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SECTION: MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS, SERVICES AND TOURIST BEHAVIOR

FROM CLICK TO TRIP: THE POWER OF TRUST IN DIGITAL INFLUENCE WITHIN ECOTOURISM

DO CLIQUE À VIAGEM: O PODER DA CONFIANÇA NA INFLUÊNCIA DIGITAL NO ECOTURISMO

TURISMO ACCESIBLE EN DESTINOS DEL ESTADO DE RÍO DE JANEIRO: ANÁLISIS DEL ESCENARIO ACTUAL, PRINCIPALES RETOS Y PRIORIDADES DE ACTUACIÓN

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose – To analyze whether, and to what extent, trust in digital influencers impacts the purchase behavior of ecotourism trips, considering the mediating roles of desire and information search.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative research design was employed through an online survey, yielding 558 valid responses. Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), operationalized in SmartPLS 4.

Findings – The results reveal that trust in the influencer is a pivotal factor, driving both consumption desire and information search, which together explain purchase behavior. Desire acts as an affective bridge between intention and action, while the information search plays a validating role. The analyses also demonstrated significant indirect effects, showing that part of the influencer's impact occurs through the combined mediation of desire and information search, reinforcing the complexity of decision-making processes in ecotourism.

Practical implications – The theoretical and managerial implications suggest that influencer marketing has become a strategic tool in ecotourism. But to be effective, it should be guided by authenticity, consistency, and sustainability thereby strengthening emotional bonds and promoting more conscious consumption practices.

Originality/value – The originality of this study lies in its joint analysis of direct and indirect effects, revealing affective–cognitive mechanisms that are typically examined in isolation. By empirically demonstrating how digital influencers shape ecotourism travel decisions, it advances theoretical understanding of socio-affective mediations in this tourism activity and provides novel insights for communication and strategic management of destinations.

Research limitations – While the study contributes to understanding trust in digital influencers and its impact on purchase behavior, considering psychological and behavioral constructs, it does not address contextual factors, other tourism activities, or the specificity of the digital platforms used.

Keywords: trust; engagement; digital influencers; perception; belonging.

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RESUMO:

Objetivo – Analisar se e em que medida a confiança no influenciador digital impacta o comportamento de compra de viagens ecoturísticas, considerando o papel do desejo e da busca de informações.

Desenho/metodologia/abordagem – Foi utilizado um desenho de pesquisa quantitativo, com aplicação de questionário online, totalizando em 558 respostas válidas. A análise foi conduzida por meio de modelagem de equações estruturais (PLS-SEM) operacionalizada no software SmartPLS 4.

Resultados – Os resultados revelam que a confiança no influenciador é um fator central, impulsionando tanto o desejo de consumo quanto a busca informacional, os quais, em conjunto, explicam o comportamento de compra. Verificou-se, ainda, que o desejo atua como elo afetivo entre intenção e ação, enquanto a busca de informações cumpre papel validador. As análises também evidenciaram efeitos indiretos significativos, indicando que parte da influência exercida pelo influenciador ocorre por meio da mediação combinada entre desejo e busca informacional, reforçando a complexidade dos processos decisórios no ecoturismo.

Implicações práticas – As implicações teóricas e gerenciais indicam que o marketing de influência se consolida como instrumento estratégico no ecoturismo, devendo ser orientado por autenticidade, coerência e sustentabilidade, a fim de fortalecer vínculos emocionais e promover práticas de consumo mais conscientes.

Originalidade/valor – A originalidade da pesquisa reside na análise conjunta de efeitos diretos e indiretos, revelando mecanismos afetivo-cognitivos que geralmente são examinados de forma isolada. Ao demonstrar empiricamente como influenciadores digitais moldam decisões de viagem ecoturística, a pesquisa amplia a compreensão teórica sobre mediações socioafetivas nesta atividade turística e oferece insumos inéditos para a comunicação e gestão estratégica de destinos.

Limitações da pesquisa – Os resultados contribuem para a compreensão da confiança no influenciador digital e de seu impacto no comportamento de compra, considerando construtos de natureza psicológica e comportamental, mas não abrangendo fatores contextuais, outras atividades turísticas e tampouco a especificidade das plataformas digitais utilizadas.

Palavras-chave: confiança; engajamento; influenciadores digitais; percepção; pertencimento.

RESUMEN:

Objetivo: analizar si, y en qué medida, la confianza en los influenciadores digitales impacta en el comportamiento de compra de viajes de ecoturismo, teniendo en cuenta el papel mediador del deseo y de la búsqueda de información.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: se empleó un diseño de investigación cuantitativa, con la aplicación de una encuesta en línea, que arrojó un total de 558 respuestas válidas. El análisis de los datos se llevó a cabo mediante el modelado de ecuaciones estructurales de mínimos cuadrados parciales (PLS-SEM), operacionalizado en el software SmartPLS 4.

Resultados: los resultados revelan que la confianza en los influenciadores es un factor central que impulsa tanto el deseo de consumo como la búsqueda de información, lo que en conjunto explica el comportamiento de compra. Asimismo, se verificó que el deseo actúa como un puente afectivo entre la intención y la acción, mientras que la búsqueda de información cumple una función de validación. El análisis también evidenció efectos indirectos significativos, indicando que parte de la influencia ejercida por los influenciadores ocurre por la mediación combinada entre el deseo y la búsqueda de información, lo que refuerza la complejidad de los procesos de decisiones en el ecoturismo.

Implicaciones prácticas: las implicaciones teóricas y de gestión sugieren que el marketing de influencia se consolida como una herramienta estratégica en el ecoturismo y debe orientarse por la autenticidad, la coherencia y la sostenibilidad, con el fin de fortalecer los vínculos emocionales y promover prácticas de consumo más conscientes.

Originalidad/valor: la originalidad de la investigación radica en su análisis conjunto de los efectos directos e indirectos, revelando mecanismos afectivo-cognitivos que, generalmente, se examinan de forma aislada. Al demostrar empíricamente cómo los influenciadores digitales moldean las decisiones de viaje en el ecoturismo, el estudio amplía la comprensión teórica sobre las mediaciones socioafectivas en esta actividad turística y proporciona insumos inéditos para la comunicación y la gestión estratégica de los destinos.

