Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

From Envy to Aspiration: How Travel Influencer Characteristics Shape Travel Aspiration Through Benign and Malicious Envy?

Sudhir Bhatia

sudhirbhatiadhiru@gmail.com

Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology

Harbhajan Bansal

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Research Article

Keywords: Travel influencers, benign envy, malicious envy, travel aspiration, social comparison theory, PLS-SEM

Posted Date: October 30th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9364457/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

From Envy to Aspiration: How Travel Influencer Characteristics Shape Travel Aspiration Through Benign and Malicious Envy?

Abstract

Social media travel influencers have emerged as powerful catalysts of travel aspiration, yet the emotional mechanisms connecting influencer characteristics to audience aspiration remain underexplored. Drawing on Social Comparison Theory and Dual Envy Theory, this study proposes and tests an integrated framework in which attractiveness, popularity, and perceived similarity shape travel aspiration through the parallel mediating pathways of benign and malicious envy. Data were collected from 311 followers of travel influencers and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Results reveal that influencer popularity is the strongest direct predictor of travel aspiration, while perceived similarity is the strongest antecedent of benign envy. Benign envy significantly and consistently mediates the relationships between all three influencer characteristics and travel aspiration through complementary partial mediation. Contrary to theoretical expectations, influencer attractiveness does not significantly predict malicious envy, and malicious envy exerts no significant influence on travel aspiration, nor does it mediate any relationship. These findings reveal a meaningful asymmetry between the two envy pathways, demonstrating that not all envy translates into behavioral outcomes. The study extends Social Comparison Theory and Dual Envy Theory to the travel influencer domain and offers actionable guidance for destination marketers and influencer strategy practitioners on designing relatability-driven content that activates aspirational emotional responses.

Keywords

Travel influencers; benign envy; malicious envy; travel aspiration; social comparison theory; PLS-SEM

1. Introduction

Social media has become an inextricable component of contemporary society, exerting a demonstrable influence on choices we make across all spheres of life (Van Dijck, 2013). Studies in Tourism marketing (Olga Lo & Razaq, 2014) and Consumer behaviour (Vinodh et al., 2024) corroborate its pervasive impact on cognition and behaviour. It is undeniable that social media shapes travel behaviour from pre-trip inspiration to post-visit reflection (Hudson & Thal, 2013). People often post their travel journeys on social media, showcasing destination highlights, activities, and personal experiences. Lo et al. (2011) reported that 89% of travellers take photographs and 41% of them share photos during trips, while most of the travellers post reviews after the trip (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Travel content holds a significant share in the total user-generated content on social media. In the modern-day tourism marketing ecosystem, a notable phenomenon is the rise of travel influencers who post travel-related content on social media and amass large followings on platforms like Instagram (Pop et al., 2022). Deploying social media influencers has become an indispensable marketing strategy across industries, with the travel sector being particularly transformed by influencer partnerships (Gretzel, 2017; Yetimoğlu & Uğurlu, 2020). The dynamics of travel influencers and the resultant shift in travel behaviour is worth investigating and the researchers have given due importance to this.

Many studies have found that travel influencers are the source of travel information and inspiration (Magno & Cassia, 2018). The informational aspects of influencer marketing have already been well-documented whereas the emotional nuances remain underexplored for the tourism domain (Kilipiri et al., 2023; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). While audiences perceive social media influencers as authentic narrators of travel experiences, their content creation is fundamentally shaped by the notion of showing only the good part (Taylor, 2022; Wellman et al., 2020). They display luxurious amenities, wonderful destination highlights, and rich experiential adventures and avoid undesirous mundane realities (e.g., airport queues, crowds). This is further fuelled by the strategic content editing in order to make the self-presentation as glamorous as possible. The overt social persona of a travel influencer has emotional consequences for the social media users. Social media influencers are seen as someone living the ideal life and people experience being envious of their aspirational lifestyle. In the travel domain, studies reveal that viewing idealized travel content activates brain regions associated with both desire and self-evaluation (Asdecker, 2022). The travel content posted by the travel influencers is a conspicuous consumption signal that fuels social comparison and distorts our aspirations. Envy is one of the widely recognized consequences of social media consumption and it can result in both positive and negative behavioural outcomes.

Drawing from the Social Comparison Theory, it can be easily understood that the travel content posted by social media influencers serves as a powerful catalyst for upward social comparisons due to numerous intersecting reasons: (1) meticulously crafted visual aesthetics optimized for prestige appeal (Bainotti, 2024), (2) strategic selective depiction that omits mundane realities (Can et al., 2025), (3) the perceived social and physical attractiveness of influencers (Wahba et al., 2025), and (4) their large follower bases that serve as social proof of status (Janssen et al., 2022). Moreover, influencers are perceived as someone similar to

them as opposed to the celebrities who do not have perceived attainability appeal. On the basis of this discussion, we substantiate that SMIs in the travel domain induce travel envy among the social media users. However, the ambivalent nature of envy adds to the confusion as to how the social media influencers impact the travel aspirations.

Envy triggered by travel influencers exhibits a dual nature within the social comparison paradigm (Smith & Kim, 2007), functioning as either benign envy that stimulates aspirational travel motivation (van de Ven et al., 2009), or malicious envy that fosters resentment and self-deprecation (Lange & Crusius, 2015). Prior studies suggest that benign envy generally induces positive aspirations and as such travel influencers can be seen as 'aspirational peers', while malicious envy often leads to contrastive emotions and negative behaviours.

