above have been acknowledged for their ability to shape environmental awareness, there is limited empirical work examining the precise actions such as involvement in environmentally friendly practices that drive the followers to adopt sustainability practices.

Although earlier research has predominately concentrated on the link between SMIs and the levels of consumer sustainable awareness and sustainable behaviour (Boerman et al., 2022; Levin and Anning-Dorson, 2024), there is still a gap in comprehending the potential association between the perceived influence of SMIs, inspiration towards sustainability, involvement of followers in environmentally friendly practices, and their impact on sustainable travel behaviour.

SMIs are considered as key figures for shaping eco conscious consumption but prior studies have seldomly examined the mechanisms through which SMIs foster higher levels of sustainable inspiration and involvement. Moreover, recent studies such as by Elgammal and Majeed (2024) also propose that parasocial relationships and perceived information quality are important in shaping consumer trust however still their role in sustainability communication remains underexplored. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the mediating process specifically how SMI driven inspiration leads to pro-environmental engagement and subsequent travel decision also remains an important gap in sustainable tourism research. This gap in the literature indicates a need for research that not only acknowledges the influence of SMIs on sustainable tourism behaviours but elucidates the internal processes for instance, how inspiration derived from influencer content leads to increased involvement in environmentally friendly practices among the followers, ultimately influencing sustainable travel behaviour.

Given the substantial impact of tourism in the world, this research aligns with many United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as 'SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)'. The key significance of the current study is rooted in its potential to enhance an understanding of how SMIs can effectively promote sustainable tourism. By engaging a broad audience through influencers, this study provides a pathway for amplifying and implementing sustainability and also provides valuable insights for marketers, policymakers and tourism organisations to work towards fostering environmentally friendly and responsible travel behaviour.

Review of Literature

Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) Theory

The S-O-R model, initially proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), demonstrates the relationship between stimuli, organisms, and responses. Jacoby (2002) modified the model and indicated that the activation of individuals' internal states due to external factors results in behavioural outcomes. The 'Stimulus' (S) element of the S-O-R model indicates those factors arising from the surrounding environments of individuals or certain situations of external factors (Kamboj et al., 2018; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). SMIs refer to the external forces that influence the cognition, emotions, and behaviour of individuals (Hussain et al., 2023). In this present study, SMIs are introduced as stimuli to cause external influences on the internal mechanism in the form of emotions and thoughts related to sustainable tourism. Based on the persuasion theory, the perceived influence of SMIs serves as an external persuasive factor in motivating viewers to feel inspired towards sustainability and engaging in environmentally friendly practices (Fang et al., 2023). In light of this, perceived SMIs in this study have been assumed to act as a stimulus that triggers response through sustainable tourist evaluations and information processing.

Next, the 'Organism' (O), which is the second element of the S-O-R model, describes the internal mechanisms of individuals, including psychological processes, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts that occur in response to external factors or stimuli (Famiyeh et al., 2018). Individuals interpret stimuli as meaningful information that assists in their overall decision-making and shapes their behaviour (Kamboj et al., 2018; Qiu et al., 2023). Similarly, social media and influencers' attributes act as stimuli that affect the emotions and perceptions of individuals (Abbasi et al.,

2023a). Together, these internal states serve as facilitators that translate the perceived influence of SMIs into solid actions. In the current study, viewers' inspiration towards sustainability and involvement in environmentally friendly practices are considered external stimuli that lead to behavioural outcomes, such as sustainable travel behaviour.

The 'Response'(R) element of the S-O-R model explains how a person behaves as an outcome of internal mechanisms and is thus also called the behavioural outcome (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Qiu et al., 2023). According to Famiyeh et al. (2018), an internal state (emotional or cognitive) translates into observable reactions from the customer, known as the 'response.' These responses can manifest in various ways, such as engaging in pro-environmental behaviour or participating in sustainable tourism practices. In the current study, sustainable travel behaviour is associated with the response outcome.

The S-O-R model as an underpinning theory has been employed across different domains, including travel services (Kim et al., 2020), social media platforms focused on travel vlogs and images (Abbasi et al., 2023a; Abbasi et al., 2023b; Yousaf, 2022) and sustainable tourism (Hu et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). The current investigation utilised the S-O-R framework as an underpinning theory, thereby incorporating the perceived influence of SMIs as a stimulus (S), travellers' inspiration towards sustainability and travellers' involvement in environmentally friendly practices as an organism (O), and sustainable travel behaviour of travellers as a response (R).

Persuasion theory

Hovland's Persuasion Theory (1953) examines how communication influences attitude and behaviour changes through key factors: the source of information, the message supplied by the source, the audience following the source, and context (Fang et al., 2023; Hovland et al., 1953).

Persuasion represents the utilisation of particular strategies by a group or individual to affect the viewpoints and behaviour of others via the diffusion of messages so that others adopt their views and thus attain the anticipated objective (Amos et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). The source credibility enhances the perceived value of the message, making the source trustworthy and more persuasive (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). The principal aim of tourism and consumer studies implies investigating how persuasive content trustworthiness and expertise can change the public's perspectives, emotions, and behaviour, particularly in the context of acquiring tourism-related goods and services (Fang et al., 2023; McGuire, 2000; Zhou et al., 2024). In the conventional promotion process newspaper ads, television ads, posters, and celebrity endorsements have been utilised for commercials. However, with the advent of internet technology, digital media has opened avenues for various online marketing strategies. Among these, social media influencers have developed an influential force in online persuasion, effectively linking with viewers via their interactive communication and engaging content (Wang, 2020; Zhou et al., 2024). So, the persuasion effect varies with the change of influence medium, whereas the influencer personality and direct involvement have a considerable effect (Fang et al., 2023). In the context of the current research, persuasion theory provides adequate theoretical background; thus, social media influencers (SMIs) serve as persuasive sources, providing valuable information on sustainable tourism through various social media platforms. They aim to influence followers' perceptions and inspire them towards adopting sustainable travel behaviour.

Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

Due to the wide universal reach and many other attached benefits, social media has recently become a key tool for both social interaction and online promotion. This tool outperforms

traditional media in terms of cost-effectiveness (Zimmerman and Sahlin, 2010) and can facilitate interactive communication (Thomas et al., 2021). Social media also has the potential to reach a larger audience in less time (Howard et al., 2019) and is perceived to be autonomous in nature (Drury, 2008). Therefore, the efficacy of online media as an information-sharing and promotional tool has garnered substantial investigator interest (Dwivedi et al., 2017; Shareef et al., 2019). Thus, SMIs significantly increase the destination country's image (Lorgeoux and Divakaran, 2023). More specifically in the context of emerging countries, SMIs' promotion appears as a significant tool in the betterment of a country's image all over the globe and economic development (Abbasi et al., 2024; Adekunle and Kajumba, 2021; Motahar et al., 2021).

SMIs can engage with their followers on digital applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, allowing them to practice shared values and interests (Li et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2021). SMIs are independent endorsers who can shape viewers' opinions via the online content they produce and share on social media platforms. This content can include various forms, such as vlogs, blogs, images, and text. SMIs exert their influence by drawing on their personal judgements and experiences (Ge and Gretzel, 2018). Vlogs have been widely acknowledged as a highly effective and popular means of communication on various social media platforms, promoting travel-related content and raising awareness of unfamiliar tourist destinations (Tham et al., 2020).

According to Lee et al. (2021), various SMI characteristics, including consumerism, genuineness and envy, influence consumers' trust levels and purchase frequency. Numerous studies have examined how different supplemental characters used by SMIs affect the behaviour of people who follow them and their intention to purchase (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). In the context of tourism promotion, it has been observed that

influencer marketing impacts individuals' preferences and inclinations (Zhang and Huang, 2022). The topic of eco-friendly sustainability has gained significant importance within the travel industry (Nuryyev et al., 2020). Recent academic research by Boerman et al. (2022) demonstrated the significance of SMIs in pro-environmental travel intention. According to a study conducted by Lindh and Johnstone (2018), it has been observed that the presence of SMIs positively influences the level of sustainability awareness among younger individuals. Extant literature has elucidated the potential of social media platforms to positively affect individuals' intentions to engage in green purchasing decisions (Bedard and Tolmie, 2018; Jacobson and Harrison, 2022).

Hypotheses Development

Perceived Influence of SMIs and Sustainable Travel Behaviour

Hovland's Persuasion Theory (1953) examines how communication influences attitude and behaviour changes through key factors: the source of information, the message provided by the source, the audience following the source, and context (Fang et al., 2023; Hovland et al., 1953). Persuasion theory holds significance in marketing, advertising and tourism (Fang et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). In tourism studies, sustainable and environmental protection is a crucial research topic. According to Tiago et al. (2021), small and medium tourism businesses can arguably attain sustainable goals through the assistance of online digital media (Tiago et al., 2021). In fact, social media promotion campaigns can help raise public awareness of sustainability, especially by encouraging such forms of tourism as ecotourism (Gulati, 2022). The necessity of a sustainable ecosystem has arisen due to increased environmental degradation and unhealthy travel practices. In this regard, SMIs can contribute to promoting sustainable tourism (Palazzo et al., 2021) as their perspectives significantly influence individuals' perceptions, particularly among

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younger generations (Kadekova and Holienčinova, 2018). Previous studies repeatedly show that digital influencers and external sources are an effective way of persuasion and have significantly influenced consumer behavioural intention (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019). There is a high likelihood that followers will engage in sustainable behaviour if the influencer's endorsement emphasises environmental protection and a healthy lifestyle and promotes sustainable tourism (Baltezarević et al., 2022). Environment awareness can lead to pro-environmental behaviour because green consumers behave in an eco-friendly manner (Ham et al., 2016). Based on the S-O-R underpinning theory, this study posits that the perceived influence of SMIs as external stimuli plays a substantial role in shaping sustainable travel behaviour. Therefore, the subsequent hypothesis is posited:

H1: Perceived influence of SMIs positively impacts sustainable travel behaviour.

Direct and Mediating Effect of Inspiration

The perceived influence of SMIs can be stated as the tendency to recognise that the influencer's information is valid and believable (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). According to persuasion theory, the information provided by influential personalities is crucial in shaping the decisions of others (Fang et al., 2023; Hovland et al., 1953). Influencer endorsement is a marketing concept where influencers communicate the brand or service-related information in their followers' circle (Belanche et al., 2021). Famous person endorsements assist in accomplishing greater brand awareness among consumers (Chopra et al., 2021). Influencers impact individuals' decisions through their position, authority, knowledge or association (Geyser, 2022). The purchase endorsement by influencers changes the behaviour of followers at four levels: (1) creating awareness about the product; (2) improving knowledge; (3) encouraging followers to recommend the product to others; and (4) self-

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purchase of a product by customers (Chopra et al., 2021). SMIs can connect with their audience via social media platforms to illustrate their shared values and interests (Li et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2021). Different SMIs' attributes could motivate tourists toward the travel destination and enhance their travel interest (Pop et al., 2022; Zhang and Huang, 2022). In the previous literature, different characteristics of SMIs, such as source credibility, attractiveness, closeness, and interactivity affect inspiration (Ki et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025). Informational-interaction is another stimulus impacting customer inspiration in the online brand community (Cao et al., 2021). According to previous research investigated by He et al. (2021), it was found that visitors who experience a sense of inspiration are more inclined to engage with the tourism destination actively.