Limitaciones de la investigación: los resultados contribuyen a la comprensión de la confianza en los influenciadores digitales y de su impacto en el comportamiento de compra, teniendo en cuenta los constructos de naturaleza psicológica y comportamental, pero sin abarcar factores contextuales, otras actividades turísticas y la especificidad de las plataformas digitales utilizadas.

Palabras clave: confianza; compromiso; influenciadores digitales; percepción; sentido de pertenencia.

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism, especially ecotourism, has emerged globally as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism (Ugljesa et al., 2011; Singh, 2021; Esparza-Huamanchumo et al., 2024). From Buckley's (2009) perspective, this form of tourism provides authentic experiences by combining elements related to environmental conservation, sociocultural interaction and local economic development.

According to Weaver (2001), ecotourism reinforces community identity by promoting local participation and the responsible use of natural resources—elements that embody the environmental and cultural authenticity of tourist destinations. Faustino-Dias (2024) adds that these characteristics, coupled with travelers' growing interest in immersive and personalized experiences, have driven the demand for destinations that offer direct contact with nature, agricultural or rural experiences, and leisure opportunities, especially in less commercially exploited environments.

In Brazil, ecotourism has become the Ministry of Tourism's (MTur) primary strategy for fostering rural development in post-pandemic period (MTur, 2022). Recent data show that Nature Tourism/Ecotourism ranks second among national travelers' preferences, with 27% of mentions, behind traditional Sun and Beach Tourism at 59% (MTur, 2024). Specifically, the 2nd edition of the Rural Tourism Demand survey revealed that when it comes to activities in rural areas, tourists seek contact with nature (74%) and activities related to sustainability (47%) (Sprint, 2023).

Parallel to this market growth, social media has emerged as a central platform for the exchange of information and experiences among tourists (Hussain et al., 2024; Majeed & Gupta, 2024; Martins et al., 2025). Within this context, digital influencers increasingly shape the decisions of potential tourists (Zhang et al., 2022; Kilipiri et al., 2023).

Blog posts, digital videos and social media posts offer recommendations, personal accounts and images that highlight the unique characteristics of different rural destinations. Influencers act as opinion leaders, shaping value perceptions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pop et al., 2021). Information about infrastructure, costs, and the experiences of previous visitors becomes decisive in purchasing behavior (Faustino-Dias, 2024), particularly when associated with the trust and desire, generated by virtual influence (Pop et al., 2021). However, the abundance of information available online complicates decision-making, making evaluation difficult for consumers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chung & Koo, 2015; Susanto et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2024).

Despite this, research investigating how psychological and behavioral mechanisms, such as trust, desire and information search, interact to shape ecotourism purchasing behavior in digital environments, especially when mediated by influencers, remains scarce. Addressing this theoretical and empirical gap is essential to understand how these factors interact to shape consumption decisions in ecotourism, as it can inform both public and private managers, as well as the digital influencers, whose actions can play a decisive role in the success of ecotourism projects in small towns and emerging regions.

In this scenario, the central research question arises: whether, and to what extent does trust in influencers impact the purchasing behavior of ecotourism trips? To answer this question, the overall objective of this study was to analyze whether, and to what extent, trust in digital influencers affects purchasing behavior of ecotourism trips, considering the role of desire and information search.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Trust in digital influencers and consumer behavior in ecotourism

Trust in digital influencers has become a central pillar for understanding consumer behavior on social media (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pop et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Nuji et al., 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Tang et al., 2024; Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Barari et al., 2025; Benevento et al., 2025). According to Lou and Yuan (2019) and Hussain et al. (2024), when consumers perceive an influencer to be honest, clear and authentic, their uncertainties about the content presented are reduced.

This reduction in perceived risk encourages consumers to seek more information about the product or service mentioned, as they begin to regard the influencer as a legitimate source of knowledge (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Majeed & Gupta, 2024; Barari et al., 2025). Information search is a crucial step in the purchase decision process (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Kotler & Keller, 2019). In digital environments, this practice gains greater relevance, as consumers have immediate access to a wide range of sources, including reviews, blogs and influencer recommendations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chung & Koo, 2015; Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023; Martins et al., 2025).

At this stage, it is established that trust in digital influencers plays a decisive role in activating cognitive verification processes. This in-depth analysis supports the first hypothesis of this research:

Hypothesis 1: Trust in digital influencers directly influences the consumers' search for information about tourist destinations, services and experiences.

The marketing literature further demonstrates that both the quality and depth of information search can directly influence consumers' attitudes toward a product or, in this case, a tourist destination (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Kotler & Keller, 2019; Zarezadeh et al., 2023; Uthaisar et al., 2023). Hafezieh and Pollock (2023) emphasize that when consumers engage in informational processes, they tend to evaluate attributes more critically, which strengthens conviction and increases the likelihood of making a purchase.

Trust in the influencer acts as a catalyst, transforming mere consumer exposure to a message into active engagement, with deeper informational understanding (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pop et al., 2021). In other words, trust in the digital influencer leads the consumer to perceive them as an efficient filter and interpreter of information regarding products or destinations; this, in turn, increases their motivation to expand this search to other complementary sources.

Casaló et al. (2020) further emphasize that the link between trust and information search is closely tied to the perception of the influencer's expertise. According to the author, consumers often recognize influencers as specialists within certain niches, which legitimizes their recommendations and encourages followers to find out more about a product or service.

There is also evidence that trust in the influencer directly shapes purchasing behavior (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Nuji et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2024; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Susanto et al., 2024; Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Benevento et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). This is because trust reduces perceived risk (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Hussain et al., 2024), enhances the credibility of the message, and strengthens the emotional bond with the influencer (Xu et al., 2025). As a result, the consumer accepts the influencer's recommendations with greater confidence and less cognitive effort (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Thus, when influencers are perceived as authentic and competent, trust is translated into action, which explains their direct and significant impact on purchasing behavior.

Accordingly, it is proposed that both the trust in the influencer and information search exert directly influence tourist purchasing behavior, as outlined in H2 and H3.

