

THE REALITY BEHIND THE TREND OF DIGITAL NOMADS

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Fascinating images? Splendid locations? Impressive lifestyle? All the way from Amalfi Coast in Italy, enjoying pasta and Aperol Spritz, to exploring colourful pathways of the Greek islands, then riding a camel through Wodi Rum desert in Jordan and ending up staring at the Northern Lights in Denali National Park, Alaska.

Probably, I made your mind wander for a while. However, this is what top Instagram travel influencers like Louis Cole @funforlouis, 1.3 million followers), Chris Burkard @chrisburkard, 2.3 million followers, Jennifer Tuffen @izkiz, 2.7 million followers and Jessica Stein @tuulavintage, 2.5 million followers portray to their followers. Figure 1 below shows a collection of Instagram posts from the above-mentioned travel influencers.

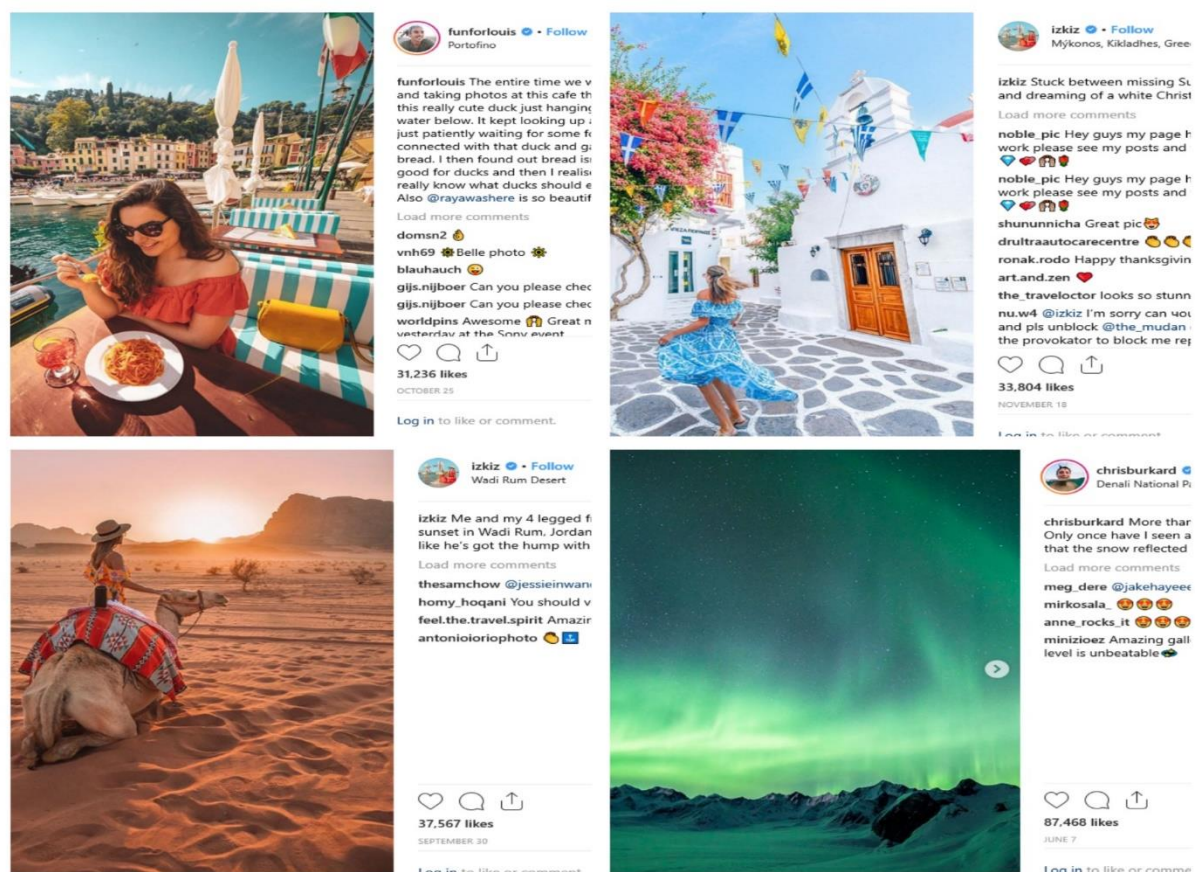


Figure 1: Instagram posts from four of the most popular travel influencers

The contemporary strategy of emphasizing images and videos as the main content of social media platforms, especially Instagram, has shifted advertisement and marketing to another level. According to Captiv8 and as reported by Bloomberg, globally well-known brands are constantly directing their marketing strategies from campaigns in traditional media outlets to social media influencing campaigns, therefore investing more than \$225 million just in Instagram posts (Morad, Rene., 2016). It happens often to all of us that while scrolling through our Instagram feeds, we stop and stare at the stunning images captured all over the world by the above-mentioned ‘digital nomads’, who appear to be on holiday all year round. Or at least, that is what their posts show us. The new trend of Instagram travel influencers or so-called ‘digital nomads’ is a new form of social media marketing campaign with the aim of influencing followers and audiences. Travel influencers are the new era of traveling magazines but more effective because they can reach a larger audience with much less expense.