Moreover, prior research asserts that inspiration can function as a mediating factor (Chen et al., 2024; Oleynick et al., 2014; Tsaur et al., 2022). The mediating effect of inspiration was also tested in the creative tourism context, which explains the mediating role of tourist inspiration between experience and creative atmosphere (Wei et al., 2023). While creating short videos on social media, the presenter's attractiveness significantly influences travel intention through travel inspiration (Fang et al., 2023). According to Nguyen et al. (2025), online source credibility and travel planning decisions are mediated by inspiration. Furthermore, a study by Kwon and Boger (2021) found that the linkage between experience and pro-environmental intention is mediated by consumer inspiration, based on the S-O-R theory. However, the impact of the perceived influence of SMIs on travellers' sustainable travel behaviour through the mediating role of inspiration has not yet been explored. In the current study, the S-O-R model is used as the underpinning theory, wherein the external factor i.e., the perceived influence of SMIs (S), affects travellers' inspiration (O), leading to the subsequent outcome of sustainable travel behaviour (R) among visitors. Therefore, it is postulated that:

H2: Perceived influence of SMIs positively impacts inspiration towards sustainability.

H3: Inspiration towards sustainability positively impacts sustainable travel behaviour.

H4: Inspiration towards sustainability mediates the link between the perceived influence of SMIs and sustainable travel behaviour.

Direct and Mediating Effect of Involvement

Involvement refers to the extent to which customers participate in various aspects of the consumption practices, including product selection, information seeking, decision-making, and buying (Broderick and Mueller, 1999). In other words, involvement is typically understood as an individual's perceived significance based on their intrinsic essentials, values and interests, or the degree of importance they devote to a subject (Zaichkowsky, 1985, 1994). Since it started, this concept has been integrated into other academic disciplines, including marketing and tourism (Biswas et al., 2021), because of its ability to impact buyers' attitude and decision-making (Josiam et al., 1999). Verbeke and Vackier (2004) demonstrated that involvement has a crucial impact in every stage of the buying decision-making phases and impacts intention, attitude, and behaviour.

Thus, in the tourism literature, involvement plays a significant role, such as consumer involvement mediating link between social media images perceived value, and eWOM behaviour (Abbasi et al., 2023b). Another found that tourist involvement has directly influenced and mediated the link between women's empowerment and sustainable tourism development (Elshaer et al., 2021). According to Bowler et al. (1999), active involvement results in pro-environmental mindsets and intention to engage in ecological activities. Hospitality employees involved in environmentally sustainable activities give benefit in both the administrative process of implementation of sustainability inside the organisation as well as outside the natural

environment prevention (Ashraf et al., 2024). The findings of Kapoor et al. (2022) indicate that travellers prefer hotels that participate in initiatives to promote sustainability and offer information regarding environmentally friendly practices. A study by Aprilia et al. (2024) explained that environmental sustainability leads to tourism involvement, which further contributes to sustainable tourism development. This study establishes that tourism involvement acts as both a direct and a mediating factor in achieving sustainable tourism outcomes (Aprilia et al., 2024). However, the direct and mediating role of involvement in environmentally friendly practices in the relationship between the perceived influence attribute of SMIs and sustainable travel behaviour has not been clearly established. Therefore, based on the S-O-R theoretical framework, this study assesses the external factor i.e., the perceived influence of SMIs (S), affects travellers' involvement in environmentally friendly practices (O), which may result in shaping sustainable travel behaviour (R). We developed the following hypotheses:

H5: Perceived influence of SMIs positively impacts involvement in environmentally friendly practices.

H6: Involvement in environmentally friendly practices positively impacts sustainable travel behaviour.

H7: Involvement in environmentally friendly practices mediates the link between the perceived influence of SMIs and sustainable travel behaviour.

Inspiration Towards Sustainability and Involvement in Environmentally Friendly Practices

According to Walker and Moscardo (2014), there has been a prevalent assumption among policymakers and scholars in the field of sustainability that launching successful public education campaigns aimed at increasing knowledge of sustainability concerns would result in travellers'

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inspiration towards sustainable behaviours. Inspiration for sustainability is a potent stimulant encouraging involvement in environmentally friendly practices. For instance, Horng et al. (2024) offer insights on the influence and effect of SMIs on consumer behaviour, specifically in promoting hotels involved in environmentally friendly practices. Similarly, Hayles (2019) discovered that inspirational internships focused on sustainability encourage students to participate in campus green initiatives. As stated by Fredrickson (2001), the broaden-and-build theory explains that positive emotions increase personal resources and encourage adaptive behaviour. Another study explained that emotional closeness to a destination is linked with tourist involvement (Aleshinloye et al., 2024). Thus, it can be presumed that inspiration towards sustainability can be a key factor in motivating individuals' involvement in environmentally friendly practices. Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed:

H8: Inspiration towards sustainability positively impacts involvement in environmentally friendly practices.

