



Presenting an Influencer Marketing Model for Attracting Tourists in Iran's Tourism Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to design an influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran's tourism industry. Given the research objectives, this study is an applied-developmental research. Adopting a qualitative approach and utilizing thematic analysis, an effort was made to propose the intended model. The qualitative study participants include theoretical experts (faculty members specializing in management and marketing at universities). The criterion for selecting the qualitative sample population was faculty members holding a PhD degree with expertise and teaching experience in marketing. Additionally, practical experts, including managers and experts from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, were also considered. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was employed. The sample size in the qualitative phase was determined by theoretical saturation, meaning that interviews with theoretical and practical experts continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The saturation point was achieved after conducting semi-structured interviews with 16 experts. Data collection in the qualitative phase was conducted through semi-structured interviews. To ensure the reliability of the qualitative research phase and theoretical saturation, the agreement matrix test and a dual-coder reliability chart were used. The model design and identification of main and sub-themes were carried out using Maxqda 2020 software. Based on the findings, the main themes of the influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran's tourism industry consist of seven key components: identifying and selecting appropriate influencers, producing and disseminating engaging content, creating targeted campaigns, enhancing audience engagement, utilizing innovative marketing technologies, emphasizing Iran's competitive advantages, and measuring and evaluating marketing effectiveness.

Keywords: *Influencer marketing, tourist attraction, tourism industry, thematic analysis.*

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest and most dynamic industries in the world, significantly contributing to the economic, social, and cultural development of nations [1]. Iran, with its ancient civilization, rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, and unique attractions, has great potential to become a leading global tourism hub [2].

However, Iran's share of global tourism is significantly lower than that of neighboring countries such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. According to statistics from the World Tourism Organization (2023), Iran's share of global tourism is less than 1%, whereas countries with fewer attractions have secured a much larger portion [1]. Thus, developing innovative and effective strategies to attract tourists has become a national priority. One such strategy is influencer marketing, which leverages digital media and well-known individuals to enhance Iran's tourism brand.

The choice of a tourism destination is a crucial aspect of tourists' purchasing behavior, and understanding the influencing factors plays a key role in tourism planning and destination development. Based on the Black Box Model of Consumer Behavior, two major categories of factors influence tourist purchasing behavior: tourist characteristics and marketing stimuli [3]. The sustainability and competitiveness of shopping tourism destinations require a thorough understanding of tourists' needs and behaviors. Destination selection is influenced by both environmental and marketing factors as well as the tourists' personal conditions and characteristics [4, 5].

One of the key elements for improving tourism marketing is the effective use of marketing tools and variables. Sardi Makan (2001) argued that marketing can provide potential tourists with information about a region's offerings, encouraging them to visit. Limar and Weiss (2009) highlighted influencer marketing as a modern marketing approach that impacts consumers' purchasing decisions [6].

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed both human life and business practices. Influencer impact has become a crucial concept in social media [4]. Influencer marketing is defined as a modern marketing strategy based on the influence of high-profile individuals (influencers) on the attitudes, behaviors, and decisions of target audiences [7]. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing relies on credibility, trust, and personal connections, making influencer messaging more effective [8].

Although influencer marketing is often integrated with other marketing strategies, its direct impact has increased

with the advent of social media platforms and the ability to embed direct links. Influencer-driven advertisements often spark discussions, making them a precursor to word-of-mouth marketing [9-11]. If the promoted content is highly shareable, it can further lead to viral marketing [12-14].

Social media influencers frequently share their opinions and experiences about services and products online. Many of these posts are sponsored by brands, while others serve as independent recommendations [15]. Influencers can leverage their reach and credibility to generate personal revenue through brand collaborations [9]. Given the increasing reliance on social media influencers for brand endorsements, it is critical to analyze their impact on consumer perceptions and behaviors [7, 16, 17].

Numerous studies indicate that influencer marketing is highly effective in increasing brand awareness, generating interest in travel, and influencing tourism decisions due to its ability to establish emotional and psychological connections with audiences [18]. However, in Iran, the structured and strategic use of influencer marketing for tourism promotion remains underdeveloped, and its potential for attracting tourists has not been fully utilized [17].