Hypothesis 2: Trust in digital influencers directly influences consumer purchasing behavior, stimulating the decision to purchase travel packages, services, or experiences.

Hypothesis 3: Seeking information about tourist destinations and experiences significantly influences consumer purchasing behavior.

okolova and Kefi (2020) added that influencers are perceived as human beings the consumer can relate to, sharing characteristics with close friends or social peers. This symbolic proximity fosters a sense of security, in which consumers feel comfortable about accepting the influencer's recommendations. As result, doubts about the authenticity of the product or service are reduced, and purchase intention is translated into purchase action.

Trust is the fundamental component of persuasive communication in digital environments (Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Barari et al., 2025; Benevento et al., 2025). By believing in the influencer's integrity, consumers not only internalize recommendations but also associate them with positive personal experiences, strengthening the link between the message received and the purchase decision (Hoang et al., 2022).

According to Belk et al. (2003), consumer desire is understood as a motivational force that connects affect to purchasing behavior. When an influencer transmits messages perceived as authentic and trustworthy, emotional responses are triggered, intensifying the desire for a product or experience (Pop et al., 2021; Kim & Park, 2023; Shamim & Azam, 2024). Shamim and Azam (2024) argue that trust in an influencer facilitates the symbolic transfer of values, allowing the consumer to internalize emotional attributes related to the product or service being promoted.

But desire is more than a simple purchase intention: it is a psychological state combining aspiration and hedonic anticipation (Belk et al., 2003; Faraji-Rad et al., 2017; Chen, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). In this sense, trust in the influencer acts as an initial stimulus for desire activation, eliminating cognitive resistance that could block emotional experiences. Based on this argument, H4 is proposed.

Hypothesis 4: Trust in the digital influencer positively influences the consumer's desire to experience recommended tourist destinations and experiences.

Evidence from Faraji-Rad et al. (2017) and Chen (2024) shows that desire also creates a state of intense engagement, in which the consumer dedicate time and effort to learning more about a product or service. Desire, therefore, acts as the initial trigger for the information search, awakening curiosity and motivating the consumer to close the gap between aspiration and reality (Hoang et al., 2022).

When consumers develop a desire for a destination or experience, they tend to seek information from sources such as social media, travel blogs and influencer content (Pop et al., 2021). Kozinets et al. (2010) argue that this search reflects not only a functional need but also a symbolic process of constructing meaning around the desired experience.

Desire, therefore, precedes and intensifies information-seeking behavior, prompting the consumer to close the gap between aspiration and realization (Belk et al., 2003). This affective impulse acts as a driving force that prompts interest in finding out more about the product or service, and supports the cognitive engagement to evaluate alternatives and validate choices (Faraji-Rad et al., 2017).

By acting as a link between emotion and action, desire increases the likelihood that curiosity will become intention, and subsequently, effective purchasing behavior, especially in contexts where the experience is linked to strong symbolic and anticipatory meaning, as in the case of ecotourism trips (Faustino-Dias, 2024). Based on this, H5 and H6 are supported.

> *Hypothesis 5: The desire to experience tourism motivates consumers to intensify their search for information about destinations, packages and related services.*
>
> *Hypothesis 6: The desire for tourist experiences directly influences consumer purchasing behavior, leading them to travel decisions.*

The literature indicates that the information search can mediate the relationship between trust in digital influencers and purchasing behavior, particularly within the information processing model (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023). When consumers trust an influencer, they are more likely to interpret messages as legitimate and credible, reducing perceived risk in purchase decisions (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Majeed & Gupta, 2024; Barari et al., 2025).

This credibility, however, does not always lead directly to a purchase; instead, it often encourages more in-depth searches for information, reinforcing what trust has already activated emotionally.

This same dynamic occurs when desire, rather than trust, is the starting point. As Belk et al. (2003) pointed explain, desire creates an emotional tension the consumer seeks to reduce through concrete actions, including active information search. In this way, the search operates as the mechanism that cognitively organizes motivation aroused by desire, allowing the consumer to compare alternatives, assess risks and legitimize the affective intentions.

In ecotourism contexts, where consumers need to assess aspects such as safety, environmental authenticity, sustainable practices and travel logistics (Faustino-Dias, 2024), the information search serves whether to validate or complement initial recommendations. Trust acts as a trigger, but it is the search that enables the cognitive refinement necessary for the intention to be transformed into concrete action, justifying the proposed mediation. In light of these considerations, hypotheses H7 and H8 are formulated:

> *Hypothesis 7: The information search mediates the relationship between trust in digital influencers and purchasing behavior for ecotourism trips.*
>
> *Hypothesis 8: The information search mediates the relationship between desire and purchasing behavior for ecotourism trips.*

Belk et al. (2003) emphasize that desire operates as the motivational element articulating emotions, imagination and aspiration. Within influencer marketing, trust in a digital influencer acts as an affective trigger that intensifies consumer desire, since content perceived as authentic, trustworthy, and socially relevant prompts emotional responses that foster engagement with the experience presented (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Park, 2023).

This emotional activation not only stimulates interest but also generates a symbolic projection that brings the consumer closer to the experiences narrated by the influencer. This projection is amplified by mechanisms of social comparison and parasocial bonding (Xu et al., 2025; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Accordingly, H9 is proposed:

> *Hypothesis 9: Desire mediates the relationship between trust in the digital influencer and the information search.*

Desire also acts as an element that mediates trust and purchasing behavior, as it represents the psychological stage in which emotional motivation becomes strong enough to prompt the consumer to act. Recent studies confirm that desire is among the most powerful affective predictors of consumption decisions, especially in highly symbolic categories such as travel, leisure and nature tourism where emotional expectations, hedonic anticipation and lifestyle aspirations are central (Hoang et al., 2022; Chen, 2024). On this basis, Hypothesis 10 is supported:

