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The persuasive communication of Instagram influencers to promote tourism in the Riviera Maya

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Introduction: Destination management organizations are using influencer marketing to implement alliances with influencers to actively stimulate tourist visits. This study analyzes the tourism promotion strategy employed by the content creators hired by the Quintana Roo Tourism Promotion Council to promote the Riviera Maya in Mexico.

Methods: Using a mixed methodology approach and drawing on the functionalist paradigm of communication, the content of the publications is examined.

Results and discussion: The results show that the physical appearance and communication skills of influencers have an impact on tourists' travel intentions. Moreover, the analysis concludes that the motivation conveyed by the influencer shapes the reception of the message.

KEYWORDS

persuasive communication, tourism marketing, influencer, purpose of the trip, tourism promotion, influencer marketing

1 Introduction

Tourism is one of the most important global income generators and serves as a major driver of economic growth for many developing countries (UNWTO, 2023). Situated between the Atlantic Ocean (Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean) and the Pacific Ocean (Cabrera, 2022), Mexico enjoys a privileged geographical location. However, due to the increasing and diversifying competition among destinations, tourism companies face an uncertain future and need to explore new strategies to better connect with their clients and remain competitive (Esparza et al., 2022). The development that the sector seeks largely depends on its ability to adapt to the mitigating circumstances following the COVID-19 pandemic and on the deployment of strategies to effectively market the most attractive Mexican tourist destinations in the face of competition from other countries (Béjar et al., 2022).

The advent of social networks has made information about tourist destinations increasingly accessible. Tourism organizations have almost unlimited forms of communicating with their current and potential customers in order to build loyalty. Cooperating with influencers has emerged as a popular and effective option (Ye et al., 2021) for organizations to promote their products or brand-related content on social media. Through personal experiences and third-party recommendations, organizations can reach out to their potential clients in a less direct manner (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017; Petrescu et al., 2018). In addition, the use of influencers also allows access to market segments that are typically difficult to target using methods such as advertising on traditional mass media (Enke and Borchers, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to analyze this phenomenon, particularly in the Riviera Maya. A destination located in the State of Quintana Roo, Mexico, it offers a diverse range of tourist

products across four locations within the Mexican Caribbean: Cancun, Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen and Tulum. The Riviera Maya has played a pioneering role in Mexico and Latin America by adopting tourism promotion strategies, including influencers. This was made possible thanks to the efforts of the Quintana Roo Tourism Promotion Council (CPTQ), a decentralized body under the State Government that aims to promote and position local tourist destinations through the development and implementation of actions within the areas of Strategic Planning, Marketing, Promotion and Public Relations (CPTQ, 2023).

The current analysis examines the persuasive communication strategies implemented by the influencers hired by CPTQ to promote the Riviera Maya. From the functionalist paradigm of communication, four analysis variables were taken into consideration (sender, message, channel and receiver) in order to analyze the communication tactics employed by influencers. This study presents both quantitative and qualitative results, and prior works are also discussed. This research contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the field, as no prior studies have analyzed persuasive communication from a mixed-methods approach or explored a vacation destination as popular as the Riviera Maya.

2 Identification of the research problem

For years, traditional media have been at the forefront of promoting products and services. They used to represent the most dynamic and attractive way to promote tourist destinations until the beginning of the 21st century, when tourism organizations would allocate more than 90% of their advertising budget to newspapers and magazines (Reinares, 1994). However, the consumption of traditional media has decreased considerably in recent years. Globally, the consumption of printed media has decreased between 15 and 25% between 2017 and 2020. For example, TV consumption in Latin America has decreased by over 10% during the same period (Newman et al., 2020). Conversely, the number of internet users in Mexico has risen notably, from 50.1 million in 2015 to 98.6 million in 2022. The most frequent activity among these users is social networking (Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, 2020), something that is predicted to increase further to 118.2 million users by 2026 (Statista, 2023).

The advent of the Internet brought about a transformation in the media landscape, providing numerous alternatives to promote tourist destinations. The emergence of a wide range of spaces for online interaction, together with the widespread use of smart devices, has fueled the participation of people in new social communities that are now developing in online spaces. Whilst this shift in consumer behavior implies more opportunities, it also poses great challenges for organizations as they seek to reconfigure and adapt their communication strategies to keep up with the latest trends in consumption habits. Micro-segmentation of markets and the lack of credibility of digital media, combined with the existence of old and new media, has meant that it is not enough just to know what tourists are consuming; it is now essential to understand the way in which they consume and how they make their purchase decisions. This involves understanding the role that influencers and media narrative play in shaping the needs and decision-making of tourists when purchasing a tourist product.