The literature on influencer marketing in tourism and consumer behavior highlights various psychological, strategic, and technological aspects of this evolving field. Moghaddar et al. (2024) identified both positive and negative psychological effects of social media influencers, categorizing them into emotional support, identity formation, and destructive behaviors [4]. Similarly, Saidi et al. (2022) and Rastegari et al. (2021) emphasized the growing consumer inclination toward influencer marketing due to changes in communication patterns, technological advancements, and evolving marketing strategies, particularly on platforms like Instagram [5, 19]. The role of celebrity endorsements in shaping consumer attitudes was examined by Ismailpour et al. (2017) and Abdolvand & Hosseinzadeh Imam (2014), who found that credibility, familiarity, and brand fit play crucial roles in advertising effectiveness [12, 20]. Meanwhile, Polat et al. (2024) provided a comprehensive review of past, present, and future trends in influencer marketing within the hospitality and tourism industry, noting the increasing reliance on travel blogs, vlogs, and celebrity endorsements [3]. Kilipiri et al. (2023) highlighted the role of Instagram travel influencers in promoting sustainable tourism destinations [8], while Zhang & Huang (2022) demonstrated the shift in local tourism organizations from viral marketing to influencer marketing,

emphasizing the impact of influencer attractiveness and government initiatives on travel interest [21]. Yangjuan (2020) explored the effectiveness of local celebrity endorsements in social media marketing, showing that local endorsers generate higher social media engagement compared to standard celebrities [22]. Castillo et al. (2019) examined digital influencers' impact on engagement, expected value, and purchase intention [11], while Stubba et al. (2019) warned that neutral influencer posts might decrease brand attitudes and purchase intent when perceived as dispassionate [15]. The issue of influencer credibility was also addressed by Audrezeta et al. (2018), who emphasized the need for marketers and influencers to collaborate while maintaining authenticity [9]. Lastly, Ghotbivayghan et al. (2015) demonstrated that young consumers in Hong Kong respond positively to fashion advertisements featuring celebrity endorsers, reinforcing the idea that influencer marketing significantly affects purchasing decisions in various industries [23]. Collectively, these studies underscore the increasing significance of influencer marketing in tourism promotion, consumer engagement, and brand perception, shaping contemporary digital marketing strategies.

Most previous tourism marketing studies in Iran have focused on traditional strategies, such as print advertisements and in-person events (Piahour et al., 2020). In contrast, international research has demonstrated the effectiveness of influencer marketing on digital platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube in attracting younger, tech-savvy audiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This theoretical gap highlights the necessity of developing localized influencer marketing models tailored to Iran's tourism industry.

From a practical perspective, Iran's poor performance in attracting international tourists is evident in existing statistics. According to the Iranian Statistics Center (2023), Iran received approximately 4.5 million inbound tourists in 2022, whereas Turkey attracted over 40 million tourists in the same period (Statista, 2023). Additionally, surveys conducted by the Cultural Heritage Organization (2023) indicate that over 70% of inbound tourists criticize the lack of adequate information and marketing regarding Iran's attractions. Given these statistics, one of the primary challenges in Iran's tourism industry is the underutilization of digital and influencer marketing strategies. While many countries have successfully used travel influencers to attract international tourists, Iran lacks a cohesive influencer marketing strategy. Therefore, developing a localized

influencer marketing model tailored to Iran's market needs and characteristics can significantly enhance Iran's global tourism positioning. Such a model should be based on tourist behavior analysis, identification of suitable influencers, and optimized content marketing across digital platforms to build trust, engagement, and ultimately increase Iran's global tourism share.

2. Methodology

The nature of this study is exploratory, and qualitative data has been used. The aim of this research is to present an influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran's tourism industry. The qualitative study participants include theoretical experts, comprising faculty members specializing in management and marketing at universities. The criteria for selecting the qualitative sample population were faculty members with a PhD degree, expertise, and a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience in marketing. Additionally, practical experts, including managers and experts from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, were included. The expertise criterion for practical experts was a minimum of 10 years of relevant work experience and at least a graduate-level degree.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was employed. The sample size in the qualitative phase was determined based on theoretical saturation, meaning that interviews with experts continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The saturation point was achieved after conducting semi-structured interviews with 16 experts. Using thematic analysis, the study aimed to develop and validate a model for "presenting an influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran's tourism industry."