While envy has been extensively studied in digital contexts (Lange & Crusius, 2015; Smith & Kim, 2007), its dual-path manifestation (benign vs. malicious) in travel influencer contexts remains theoretically underdeveloped. Prior research has predominantly examined envy through either a social credibility lens (Wang et al., 2024), which conflates envy with general source effects, or a personality-trait approach (Ng et al., 2023) that neglects the role of influencer attributes. Building on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Dual Envy Theory (van de Ven et al., 2009), we address these limitations by proposing a novel framework that: (1) identifies three key influencer characteristics (attractiveness, perceived similarity, popularity) as distinct antecedents of travel-related envy, (2) models their differential effects through parallel mediation pathways (benign vs. malicious envy), and (3) specifies how these emotional responses ultimately polarize travel aspirations. Our model advances beyond existing work by demonstrating how the same influencer attributes can simultaneously motivate and discourage travel intentions through competing psychological mechanisms.

The main objectives of this study are as follows: to examine the influence of influencer attractiveness, influencer popularity, and perceived similarity on travel aspirations of their audience, to investigate the mediating role of benign envy in the relationship between influencer characteristics and travel aspirations, and to investigate the mediating role of malicious envy in the relationship between influencer characteristics and travel aspirations. The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated emotional framework that connects multiple influencer traits with audience aspiration, using benign and malicious envy as distinct mediators. Overall, the study advances our understanding of emotion-driven digital travel behaviour in the influencer era.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Travel Aspiration

Travel aspiration is an individual's dream to undertake leisure travel at specific destinations. It is an emotionally charged desire driven by affective responses to some social stimuli and

on a cognitive level, it is future oriented based on goal setting (Pearce, 2019; Dedeoglu et al., 2025). Hart (2016) highlights aspirations could be based within the realms of rationality, emotion, pragmatism, or idealism. Rooted in Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), it emerges when individuals idealize travel experiences through upward comparisons, and in Appraisal Theory (Lazarus, 1991), where envy or admiration triggers goal formation. In the present context, travel aspiration can be influenced by emotional responses to the content posted by travel influencers (Smith, 2000; Liu et al., 2019). Travel aspiration is worth investigating because of its emotional intensity and pre-decisional yearning that can act as a latent travel motivator (Ye et al., 2025).

2.2 Influencer Characteristics and Travel Aspiration

Social media influencers are one of the new marketing realities and influencer marketing has spanned its power over various sectors including the tourism industry. Travel influencer is a rising SMI category across all the social media platforms. These influencers showcase their travel journeys via social media photos and videos and impact the travel planning and execution. The destinations that are admired on social media become the dream tour of their audiences. The destination highlights include specific sights, cafes and restaurants, dream-worthy stays, and a blend of cultural glimpses of the places these influencers visit. The life stories of these influencers are attractive and aspirational for the social media users as they have a socially desirable lifestyle and a large number of followers despite being from the similar background. Travel influences not only shape destination awareness but also engrave deeper psychological outcomes such as aspirational desire. Previous literature in this space has focused on effectiveness, persuasiveness and informational value of the influencer content ignoring the emotional impacts of it (Saini et al., 2023). The luxury cues in the picture-perfect moments posted on social media bring considerable desirability and aspiration. Social media users compare their own monotonous routine-bound lives with the operant socially attractive lifestyle of the influencers.

One of the most pursued themes in this research direction is the influencer traits that act as personal influence for the consumers of their social media content. It is well-documented that travel influencers possess credibility, perceived authenticity, expertise and trustworthiness shaping attitude and travel behaviour. Moreover, influencer attractiveness has also gained academic attention and its impact on travel behaviour has been investigated without taking into account the affective responses of social media users. Influencer attractiveness refers to the influencer's perceived physical and social appeal (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Physical attractiveness enhances the influence and social attractiveness is desirable and aspirational (Wahba et al., 2025). On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H1a: Influencer attractiveness positively influences travel aspiration.

Travel influencers start as ordinary social media users sharing their travel-related ideas, stories, destination and tour highlights and on later stage, they amass a large no. of followers and eventually become popular. Influencer popularity refers to the perceived social standing

and public visibility of a content creator, typically inferred through quantifiable social metrics such as follower count, likes, comments, and shares (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). SMIs get more likes and have wider reach, which is a desirable stage in the contemporary world (Manthiou et al., 2024). Some seminal social media studies have revealed that more like and desire to be popular is one of the motivators of social media usage. In the present context, the aforesaid popularity brings freedom and enjoyment in terms of the ability to travel on the basis of economic gains due to a large follower-base. Moreover, influencer popularity serves as a social proof heuristic (Cialdini, 2013) that enhances the influencer's aspirational value. On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H1b: Influencer popularity positively influences travel aspiration.

In line with the social comparison theory, it can be said that influencers carry more aspirational values because users perceive them as similar. Perceived similarity reflects the degree to which followers see influencers as relatable or similar to themselves in terms of lifestyle, values, or background. It is the degree to which followers identify shared traits encompassing demographic resemblance (age, culture, etc.) and psychographic congruence (beliefs, goals, or interests). When similarity is high, followers may perceive the influencer's experiences as attainable and relevant, making it more likely that they will internalize and aspire to replicate such experiences (Lee & Watkins, 2016). On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H1c: Perceived similarity with the influencer positively influences travel aspiration.