Travel influencers constantly travel to different destinations around the globe, posting the most prominent pictures with the aim of influencing their audiences to fly to that destination, book that hotel or buy products from that brand. Ibiza’s counsellor for tourism, Vicente Torres, argues that the role of travel influencers and Instagram marketing promoting the country (Spain) is increasing rapidly, often surpassing traditional marketing in terms of impact due to engagement from the loyal followers (George-Parkin H., 2018). This statement gives a clear definition of the importance of travel influencers’ marketing nowadays. The pictures and travel destinations are especially inspired by the partnerships that the travel influencer has constructed with different hotels and resorts, destinations and brands. To simplify, Travel Influencer X has a partnership with Luxury Resort Y in Destination Z. Travel Influencer X is invited to visit Luxury Resort Y for free for one week, and during this time he/she keeps promoting his/her fabulous stay at Destination Z through pictures or video footage. Depending on the popularity of the travel influencers and their specific contracts with brands or agencies, they get paid for the promotion as well.

The trend of travel influencers, which is growing at a very fast pace, has a positive impact on exploring and promoting new travel destinations, inspiring people to travel, create and tell stories. According to MMGY Global 2017 Portrait of American Travelers, more than a third of travelers reported choosing a destination based partially or primarily on social media research, and 58 percent of millennial travelers documented their trips on social media

themselves (George-Parkin H., 2018). To summarize, it is a powerful method of marketing and when is done well, it really works.

On the other hand, there is also the ‘hidden’ side or the reality behind the scenes which the followers of travel influencers are rarely aware of. This article digs into the depth of the top travel influencers’ Instagram profiles, blogs and interviews, and analyses several facts and figures about the reality of digital nomads’ lifestyle. Furthermore, it examines different articles dealing with the ‘unspoken truths’ of travel influencers’ working environment.

REAL hard work and commitment

When I finished reading interviews with Matthew Karsten (full time travel blogger and photographer), Sorelle Amore (vlogger and Instagram influencer) and Henry Do (Instagram travel influencer) about their life as travel influencers, there was one common highlighted factor that I figured out from their interviews. Most of the days in the life of a travel influencer require real hard work, from early morning to late evening. This includes taking pictures, shooting videos, creating and editing media content for the brands they are cooperating with. Moreover, it is not as simple as taking a picture or video, adding some filters and posting it on social media.

When asked to describe a standard day as a travel influencer, Henry Do answered: *“Wake up and have a good breakfast (lots of coffee!). Then I research hot spots in the area and find ways to get there. I pack up my camera gear and double check it. First, I find a safe location to shoot, preferably somewhere with good light. The sun plays a HUGE role in your photos so I shoot before, during, and after sunrise or sunset — never at high noon because it is too bright and will cause harsh shadows on your subject. Then I shoot from multiple angles. Lastly, I grab dinner and explore the night scene. Then back to charge my camera batteries and get a good night’s rest”* (Olympus, 2018). In order to create the splendid content that they portray in their social media profiles, travel influencers have to work on perfect planning, the perfect shot, perfect timing, the perfect texture etc. Deadlines are another common factor while working as a travel influencer, which forces them to work long hours. In a nutshell, it is the kind of job that even if they are staying at a luxurious resort in Bali, they must spend most of their time sitting with the laptop on their lap to create the media content they are paid for.

On his blog post: ‘This Is How I Get Paid to Travel the World (Yes, Really)’, Matthew Karsten displays two pictures in contrast (Karsten M., 2019). The first one shows him from a high perspective standing on the shore with stunning scenery associated with the caption: ‘Another day at the office!’. The second picture shows him sitting and working on the laptop together with the caption ‘Actually most of the days look like this!’ This example illustrates the commitment and hard work required to create and edit the media content digital nomads post on their social media profiles. Figure 2 below shows the two contrasting pictures of Matthew Karsten’s daily life as a travel influencer.



Figure 2: Mathew Karsten’s contrasting pictures show the daily life of a travel influencer

In addition, in the beginning of their careers as travel influencers they usually have to work two jobs and save money to travel. Karsten explains that he had to quit his normal life in order to follow the dream of traveling the world. Commitment and loyalty are really important features to be successful in the industry of travel influencer marketing.