To ensure construct validity in the qualitative research, participant validation was employed. Additionally, the search for negative cases and alternative explanations was implemented. Efforts were made to select interviewees with diverse experiences and perspectives to prevent any bias stemming from the personal inclinations of the participants. Furthermore, to achieve internal validity, after coding, categorization, and qualitative data analysis, an experience-based model was developed and compared with the theoretically predicted model.

To ensure the reliability of the qualitative phase and theoretical saturation, the agreement matrix test and a dual-coder reliability chart were used, which will be explained

further. The analysis was conducted using Maxqda 2020 qualitative analysis software.

3. Findings and Results

This section presents the analysis of the collected data and the research findings. The data collection tool consisted of semi-structured interview transcripts, and the results were analyzed using Maxqda 2020 qualitative analysis software. The data analysis was conducted based on 16 interview transcripts. Subsequently, three stages of coding were carried out, including open coding, coding for sub-themes, and coding for main themes. These three stages are visually illustrated in Figure 1.

Ultimately, for the present study, a model was developed under the framework of “influencer marketing for attracting tourists in Iran’s tourism industry.” The coding process was conducted as follows:

1. **Open coding:** In this stage, interview transcripts were collected and categorized by the researcher. It is noteworthy that in this study, 16 interview transcripts were collected and coded.
2. **Sub-themes:** Coding for sub-themes was performed when the researcher assigned a code to

each paragraph based on its content. More than one code could be assigned to a particular segment of text or paragraph.

3. **Main themes:** At this stage, the extracted codes were displayed in the Code System, allowing for categorization and integration of the codes. This stage represents selective coding (main themes), where codes were used for classification, categorization, and structuring the framework.

The qualitative findings reveal the identification of seven main themes, which constitute the primary organizing themes (dimensions) of the influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran’s tourism industry. These themes include:

1. Identifying and selecting appropriate influencers
2. Producing and disseminating engaging content
3. Creating targeted campaigns
4. Enhancing audience engagement
5. Utilizing innovative marketing technologies
6. Emphasizing Iran’s competitive advantages

Accordingly, the thematic network of the influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran’s tourism industry is presented in Figure 1.