The issue upon which this research is based is the decline of traditional media as primary channels for promoting tourist destinations, which has led to new digital scenarios that offer tourist organizations alternative spaces to communicate with their target audiences. This phenomenon emerged within the social context of the early 20th century, when the process of addressing, distributing, and controlling messages became increasingly complicated due to unstable decision-making processes, as described by Bauman (2000). This complexity is related to constant changes in the way that people are and the way that they think. All of this has led to the need to explore and investigate new ways to more effectively break into segmented and hard-to-reach markets.

In today's highly competitive global market, the analysis of consumer behavior and decision-making processes has become increasingly relevant (Sundermann and Raabe, 2019; Marreiro et al., 2014). The same applies to identifying and analyzing the methodological and sectoral trends of the different factors that influence tourists' decision making (Le and Le, 2018; Azazi and Shaed, 2020; Stylos, 2020).

Research has shown that cognitive biases play a significant role in the different stages of travel, including pre-trip, on site and post-trip (Wattanacharoensil and La-ornual, 2019). Moreover, technological advances have a structural impact on shaping tourist decision-making processes, with social media transforming communication in society. As people become part of a digital community, they generate content and become advocates, ultimately exerting influence on their followers (Gómez, 2018).

The motivation for this research is rooted in the necessity for tourism organizations to develop innovative communication strategies for the promotion of tourist destinations that leverage the power of influencers as a key element for the success of tourism marketing strategies. Specifically, this research aims to analyze the communication process of Instagram influencers and their ability to encourage tourists to visit the Riviera Maya destination in Mexico. To achieve this objective, the following research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: What elements contribute to the persuasive power in influencers' communication?

RQ2: What narrative and interactive features of Instagram do influencers exploit to guarantee persuasion in their communication?

RQ3: What factors are decisive in the elaboration of their messages?

3 Literature review

Prior research has proven how influencer marketing has become an essential tool in the strategic communication of organizations (Hudders et al., 2021). This includes significant social media efforts to achieve marketing objectives (Enke and Borchers, 2019), reduce errors and minimize risks. In today's constantly changing market, influencer marketing is helping tourist destinations compete (Seçilmiş et al., 2021), allowing organizations to interact with their customers in a more credible and direct way (Backaler, 2018; Hays et al., 2013) and therefore increasing the overall satisfaction with the travel experience, increasing the likelihood of repurchase (Pop et al., 2022) and customer loyalty. It has been demonstrated that a greater investment in marketing strategies

of this type has a direct impact on the organization's income statement due to the engagement generated (Rodríguez and Sixto-García, 2021). Thus, influencers must be considered as key players in the tourism sector (Asan, 2022), especially celebrities and their short videos have a special impact on international tourist conation (Matiza and Slabbert, 2024).

Influencers are social media users who have gained popularity by crafting a strong online identity through social networks (Enke and Borchers, 2019). This is mainly due to the strategic use of both textual and visual narratives to broadcast their lives and influence the opinions and behaviors of certain groups (Oneto et al., 2020). They are also referred to as social media influencers (Hudders et al., 2021), bloggers, youtubers or instagrammers (Backaler, 2018; Brown and Hayes, 2007; De Veirman et al., 2017).

In the tourism industry, some authors define them as travel influencers due to their ability to influence the decisions of potential tourists (Hanifah, 2019; Kaur et al., 2018). Travel influencers create and publish content related to the technical travel issues they experience (Asan, 2022), destinations, routes, and tour packages, providing insight into the cultural, historical, geographic, socioeconomic, and the demographic characteristics of the destinations based on their own personal experiences (Seçilmiş et al., 2021).

Influencers, as digital prescribers, can sway tourists based on two main factors: cognitive response and trust. This, in turn, can shape their decision regarding where to visit, as influencers promote self-discovery, community participation and information exchange. (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021). In this context, the fact that influencer marketing is increasingly being used in destination promotion strategies requires tourism managers to take the necessary precautions and be prepared to understand and manage the effects of influencers on different services and tourist activities (Asan, 2022; Seçilmiş et al., 2021).

Influence marketing carried out primarily on social networks involves new forms of audience participation and a new way of understanding the sales funnel (Dangaiso, 2024) to the point that this type of marketing impacts electronic word of mouth and generates a kind of electronic love for brands (Valmohammadi et al., 2024). The practical potential of an influencer can be identified based on several factors, including the number of followers, likes and comments on their posts, shares and, ultimately, the overall engagement they secure (Schouten et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Ing and Ming, 2018; Sundar, 2008; Kay et al., 2020). In addition, it has been verified that the accounts of influencers specializing in tourism tend to reach greater heights than those with a high number of followers but no specific niche (Rodríguez and Sixto-García, 2021).