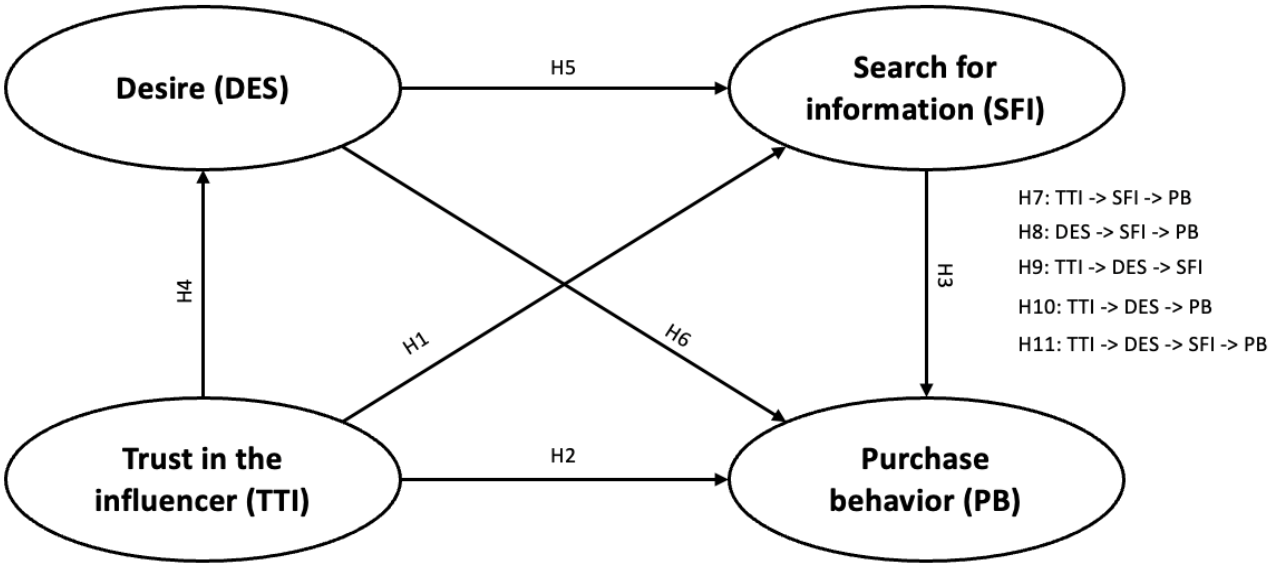
> *Hypothesis 10: Desire mediates the relationship between trust in digital influencers and purchasing behavior for ecotourism trips.*

The phenomenon, however, may unfold in a more complex and integrated way (trust, desire, information search, purchase). Evidence from Faraji-Rad et al. (2017) and Hafezieh and Pollock (2023) suggests that desire and search do not operate in isolation, but are interlinked within an affective-cognitive chain that culminates in a final decision. Thus, the consumer is initially driven by emotion (desire), then engages cognitively through the information search, and ultimately, proceeds to purchase. Desire, thus, serves as the emotional bridge between trust and action, while the information search cognitively organizes the choice. This model of multiple mediation underpins H11.

> *Hypothesis 11: Desire and the information search jointly mediate the relationship between trust in digital influencers and purchasing behavior for ecotourism trips.*

Figure 1 presents the structural model proposed for this study, summarizing the hypothesized relationships between constructs.

Figure 1 – Structural model of the research



Note: Hypotheses H7 – H11 refer to the indirect effects (mediations) tested from the trajectories represented in the model.
Source: Prepared by the authors.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a quantitative and descriptive design, using an online survey to assess the influence of trust, desire and information search on ecotourism travel purchasing behavior (PB). The theoretical framework was grounded in literature on ecotourism, digital marketing and consumer behavior, enabling the formulation of hypotheses regarding these variables.

Data were collected via an electronic survey hosted on the Google Forms platform and distributed by email to research centers across Brazil. This instrument comprised 17 closed-ended items adapted from scales validated by Pop et al. (2021) and Hoang et al. (2022) as presented in Table 1.

The instrument was organized into two sections: the first captured the sociodemographic profile of the participants, while the second measured the constructs of interest. To ensure consistency, the respondents were asked to regard a digital influencer as any individual they follow on social media who influences or shapes their opinions, attitudes or behaviors, especially regarding tourism services and products.

Table 1 – Scale used to measure and test the hypotheses

I construct	Affirmative
Confiança no influenciador (Pop et al., 2021)	Influencer reviews are reliable.
	The influencers' reviews are honest.
	Influencer ratings are independent.
	The influencers' reviews are credible.
	I trust the travel information provided by influencers.
	Digital influencers are more trustworthy than mass media.
	Digital influencers are more trustworthy than travel agents.
	Digital influencers are more trustworthy than official tourism websites.
Desejo (Pop et al., 2021)	I want to visit the destination recommended by the digital influencer.
	Reviews from a digital influencer increase my willingness to buy.
	Reviews from a digital influencer make me want to visit a destination.
Busca de informações (Pop et al., 2021)	To ensure I choose the right place, I often read online reviews from other tourists.
	I often consult online reviews from other tourists to help me choose a product destination.
	I often gather information from online reviews before traveling to a specific destination.
Comportamento de compra (Hoang et al. 2022)	When I have to make travel-related decisions, I consider suggestions from digital influencers.
	My final decision when booking a trip or tourism product is influenced by the influencer's rating.
	Influencer reviews may alter my existing travel plans.

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on Pop et al. (2021) and Hoang et al. (2022).

The non-probabilistic sample consisted of 558 Brazilians aged eighteen or older, collected between July and September 2024. This sample size exceeds the minimum threshold of ten to fifteen respondents per variable recommended by Hair et al. (2014), ensuring robust statistical power.

For the data analysis, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was applied using SmartPLS 4 software, following Hair et al. (2014). This method is appropriate for research that seeks to simultaneously estimate causal relationships and validate measurement instruments.

The measurement model was assessed followed the recommendations of Hair et al. (2014), Ringle et al. (2014), Hair et al. (2022) and Hair et al. (2024). Evaluation criteria included: Factor loadings (≥0.70); internal consistency—measured by Cronbach's alpha, rho_A and rho_C (≥0.70)—convergent validity (AVE ≥ 0.50); and discriminant validity, according to Fornell--Larcker and HTMT criteria (<0.90). As emphasized by Dijkstra and Henseler (2015) and Hair et al. (2024), rho_C provides a more robust measure of the internal consistency of the observed variables by incorporating actual factor loadings, while rho_A offers an intermediate estimate between Cronbach's alpha and rho_C, yielding a more realistic measure of reliability in structural equation models.