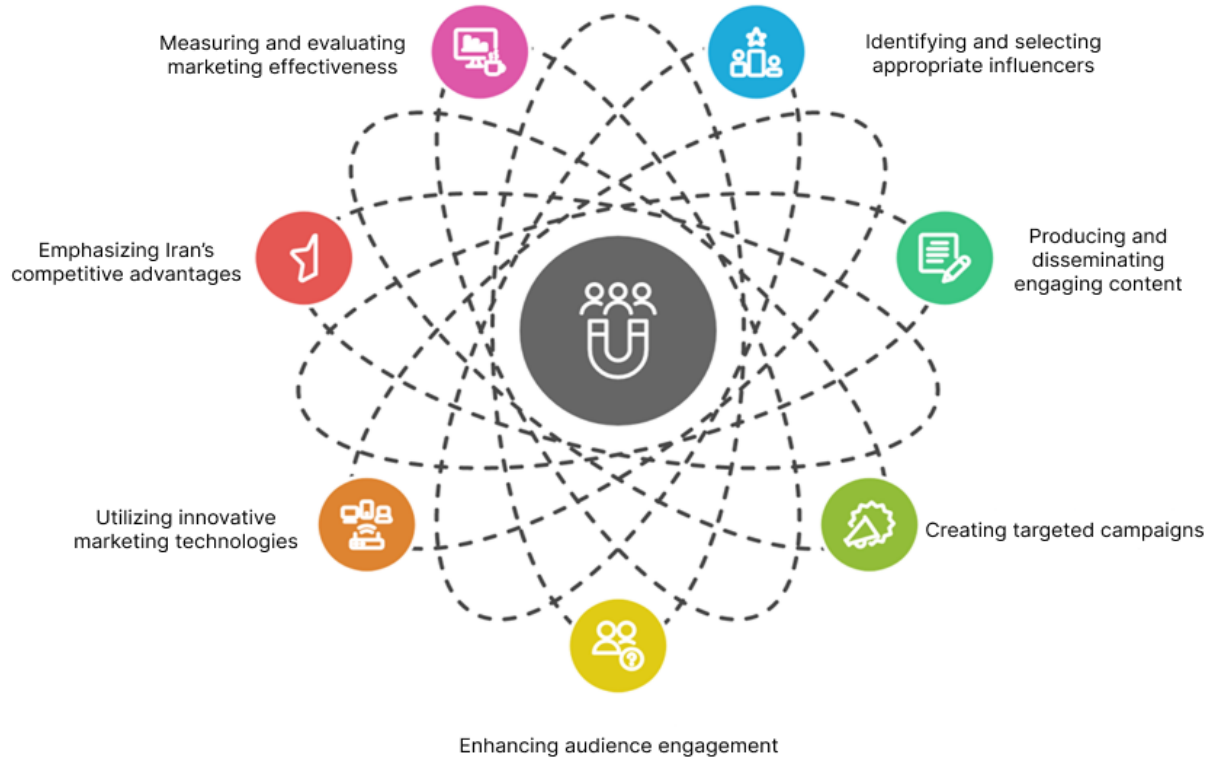


Figure 1. Thematic Network of Influencer Marketing for Attracting Tourists in Iran’s Tourism Industry

One of the key indicators of reliability in qualitative research is the evaluation of two or more documents concerning their reference to a specific index. Maxqda 2020 software provides this capability. The reliability coefficient can be calculated using a single test or multiple tests, and these tests can be conducted at a single time point or multiple time points.

For each selected theme in this study, the level of agreement among interviewees was calculated, where an acceptable threshold of agreement was considered to be above 60%. This means that the intersection of each row and column for the same interviewee naturally equates to 1, and the agreement level between an interviewee and other interviewees must be assessed.

For example, Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 demonstrated a 0.73 (73%) agreement on a selected theme. The interpretation of these figures indicates that Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 shared a 73% similarity in their responses regarding the selected theme. Given that the agreement level among the interviewees exceeded 60%, it can be concluded that theoretical saturation was achieved after the twelfth interview.

The correlation matrix of the interviewees concerning the identified themes is presented in Table 1. The matrix displays the degree of agreement among interviewees for each theme.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Interviewees for Themes

Interviewee	Res0 1	Res0 2	Res0 3	Res0 4	Res0 5	Res0 6	Res0 7	Res0 8	Res0 9	Res1 0	Res1 1	Res1 2	Res1 3	Res1 4	Res1 5	Res1 6
Res01	1.00	0.73	0.67	0.65	0.67	0.66	0.67	0.69	0.67	0.65	0.64	0.65	0.65	0.64	0.71	0.70
Res02	0.73	1.00	0.65	0.67	0.65	0.66	0.65	0.64	0.65	0.67	0.69	0.67	0.67	0.69	0.62	0.63
Res03	0.67	0.65	1.00	0.65	0.67	0.66	0.67	0.64	0.63	0.67	0.69	0.63	0.65	0.64	0.64	0.65
Res04	0.65	0.67	0.65	1.00	0.67	0.64	0.67	0.69	0.72	0.65	0.66	0.72	0.67	0.69	0.71	0.70
Res05	0.67	0.65	0.67	0.67	1.00	0.68	0.65	0.62	0.67	0.67	0.62	0.65	0.70	0.71	0.71	0.65
Res06	0.66	0.66	0.66	0.64	0.68	1.00	0.66	0.67	0.66	0.62	0.72	0.69	0.62	0.65	0.63	0.64
Res07	0.67	0.65	0.67	0.67	0.65	0.66	1.00	0.62	0.72	0.65	0.66	0.61	0.67	0.66	0.71	0.72
Res08	0.69	0.64	0.64	0.69	0.62	0.67	0.62	1.00	0.62	0.71	0.63	0.76	0.64	0.65	0.63	0.62
Res09	0.67	0.65	0.63	0.72	0.67	0.66	0.72	0.62	1.00	0.63	0.69	0.70	0.70	0.64	0.80	0.77
Res10	0.65	0.67	0.67	0.65	0.67	0.62	0.65	0.71	0.63	1.00	0.69	0.65	0.74	0.78	0.64	0.67
Res11	0.64	0.69	0.69	0.66	0.62	0.72	0.66	0.63	0.69	0.69	1.00	0.69	0.69	0.63	0.65	0.66
Res12	0.65	0.67	0.63	0.72	0.65	0.69	0.61	0.76	0.70	0.65	0.69	1.00	0.63	0.73	0.69	0.58
Res13	0.65	0.67	0.65	0.67	0.70	0.62	0.67	0.64	0.70	0.74	0.69	0.63	1.00	0.78	0.73	0.70
Res14	0.64	0.69	0.64	0.69	0.71	0.65	0.66	0.65	0.64	0.78	0.63	0.73	0.78	1.00	0.67	0.62
Res15	0.71	0.62	0.64	0.71	0.71	0.63	0.71	0.63	0.80	0.64	0.65	0.69	0.73	0.67	1.00	0.73
Res16	0.70	0.63	0.65	0.70	0.65	0.64	0.72	0.62	0.77	0.67	0.66	0.58	0.70	0.52	0.73	1.00