2.3 Envy as an Emotional Mediator

Social comparison is a natural tendency to evaluate one's own experiences in light of experiences of others. When such comparison is with someone considered to be having more privileges, it is an upward form of social comparison, while downward social comparison is with someone who is considered as low-grade in terms of the compared traits. Social media research has already pointed out that people indulge in social comparisons with the social media influencers and it can evoke many affective responses among them. Envy is one such emotion that gets triggered by the social media content posted by the influences as it is not always enjoyable to see someone living the desired life. Travel influencers show their status and lifestyle while sharing their travel journeys and people get envious of them. These influences make social media a fertile ground for stimulating feelings of relative inferiority among the social media users by posting their content in an idealized form in accordance with their personal and professional motives. Influencer marketing literature has found that envy is predicted by numerous influencer traits and such studies have been conducted in the context of fashion and beauty influencers (Hendricks & Bright, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). We substantiate that influencer characteristics have an impact on envious feelings of social media users. Envy is a complex emotional reaction that arises when individuals perceive others to possess superior qualities, achievements, or possessions that they desire but lack (Smith & Kim, 2007). It is well-documented that envy has an impact on the aspirations of an individual

and on that basis, we contemplate that envy induced by the social media influencers leads to an impact on the travel aspirations.

2.4 Mediation by Benign Envy

The contemporary Psychology literature has identified two functionally distinct forms of envy: benign envy and malicious envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Benign envy occurs when the observer admires the achievements of others and feels motivated to improve their own situation. It is characterized by assimilative thinking and can lead to increased ambition, emulation, and aspirational behaviours. In the context of influencer marketing, benign envy can arise when followers view travel experiences of an influencer not as unfair privilege but as deserved and achievable. Influencer attractiveness is one of the traits that make them a social media star and it signals prestige (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). When followers perceive an influencer as socially and physically attractive, they are likely to be positively envious of the influencer. This positive form of envy stems from the admiration and it may inspire the followers to attain similar outcomes (Chae, 2018). On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H2a: Benign envy mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and travel aspiration.

Influencer popularity is yet another social proof that may evoke desirability among the social media users (Jin et al., 2019). When followers view popular influencers as widely admired and socially validated, they are more likely to regard their lifestyle as aspirational and worth emulating. When such popularity is perceived as earned, this admiration can evoke benign envy. This may further stimulate the desire to "level up" by engaging in similar travel experiences. On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H2b: Benign envy mediates the relationship between influencer popularity and travel aspiration.

Influencer attractiveness and popularity are the factors that signal fame and power and make the travel influencers seem desirable. In the domain related to celebrity, such factors have been found to induce benign envy. However, perceived similarity is the concept that is specifically pertinent to the influencers as people relate to them and view them as "like me." It reduces psychological distance and increases identification with the influencer (Lee & Watkins, 2016). When followers see the influencer as "like me," their travel experiences appear more attainable, and the lifestyle portrayed becomes a valid reference point for comparison. Social media users feel aspired to travel to similar destinations and the goals seem more attainable due to the similarity they associate with the influencers. On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H2c: Benign envy mediates the relationship between perceived similarity and travel aspiration.

2.5 Mediation by Malicious Envy

Social media content evokes envy among users and it can be either positive or negative. In contrast to the benign envy, malicious envy stems from feelings of inferiority and perceived injustice. It is a negative emotion associated with resentment or the desire to undermine the envied other (Lange & Crusius, 2015). The content of travel influencers sometimes may reflect unattainable levels of luxury or freedom, and their followers may perceive such lifestyle as undeserved thereby triggering malicious envy (Lange & Crusius, 2015). When followers perceive the lifestyle of influencers as unrealistically perfect, the influencer attractiveness can foster negative form of envy among followers. This can reduce travel aspiration by replacing motivation with emotional withdrawal. On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H3a: Malicious envy mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and travel aspiration.

On the similar lines, highly popular travel influencers often display exclusivity and social superiority through their travel-related content. When popularity is interpreted as a reflection of unearned privilege, it may trigger malicious envy. This hostile appraisal can suppress aspirational motivation and lead to devaluation of the influencers' lifestyle. Thus, influencer popularity may indirectly decrease travel aspiration through malicious envy. On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H3b: Malicious envy mediates the relationship between influencer popularity and travel aspiration.

Perceived similarity with the influences often leads to positive emotions as it breeds identification and relatability. However, in a few instances it can also intensify feelings of inferiority and resentment. If followers perceive an influencer as similar in background but vastly more privileged in terms of travel experience, the comparison may feel unfair and it can give rise to malicious envy. The resulting emotional discomfort may hinder the formation of travel aspirations towards the destinations shown on the social media. On the basis of above discussion, we posit that:

H3c: Malicious envy mediates the relationship between perceived similarity and travel aspiration.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Measurement

A survey research design deemed fit for the present study and a structured questionnaire were framed for data collection. In order to measure all the constructs under study, mostly adapted scales were used after intensively exploring several avenues. In order to ensure content validity, scale items underwent multiple iterations of framing, pretesting among peer groups of researchers and travel enthusiasts and reframing. Later on, the face validity was ensured by getting the instrument inspected by senior academicians working in the same inquiry area and an English language Professor. Benign Envy was measured using 5 items scale adapted from Lange and Crusius's (2015) Benign and Malicious Envy Scale (BeMaS), Malicious Envy used 6 items from the same scale supplemented by van de Ven et al. (2009), Influencer Attractiveness was measured using 6 items scale adapted from McCroskey and McCain's (1974) Interpersonal Attraction Scale and Ohanian's (1990) Source Credibility Scale, Influencer Popularity was measured using 5 items scale adapted from Ladhari et al. (2020) and De Veirman et al. (2017), Perceived Similarity was measured using 6 items scale adapted from McCroskey et al. (1975) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and Travel Aspiration was measured using 5 items scale adapted from Liu et al. (2019) and Böttger et al. (2017). For all the measures, 7-point Likert-type scale was used with tailored anchors. Order was varied to maintain randomness and 2 attention-check filler tasks were kept in between to ensure high-quality data collection (For example, Please select 'Strongly Agree' for this statement).