Moreover, to determine the persuasive and motivational communication of an influencer (Xie and Ritchie, 2019) it is crucial to understand the credibility factors (Xiao et al., 2018), trustworthiness (Lee and Eastin, 2020), quality of the content and storytelling, and adaptation to social media platforms (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020). Furthermore, the segmentation of the target market and an influencer's expertise in producing, distributing, and integrating content over time are also of great importance (Enke and Borchers, 2019).

4 Functionalist paradigm of communication

This study adopts the functionalist paradigm of communication, which offers a comprehensive perspective for examining and understanding the phenomenon by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research tools. The functionalist paradigm rooted in empiricism understands society as a cohesive and interconnected organism. According to this, if one part of the organism is disturbed, everything else is affected (Escobar, 2012).

Aristotelian rhetoric serves as a cornerstone of this paradigm, highlighting three key elements -the sender (speaker), the receiver (public) and the message (speech)- (Guerrero and Flores, 2009). Moreover, it emphasizes the pragmatic dimension of linguistic accomplishments. The paradigm is an unlimited flow of linguistic exchanges determined by a communicative intention that is influenced by both syntax and the knowledge that the interlocutors have of the world and their society.

The paradigm of communication has been shaped by several historical figures, including Laswell (1948). Emphasizing the importance of understanding, he also made a significant contribution to this paradigm with his proposal "A mathematical Theory of Communication," which sought to optimize the time efficiency of transmissions through the identification of the appropriate channel for message delivery (Baecker, 2017). In their Theory of Two Steps, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) marked the receiver as a passive actor and stated that media messages did not reach people directly but were filtered by opinion leaders. Hovland and his team (1953) focused their efforts on exploring how the media contributed to the formation and modification of attitudes through mechanisms of persuasion. On the other hand, McLuhan (1967) explained that the medium in which the message is transmitted is just as important as the message's content.

Communication research in this paradigm has historically focused on understanding how people collectively respond to certain factors and their interconnections (Galeano, 1997). The relevance of these theories in the present study is supported by the need to analyze the communication process between the influencers and their communities of followers as potential tourists, is significant in shaping future travel-related decisions. These thought processes are based on the mental anticipations of a future event (Karl et al., 2021). A range of contingent temporal, dynamic, successive, and multi-stage processes come to play when choosing a destination (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). External and internal factors also influence decisions about how often, for how long, and where someone will travel (Lian and Yu, 2019).

5 Methodology

A mixed method approach was selected for this study due to its ability to provide a more robust understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2014). This type of study involves combining research techniques, methods, concepts, and quantitative and qualitative language (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) in such a way that both methods are integrated throughout the research process (Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza, 2020).

The research design employed the concurrent strategy of methodological triangulation (Creswell, 2014), which enables the correlation and corroboration of data from the previous theoretical perspective. This approach facilitates the simultaneous integration of both quantitative and qualitative data collected.

In recent years, tourism as a discipline has seen exponential growth in the use of mixed research to investigate the object of study

of tourist destinations from different social and temporal contexts (Gómez, 2018; Altamirano et al., 2018; Barrientos-Báez et al., 2022; Seeler et al., 2019). These studies have strengthened and expanded our understanding of the phenomenon investigated here by utilizing various forms of data, including numerical, verbal, textual, visual and symbolic data (Creswell and Clark, 2018; Lieber and Weisner, 2010).

The study sample consists of 8 influencers with the largest number of followers who were hired by CPTQ to promote the Rivera Maya (see Table 1). It should be noted that the information on the social media accounts and the metrics analyzed were extracted from public information sources on the Internet, so the only information obtained is that which appears on their public profiles. Influencers have profiles open to the public, it would be similar to examining information published in a media outlet, for example. In any case, written approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Tourism and Gastronomy of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico.

The period studied was from September 28, 2020, to August 27, 2022, a total of 20 posts were selected for analysis, 10 of which were written in English and 10 in Spanish. This study aims to investigate how the profile of the influencer, as the sender of the tourist message, constitutes a crucial element in achieving the persuasive communication goals. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the attributes of Instagram and assess their potential to guide the desires of the message recipients.

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 entailed the development of a quantitative approach, utilizing the descriptive method in the sense that the presence, characteristics and distribution of a phenomenon within the study population is measured (Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza, 2020). Instagram metrics such as number of followers, comments and shares were analyzed to determine the impact of publications. The level of engagement was evaluated as a measure of the level of interaction and the degree of commitment between the user and the brand (Oneto et al., 2020).