In the structural model, multicollinearity was assessed using VIF (<3); fit of the model was assessed using the coefficients of determination (R^2), relevance of the effects using β and effect size (f^2), and significance through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample profile

The sample comprised 558 participants from across Brazil. The majority were women (62.0%), aged between 18 and 24 years (30.1%). The average level of education was high, with nearly half having completed postgraduate studies (48.0%). Monthly income was mostly below R$2000 (33.7%), and place of residence was concentrated in the Southeast region of Brazil (33.9%). The chi-square test (χ^2) indicated that these proportions were significantly higher than the other categories ($p<0.001$), confirming the presence of predominant groups in the sociodemographic profile of the sample.

Statistical analyses

The measurement model was first evaluated, examining factor loadings and the main reliability and validity indices (Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability rho_C, and average variance extracted [AVE]).

Table 2 demonstrates the adequacy of the measurement model regarding the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs. All factor loadings exceeded 0.70, confirming that the indicators contributed substantially to their latent constructs (Hair et al., 2022). Internal consistency was confirmed by the high Cronbach's α values of between 0.884 and 0.941 and rho_A of between 0.916 and 0.945, meeting established reliability thresholds (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2024).

Table 2 – Evaluation of the load measurement model, Cronbach's α, CR and AVE

Construct	Factorial loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Rho_A	Rho_C	AVE
Information search		0.865	0.884	0.916	0.785
SFI1	0.861				
SFI2	0.916				
SFI3	0.880				
Purchasing behavior		0.906	0.908	0.941	0.842
PB1	0.927				
PB2	0.940				
PB3	0.884				
Trust in the influencer		0.933	0.941	0.945	0.684
TTI1	0.884				
TTI2	0.905				
TTI3	0.781				
TTI4	0.876				
TTI5	0.876				
TTI6	0.764				
TTI7	0.773				
TTI8	0.740				
Desire		0.917	0.919	0.948	0.858
DES1	0.924				
DES2	0.916				
DES3	0.939				

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The composite reliability (rho_C), ranging from 0.785 to 0.948, also exceeds the threshold (0.70) proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), confirming the stability of the indicators. The average variance extracted (AVE), with values between 0.684 and 0.858, further supported the convergent validity of the constructs, as each factor explained more than 50% of the variance of its indicators (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2024).

The discriminant validity of the model was then assessed (Table 3) to ensure that each construct was empirically distinct. For this, two complementary procedures were applied: the Fornell-Larcker criteria and heterotrace-monotrace ratio (HTMT), both widely recognized in the literature for their robustness in validating whether each latent variable represents a distinct concept, without empirically overlapping with other constructs of the model (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2024).

According to the Fornell-Larcker approach, the square root of the AVE of each construct must be greater than the correlations between it and the others. This condition was satisfied in all cases, confirming that each latent variable shared more variance with its own indicators than with the other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3 – Discriminant validity

Fornell-Larcker criterion				
Construct	IS	PB	TTI	DES
IS	0.886			
PB	0.442	0.917		
TTI	0.374	0.729	0.827	
DES	0.403	0.777	0.628	0.926
Heterotrace-to-Monotrace Ratio (HTMT)				
Construto	IS	PB	TTI	DES
IS				
PB	0.492			
TTI	0.403	0.787		
DES	0.447	0.851	0.672	

Legend: IS: Information Search; PB: Purchasing behavior; TTI: Trust in the influencer; DES: Desire
Source: Prepared by the authors.

Given the limitations of the traditional Fornell-Larcker criterion, the HTMT ratio proposed by Henseler et al. (2015) was also applied, as it is a more sensitive method of evaluating the absence of factorial discrimination. The values obtained (0.403 to 0.851) remained below the 0.90 threshold recommended by the authors, confirming the empirical distinction between the constructs. Notably, the strongest relationship was between Purchase behavior and Desire (HTMT = 0.851), reflecting their close conceptual correlation, consistent with the affective-behavioral nature of these constructs.

Following these validations, The model was assessed using the Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) index (Table 4). GoF is a synthetic measure of model adequacy derived from the square root of the product of AVE and the coefficient of determination (R^2), simultaneously reflecting the quality and explanatory power of the structural model (Wetzels et al., 2009; Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013; Hair et al., 2022; Schuberth et al., 2023).

According to the interpretation proposed by Wetzels et al. (2009), higher GoF Values below 0.25 indicate low fit, around 0.36 moderate fit, and equal to or greater than 0.50 high fit. The GoF value obtained (0.582) was classified as high, demonstrating strong capacity of the model to reproduce the observed empirical variance, and validating the proposed theoretical framework.

Table 4 – Goodness-of-Fit (GoF)

Construtos	AVE	R^2
Information search	0.785	0,186
Purchase behavior	0,842	0,708
Trust in the influencer	0,684	
Desire	0,858	0,394
Scores médios	0,792	0,429
AVE * R^2	0,339	
GoF = √(AVE*$R65^2$)	0,582	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The coefficients of determination (R^2) confirmed strong explanatory power. The construct Purchase behavior showed the highest R^2 = 0.708, meaning that approximately 71% of the variability in this behavior is explained by some of the theoretical variables of model. This result is considered highly satisfactory when compared to usual standards in applied social science research, where values above 0.40 are considered satisfactory (Hair et al., 2022). Desire, on the other hand, exhibited moderate explanatory power (R^2 = 0.394), while information search had a lower, but still statistically relevant power (R^2 = 0.186), consistent with more exploratory nature of this cognitive dimension.

Table 5 presents the path estimate coefficients of the structural model, while Figure 2 illustrates the tested model with the β, f2 and R^2 values. Coefficients with p≤0.05 were deemed statistically significant, confirming the significance of the relationship between the variables.