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Data was collected employing a structured measurement instrument during April 2025 to November 2025 using Google Forms. The study was conducted in the Indian context, where social media penetration and travel influencer culture have grown substantially in recent years. The questionnaire was distributed across social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook Travel-related groups and a few travel influencers were approached to share the link on their Instagram Stories. Our target respondents were social media users actively following at least one of the travel influencers. In order to obtain data only from target respondents, 2 filtering questions were posed at the beginning after providing an introductory note explaining the context and seeking the consent of the respondent. This preliminary section of the form stated purpose of the survey and provided assurance of confidentiality. Moreover, IRB approval was also taken so as to uphold the research ethics while conducting the study. All of these efforts also helped in removing the common method bias which was later on ruled out on the basis of a 32.13% score for Harman's single-factor test. Additionally, the full collinearity test (Kock, 2017) confirmed all VIF values were below 3.33 (see Table 5). 500 responses on the survey were decided as completion of the data collection and we received 509 responses as checked on 27 Nov 2025. Out of 509 responses, 383 were eligible to complete the main section of the survey as they were active followers of one of the travel influencers.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted after data cleaning done on the basis of attention-check items. Out of 383 responses, 72 did not meet the eligibility criteria for further data analysis as those were not filled with full attention. Data was analysed employing PLS-SEM using SmartPLS 4.1.1.5 version. It is suitable for the present study as we aim to explain variance by investigating novel mediation pathways (Hair & Alamer, 2022). The composite-based approach of PLS-SEM captures all variance types (common, specific, and error), enhancing predictive accuracy opposed to Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM), which relies only on common variance (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

4. Results & Findings

4.1 Sample Profile

The sample comprised 311 respondents and the sample profile has been depicted below as Table 1. Females constituted a slight majority at 51.5%, with males accounting for 48.5%. The largest age segment fell within the 21–30 years bracket (41.8%), followed by the 16–20 years group (27.3%), reflecting a predominantly younger demographic consistent with active social media usage. Graduates formed the largest educational group (40.5%), followed by those with up to senior secondary education (30.8%) and postgraduates (20.0%). Regarding monthly disposable income, the majority fell in the ₹40,001–60,000 range (38.6%). On social media usage, 43.4% reported spending 2–3 hours daily, with 32.2% spending more than 3 hours, indicating high platform engagement. The relatively young and digitally engaged profile reflects the demographic composition of active travel influencer followers in the Indian context.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Trait	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	151	48.5
	Female	160	51.5
Age Group	16–20 years	85	27.3
	21–30 years	130	41.8
	31–40 years	60	19.3
	Above 40 years	36	11.6
Educational Qualification	Up to Senior Secondary	96	30.8

Demographic Trait	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	(12th)		
	Graduate	126	40.5
	Post-graduate	62	20
	Other	27	8.7
Monthly Disposable Income	Below 20,000	35	11.2
	20,000–40,000	70	22.5
	40,001–60,000	120	38.6
	Above 60,000	86	27.6
Time spent on social media per day	Up to 1 hour	36	11.6
	1–2 hours	40	12.9
	2–3 hours	135	43.4
	More than 3 hours	100	32.2

Source(s): Survey data collected by authors.

4.2 Assessment of Measurement Model

Convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability were assessed following Hair & Alamer (2022). The majority of items had loadings exceeding 0.70 and all the constructs satisfied the AVE criterion of 0.50 affirming convergent validity (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Table 2 shows that composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values ranged between 0.892 and 0.939, ensuring strong internal consistency.

Table 2: Constructs' Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	rhoA	Composite Reliability	AVE
Benign Envy			0.920	0.928	0.940	0.757
	BE1	0.845				
	BE2	0.889				
	BE3	0.909				

Constructs	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	rhoA	Composite Reliability	AVE
	BE4	0.882				
	BE5	0.823				
Influencer Attractiveness			0.910	0.912	0.930	0.689
	IA1	0.811				
	IA2	0.849				
	IA3	0.876				
	IA4	0.833				
	IA5	0.782				
	IA6	0.826				
Influencer Popularity			0.939	0.946	0.954	0.805
	IP1	0.917				
	IP2	0.920				
	IP3	0.868				
	IP4	0.880				
	IP5	0.899				
Malicious Envy			0.922	0.929	0.939	0.720
	ME1	0.844				
	ME2	0.885				
	ME3	0.873				
	ME4	0.867				
	ME5	0.806				
	ME6	0.814				
Perceived Similarity			0.892	0.897	0.917	0.649
	PS1	0.866				
	PS2	0.809				
	PS3	0.775				
	PS4	0.765				
	PS5	0.817				

Constructs	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	rhoA	Composite Reliability	AVE
	PS6	0.797				
Travel Aspiration			0.920	0.926	0.940	0.759
	TA1	0.885				
	TA2	0.799				
	TA3	0.909				
	TA4	0.870				
	TA5	0.889				

Source(s): Authors' own data analysis.

