

How State-Regulated Influencers Could Manipulate Tourism Trends

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In the digital age, social media influencers have emerged as powerful mediators between destinations and audiences, shaping how people imagine and experience travel. Initially perceived as credible voices who offered authentic recommendations, influencers have grown into formidable actors capable of steering entire industries, including tourism (Benhaida et al., 2024; Bangahan et al., 2025). While government collaboration with influencers has been used to promote tourism growth, a troubling possibility lies in the deliberate manipulation of travel narratives. If states were to regulate and co-opt influencers not for transparency but for propaganda, tourism could be transformed from a genuine pursuit of experience into a carefully manufactured illusion. State-regulated influencer campaigns risk misleading travelers, undermining authenticity, and turning tourism into a tool of political or economic control.

One of the greatest risks of state-controlled influencer campaigns is the capacity to fabricate or exaggerate tourism appeal. Governments already collaborate with influencers to spotlight under-promoted regions, as seen in digital campaigns (Azizah & Said, 2024). While such strategies can enhance competitiveness, they could also be weaponized to promote attractions that are unsustainable or even nonexistent. Some may argue that directing attention to lesser-known sites helps distribute tourist traffic and stimulate local economies (Francalanci & Hussain, 2014; Reamico et al., 2025). However, when narratives are orchestrated from above, travelers risk arriving at destinations only to encounter empty lots or underdeveloped facilities, a betrayal of expectations that undermines tourism credibility.

Authenticity has long been a central concern in tourism studies, with visitors often seeking cultural encounters that promise “otherness” and real connection (Atasoy, 2021). Yet state manipulation of influencer content risks commodifying authenticity into a tool of perception management. In practice, sponsored posts already tend to highlight only positive aspects of a destination, omitting potential drawbacks. Although influencer promotions inevitably simplify reality, the real risk is that tourists who value authenticity may find their expectations replaced by a staged spectacle. For instance, travelers who journey great distances expect more than curated imagery; discovering staged or exaggerated experiences can damage trust not just in influencers but in tourism as a whole.

Digital infrastructures that enable tourism marketing can also serve as conduits for propaganda. Research shows that tourists increasingly rely on digital channels such as mobile phones and social media, making them vulnerable to orchestrated campaigns that mask state propaganda as innovation or efficiency (Milenkovski, 2024). Advocates might suggest that influencer campaigns are valuable for rallying tourism in times of crisis, for example, promoting safe travel after natural disasters. Indeed, in disaster-prone countries such as the Philippines, influencer-led campaigns to raise awareness of safety measures could be beneficial. However, when

governments use similar tools to distort realities or conceal problems, the line between responsible promotion and manipulation becomes dangerously blurred.

State-regulated influencers represent both a tool of opportunity and a potential weapon of manipulation. While collaborations can help highlight lesser-known destinations or encourage responsible practices, the deliberate use of influencers to fabricate tourism appeal threatens authenticity, misleads travelers, and risks reducing tourism to propaganda. The challenge lies in distinguishing between campaigns that serve the public interest and those that merely manufacture illusions for state gain. As digital influence deepens, the question becomes not whether influencers will shape tourism trends, but whether those trends will remain authentic expressions of cultural encounter, or devolve into narratives scripted by state control.

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