Phase 2 consisted of developing a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena, exploring them from the perspective of the participants in their natural environment and within the overall context (Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza, 2020). This phase aimed to determine the depth and quality of information regarding the values, experiences, and meanings of a social group. To achieve this, the study analyzed the structure of the message shared by the influencers and the content of the comments generated by the followers, in order to understand the communication environment between the influencer and the tourist. Communication abilities,

attitudes, level of knowledge and sociocultural system structure of message were analyzed.

According to the functionalist paradigm of communication, the data collected was classified into categories, dimensions, and units of analysis to interpret the experiences of the participants according to their perspective, language, and expressions, as well as their connections with reference to the research issue at hand (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). The primary goal of this was to respond to the research aims, which focused on examining the structure of the messages shared by the influencers and interpreting the response of the followers through their comments in relation to the persuasive intentions of the influencers (Ki and Kim, 2019).

The Atlas ti version 8 software was used to conduct the analysis of the comments and captions because it facilitates the qualitative analysis of large amounts of data such as text, audio, images or video. Moreover, the communication process was categorized into four key items in accordance to the functionalist paradigm of communication: sender, message, channel and receiver (see Table 2).

6 Results

6.1 Quantitative approach

During phase 1 of the research, a quantitative analysis was conducted on the Instagram metrics of the 8 influencers who promoted the Riviera Maya as a tourist destination during the aforementioned period, carried out with the intention of using statistical data analysis to determine the level of interaction of followers with the content generated by the influencers to understand the impact of their publications through the engagement generated.

The following formula was used: (No. likes + No. comments)/No. followers * 100. Simultaneously, a graphic content analysis of their publications was conducted to determine the relationship between the content and the achieved engagement (Altamirano et al., 2018).

The most impactful publications belonged to I1 and I8, who achieved an engagement of between 6.4 and 8.7% (see Table 3). These influencers share similar characteristics in relation to the four elements of communication, using a language known to their followers and expressing their experiences of the tourist destination in a clear and concise manner.

In response to the first research question, related to elements that contribute to the persuasive power in influencers' communication, followers are familiar with the language of an influencer and empathize with it, which is why they become followers. Additionally, both influencers convey their attitude through images and videos that show their facial expressions. Gestures are also a priority way to empathize with audiences. In fact, non-verbal communication is much more credible than the truth because the former is involuntary and cannot be controlled.

In cases where careful observation was not feasible, both influencers frequently resorted to the textual narration of the events using exclamation marks and non-textual expressions (emoticons). These elements were used to convey their attitude and emphasize the message (Sampietro, 2016), demonstrating their proficient knowledge in describing the activities offered and how they can be enjoyed.

Research question 2 investigates narrative and interactive features of Instagram that influencers exploit to guarantee persuasion in their

TABLE 1 Study sample.

Influencer	Country	Followers
I1	México	325 K
I2	United States of America	321 K
I3	United States of America	223 K
I4	México	205 K
I5	United States of America	144 K
I6	Colombia	124 K
I7	United Kingdom	61.2 K
I8	México	45.1 K

Source: own elaboration.

TABLE 2 Categories for analysis.

Category	Subcategories	Units of analysis
Persuasion	Source-encoder	Communication abilities
		Attitudes
		Level of knowledge
		Sociocultural system
	Message	Structure
		Message code
		Content
	Decoder receiver	Communication abilities
		Attitudes
		Level of knowledge
		Sociocultural system
	Channel (social media)	Variety of platforms
		Community building
		Linguistic creativity

Source: own elaboration.

communication. According to this, the virtual world allows for a closer connection between sender and receiver. Through mobile devices, senders have the opportunity to enter the receivers' private space and provide information, share their opinions and recommend activities of a place. By leveraging their experience and knowledge about their audience's preferences, influencers have the ability to build their own image as well as the image of the tourist destination they promote.

Based on these insights about the needs and desires of their community of followers, influencers use a specific language, both verbal, visual and written, to create a safe environment where their community feels comfortable expressing their opinions and externalizing any doubts they may have about the destination. Influencers have the responsibility to attract, serve and, above all, leave a lasting impression of the tourist destination on their followers.

The more followers feel part of a trustworthy environment, the more likely they are to consider the influencer's opinions when making travel decisions. This, in turn, can encourage stereotypical behaviors within communities of followers, prompting them to comply with certain affinities and behavior patterns in the tourist location.