Following this, the frequency of each identified main and sub-theme is calculated based on the cross-referenced responses of each interviewee, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Sub-theme Codes in Interview Files

Main and Sub-Themes	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14	R15	R16	Total Frequency
Selecting and Identifying Suitable Influencers																	
Choosing Tourism-Related Influencers	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	1	4	3	0	1	4	2	4	2	35
Influencer Credibility and Authenticity	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	4	2	0	2	2	2	1	2	1	28
Access to Target Audience	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	0	3	0	0	1	3	2	2	2	24
Producing and Disseminating Engaging Content																	
Use of High-Quality Images and Videos	1	2	2	1	1	1	0	3	3	3	1	3	1	1	0	2	25
Effective Storytelling	2	1	1	2	2	1	3	1	2	3	3	0	1	1	1	3	27
Interactive Content	1	2	1	2	0	2	0	1	0	2	2	2	2	3	0	0	20
Creating Targeted Campaigns																	
Market Segmentation	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	3	1	0	2	0	0	3	4	28
Collaborative Advertising Campaigns	2	1	2	1	2	1	0	3	1	3	0	1	3	2	0	2	24
Precise Targeting	1	2	2	1	0	2	2	1	2	1	3	2	1	1	1	0	22
Enhancing Audience Engagement																	
Encouraging Engagement	2	1	1	2	2	0	1	2	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	2	17
Creating a Sense of Belonging	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	3	0	2	3	1	2	1	0	24
Using Attractive and Relevant Hashtags	2	1	2	0	1	1	2	3	0	2	0	0	2	1	0	1	18
Utilizing Innovative Marketing Technologies																	
Data Analytics	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	13
Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR)	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	2	1	2	0	2	2	2	2	1	20
Use of Advanced Platforms	1	1	1	1	0	2	2	0	1	2	2	1	2	1	0	2	19
Emphasizing Iran's Competitive Advantages																	
Highlighting Iran's Culture and History	1	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	1	0	1	2	16
Showcasing Iran's Untouched Nature	1	2	3	1	0	2	1	2	3	2	3	2	1	2	4	3	32
Emphasizing Iranian Hospitality	2	1	1	2	2	0	2	1	2	0	2	2	1	0	5	2	25
Measuring and Evaluating Marketing Effectiveness																	
Measuring Feedback	1	1	2	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	13
Pre- and Post-Campaign Comparisons	1	1	0	2	1	1	0	1	1	2	2	2	0	2	1	0	17
Return on Investment	1	1	2	0	1	0	2	1	0	2	2	1	0	1	1	0	15

Table 2 presents the distribution of coded segments related to sub-themes based on interview files. The data reflect the occurrence of each sub-theme across interview participants.

The next section of this study focuses on designing an influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran's tourism industry. This model addresses the primary research question by providing a structured framework.