There is a legitimate industry behind the trend of travel influencers

Even though I have used the term ‘new trend’ to refer to the growing number of digital nomads, there is a legitimate marketing industry that generates millions as a result of travel influencers. If we pay close attention to the destination that most of the famous travel influencers feature in their social media profiles, it is easy to find common patterns and destinations. For instance, destinations like the Ubud jungle in Bali, Positano on the Amalfi Coast, private seafront villas in the Maldives, the white houses and blue skies of Santorini are present in the Instagram profiles of top travel influencers. Just think about that: do you get the feeling that there are reasons why these travel destinations feature all over Instagram feeds of travel influencers? Yes, there are reasons. Travel influencers aim to promote luxury travel destinations, resorts and hotels because in these luxury spots they are able to capture the most incredible-looking pictures to post to their audiences. They cannot influence their audiences by posting pictures from a three-star hotel. Moreover, they get free accommodation and, depending on the contract, they get financial support as well.

To go further, the relationship between travel influencers and resorts and hotels is dual. The representatives of the marketing departments of these luxury resorts or hotels are constantly looking for the ideal travel influencers to cooperate with. For instance, Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, which includes a collection of 70 luxury properties worldwide, has engaged in travel influencers’ campaigns but going further, which means that they build long-term cooperation that lasts one year instead of weekly cooperation with two or three posts. One of their most successful campaigns featured Louis Cole (*@funforlouis*) shooting videos while flying over an erupting volcano in Hawaii. An example of an Instagram post during Fairmont Hotels and Resorts campaign with Louis Cole in Canada can be seen in figure 3 below.



Figure 3: Louis Cole's (@funforlouis) posting for Fairmont Luxury Resort and Hotels

Another related example, Cavo Tagoo Mykonos, which is a five-star hotel located on the Greek island of Mykonos, has reached a very active audience of 787,000 Instagram followers. The strategy that helped them reach this audience was that they posted the best media content captured or filmed by their guests. As a result, they portray in their Instagram profile the experience of staying there from the perspective of a guest, which makes the content seem more authentic. Figure 4 below contains a screen capture from Cavo Tagoo Mykonos's Instagram profile in which most of the posts include pictures from their guests.