When considering the receiver, the number of reactions on the publications and the types of comments both indicate the effectiveness of the influencers' content. The analyzed metrics reveal the contributions of the followers. The receivers interpret the message according to their own preferences, taking into account the oral, visual and written elements that appeal the most to them before visiting a tourist location.

The different reactions available on the social network allow users to express their approval or rejection of the message and the influencer. In most cases, particularly in Spanish-language publications, the intimacy between the influencers and their followers is evident. The receivers express their interpretation of the message through comments on the posts, which the influencer pays special attention to, since they are clear indications of the aspects of the message that have been clearly understood and those that require further reinforcement.

Regarding the channel, Instagram is characterized by its focus on the dissemination of visual content (images and videos). This type of content is particularly suitable for advertising, marketing, brand building and enhancing purchase intent (Hernández et al., 2018). It is worth noting that Instagram ranks as the fourth most popular social platform in the world after Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp (Digital Business School, 2022). Moreover, Instagram has become an effective communication tool to showcase products through visual descriptions (Fatanti and Suyadnya, 2015) and lends itself to engagement with an active audience (Ramos, 2015) by disseminating relevant content (Caerols-Mateo et al., 2013).

Finally, in response to the third research question, related to factors that determine the elaboration of influencers' messages, when considering the message, the publications with the most significant impact are those that, in a well presented way, provide graphic and textual elements that give meaning to the description of their messages. Also, those that show a creative approach in the selection of photos uploaded to Instagram perform well.

These high-impact publications are tailored to the preferences of the influencers' communities of followers. Through the message, influencers aim to create a need to visit the destination. They address specific audiences likely to be interested in visiting the region of Riviera Maya, highlighting the sense of loss that would result from not doing so. The images carry the most weight in conveying the message, serving as proof of the influencers' words. Therefore, the text complements the visual message. This analysis of publications shows that images and videos are the fundamental vehicle through which to communicate about the destination, with the goal of generating desires and driving the will of potential tourists.

In publications targeting Spanish-speaking communities, the response from the audience is notable. One example is the photo album published by I8, which generated an engagement of 8.7%, surpassing the range of 1–5%, considered a good rate on Instagram (Iconosquare, 2020). This formal feature is also noticeable in I1's subsequent post, which achieved a 6.4% engagement rate, making it the most impactful post from the account.

The similarity between both publications lies in their structure and the content of the message, since they maximize Instagram's feature of sharing up to 10 images per post. Additionally, the static nature of the images allows the user to appreciate the photo in greater detail, distinguishing each of the specific elements that the influencers selected to incorporate into their message, and stimulating the user to imagine themselves in the showcased location. This phenomenon is not observed in reels, as the images are displayed briefly, which makes them less memorable, thereby reducing their potential to influence the tourist's decision-making process.

The reception of the consumer message is influenced by prior information obtained through different channels, which shapes the perception of followers toward the destination and the perceived risks associated with travel, based on their own knowledge and experience. These risks can be related to economic, social and cultural factors, which are often expressed in the comments section of the post. Therefore, comments constitute an important source of

TABLE 3 Engagement generated by post.

Instagram account	Followers	Type of content	Likes	Comments	Day of publication	Engagement
I5	144000.00	Photo	1,450	148	Friday	1.1
		Photo	853	784	Friday	1.1
I3	223000.00	Photo	5,158	49	Friday	2.3
		Video	4,618	96	Sunday	2.1
		Photo	1952	42	Monday	0.9
		Video	3,626	84	Tuesday	1.7
I7	61200.00	Video	2,397	30	Sunday	4
		Photo	2,316	40	Tuesday	3.9
I2	321000.00	Video	9,747	556	Saturday	3
		Video	5,361	128	Sunday	1.7
I6	124000.00	Photos and video	1,642	60	Sunday	1.4
		Photo	737	61	Sunday	0.7
I8	45100.00	Photo album	3,815	86	Sunday	8.7
		Video	1,549	74	Wednesday	3.6
I4	205000.00	Video	2,424	34	Tuesday	1.2
		Photo album	Not mentioned	20	Wednesday	No access
I1	325000.00	Reel	17,500	84	Friday	5.4
		Reel	13,200	69	Thursday	4
		Reel	7,805	55	Tuesday	2.4
		Photo album	20,700	41	Saturday	6.4

Source: own elaboration.

information for both the influencer and the tourist destination organizations that can be analyzed and used to redesign their communication strategies.

The data analysis indicates that the highest levels of user engagement occur at the weekend, specifically on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, when individuals have more time to plan their holidays. The number of reactions generated determines the overall impact in the communities of followers, representing a manifestation of the extent to which the publication resonated with the audience. The majority of reactions typically involve asking specific questions, providing brief opinions and/or leaving non-verbal expressions such as emoticons to express their like or dislike toward the theme, content or tone of the message.