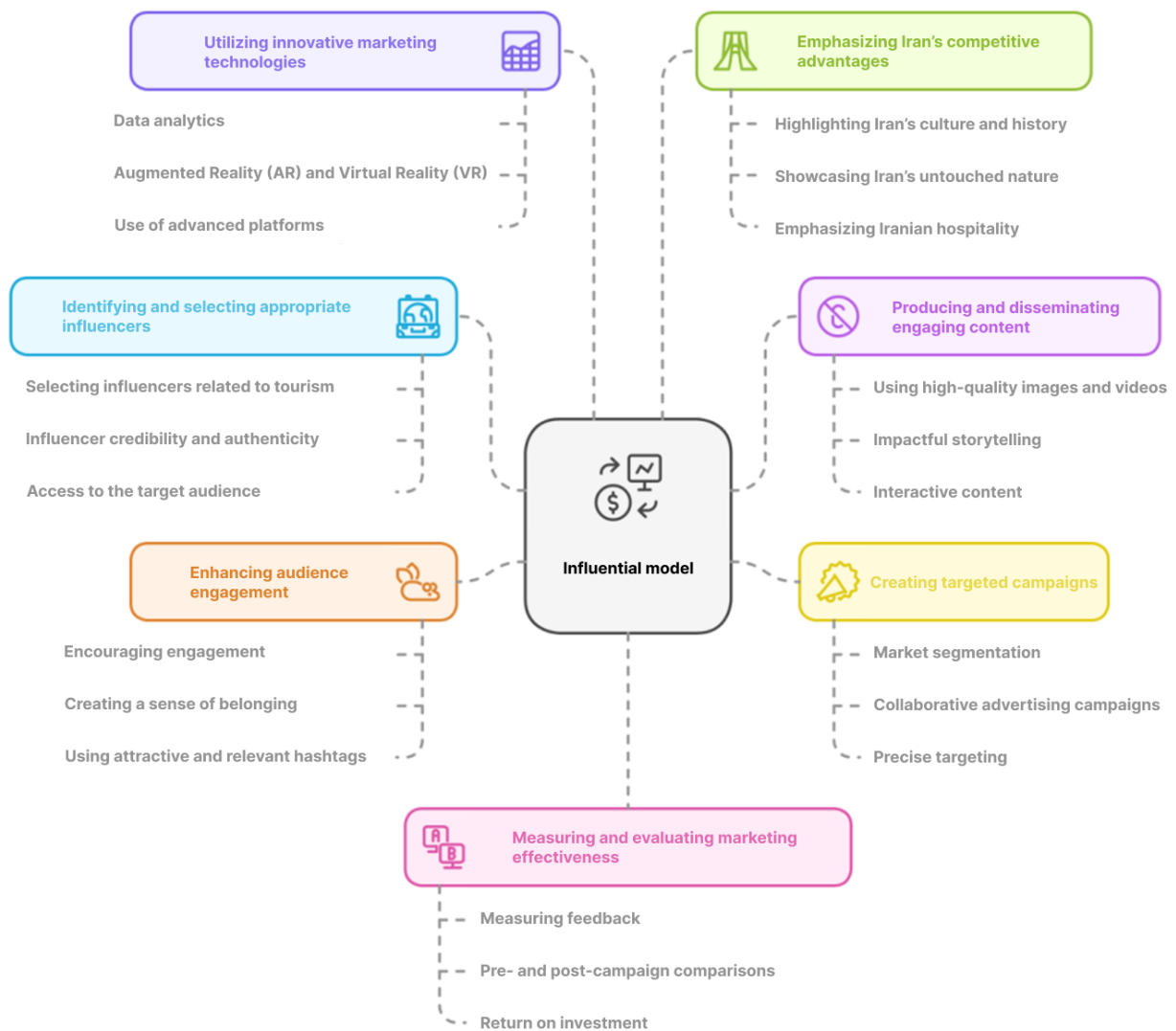


Figure 2. Influencer Marketing Model for Attracting Tourists in Iran’s Tourism Industry

Figure 2 visually represents the conceptual model derived from the thematic analysis. This model integrates key dimensions and constructs that contribute to influencer marketing effectiveness in the tourism sector.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the obtained results, the main themes of the influencer marketing model for attracting tourists in Iran’s tourism industry consist of seven primary dimensions: identifying and selecting appropriate influencers, producing and disseminating engaging content, creating targeted campaigns, enhancing audience engagement, utilizing innovative marketing technologies, emphasizing Iran’s

competitive advantages, and measuring and evaluating marketing effectiveness.