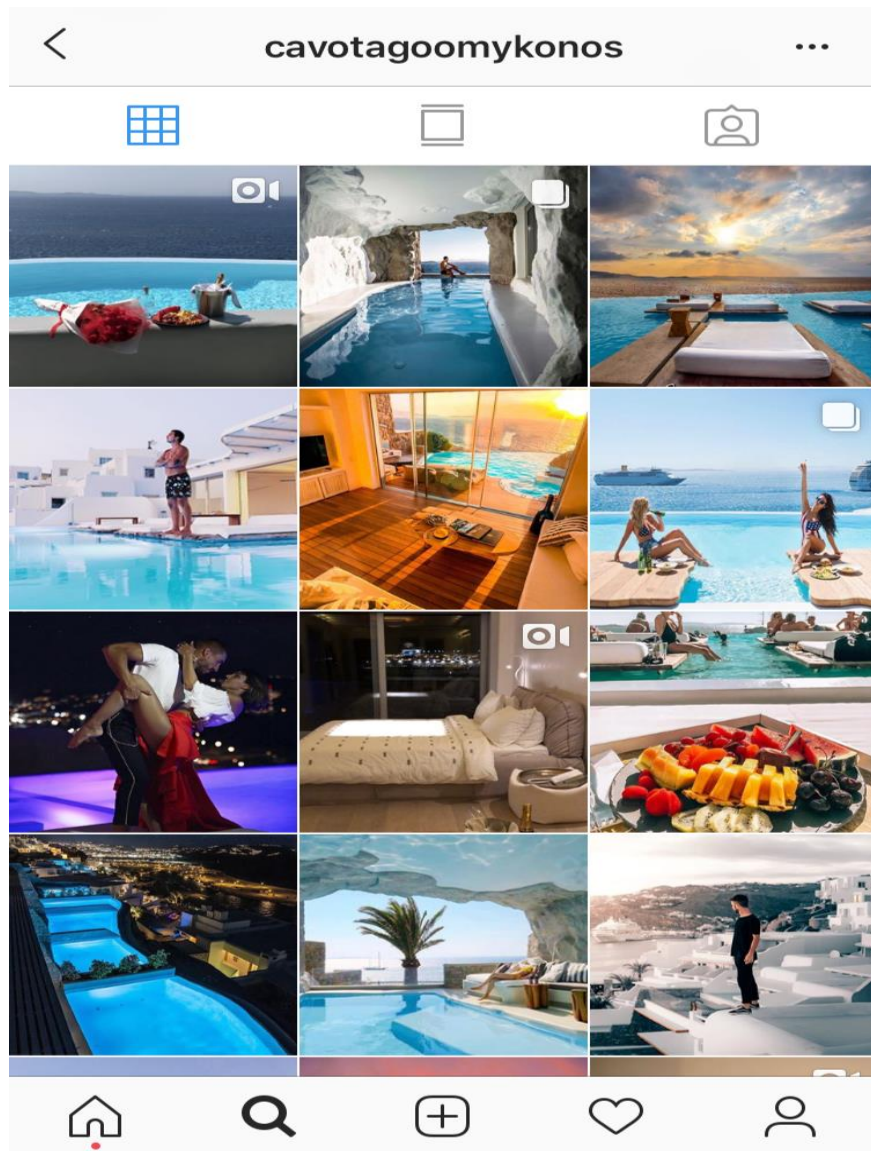


Figure 4: Cavo Tagoo Mykonos' Instagram profile

Besides promoting exotic and luxurious destinations, the trend of digital nomads has led to an increase in sales of airplane tickets. British Airlines developed an influencer marketing campaign in which they cooperated with Australian YouTuber Sam Evans and Swedish content creator Jon Olsson. British Airlines sent them to London and then Croatia to create and post media content on their profiles. The content they created was viewed by 800,000 social media users and triggered around 300,000 direct user engagements or profile activity. These results indicate that travel influencers are playing a crucial role in inspiring people to book flights.

Finally, digital nomads are influencing young people to travel more and more. The popularity of the terms ‘backpacker’, ‘budget traveler’ and ‘bucket list’ among young people indicates their travel interests and preferences. Digital nomads’ popularity among young people is increasing at a very fast pace; therefore young people get inspired to travel to the same places their favorite travel influencers visit. They usually travel to the same ‘famous’ places to take the same pictures for the sake of Instagram. There is a growing competition where young people travel to tell their friends that they have been there and fill their Instagram profiles with as many pictures of as many destinations as possible.

Anyone can be an influencer. The increasing number of ‘fake’ influencers

If I say that anyone can be a travel influencer nowadays, most probably you think I am wrong. Actually, it is true. The freedom to create and post media content on Instagram has made it possible for everyone to be a travel influencer. There is a surprising growing number of Instagram profiles which label themselves as travel influencers. But how is the trend spreading through Instagram? Recently, while I was scrolling through Instagram feeds, I stopped to read a sponsored Instagram post by *@travelingnextlevel* suggesting that instead of looking at other profiles of people who are traveling the world, I should be the one traveling and creating content. Moreover, the caption claimed to guide me how to get into this ‘business’ and start making a profit. Figure 5 below shows the sponsored post together with the description. When I followed the link, I was taken to a website where I had the option to purchase a ‘Step-by-step’ e-book to learn how to make money while traveling the world. It seemed too good to be true. Besides sponsored posts by beginner travel influencers, I have also received hundreds of follow requests from them and even messages concerning cooperation in some cases.