Table 5 – Path estimates of the structural model (hypothesis tests)

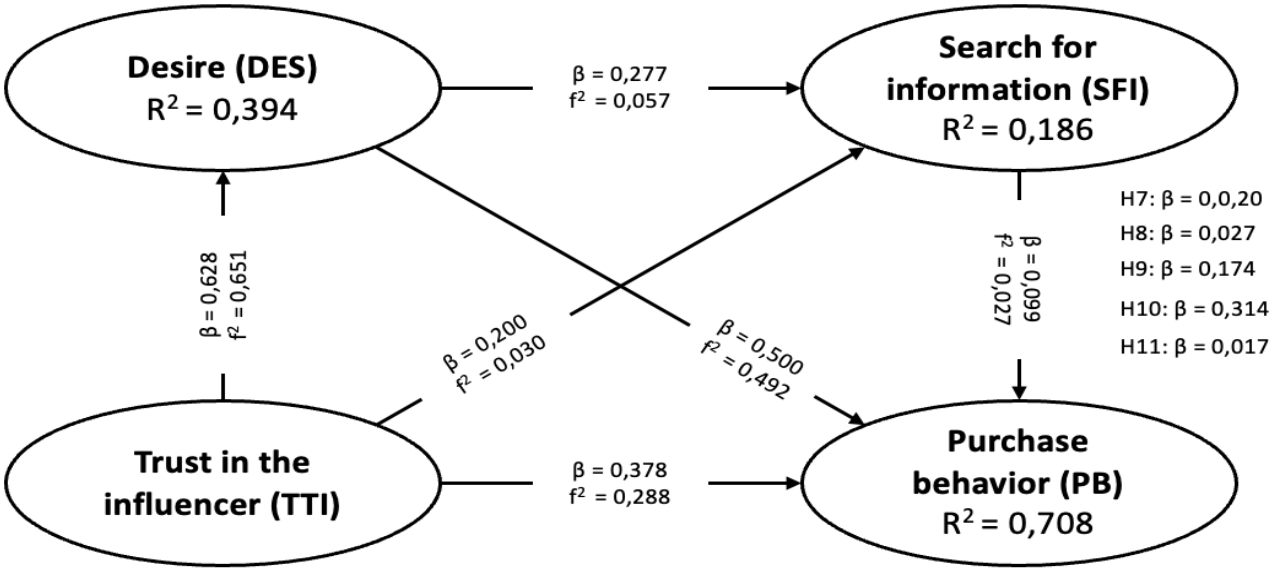
Hypotheses	β	f^2	s (1)	T (2)	IC (3)	Decision
H1: Trust in the influencer -> Information search	0,200	0,030	0,054	3,700*	(0,093 – 0,307)	Suportada
H2: Trust in the influencer -> Purchase behavior	0,378	0,288	0,032	11,980*	(0,315 – 0,439)	Suportada
H3: Information search -> Purchasing behavior	0,099	0,027	0,028	3,475*	(0,043 – 0,154)	Suportada
H4: Trust in the influencer -> Desire	0,628	0,651	0,026	24,433*	(0,578 – 0,678)	Suportada
H5: Desire -> Information search	0,277	0,057	0,049	5,641*	(0,178 – 0,371)	Suportada
H6: Desire -> Purchasing behavior	0,500	0,492	0,033	15,216*	(0,436 – 0,563)	Suportada
H7: Trust -> Search -> Behavior (4)	0,020	-	0,008	2,492***	(0,007 – 0,037)	Suportada
H8: Desire -> Search -> Purchasing (4)	0,027	-	0,010	2,866**	(0,011 – 0,048)	Suportada
H9: Trust -> Desire -> Search (4)	0,174	-	0,031	5,633*	(0,113 – 0,233)	Suportada
H10: Trust -> Desire -> Behavior (4)	0,314	-	0,023	13,450*	(0,270 – 0,362)	Suportada
H11: Trust -> Desire -> Search -> Behavior (4)	0,017	-	0,006	2,868**	(0,007 - 0,030)	Suportada

Notes: (1) = Standard deviation; (2) = t-value; (3) = Confidence intervals (2.5% - 97.5%); (4) H7 - H11 without f2, as the indicator is applicable only to direct relationships, not to indirect effects; *significant a < 0.001, ** < 0.01; *** < 0.05.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Statistical significance was determined using Bootstrapping with 5000 resamples. This procedure generated robust confidence intervals and allowed the stability of the estimates to be evaluated (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2024). Statistically significant coefficients provide empirical support for the hypotheses, while non-significant coefficients indicated a lack of support in the sample analyzed.

Figure 2 – Estimated structural model



Source: Prepared by the authors.

In this study, the results presented in Table 5 reveal that all hypotheses (H1 to H11) were supported. Direct relationships yielded significant effects ($p<0.05$) with magnitudes consistent with the literature on digital influence and decision-making in tourism, while indirect relationships confirmed the mediating role of desire and information search within the proposed model.

For H1, the relationship between trust in the influencer and information search showed a coefficient of $\beta = 0.200$ and $f^2 = 0.030$ ($p<0.001$), indicating positive and statistically significant effects. This suggests that greater trust in the influencer increases the consumers' tendency to seek additional information about the recommended products or services (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Barari et al., 2025).

H2, which analyzed the influence of trust on purchasing behavior, revealed a coefficient of $\beta = 0.378$ and $f^2 = 0.288$ ($p < 0.001$), confirming a strong and significant direct effect ($p < 0.001$). This highlights trust as a decisive factor in converting intention into purchase action (Casaló et al., 2020; Nuji et al., 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Ampornklinkaew, 2025).

H3, which tested the influence of search for information on purchasing behavior, showed a coefficient $\beta = 0.099$ and $f^2 = 0.027$ ($p < 0.001$). Although smaller in magnitude, this effect demonstrates that information search contributes meaningfully to purchase decisions, complementing the affective dimensions of the model (Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023; Uthaisar et al., 2023).

The most significant effect was observed in H4, where trust in the influencer was a significant predictor of desire, with a coefficient of $\beta = 0.628$ and $f^{/i44} = 0.651$ ($p < 0.001$). This indicates a strong association between influencer credibility and heightened consumer desire (Kim & Park, 2023; Shamim & Azam, 2024; Xu et al., 2025).