6.2 Qualitative perspective

The results were presented using the Atlas.ti version 8 software, which allowed for a rigorous qualitative exploration of the data. The content was examined according to the categories of the functionalist paradigm of communication: (1) sender, (2) message, (3) channel, and (4) receiver. The categories, dimensions and units of analysis used for the study are depicted in Figure 1.

The tree-shaped map in Figure 1 diagnoses the content shared by influencers on their respective accounts in order to promote the Riviera Maya and determine, according to the frequency with which they appear, the relevance of each of the elements of communication, to know what is working and what is not, thus being able to manage

more objectively the content of the next promotional campaigns for the destination.

Each category, dimension and unit of analysis is represented by two key pieces of data: rooting (identified with the letter E) and dimension (identified with the letter D). Rooting represents the number of citations found in the text, indicating how many times a certain dimension, category or unit of analysis was coded. Meanwhile, dimension refers to the number of connections a code has with other codes. In examining the first dimension, source-encoder, the influencer's communication skills stood out. This is particularly evident in the informal language used in the posts' captions.

At the top, on a first level, the tree-shaped map shows the elements of communication as the main category, aligned with the functionalist paradigm. The second level displays the dimensions of the communication process, including source-encoder, message, decoder-receiver and channel. On the third level, each unit of analysis is presented according to the corresponding dimension and the fourth level presents subcategories that were not initially determined but were subsequently incorporated due to their relevance during the data collection process.

Research question 1 investigates the elements that contribute to persuasive communication. According to this, the type of language is familiar within the community of followers and invites them to be part of the ongoing dialog. Some examples are the following fragments: <<Mijit@s, I love nature and I've had the opportunity to explore various caves and cenotes, but none like these from @bejilha>>, <<Plebitosss well you know what a week ago we were touuuristing and getting to know a bit of the #MexicanCaribbean!>> or <<Plebitooos
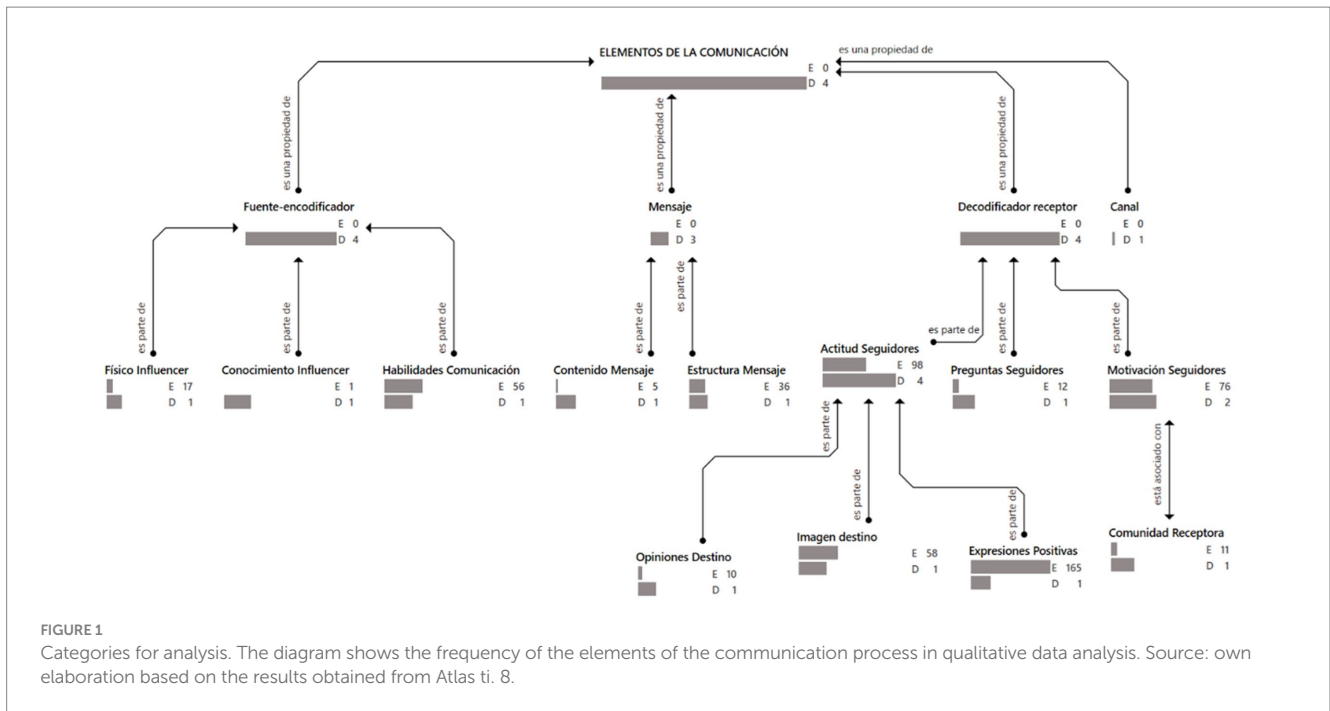
FIGURE 1
Categories for analysis. The diagram shows the frequency of the elements of the communication process in qualitative data analysis. Source: own elaboration based on the results obtained from Atlas ti. 8.