Discriminant validity was verified using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As shown in Table 3, the square root of the AVE for each construct (diagonal values) exceeds its highest correlation with any other construct, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker requirement. Furthermore, Table 4 shows that all HTMT ratios are below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming the distinctiveness among all latent variables.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	BE	IA	IP	ME	PS	TA
BE	0.870					
IA	0.458	0.830				
IP	0.475	0.559	0.897			
ME	-0.065	0.001	0.048	0.849		
PS	0.512	0.377	0.406	-0.197	0.806	
TA	0.642	0.539	0.633	-0.072	0.507	0.871

Note(s): BE = Benign Envy, IA = Influencer Attractiveness, IP = Influencer Popularity, ME= Malicious Envy, PS=Perceived Similarity, TA= Travel Aspiration.
Source(s): Authors' own data analysis.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity using the HTMT Criterion

	BE	IA	IP	ME	PS	TA
BE						

IA	0.492				
IP	0.499	0.598			
ME	0.097	0.082	0.081		
PS	0.552	0.414	0.437	0.212	
TA	0.687	0.587	0.672	0.115	0.552

Note(s): BE = Benign Envy, IA = Influencer Attractiveness, IP = Influencer Popularity, ME= Malicious Envy, PS=Perceived Similarity, TA= Travel Aspiration.
Source(s): Authors' own data analysis.

4.3 Assessment of Structural Model

For the structural model, first the multicollinearity bias among the variables under study was checked. All VIF values were found to be less than the critical limit of 3.33; hence, there was no issue of collinearity (see Table 5). Next, we checked for SRMR (standardized root mean square residual) to determine the good fit of the model. For both the saturated and estimated models, SRMR values (0.056) were found to be less than the conservative limit of 0.080, indicating a good fit. Consistent with Hair & Alamer (2022), a bootstrapping test was performed (10,000 sub-samples) to generate standardized beta, p values, t-statistics, and confidence intervals. All hypothesized relationships were statistically supported, except for a few non-significant paths. Specifically, IA → ME ($\beta = 0.019$, $p = 0.759$) and ME → TA ($\beta = -0.040$, $p = 0.177$) were found to be insignificant, indicating that IA does not significantly influence ME and ME does not significantly predict TA. Further, IA showed a significant positive effect on BE ($\beta = 0.205$, $p < 0.001$) and TA ($\beta = 0.142$, $p = 0.003$), while IP significantly influenced BE ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.001$), ME ($\beta = 0.144$, $p = 0.009$), and TA ($\beta = 0.337$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, PS demonstrated a significant positive impact on BE ($\beta = 0.346$, $p < 0.001$) and TA ($\beta = 0.132$, $p = 0.006$), but a significant negative effect on ME ($\beta = -0.263$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, BE was found to significantly influence TA ($\beta = 0.347$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that BE plays a crucial role in predicting TA, while ME does not exhibit a significant direct effect on TA.

Table 5: Results of Structural Model

Relationships	Std. Beta	p-value	t-value	BC 95% CI	Significance	f-square	VIF
BE -> TA	0.347	0.000	6.277	[0.240 ; 0.458]	Yes	0.180	1.602
IA -> BE	0.205	0.000	3.651	[0.096 ; 0.316]	Yes	0.044	1.515

Relationships	Std. Beta	p-value	t-value	BC 95% CI	Significance	f-square	VIF
IA -> ME	0.019	0.759	0.307	[-0.103 ; 0.139]	No	0.000	1.515
IA -> TA	0.142	0.003	2.999	[0.050 ; 0.236]	Yes	0.030	1.582
IP -> BE	0.220	0.000	3.869	[0.112 ; 0.336]	Yes	0.050	1.556
IP -> ME	0.144	0.009	2.629	[0.034 ; 0.248]	Yes	0.014	1.556
IP -> TA	0.337	0.000	6.275	[0.236 ; 0.447]	Yes	0.164	1.656
ME -> TA	-0.040	0.177	1.350	[-0.097 ; 0.018]	No	0.004	1.063
PS -> BE	0.346	0.000	6.259	[0.234 ; 0.450]	Yes	0.154	1.246
PS -> ME	-0.263	0.000	5.069	[-0.366 ; -0.162]	Yes	0.059	1.246
PS -> TA	0.132	0.006	2.751	[0.034 ; 0.221]	Yes	0.027	1.509
Mediation Analysis							
IA -> ME -> TA	-0.001	0.806	0.246	[-0.008 ; 0.005]	No		
IP -> ME -> TA	-0.006	0.210	1.254	[-0.015 ; 0.003]	No		
IA -> BE -> TA	0.071	0.001	3.205	[0.031 ; 0.117]	Yes		
PS -> ME -> TA	0.010	0.196	1.294	[-0.005 ; 0.027]	No		
IP -> BE -> TA	0.076	0.001	3.234	[0.035 ; 0.127]	Yes		
PS -> BE -> TA	0.120	0.000	3.902	[0.066 ; 0.186]	Yes		
R-Square							
BE	0.376						
ME	0.059						
TA	0.582						

Note(s): BE = Benign Envy, IA = Influencer Attractiveness, IP = Influencer Popularity, ME= Malicious Envy, PS=Perceived Similarity, TA= Travel Aspiration.
Source(s): Authors' own data analysis.

4.4 Mediation analyses

Analytical procedure outlined by Preacher & Hayes (2008) guided our mediation analysis and bootstrapping at 10,000 subsamples were run to evaluate mediating relationships. The mediation analysis revealed that BE significantly mediated the relationships between IA, IP, PS and TA. The indirect effect of IA on TA via BE ($\beta = 0.071$, $p = 0.001$), IP on TA via BE

(β = 0.076, p = 0.001), and PS on TA via BE (β = 0.120, p = 0.000) were found to be significant. These findings confirm Hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c. However, the indirect effects of IA on TA via ME (β = −0.001, p = 0.806), IP on TA via ME (β = −0.006, p = 0.210), and PS on TA via ME (β = 0.010, p = 0.196) were found to be insignificant, indicating that ME does not mediate these relationships. These findings indicate partial mediation, suggesting that BE partially explains the relationship between IA, IP, PS and TA, while ME does not act as a significant mediator. To determine the type of mediation, Zhao et al.'s (2010) guidelines were followed. When both the direct effect (c) and indirect effect (a × b) are significant and share the same sign, the mediation is classified as complementary partial mediation. In this study, all significant mediation paths via BE showed positive direct and indirect effects, confirming complementary partial mediation.