H5, which examined the impact of desire on information search, reported a coefficient of $\beta = 0.277$ and $f^2 = 0.057$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating that increased desire leads to greater cognitive engagement and informational effort (Faraji-Rad et al., 2017; Hoang et al., 2022; Chen, 2024).

Finally, H6, which assessed the influence of desire on purchasing behavior, presented a coefficient $\beta = 0.500$ and $f2 = 0.492$ ($p < 0.001$), confirming desire as a key variable and predictor of consumer behavior (Pop et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2025).

All the mediated hypotheses were also statistically supported: H7 (β = 0.020, p < 0.05); H8 (β = 0.027, p < 0.01); H9 (β = 0.174, p < 0.001); H10 (β = 0.314, p < 0.001) and H11 (β = 0.017, p < 0.01). These results confirm the relevance of desire and information search as mediating mechanisms in the model, linking trust in the digital influencer to the purchasing behavior of ecotourism trips, thereby supporting the proposed theoretical framework.

DISCUSSION

The results highlight the central role of digital influencers as symbolic and cultural mediators in ecotourism consumption behavior. Decisions once guided by institutional sources or objective references (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023) are now guided by affective ties and perceptions of authenticity (Faustino-Dias, 2024). This demonstrates that the effectiveness of digital influence stems from the combination of credibility, affinity and emotional engagement (Casaló et al., 2020; Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Barari et al., 2025; Benevento et al., 2025). Thus, digital platforms not only inform customers, but also symbolically shape destinations choices, travel styles and tourist experiences. The empirical results confirm this trend, indicating that trust directly impacts the information search (β = 0.200; f^2 = 0.030) and purchasing behavior (β = 0.378; f^2 = 0.288), emphasizing its structuring role in tourism decisions.

This reflects a reconfiguration of authority structures in tourism communication, with influencing over decision-making shifting from experts and institutions to individuals performing authenticity in online algorithmic environments. This shift, though it democratizes the production of meaning, also introduces new asymmetries, as visibility power is conditioned by ranking mechanisms, social capital and digital engagement, challenging the notion of autonomous consumer choice.

Trust is therefore proven to be the structuring element in this process, functioning as a cognitive shortcut in contexts of information overload, a defining feature of the current digital environment (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Pop et al., 2021; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Shamim & Azam, 2024; Martins et al., 2025). As Lou and Yuan (2019), Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and Liu and Zheng (2024) point out, credibility of the source reduces uncertainty in decision-making, reinforcing the influencer's role as a curator of the tourist experience. According to Casaló et al. (2020), perceived authenticity transforms the relationship between influencer and follower into a parasocial relationship, making it seem more like a real interpersonal interaction. The findings of this research corroborate this effect, as trust had a significant impact on desire (β = 0.628; f^2 = 0.651), confirming the affective role of the influencer in shaping consumers' motivation.

In tourism, this relational dimension has direct implications. Trust in influencers who share genuine experiences in specific destinations, in niches such as ecotourism, gastronomic or cultural tourism, awakens curiosity but fosters a desire to belong (Pop et al., 2021; Kim & Park, 2023; Nuji et al., 2023; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Shamim & Azam, 2024; Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Barari et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). The present research demonstrates that desire, in turn, significantly impacts on both information search (β = 0.277; f^2 = 0.057) and purchasing behavior (β = 0.500; f^2 = 0.492).

In this context, desire emerges as a social and symbolic phenomenon, in which consumption is experienced as an extension of identity (Belk et al., 2003). Xu et al. (2025) expand this view, showing that desire is mediated by ties of attachment and social comparison, with the influencer serving as the reference figure who inspires imitation and lifestyle projection.

This finding raises relevant questions: to what extent does desire in digital environments reflect authentic aspirations versus normative pressures imposed by aesthetic standards and idealized narratives? In ecotourism, for example, desire can romanticize nature practices, obscure real socio-environmental challenges, and create unrealistic expectations in relation to sustainability. By artificially amplifying the attractiveness of the ecotourism destination, this dynamic can intensify tourist flows beyond local capacity, compromising environmental conservation and potentially exacerbating unsustainable processes, (Butcher, 2007).

The information search also assumes an emotional validation function rather than a purely rational one. As Hafezieh and Pollock (2023) note, consumers often seek information not to decide, but to confirm their affective preferences, altering the classic logic of purchase decisions. In ecotourism, travelers increasingly rely on visual content and narratives of others' experiences — stories, vlogs, reels — that reinforce their confidence and reduce the perception of perceived risk associated with the trip. This cognitive-affective dynamic is evident in the positive influence of the information search on purchasing behavior (β = 0.099; f^2 = 0.027), albeit to a lesser extent than the emotional factors.

Overall, the findings confirm that information search in digital environments is not merely a rational process of comparison but operates as a mechanism for reinforcing beliefs and affective filtering. This phenomenon is linked to emotionally bounded rationality, challenging decision-making models that assume fully deliberative choices.

These transformations corroborate the findings of Xiang and Gretzel (2010) and Chung and Koo (2015), who identified social media as playing a decisive role in the tourism journey, shifting authority from institutional sources to peer networks and influencers. Tourists now place greater trust in personalized recommendations and first-person narratives than in official information. Hussain et al. (2024) further emphasize that emotional trust is central to the choice of a tourist destinations and services, positioning influencers as agents of legitimation of the tourist experience.

This shift, however, entails risks: reliance on subjective assessments and heavily curated content can distort perceptions of infrastructure, safety, environmental preservation and cultural authenticity of a destination, reinforcing the phenomenon of selective hypervisibility, in which only positive narratives are amplified.

Information search is also reactivated by desire, establishing a continuous cycle between emotion and cognition. Faraji-Rad et al. (2017) note that desire shapes how deeply people search for information, leading them to gather more data to support their emotionally-driven decision. This mechanism is evident in the search for reviews, photos and videos that confirm affective and aesthetic expectations about the ecotourism destination. Wang et al. (2024) highlight that this process transforms desire into a concrete willingness to act, even increasing tourists' willingness to pay for unique and sustainable experiences.