now if I share the last summary of our trip to the #MexicanCaribbean!!>>.

The influencer's physical appearance emerges as the second relevant dimension in the analysis, with messages such as << Beautiful>>, <<Your dress is beautiful>>, <<How beautiful>>, <<You are beautiful babe!!! And the place is magical>> or <<Without a doubt, you are really wonderful, beautiful, elegant, very sensual, nice, with your own personality and exquisite beauty>> standing out.

Finally, on the receiver dimension, comments linked to the units of analysis "attitude of the receiver" and "motivation" were particularly notable (Xie and Ritchie, 2019). Regarding the first, comments such as <<I love you two>>, <<That's how beautiful love looks>>, <<You brought me back to 2014, sister>>, <<It fills me with happiness to see you to go out and I love that you are together visiting places, I love you>> or <<Incredible as always and also the recommendations>>.

In response to the second research question, in the qualitative analysis of the publications for examining the narrative and interactive features of Instagram that influencers exploit to guarantee persuasion in their communication, a subjective description of tourist destinations is evident, so that emotions prevail, instead of descriptions based on historical, geographical or landscape contributions. Brand love prevails over reason, and, in this sense, the influence strategies appeals directly to emotion (*pathos*) and the acquisition of experiences. Qualitative prevails over quantitative, while subjectivity overcomes verified information, so that information gives way to opinion.

Regarding motivation, the comments in which the followers stated their intentions to visit the destination were considered. Some of them are: <<How beautiful!! I want to experience it>>, <<Wow, it looks amazing! I wanna go. I love the Mexican Caribbean, it's super beautiful>>, <<Wowwww!! I want to go>>, <<Padrisimoooo I want to go!!!!>>, <<I want to go now!!!>>, <<It looks very cool! Now I want to visit Puerto Morelos>>, <<Wooow I want to go!!!>>, <<I'm dying to go>>, <<I cannot wait to be at a Caribbean beach>>, <<OK. Now I know where my next vacation will be>>, <<More than beautiful>>, <<Now I know where I want to go on vacation!!>>, <<The beach is beautiful, love the plan>>, <<that white sand is so tempting>> or <<I see this and it gives me a lot of peace! I'll put it on my to-see list>>.

At last, in response to the third research question, related to factors that determine the elaboration of influencers' messages, the structure of the message is shaped by comments such as <<Nice images>>, <<Each photo is a postcard, each of them has so much light and life, they look amazing! >>, <<Beautiful photographs>>, <<your photographs give me visual pleasure>>, <<Great shot>>, <<Everything is so impressive, it leaves me speechless and I also love that song>> or <<Wow with the reel, the places you touch become magic, I love them>>.

7 Discussion

In order to fulfil the main objective of analyzing the communicative process of the Instagram influencer who tries to influence the tourist's travel intention to visit the Riviera Maya destination in Mexico, the research focused on a specific tourist region where it was possible to contrast and corroborate what was exposed in the literature review applied to a specific object of study, so that the results ratify the importance of the credibility factor that the influencer builds over time from the detection of the interests of his followers to achieve identification with them. This finding concurs with the observations made by Al-Emadi and Yahia (2020), who posited that highly credible sources wield greater persuasion in shaping the attitudes and behavioral intentions of the public compared to less credible sources.

A thorough examination of how the communication process is constituted has confirmed findings of previous researchers: that influencers use a visual, semantic chain to recreate their experiences at the destination where the text supplements the images, rather than the other way around. Our position finds consensus with Oneto et al.

(2020), who emphasize the importance of visual language codes, not only for the dissemination of a sun and beach destination, but also for promoting the array of options available in the Riviera Maya. In doing so, this communication aims to make the destination, and its unique offerings stand out, making it more desirable than others on offer (Seçilmiş et al., 2021). However, this research diagnoses a prevalence of emotion over information and, consequently, an attempt to convey to the community of followers a love for living the tourist experience.