Based on the above discussion, the following conceptual framework was developed:
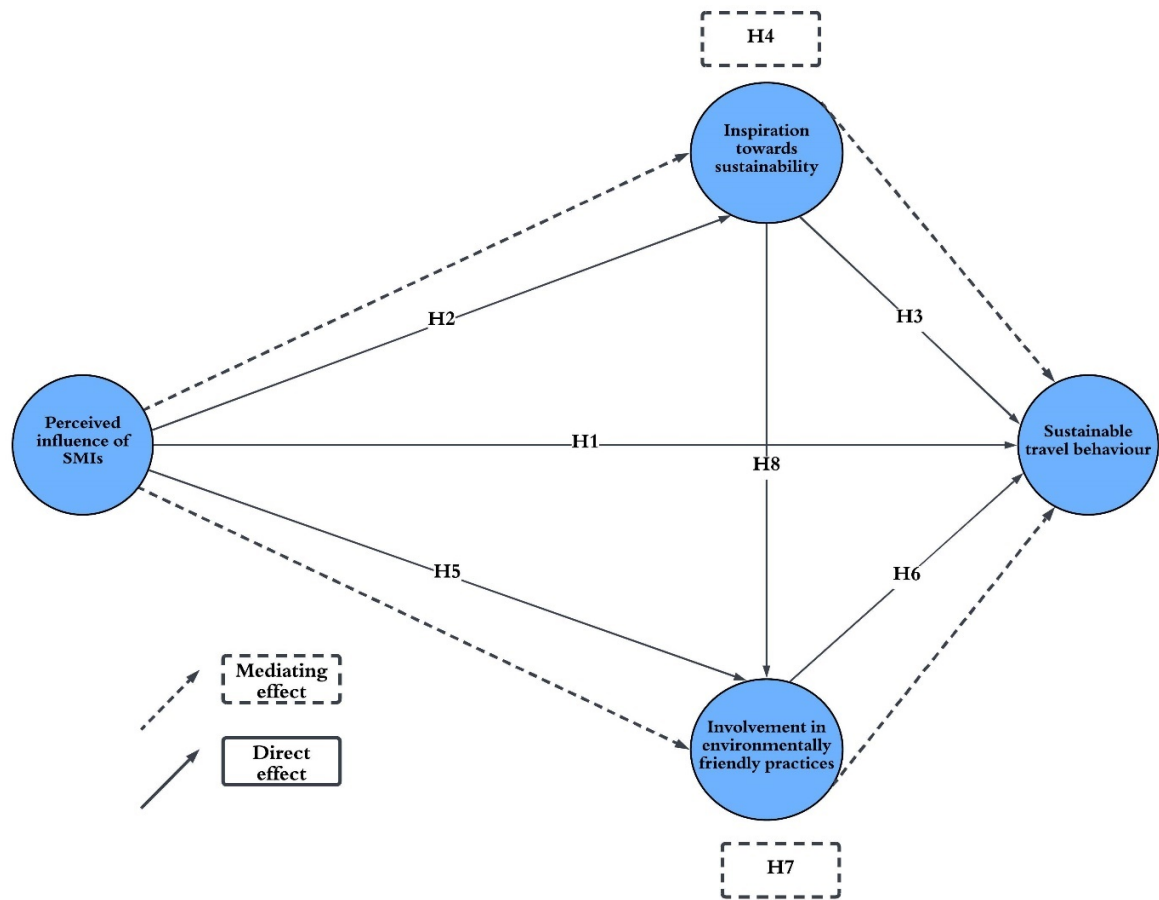
Figure 1.   Conceptual model

Source(s): Developed by authors

Research Methodology

Scope of Study

Dalian City, located in northeastern China, is renowned as a compelling tourism destination because of its scenic coastline landscape (Britannica, 2023; Juma and Gao, 2022). This city has 2,211 km of coastline, representing 840 km of the island and 1371 km of the mainland (Lu et al.,

2019). The urban area hosts the vast Xinghai Square, recognised as one of the largest squares globally (Britannica, 2023). Dalian is renowned for its abundant verdant areas, including Xinghai Park and Tiger Beach Ocean Park, which provide serene environments for individuals seeking relaxation and nature (Zhang et al., 2020). Dalian has a significant historical legacy in that its cultural heritage has Russian influences, manifested in its architecture and represented by such places as Russian Street. Port Aruthur also hosts a range of conserved forts and museums (Xiao and Wall, 2009). The city has a strong reputation for attracting culinary tourists, particularly as there is a range of gastronomic offerings (Kabiraj et al., 2021). According to Dalian News Media Group (2023), Dalian recorded a year-on-year rise of 87.84% in tourist arrivals, achieving 157.49% of its 2019 figures.

Dalian aims to be among the pioneers in adopting sustainable tourism practices by ensuring that the municipality maintains its natural beauty and cultural heritage despite the challenges posed by tourism growth. These initiatives include responsible waste management, marine ecosystems conversation, and transportation means that are eco-friendly (Shi et al., 2019). Travellers must be actively involved in sustainability issues such as waste management practices that minimise the use of plastic, respect for the culture of the host people, and patronising establishments that are eco-friendly (Mowforth and Munt, 2015). Sustainable practices should be of relevance to the future of Dalian as a tourist destination especially because such practices can bring into being intergenerational equity. Considering sustainability's importance, data was collected from domestic travellers in different Dalian city tourist spots.

Measurement

This study measured and collected data through survey-based questionnaires. Questionnaire scales have been applied extensively in quantitative research, enabling structured

and standardized data collection. The measures were adapted from existing literature. For the perceived influence of SMIs, three items were obtained from Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019). Ten items of inspiration towards sustainability were acquired from Böttger et al. (2017), and five items of involvement in environmentally friendly practices were obtained from Elshaer et al. (2021) and Suhartanto et al. (2018). Finally, eight items of sustainable travel behaviour were obtained from Holmes et al. (2021), and responses were obtained using a five-point Likert scale anchored by 5 for "strongly agree" and 1 for "strongly disagree."

Pilot Test

First, the instruments were adopted from previous research and tested for their validity with the help of three experts. Then, a pilot test was conducted to test aspects of the survey such as context, minor spelling, and grammatical errors, scope regarding length and depth of variables, and their corresponding items to determine reliability and content validity. A pilot dataset of 96 responses was collected from tourists engaged in sustainable tourism activities. In the pilot test, a small sample can be utilised, and based on the findings, the measures can be retained and deleted (Abrahim et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2010; Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). To test the reliability and validity of the current study model, we employed the PLS-SEM approach using SmartPLS software to assess the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019). The results showed that no major problems detected existed for adopted instruments and therefore were considered to be appropriate and deemed valid and reliable. Based on respondents' suggestions, slight modifications were made to the questions before conducting the main test.

Sampling and Data Collection for Main Test

In the current study, a purposive sampling method is applied for data collection as it is regarded as an efficient method to reduce sample prejudice (Frey, 2018); here, the investigator used their personal knowledge and experience to select relevant respondents who met certain criteria and thus offered sufficient information about a particular study. In the context of sample size determination, utilisation of appropriate software is crucial. Faul et al. (2007) recommended G*power as a suitable software tool for conducting such analyses. Therefore, the current study utilised the G*Power software to execute a series of commands. According to the findings obtained from the G*Power software, it is proposed that a minimum sample size of 107 participants be utilised in the current study to conduct Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) analysis (Hair et al., 2021b). Furthermore, Hoelter (1983) suggested a threshold sample size of 200. According to Majchrzak et al. (2005), the minimum sample size should be five to ten times the number of relationships in the model. The current study thus encompasses eight hypothesised relationships, of which 200 participants are deemed adequate for analysis with SmartPLS.