4.5 Explanatory and predictive power of model

Table 5 presents results for measures such as R^2 and f^2. Our model explained variance of 37% in BE, 5% in ME, and 58% in TA. Values of R^2 above 0.20 shows that the model has good explanatory capability (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Effect sizes (f^2) were found to range from small to medium as per (Cohen, 2013), indicating that BE, IP, and PS exert meaningful influence on TA and BE (see Table 5).

To assess predictive relevance, PLSpredict was conducted following Shmueli et al. (2019). All Q^2 predict values exceeded zero (see Table 6), confirming the model's ability to predict the endogenous constructs. Moreover, the PLS-SEM model outperformed the linear regression benchmark, showing lower RMSE values for most indicators.

Table 6: PLSpredict Results (Q^2predict and Prediction Errors)

Construct	Indicator	Q^2predict	PLS-SEM RMSE	LM RMSE
BE	BE1	0.374	1.157	1.131
	BE2	0.292	1.159	1.182
	BE3	0.294	1.281	1.291
	BE4	0.191	1.333	1.338
	BE5	0.170	1.433	1.409
ME	ME1	0.011	1.885	1.892

Construct	Indicator	Q^2predict	PLS-SEM RMSE	LM RMSE
	ME2	0.035	1.952	1.953
	ME3	0.040	1.969	1.959
	ME4	0.045	1.950	1.949
	ME5	0.025	1.647	1.683
	ME6	0.032	1.656	1.650
TA	TA1	0.454	0.910	0.900
	TA2	0.262	1.098	1.082
	TA3	0.379	0.871	0.876
	TA4	0.391	0.858	0.858
	TA5	0.360	1.064	1.041

Note(s): BE = Benign Envy, ME= Malicious Envy, TA= Travel Aspiration.
Source(s): Authors' own data analysis.

5. Discussion

This study unravelled the emotional mechanism through which travel influencer characteristics shape travel aspiration of the audience, positioning benign and malicious envy as competing affective pathways within a unified analytical framework. Our results illuminate not only which influencer traits matter, but why and through what emotional channels they exert influence on travel aspiration.

The emergence of influencer popularity as the strongest direct predictor of travel aspiration aligns with the social proof mechanism articulated by (Cialdini, 2013). The large number of followers and high engagement rates are indicators that the lifestyle of the influencer is highly validated, lending it a quality of desirability. Within the social comparison framework (Festinger, 1954), this validation reduces the aspirational distance between the present position of audience and the idealized lifestyle being shown, which encourages them to desire to have similar travel experiences. This finding extends the work of Rao Hill and Qesja (2023), which linked influencer popularity to authenticity perceptions, by demonstrating that

popularity also functions as a direct aspirational trigger, independent of source credibility effects.

The finding of perceived similarity as the most powerful predictor of benign envy is both theoretically consistent and substantively significant. The psychological distance between self and the envied other is narrowed when followers believe that an influencer has a similar background, values, or lifestyle (Lee & Watkins, 2016). This closeness makes the mutual travel experiences achievable instead of just aspirational, transforming what could be a debilitating feeling of inferiority into self-improvement motivation. This is precisely the mechanism van de Ven et al. (2009) described as the hallmark of benign envy: an assimilative, forward-looking emotional response that energizes goal pursuit. The implication is that identification with the influencer functions as the emotional prerequisite for benign envy to serve as a motivational bridge between social comparison and travel aspiration.

Benign envy emerged as the central mediating mechanism in this model, significantly connecting all three influencer characteristics to travel aspiration through complementary partial mediation. This finding reinforces previous research contemplating that benign envy channels social comparison into emulative aspiration (Chae, 2018; Smith & Kim, 2007), and extends it specifically to the travel influencer context. The consistent mediation across all three influencer trait pathways suggests that benign envy functions as a robust and generalizable emotional conduit in this domain, rather than a context-specific artifact.

Perhaps the most theoretically consequential and counterintuitive finding concerns the non-significant role of malicious envy. Influencer attractiveness did not significantly predict malicious envy, and malicious envy did not significantly predict travel aspiration, nor did it mediate any hypothesized relationship. This diverges from what dual envy literature might predict in contexts where idealized, luxury-laden content is prominently featured (Lange & Crusius, 2015). One plausible explanation is contextual: travel influencer content, even in its most aspirational form, tends to be received through a relational lens among active followers/audiences who have self-selected based on identification and shared interest rather than passive exposure to elite imagery. Additionally, perceived similarity emerged as a significant negative predictor of malicious envy, suggesting that the sense of shared identity among this sample may have collectively suppressed hostile appraisal processes. The extremely low variance explained in malicious envy further supports the interpretation that

influencer attributes, as operationalized in this study, do not meaningfully activate the hostile envy pathway in this domain.

Collectively, these findings highlight a theoretically meaningful asymmetry: benign envy functions as an emotionally constructive bridge between influencer perception and travel motivation, whereas malicious envy, despite being theoretically plausible in this context, remains empirically dormant. This asymmetry constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of the study and suggests that the dual-pathway model of envy may operate with considerably different effectiveness across consumption domains. Future scholarship should explore the boundary conditions under which each pathway becomes consequential, with particular attention to audience characteristics, platform environments, and content framing.