By adopting the functionalist paradigm, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the communication phenomenon by examining each element of communication, instead of solely focusing on the influencer or the message as most previous research has done. From this perspective, the persuasive impact that the influencers have on the travel plans of their followers is intertwined with every communication element, thus highlighting the relevance of their integration in the communication process. In line with Enke and Borchers' (2019) perspective and in accordance with an organization's objectives to implement tourism promotion strategies with influencers, this study concludes that influencers utilize persuasive communication strategies that apply rhetorical forms to materialize the receivers' intentions and make the destination desirable (Le and Le, 2018; Azazi and Shaed, 2020; Stylos, 2020). In this research, it is discovered that the connection between influencer and followers is enhanced, since engagement based on subjectivity, emotion and opinion is encouraged.

8 Conclusion

To answer each of the research questions posed, it is highlighted that the influencer profile reveals that the two most significant units of analysis in the communication process are the influencers' communication skills and their physical appearance (RQ1), which is consistent with previous findings. The positive assessment of the senders' credibility and physical appearance contributes significantly to their persuasive power (Asan, 2022; Seçilmiş et al., 2021; Gómez, 2018; Lou and Yuan 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017).

Gómez (2018) identified Instagram as the preferred platform for both tourist influencers and their followers. Now Instagram's attributes are examined and contrasted with other forms of communication to demonstrate its effectiveness in regards to transmitting persuasive messages in tourist contexts. The prevalence of visual and audiovisual content over textual content, along with the high level of engagement generated with the user community (RQ2) are the narrative and interactive features that the influencers make most profitable on this social network.

The analysis of the message revealed that content and structure are the two most relevant factors, reflecting the adequate use of available resources to achieve effective communication (RQ3), but, unlike previous research, in this work it is discovered that the experience and emotions lived in the tourist destination make up the narrative discourse of the influencers. This includes graphic, textual, non-textual and auditory elements that appear on Instagram, aligning with the findings of Ki and Kim (2019), Lee and Eastin (2020), and Xiao et al. (2018).

Messages that are visually appealing, prestigious, informative, credible, honest, and that convey the influencers' experience in a positive light, have a significant influence on their followers' decision-making

processes. Now it is revealed that all these elements contribute to identifying the destination as something that the influencer already enjoyed. Therefore, their story provides credibility and trust to the user.

The analysis of the receiver dimension revealed that the most notable units of analysis were the attitude that followers manifested toward influencers and the content they disseminate, as well as their motivation. The latter observation concurs with the research of Xie and Ritchie (2019) and is interpreted as a result of effective transmission of the message by the sender and appropriate interpretation by the receiver. Interest in visiting increased due to the quality of the published content and the topics covered.

This supports the findings of previous investigations (Schouten et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Ing and Ming, 2018; Sundar, 2008; Kay et al., 2020), but the new finding is that the effectiveness of the message increases as the user identifies with the influencer. The characteristics of their messages make them close and, consequently, far from celebrities experiences that users perceive as foreign and believe will never happen to them.

One limitation of this study is the exclusive focus on analyzing publications of influencers hired by the CPTQ, without considering those who voluntarily generate content to promote sites in the Riviera Maya from other parts of the world. This limitation prevents the examination of different market segments as well as an extrapolation of the results to different social and geographical settings. The ephemerality of the stories as they are self-destructive content, and the impossibility of accessing metrics that can only be viewed by the users themselves (influencers) are other limitations of this work.

Regarding future lines of research, it would be valuable to differentiate between the impact generated by influencers who specialize in promoting tourist destinations and those who have a different expertise in areas such as sports, fitness, fashion or beauty. Furthermore, contacting destination managers of different tourist services would allow for a deeper investigation into the specific promotion objectives achieved. This would also provide further insight into the specific processes for the identification, management and selection of influencers that each one of them go through.

Methodologically, this study recommends mixed research methods: that being the combination of the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected from both the study subjects and the metrics provided by the social network. This approach will enable future comparative studies of the object of study. Additionally, further exploration of the functionalist paradigm is recommended, paying attention to each of the stages of the decision-making process in order to provide arguments that support the development of effective communication strategies between influencers and their followers. To achieve this, the study of influencers and their participation in tourist activities must be based upon various perspectives that provide a better understanding of the damages associated with their improper integration into communication strategies for tourist destinations. Ultimately, this will help to minimize the risks for the destination, the tourists and the host community.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Written approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Tourism and Gastronomy of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

AB: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft. JS-G: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AT-S: Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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