The sample selection took place at different tourism destinations in Dalian, China. The current study population consisted of Chinese domestic travellers who had been actively watching social media influencers' videos. To ensure the relevance of respondents and comply with ethical guidelines, we collected data only from individuals who met the initial criteria of the study. Therefore, some screening questions were asked: (a) Are you concerned about environmental changes? (b) Do you watch SMIs' sustainable tourism videos/vlogs? (c) Does the influencer you follow talk about the importance of environmental sustainability? (d) Do you think practising

sustainable activities is important while touring? Data was collected from individuals who answered 'yes' to all screening questions.

The descriptive statistical information of the participants is summarised in Table 1, where 89 (36.7%) of the 242 participants were male and 153 (63.3%) were female. Most participants in the study were between 18 and 32 years of age; the highest range was from 18 to 25 years (64.8%), followed by 26 to 32 years (23.9%), 33 to 39 years (9.0%), and 40 years and older (2%). Accordingly, there were 3 (1.2%) high school degree holders, 161 (66.5%) bachelor's degree holders, 62 (25.6%) master's degree holders, and 16 PHD holders (6.6%). The largest group of income earners totalled 130 respondents (53%) who earned less than RMB 3000 monthly.

Common method bias (CMB)

The cross-sectional study could raise the likelihood of Common Method Bias (CMB). Therefore, assessing CMB is crucial through two approaches: Harman's single-factor analysis, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), and a full collinearity estimation employing the variance inflation factor (VIF) (Kock, 2015). The results revealed that the sum of the variance explained is 48.69%, which is below the threshold of 50%. Additionally, to ensure that there is no collinearity issue, the VIF values are less than 3.3. The findings in Table 2 confirm that there are no CMB concerns in this study.

Table 1

Demographic of Respondents

Demographic variables	Frequency	%
Total number of participants	242	100
Sex		
Male	89	36.7

Female	153	63.3
Age group		
18y to 25y	157	64.8
26y to 32y	58	23.9
33y to 39y	22	9.0
40y to 46y	5	2.0
Educational status		
High School education	3	1.2
Bachelor's degree education	161	66.5
Master's degree education	62	25.6
Doctorate degree education	16	6.6
Income (Chinese Yuan)		
Less than 3000 Yuan	130	53.7
3001-5000	63	26.0
5001-7000	25	10.3
7001-9000	9	3.7
9001-11000	9	3.7
Above 11001	0	0.0

Source(s): Authors' own work

Results of the Study

Evaluation of the measurement model

In the current study, the Smart-PLS v.4.1.0.8 was utilised to assess the model's validity and reliability. To assess the effectiveness of indicators in representing the constructs, outer loadings must exceed 0.5 (Chin, 2010); other researchers stated a 0.7 cut-off (Abbasi et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2020). In this study, outer loadings are in the defined range, such as 0.631 to 0.872. Additionally, the threshold criteria for average variance extracted (AVE) was 0.5, and Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability threshold criteria defined was 0.7, whereas the VIF value should be less than 3.3 (Hair et al., 2019). Table 2 illustrates that Cronbach's alpha values are in the appropriate range of 0.805 to 0.909. The composite reliability (CR) is also above the defined

criteria. Moreover, the AVE results were between 0.574 and 0.733. Thus, these findings represent strong internal consistency, reliability and convergent validity. In addition, the VIF values also confirmed that there are no potential multicollinearity issues.

Table 2

Measurement Model for Reliability and Validity Analysis Results

Constructs	Items	Outer loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR (rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE	VIF
Perceived influence of SMIs	PI-SMIs1	0.872	0.805	0.830	0.883	0.715	1.797
	PI-SMIs2	0.809					1.787
	PI-SMIs3	0.855					1.651
Inspiration towards sustainability (Inspired by)	INS-TS1	0.868	0.902	0.903	0.927	0.719	2.615
	INS-TS2	0.855					2.451
	INS-TS3	0.854					2.539
	INS-TS4	0.847					2.415
	INS-TS5	0.814					1.951
(Inspired to)	INS-TS6	0.864	0.903	0.904	0.928	0.720	2.713
	INS-TS7	0.837					2.386
	INS-TS8	0.868					2.756
	INS-TS9	0.819					2.338
	INS-TS10	0.853					2.433
Involvement in environmentally friendly practices	INV-EFP1	0.848	0.909	0.910	0.932	0.733	2.592
	INV-EFP2	0.866					2.762
	INV-EFP3	0.851					2.429
	INV-EFP4	0.863					2.616
	INV-EFP5	0.852					2.396
Sustainable travel behaviour	STB1	0.745	0.893	0.900	0.915	0.574	1.947
	STB2	0.729					1.850
	STB3	0.778					2.184
	STB4	0.824					2.499
	STB5	0.783					2.276
	STB6	0.801					2.463
	STB7	0.753					2.308
	STB8	0.631					1.591

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3 indicates that the average value ranges from 3.47 to 3.87, and standard deviation values from 0.80 to 1.00 derived from SPSS, with a moderate level of variability in the responses. The threshold criteria for measuring heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) states that the correlation value should be less than 0.9 (Hair et al., 2019). The current study results derived from the SmartPLS explain that the correlation values are less than the given threshold criteria. The Fornell-Larcker criterion is measured by matching the square root of the AVE (bold diagonal values) for each construct, which should be greater than its associated coefficients construct (off-diagonal values) in the related rows and columns (Pehlivan et al., 2024). The study findings reveal that both HTMT and Fornell-Larcker criteria of discriminant validity are achieved. Thus, confirms that there is no concern with discriminant validity in the current study.