5.1 Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer actionable insights for influencers and travel marketers seeking to harness influencer-driven emotional responses.

Travel marketers and campaign managers should design content that deliberately triggers benign rather than malicious envy. Since benign envy arises when followers perceive influencer experiences as simultaneously desirable and attainable, campaigns should strike a balance between aspirational appeal and contextual relatability. Content that portrays accessible routes to luxurious experiences, such as budget-friendly versions of exclusive destinations, step-by-step travel planning, or honest cost disclosures can help narrow the perceived gap between the reality of audience and the lifestyle of the influencer. This shift in perception, from passive admiration to felt attainability, is the critical emotional trigger that converts audience envy into genuine travel aspiration.

Influencers should not overestimate the motivational power of unattainable luxury displays. Given that perceived similarity is the strongest driver of benign envy, content emphasizing shared values, relatable backgrounds, and common travel motivations will prove more effective in inspiring followers than presentations of exclusive, out-of-reach lifestyles. Micro and mid-tier influencers, who are typically perceived as more demographically and psychographically similar to their audience, may generate stronger aspirational responses than celebrity mega-influencers, despite commanding smaller reach. Collaborations pairing

high-popularity influencers with more relatable travel narratives can strategically combine the aspirational signalling of social proof with the identification that drives benign envy.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several notable theoretical contributions to influencer marketing, Social Comparison Theory, and Dual Envy Theory.

First, the study extends Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) by demonstrating that upward social comparisons with travel influencers do not uniformly produce aspirational outcomes. This nuanced approach moves beyond treating social comparison as a monolithic process, inviting more emotionally differentiated theorizing about consumer responses to influencer-generated idealization in tourism.

Second, the study advances Dual Envy Theory (van de Ven et al., 2009) by integrating it with influencer characteristics in a unified empirical model. Prior work has largely examined benign and malicious envy as discrete states without tracing antecedents to specific influencer attributes. The present study fills this gap by identifying which influencer traits activate each envy type, providing a trait-based antecedent framework for dual envy formation.

Third, the finding that malicious envy is neither significantly predicted by influencer attractiveness nor significantly linked to travel aspiration represents a meaningful theoretical refinement. It suggests that the emotional architecture of the travel influencer context is predominantly aspirational rather than adversarial, revealing domain-specific boundary conditions for malicious envy in consumer behaviour research.

Finally, by demonstrating that benign envy significantly mediates between influencer traits and travel aspiration while malicious envy does not, this study underscores an asymmetric emotional architecture underlying influencer persuasion in tourism contexts.

6. Conclusion & Future Research Directions

This study examined the emotional mechanisms through which travel influencer characteristics shape audience travel aspiration, with particular attention to the dual nature of

envy as a mediating force. The findings reveal that influencer popularity constitutes the most powerful direct driver of travel aspiration, while perceived similarity is the most potent trigger of benign envy, which in turn significantly mediates all influencer–aspiration pathways. Crucially, malicious envy was conspicuously absent from these pathways, confirming that not all envy translates into behavioural outcomes. The asymmetry between benign and malicious envy constitutes this study's central contribution to digital travel behaviour research.

Future research should investigate moderating variables that may determine when malicious envy becomes activated, including cultural orientations toward inequality, individual personality traits such as neuroticism, and platform-specific affordances that shape how influencer content is consumed. Experimental and longitudinal designs would allow researchers to establish causal relationships and track the temporal evolution of envy responses over extended social media exposure.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References:

Asdecker, B. (2022). Travel-related influencer content on Instagram: How social media fuels wanderlust and how to mitigate the effect. *Sustainability*, *14*(2), 855.

Bainotti, L. (2024). How conspicuousness becomes productive on social media. *Marketing Theory*, *24*(2), 339–356.

Böttger, T., Rudolph, T., Evanschitzky, H., & Pfrang, T. (2017). Customer inspiration: Conceptualization, scale development, and validation. *Journal of Marketing*, *81*(6), 116–131.

Can, A. S., Ekinci, Y., & Dilek-Fidler, S. (2025). Fantasy or reality? Unveiling the power of realistic narratives in tourism social media advertising. *Tourism Management*, *106*, 104998.

Chae, J. (2018). Explaining Females' Envy Toward Social Media Influencers. *Media Psychology*, *21*(2), 246–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1328312

Cialdini, R. (2013). *Influence: Science and practice*. Pearson.

Cohen, J. (2013). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Academic press.

De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, *36*(5), 798–828. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035

Dedeoglu, B. B., Colmekcioglu, N., & Okumus, F. (2025). Do envy and consumer-generated content boost travel motivations? *Journal of Travel Research*, *64*(2), 267–283.

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, *7*(2), 117–140.

Gretzel, U. (2017). Influencer marketing in travel and tourism. In *Advances in social media for travel, tourism and hospitality* (pp. 147–156). Routledge.

Hair, J., & Alamer, A. (2022). Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in second language and education research: Guidelines using an applied example. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, *1*(3), 100027.

Hart, C. S. (2016). How do aspirations matter? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *17*(3), 324–341.

Hendricks, A., & Bright, L. (2023). Influencer trends shift: The psychological predictors of influencer engagement on Instagram. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, *12*(1), 155–180.

Hudson, S., & Thal, K. (2013). The impact of social media on the consumer decision process: Implications for tourism marketing. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *30*(1–2), 156–160.