Accordingly, the first main theme (identifying and selecting appropriate influencers) includes the sub-themes of choosing tourism-related influencers, influencer credibility and authenticity, and access to the target audience. This finding suggests that selecting suitable influencers from among individuals with high credibility, a relevant audience, and the ability to convey the intended messages is a fundamental step in influencer marketing. The findings related to this theme are somewhat consistent with prior research [3, 4, 9, 15, 18].

The second main theme (producing and disseminating engaging content) comprises the sub-themes using high-

quality images and videos, effective storytelling, and interactive content. This finding suggests that creating creative, engaging, and diverse content in the form of images, videos, and travel stories can stimulate excitement and increase the desire to visit among the audience. These findings align with previous studies [4, 8, 11, 21].

The third main theme (creating targeted campaigns) includes the sub-themes market segmentation, collaborative advertising campaigns, and precise targeting. This finding suggests that targeted marketing campaigns should be designed based on the characteristics of the target audience, such as nationality, interests, and travel style. The findings related to this theme are somewhat consistent with prior research [3, 5, 9, 10, 17, 21, 24].

The fourth main theme (enhancing audience engagement) includes the sub-themes encouraging engagement, creating a sense of belonging, and using attractive and relevant hashtags. This finding suggests that continuous engagement with the audience, responding to comments, participating in discussions, and establishing direct connections contribute to building trust and increasing tourist loyalty. These findings align with prior studies [6-8, 24, 25].

The fifth main theme (utilizing innovative marketing technologies) includes the sub-themes data analytics, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), and the use of advanced platforms. This finding suggests that emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI) are powerful tools for creating engaging and personalized experiences in influencer marketing within the tourism industry. These findings are somewhat in line with prior research [3, 11, 14, 26].

The sixth main theme (emphasizing Iran's competitive advantages) includes the sub-themes highlighting Iran's culture and history, showcasing Iran's untouched nature, and emphasizing Iranian hospitality. This finding suggests that Iran possesses unique advantages in cultural, historical, natural, and economic aspects. Highlighting these advantages in marketing messages can attract tourists and position Iran as a distinctive destination. These findings align with prior studies [8, 15, 21, 22].

The seventh main theme (measuring and evaluating marketing effectiveness) includes the sub-themes measuring feedback, pre- and post-campaign comparisons, and return on investment. This finding suggests that continuous assessment of influencer marketing campaign performance using key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement rate, content views, and conversion rate is

essential for optimizing strategies. These evaluations help identify the strengths and weaknesses of campaigns. These findings are somewhat consistent with prior research [6, 9, 14, 23].

Overall, this model, by focusing on identifying suitable influencers, producing engaging content, maintaining continuous audience engagement, and utilizing innovative technologies, can play a crucial role in enhancing Iran's position in the global tourism industry. Therefore, based on each of the aforementioned themes, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Identifying and Selecting Appropriate Influencers:** Establishing a database of credible and relevant influencers in the tourism sector and evaluating their influence on target audiences is recommended.
2. **Producing and Disseminating Engaging Content:** Leveraging visual storytelling and short videos to showcase Iran's cultural, natural, and historical attractions on popular platforms is suggested.
3. **Creating Targeted Campaigns:** Designing tailored campaigns for specific countries' tourists while considering cultural, economic, and travel needs is proposed.
4. **Enhancing Audience Engagement:** Hosting online contests or offering special discounts to tourists who share their experiences about Iran on social media is recommended.
5. **Utilizing Innovative Marketing Technologies:** Implementing virtual reality (VR) experiences to offer virtual tours of Iran's attractions to a global audience is suggested.
6. **Emphasizing Iran's Competitive Advantages:** Developing advertising content that highlights Iran's cultural diversity, affordable travel costs, and historical attractions is recommended.
7. **Measuring and Evaluating Marketing Effectiveness:** Using data analytics tools to monitor campaign performance and optimize marketing activities based on key performance indicators (KPIs) is suggested.

Additionally, future researchers may explore the topic of "AI-Based Influencer Marketing for Attracting International Tourists to Iran." This approach can provide new insights into leveraging advanced technologies to enhance engagement and the appeal of influencer marketing campaigns, offering innovative solutions for competing in the global tourism market.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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