Table 3

Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) and Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Mean	Std. Deviation	HTMT					Fornell-Larcker criterion				
			1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. Inspired by	3.86	0.87						**0.85**				
2. Inspired to	3.87	0.87	0.84					0.77	**0.85**			
3. Involvement in environmentally friendly practices	3.73	0.96	0.74	0.70				0.67	0.63	**0.86**		
4. Perceived influence of SMIs	3.47	1.00	0.42	0.57	0.54			0.38	0.50	0.48	**0.85**	
5. Sustainable travel behaviour	3.76	0.80	0.77	0.81	0.75	0.61		0.70	0.74	0.69	0.527	**0.76**

Source(s): Authors' own work

To develop second-order formative constructs (e.g. inspiration for sustainability), the study adhered to the methodology advised by Becker et al. (2012). Initially, we assessed the latent

variable outcomes of the first-order reflective constructs. Subsequently, we employed these data as markers for second-order formative structures. The VIF was processed to assess the validity; values below the 3.3 threshold showed no collinearity problems. Therefore, to verify the validity and reliability of the second-order formative constructs, Table 4 displays the significant indicator weights. All these findings indicate the second-order construct of inspiration towards sustainability is appropriate for the next modelling step.

Table 4

Validity tests second-order constructs

	Outer weight	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	VIF
Inspired by -> Inspiration towards sustainability	0.440	0.439	0.088	5.030	0.000	2.428
Inspired to -> Inspiration towards sustainability	0.622	0.621	0.083	7.455	0.000	2.428

Source(s): Authors' own work

Structural Model

The next step in the data analysis process through PLS involves estimating the structural model. For assessing the predictive significance of the model, the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 and R^2 were applied. The standard criterion for Q^2 is that it should be greater than zero to indicate predictive relevance. For R^2, values range from 0 to 1 (Hair et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2019). Based on the findings in this study, the endogenous variables show substantial explanatory capacity, R^2 values (0.227, 0.505 and 0.658) and Q^2 values (0.211, 0.218 and 0.265) for inspiration, involvement and sustainable travel behaviour respectively, as presented in Table 5 achieved the defined criteria. Furthermore, similar to Shmueli's et al. (2019) study, the PLS-Predict results in Table 7 indicate a strong predictive capability in this study.

Concurring with Hair et al. (2019), this study uses the bootstrapping resampling technique through Smart-PLS v.4.1.0.8, specifically employing 10,000 samples and a one-tailed test to investigate the effect of exogenous variables on an endogenous variable. Hence, a sample size of 242 was used for the bootstrapping process. The tables presented in this study, specifically Tables 5 and 6, provide relevant statistical information pertaining to the beta value, p-value, and t-value that can be used for measuring a structural model (Hair et al., 2021a).

Table 5

Results of Direct Relationships

	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	F^2	R^2	Q^2
H1: Perceived influence of SMIs ➜ Sustainable travel behaviour	0.156	0.156	0.057	2.737	0.006	0.052		
H2: Perceived influence of SMIs ➜ Inspiration towards sustainability	0.476	0.481	0.065	7.355	0.000	0.293	0.227	0.211
H3: Inspiration towards sustainability ➜ Sustainable travel behaviour	0.512	0.511	0.067	7.591	0.000	0.382		
H5: Perceived influence of SMIs ➜ Involvement in environmentally friendly practices	0.197	0.198	0.074	2.673	0.008	0.061		
H6: Involvement in environmentally friendly practices ➜ Sustainable travel behaviour	0.264	0.267	0.064	4.109	0.000	0.101	0.658	0.265
H8: Inspiration towards sustainability ➜ Involvement in environmentally friendly practices	0.595	0.596	0.073	8.131	0.000	0.554	0.505	0.218

Source(s): Authors' own work

The findings direct a statistically robust effect of the perceived influence of SMIs endorsement on inspiration towards sustainability (β = 0.476, p < 0.001), involvement in environmentally friendly practices (β = 0.197, p < 0.05), and sustainable travel behaviour (β = 0.156, p < 0.05). Further, it is also well established from the findings that travellers' inspiration towards sustainability highly and significantly impacts their involvement in environmentally friendly practices (β = 0.595, p < 0.001) and sustainable travel behaviour (β = 0.512, p < 0.001). Moreover, it is also established that involvement in environmentally friendly practices significantly impacts sustainable travel behaviour (β = 0.264, p < 0.001). Based on the results shown in Table 5, it can be determined that all the direct hypotheses associations (H1, H2, H3, H5, H6, and H8) were accepted.

Table 6

Results of a Mediating Relationship

	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
H4: Perceived influence of SMIs ➔ Inspiration towards sustainability ➔ Sustainable travel behaviour	0.244	0.245	0.044	5.602	0.000
H7: Perceived influence of SMIs ➔ Involvement in environmentally friendly practices ➔ Sustainable travel behaviour	0.052	0.052	0.022	2.419	0.016

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

This study employs the PLS-SEM approach to study the interactions among exogenous, mediator, and endogenous variables. Specifically, it is posited that variations in the exogenous variable lead to corresponding variations in the mediator variable, which subsequently influences the endogenous variable (Hair et al., 2021a). The empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that inspiration towards sustainability (H4: $\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$) and involvement in environmentally friendly practices (H7: $\beta = 0.052$, $p < 0.05$) mediates the link between the perceived influence of SMIs and sustainable travel behaviour. This study verifies that there is a partial mediation of inspiration towards sustainability and involvement in environmentally friendly practices. Table 6 presents the results.