Janssen, L., Schouten, A. P., & Croes, E. A. J. (2022). Influencer advertising on Instagram: product-influencer fit and number of followers affect advertising outcomes and influencer evaluations via credibility and identification. *International Journal of Advertising*, *41*(1), 101–127.

Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 37(5), 567–579. https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2018-0375

Kilipiri, E., Papaioannou, E., & Kotzaivazoglou, I. (2023). Social media and influencer marketing for promoting sustainable tourism destinations: The Instagram case. *Sustainability*, *15*(8), 6374.

Kock, N. (2017). *Common Method Bias: A Full Collinearity Assessment Method for PLS-SEM BT - Partial Least Squares Path Modeling: Basic Concepts, Methodological Issues and Applications* (H. Latan & R. Noonan (eds.); pp. 245–257). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64069-3_11

Ladhari, R., Massa, E., & Skandrani, H. (2020). YouTube vloggers' popularity and influence: The roles of homophily, emotional attachment, and expertise. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *54*, 102027.

Lange, J., & Crusius, J. (2015). Dispositional envy revisited: Unraveling the motivational dynamics of benign and malicious envy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *41*(2), 284–294.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation* (Vol. 557). Oxford University Press.

Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, *69*(12), 5753–5760.

Liu, H., Wu, L., & Li, X. (2019). Social media envy: How experience sharing on social networking sites drives millennials' aspirational tourism consumption. *Journal of Travel Research*, *58*(3), 355–369.

Lo, I. S., McKercher, B., Lo, A., Cheung, C., & Law, R. (2011). Tourism and online photography. *Tourism Management*, *32*(4), 725–731.

Magno, F., & Cassia, F. (2018). The impact of social media influencers in tourism. *Anatolia*, *29*(2), 288–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2018.1476981

Manthiou, A., Ulrich, I., & Kuppelwieser, V. (2024). The travel influencer construct: An empirical exploration and validation. *Tourism Management*, *101*, 104858.

McCroskey, J. C., & McCain, T. A. (1974). The measurement of interpersonal attraction. *Speech Monographs*, 41(3), 261–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637757409375845

McCroskey, J. C., Richmond, V. P., & Daly, J. A. (1975). The development of a measure of perceived homophily in interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, *1*(4), 323–332.

Ng, J. C. K., Lin, E. S. S., & Lee, V. K. Y. (2023). Does Instagram make you speak ill of others or improve yourself? A daily diary study on the moderating role of malicious and benign envy. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *148*, 107873.

Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, *19*(3), 39–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191

Olga Lo, P., & Razaq, R. (2014). Evolution of social media and consumer behaviour changes in tourism destination promotion. *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*,

12(3), 358–368.

Pearce, P. L. (2019). Dreaming and longing. *Tourist Behaviour*, 20–40.

Pop, R.-A., Săplăcan, Z., Dabija, D.-C., & Alt, M.-A. (2022). The impact of social media influencers on travel decisions: the role of trust in consumer decision journey. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *25*(5), 823–843. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1895729

Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2008). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior Research Methods*, *40*(3), 879–891.

Rao Hill, S., & Qesja, B. (2023). Social media influencer popularity and authenticity perception in the travel industry. *The Service Industries Journal*, *43*(5–6), 289–311.

Saini, H., Kumar, P., & Oberoi, S. (2023). Welcome to the destination! Social media influencers as cogent determinant of travel decision: A systematic literature review and conceptual framework. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *9*(1), 2240055.

Shmueli, G., Sarstedt, M., Hair, J. F., Cheah, J.-H., Ting, H., Vaithilingam, S., & Ringle, C. M. (2019). Predictive model assessment in PLS-SEM: guidelines for using PLSpredict. *European Journal of Marketing*, *53*(11), 2322–2347.

Smith, R. H. (2000). Assimilative and contrastive emotional reactions to upward and downward social comparisons. *Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research*, 173–200.

Smith, R. H., & Kim, S. H. (2007). Comprehending envy. *Psychological Bulletin*, *133*(1), 419–429.

Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *53*. 101742.

Taylor, A. S. (2022). *Authenticity as performativity on social media*. Springer.

Van de Ven, N., Zeelenberg, M., & Pieters, R. (2009). Leveling up and down: the experiences of benign and malicious envy. *Emotion*, *9*(3), 419.

Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.

Vinodh, K., Mahendran, K., Lavanya, S. M., Sriram, N., & Kalpana, M. (2024). A systematic literature review on social media marketing and consumer behaviour. *Journal of Consumer Sciences*, *2024*(52), 32–55.

Wahba, S., El-Deeb, S., & Metry, S. (2025). The role of influencers and social comparison in shaping travel intentions. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, *8*(3), 849–869.

Wang, T., Thai, T. D.-H., Yeh, R. K.-J., & Tamariz Fadic, C. (2024). Unveiling the effect of benign and malicious envy toward social media influencers on brand choice. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, *18*(2), 275–293.

Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M., & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content. *Journal of Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, *35*(2), 68–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078

Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, *31*(2), 179–188.

Ye, B. H., Fong, L. H. N., Wong, J. W. C., & Zhang, L. (2025). Social media users' envy toward travel bloggers: An Investigation of dual-mediating paths and boundary conditions. *Journal of Travel Research*, advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875251342200.

Yetimoğlu, S., & Uğurlu, K. (2020). Influencer marketing for tourism and hospitality. In *The Emerald handbook of ICT in tourism and hospitality* (pp. 131–148). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Zhao, X., Lynch Jr, J. G., & Chen, Q. (2010). Reconsidering Baron and Kenny: Myths and truths about mediation analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *37*(2), 197–206.