This desire-information search-purchase behavior cascade confirms the indirect effects identified in H8, H9, and H11, revealing that desire does not operate in isolation but triggers informational flows that reinforce emotionally predisposed decisions, as evidenced by the associated indirect coefficients (H8: $\beta = 0.027$; H9: $\beta = 0.174$; H11: $\beta = 0.017$). Critically, this dynamic can reduce the consumer's reflective capacity by reinforcing a closed circuit of emotional validation, in which divergent or crucial information tends to be ignored.

The influence of content creators also manifests collectively, producing contagion effects and social legitimation. Benevento et al. (2025) demonstrate that partnerships with influencers significantly expand the visibility and growth of tourism networks, transforming destinations into viral phenomena. This echoes the view of Kozinets et al. (2010) that online narratives produce an ecosystem of shared meanings, where tourists reproduce and reinterpret others' experiences, fostering imitation in the digital social environment.

Within this dynamic, indirect effects such as H7 ($\beta = 0.020$ and H10 ($\beta = 0.314$) are particularly relevant, as they show that digital influence operates not only through direct impact but also via affective and cognitive circuits that shape collective legitimation of the destination. Yet this viral spread can generate tourist overload, environmental pressure and superficial commodification of sustainable practices, posing management challenges for governance in ecotourism.

In ecotourism, digital influence acquires a strategic role. Kilipiri et al. (2023) argue that influencers can serve as cultural mediators, promoting ethical and ecological practices, provided their communication is perceived as authentic. Majeed and Gupta (2024) add that local influencers, by representing territorial identities, strengthen the emotional connection between tourists and host communities, promoting more conscious and sustainable tourism.

However, the indiscriminate use of digital narratives risks oversimplifying environmental and social issues, reducing the complexity of territories to "Instagrammable scenarios". This demands critical attention, to avoid environmental fetishism and cultural appropriation.

This evidence highlights the need to revise traditional cognitivist models of tourist behavior. Incorporating relational and emotional dimensions into these models, such as trust, attachment and desire, is fundamental to understanding tourism consumption in the digital age (Faustino-Dias, 2024; Faustino-Dias et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). The influencer, in this context, is not merely an information mediator but a symbolic agent who affectively structures decisions, especially in ecotourism and transformative travel.

Digital influence should therefore be understood as a socio-affective dynamic system with measurable effects on tourism consumption. Trust acts as risk reducer and catalyst of desire; information search becomes a form of symbolic validation; and desire acts as a bridge between intention and action. These findings reinforce that ecotourism is not built solely on infrastructure and traditional marketing, but on the ability to create emotional connections and authentic narratives that embody values of belonging, experience and sustainability.

Finally, it is essential to question the sustainability of these connections in the long term, and whether continuous exposure to idealized influences might generate unrealistic expectations, environmental pressures and consumption dynamics that erode the principles of responsible tourism.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research examined the extent to which trust in digital influencers influences the purchasing behavior in ecotourism, considering the mediating roles of desire and information search. Using PLS-SEM, this study empirically tested a structural model composed of eleven hypotheses, all of which were confirmed with statistically significant coefficients, demonstrating the robustness of the proposed relationships among trust, desire, information-seeking purchasing behavior.

The results of this research contribute both theoretically and empirically to the fields of influencer marketing and consumer behavior in ecotourism. Academically, the study broadens the understanding of socio-affective mechanism by proposing an integrative model that connects trust, desire and information search with customer's purchase decision, highlighting the relevance of emotional dimensions in tourism choices, specifically those mediated by influencers.

These contributions demonstrate that ecotourism consumption decisions are not purely rational but are the result of a complex interplay of affect, perception of authenticity and informational validation. The proposed model advances the existing literature by showing that desire plays a central mediating role, guiding the consumer from intention and action, while the information search operates as a mechanism of symbolic confirmation rather than purely cognitive evaluation. These patterns are characteristic of decision-making in digital environments.

From a managerial perspective, the results provide insights for developing more authentic and relational communication strategies. Influencer credibility and alignment with brands or a destination's values are key to building trust and engagement among consumers. Trust direct influences purchasing behavior and desire, indicating that managers should select influencers perceived as authentic, consistent and ethically aligned with ecotourism practices.

The strong influence of desire on purchasing decisions highlights the importance of narratives that inspire a sense of belonging, without reinforcing unrealistic idealizations or environmentally unsustainable practices. Information search activated by desire also serves as a validator, pointing to the need for clear, reliable institutional content integrated with influencer communications to ensure continuity between emotion and cognition throughout the decision-making journey. Finally, the indirect effects identified here demonstrate that decisions do not arise only from direct stimuli, but from complex affective-cognitive circuits, reinforcing the importance of monitoring tourist flows and planning campaigns that respect the environmental capacity of destinations.

Socially, this research highlights the potential of influencers as agents of cultural transformation, capable of promoting more conscious and sustainable consumption practices aligned with ethical values. Yet this potential is also affected by structural tensions: algorithmic logics that prioritize highly aesthetic, performative and emotionally stimulating content may paradoxically reinforce patterns of immediate consumption, romanticize nature, and create unrealistic expectations about ecotourism destinations.

Thus, while influencers can act as mediators of responsible practices, they also run the risk of reproducing socio-environmental invisibilities and contributing to tourism saturation processes if discourse, ethics and communicational responsibility are not aligned.

Among the limitations of this study, it is acknowledged that variations across influencer profiles (macro vs. micro) were not considered. These differences may reproduce biases, reinforce idealizations and amplify perceptual distortions about ecotourism destinations. Future research could explore the role of moderating variables such as perceived authenticity, influencer profile (macro vs. micro), destination identity, and travel motivations, to expand the explanatory capacity of the model. Subsequent studies are also encouraged, to integrate environmental, sociocultural and technological constructs and deepen understanding of influencer marketing implications for ecotourism.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The research data can be requested from the authors.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Jéssica Letícia Duarte Marques: Conceptualization, Data curation, Data analysis, Research, Methodology, Writing.

Álvaro Freitas Faustino-Dias: Data analysis, Methodology, Project management, Supervision, Validation and Writing – revision and editing.