Table 7

PLS Predict

Endogenous Construct	Items	PLS-SEM_RMSE	LM_RMSE	PLS-SEM_RMSE - LM_RMSE
Sustainable travel behaviour	STB1	1.015	1.015	0.000
	STB2	1.063	1.072	-0.008
	STB3	0.974	0.972	0.002
	STB4	0.909	0.920	-0.010
	STB5	0.929	0.937	-0.008
	STB6	0.949	0.950	-0.001
	STB7	0.953	0.960	-0.007
	STB8	1.016	1.023	-0.007

Source(s): Authors' own work
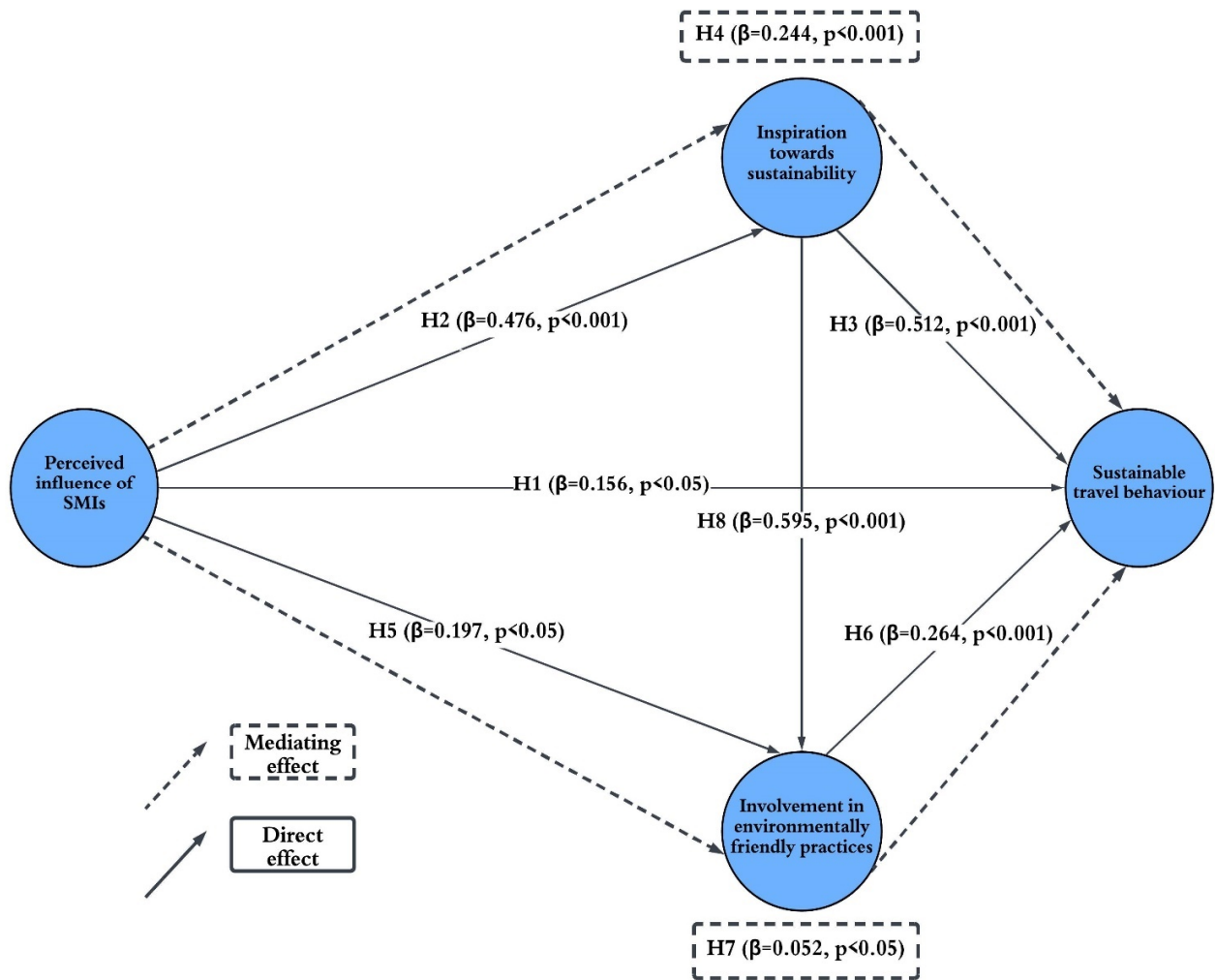
Figure 2 Results-Based Model

Source(s): Developed by authors

Discussion

The principal aim of the current study was to examine the direct and intervening role of travellers' inspiration towards sustainability and involvement in environmentally friendly

practices in the relationship between the perceived influence of SMIs and sustainable travel behaviour. This research is grounded in the frameworks of the S-O-R theory and the persuasion theory.

The findings from this study demonstrated that the inspiration of individuals concerning sustainability and their involvement in sustainable travel practices is predominantly determined by the perceived influence of SMIs. The current study supports earlier studies by Cao et al. (2021) and Ki et al. (2022), who identified that the content of the SMIs is considered reliable information and used to influence consumers' motivations. SMIs can change the travellers' perception and their engagement in environmentally friendly behaviour at a tourism destination. Moreover, the results of the study reveal that involvement in ecologically friendly initiatives and inspiration for sustainability substantially and positively affect sustainable travel behaviour. Individuals who are inspired tend to engage actively in tourism (He et al., 2021). This research is consistent with earlier studies showing direct and indirect correlations between consumer inspiration and pro-environmental intention (Kwon and Boger, 2021). In a sustainable tourism setting, more motivated tourists are becoming mindful of sustainable travel behaviour.

Interestingly, the current findings also confirm the direct impact of the perceived influence of SMIs on sustainable travel behaviour. The results confirm previous studies' findings that SMIs significantly influence awareness related to conservational and pro-environmental behaviour (Knupfer et al., 2023; Okuah et al., 2019). Hence, SMIs' sustainable endorsements can improve the behaviour of travellers towards eco-friendly travel activities. Moreover, this investigation also confirmed the mediating role of inspiration towards sustainability in the link between the perceived influence of SMI and sustainable travel behaviour. The results are similar to previous studies that explained that the path between experience and pro-environmental intention is mediated by

inspiration toward sustainability (Kwon and Boger, 2021). This theoretical broadening improves our understanding of the SMIs on customer behaviour, especially those linked to ecologically friendly results. Inspiration and participation of tourists mediate into turning perceived influences of SMIs into actionable behaviours. It underscores the fact that such campaigns need to strike a balance between motivational storytelling and participatory opportunities to enable individuals to embrace sustainable travel behaviour. Put together, these mediators ensure the messages driven by influencers are emotionally appealing yet lead to tangible action.

These findings further illustrate that involvement in environmentally friendly activities has been highly influenced by inspiration toward sustainability. The study's findings confirm Tsaur et al. (2022) research which indicates that destination inspiration is significantly linked with destination attachment. Thus, this empirical study demonstrates that social media influencers' content has a discernible impact on tourists' inspiration to engage in sustainable travel practices. Likewise, this inspiration further leads to greater involvement in environmentally friendly practices and sustainable behaviour. This study also supports and contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, by promoting awareness and action on climate change, the research associates with SDG 13 (Climate Action). The encouragement of responsible consumption and production aligns with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). By fostering economic growth through sustainable tourism practices, the study contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Lastly, the role of partnerships between SMIs, businesses, and policymakers supports SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). This integration highlights how each aspect of the study ties directly into global sustainability initiatives.

Theoretical Implication

The paper provides new theoretical insights into how SMIs motivate and influence tourists to engage in sustainable tourism consumption. Utilising the SOR model it demonstrates how SMIs act as an influential external stimulus that prompts individuals' inspiration and involvement in environmentally friendly activities, which further leads to sustainable and responsible behaviours. Firstly, although the S-O-R model has been utilised in prior studies on marketing and tourism, this exploration fills a gap by utilising the persuasion theory in the context of SMIs, illustrating how SMIs are acting for both persuasion and external triggers. Collectively, these findings reveal new perspectives on how travellers decide about sustainable tourism, as well as the potential influence of trustful digital actors on that decision.

Second, the results illustrate and confirm the crucial role that SMIs play in inspiring followers to adopt sustainable travel behaviour. Since many influencers are considered trusted voices on environmentally responsible behaviours, their support can encourage people to use eco-friendly businesses, use sustainable transportation, and minimize their environmental footprint. In particular, the mediating process (inspiration and involvement) that relates SMI influence to the corresponding travel behaviour is still underexplored. This study shows that inspiration and involvement are important mediators. These complexities create a refined suggestion of how SMIs can drive sustainable tourism practices.

Third, the study also emphasises the significance of SMIs as potential stimuli for long-term sustainable behaviour change. Influencers can use their reach and authenticity to empower and mobilise tourists to support environmental conservation and responsible tourism practices, which will benefit different stakeholders in the implementation of sustainability. The results of this study

reinforce the role of persuasion theory in understanding how digital influencers can serve as persuasive communicators of sustainability.

Fourth, the findings of the study also contribute to the growing body of literature on sustainable tourism by aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically 'SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Lastly, the results add new insights to a growing body of literature by contributing to the psychological mechanisms, particularly inspiration towards sustainability and involvement in environmentally friendly practices as mediating variables, in the influence of SMIs' role in behavioural change towards sustainability.

Practical Implication

This study also suggests key implications for SMIs, businesses, tourism organisations, and policymakers. Influencer endorsement on social media is a persuasive way of interaction to engage travellers in sustainable practices. SMIs are considered as a stimulator of individuals towards choosing and participating in environmentally friendly activities. SMIs have the power to collaborate purposefully with sustainable enterprises and assist their followers within the context of sustainable tourism. Dalian city's destination management organisations (DMOs) collaborate strategically with social media influencers who engage with sustainable travel practices. Utilising the capacity of travel influencers DMOs can influence the perspective of travellers towards sustainable travel as well. Furthermore, SMIs play a critical role in transmitting sustainability

messages to motivate travellers towards sustainability and inspire them to be involved in ecofriendly activities, which further leads to sustainable travel behaviours.

Moreover, the initiatives of SMIs campaigns on eco-tourism allow tourism businesses and government associated bodies to improve travellers' environmental sustainability consciousness. These campaigns can enlighten travellers about the ecological significance of eco-friendly choices and the value of adopting sustainable travel practices during their journeys. This includes selecting eco-friendly transportation, accommodation, and activities. Effective online media strategies employed by relevant stakeholders can play a pivotal role in raising environmental awareness and promoting sustainable travel behaviour. Thus, tourism related stakeholders can significantly contribute to sustainable practices by employing SMIs on different digital platforms.

Policymakers and private tourism businesses have opportunities to expand the availability of eco-friendly transportation and accommodation options, as there is a growing preference among individuals for sustainable goods and services over environmentally unsustainable ones because of the rising concern of global warming and its detrimental impacts on the tourism industry and on tourism destinations (Han, 2021). Implementing sound sustainability policies can mitigate harmful activities of human beings to the environment and local communities, such as carbon emissions risk and environmental trash pollution. Furthermore, the current study provides practical insights for tourism boards and organisations such as Airbnb and TripAdvisor to work together with SMIs to promote sustainable travel activities, while local governments and certification initiatives, including the Bali plastic ban and Green Key Global, can engage influencers to increase understanding of sustainable tourism regulations and criteria.

Limitation and Future Direction

The current research has some noticeable weaknesses. First, it relies on cross-sectional research, which provides a snapshot of associations at a single point in time. Future investigations could benefit from employing longitudinal study designs, allowing for the exploration of changes and causality over time. Second, future studies could incorporate mixed methods or experimental designs to further investigate sustainable travel behaviour and provide more robust insights. Third, future research should consider utilising larger sample sizes from both domestic and international tourists in China for a more comprehensive analysis, ensuring greater generalisability of the findings. Additionally, employing other methodological techniques, such as Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA), and comparing the results with PLS-SEM would offer deeper insights and strengthen the robustness of the study. Fourth, in the current study, we used the perceived influence of SMIs; future studies should thus utilise the attributes of SMIs (including expertise, trustworthiness, entertainment, and synchronous and asynchronous interactivity) to examine their impact on sustainable travel behaviour. Fifth, this study primarily focuses on the mediating effect of inspiration towards sustainability. Accordingly, future research could assess the mediating effects of both inspiration and aspiration to travel between SMIs' attributes and traveller engagement behaviour. Finally, it is recommended to test the same model or to use additional sustainability measures in various cultural contexts.

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