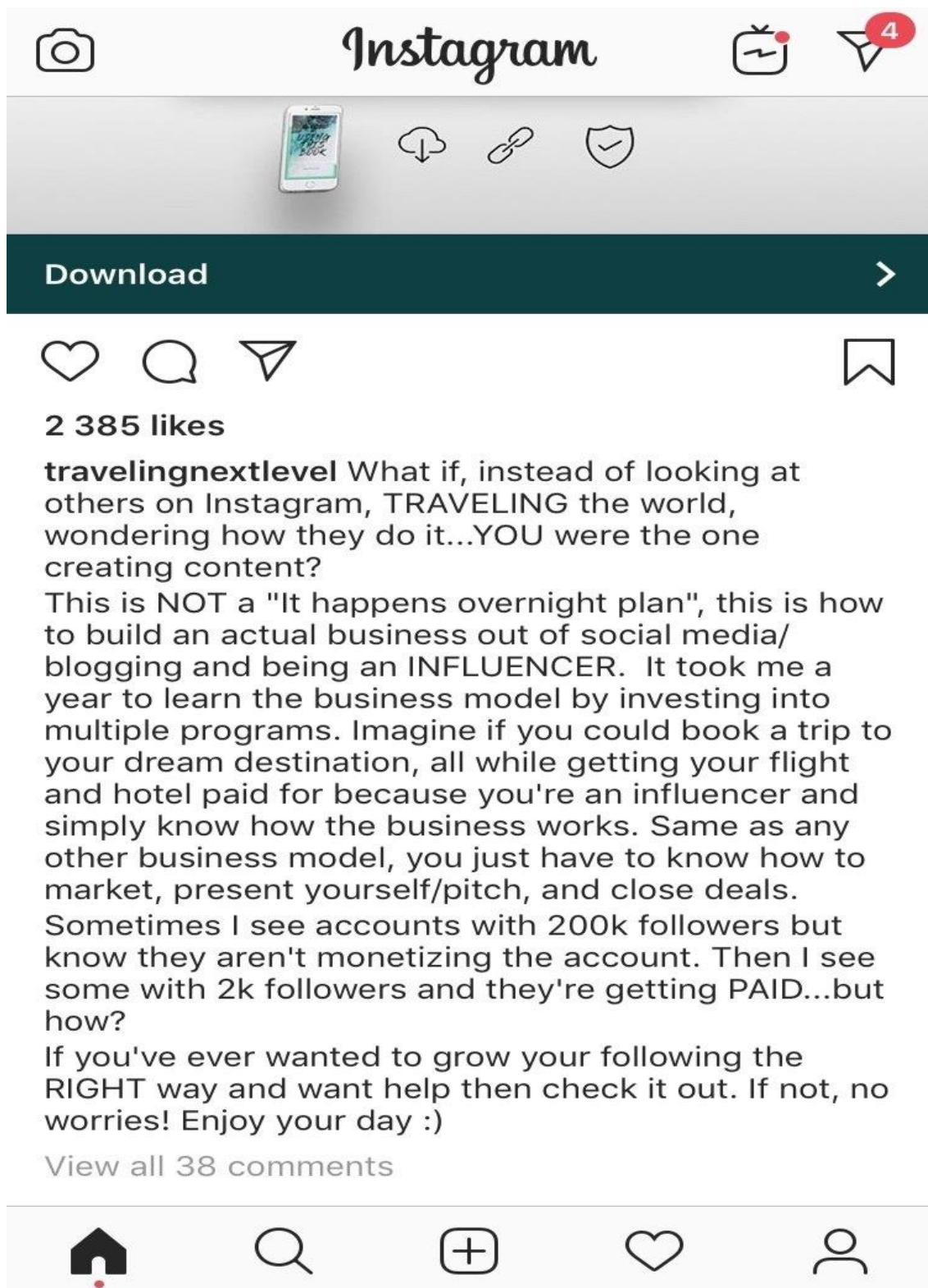


Figure 5: Example of a sponsored post by travel influencers

‘Fake followers’ or bots are another factor which can decrease the creditability of travel influencers. It is very easy for new digital nomads to buy these ‘fake followers’ on the

internet and grow their audiences. At the end of the day, the most important thing for a travel influencer is the numbers, specifically the number of followers, likes and comments they get. Buying fake followers is a very popular technique especially among new travel influencers because they can go from 1000 followers to 20,000 in one day, thereby making their profiles appear more attractive and professional. Social Blade is an online website which helps investigate the patterns and the activity of Instagram profiles. For example, if you type the name of a travel influencer and you see that the number of followers has suddenly increased by 1000 followers in one night and then the next day the number decreased by 600 followers, it is obvious that he/she bought those followers. Instagram is constantly working to remove 'fake accounts' or bots; that is the reason the number of followers decreases automatically.

Additionally, I read an online article from Matador Network about a travel influencer who cheated her audience (Diskin E, 2018). Aggie @travelinhershoes has an audience of 860,000 followers and her profile includes 1356 posts from her travels around the world. According to Matador Network, she offered a Master Tribe course to her followers which was supposed to help them grow their Instagram audiences. The course included tips on pitching to companies and editing video and other information to help 'get into the business'. The fee for the course was 500 US dollars. The problem was that the students did not get the materials they were promised, and they were asked to sell the course to their followers. She also promised face-to-face interaction with their students, but it never happened. As a result, the students asked for refunds, but she did not deliver, hence making a profit of 225,000 US dollars. Figure 6 below shows the comments and complaints from the students' Facebook group about Aggie's course. This approach is familiar among new travel influencers who try to get into the 'business' by selling guides or e-books which probably contain non-professional information or nothing at all and they start to make profit.



Complaints about the course

Figure 6: Student's complaints about the scamming course from Aggie @travelinhershoes

Super-saturated and edited pictures

Finally, the large number of image and video editing software programs such as *Adobe Photoshop Elements*, *Corel Paintshop Pro* and *Adobe Premiere Pro CC* have made it easy for everyone to be a professional photographer. Even if your pictures do not look as captivating as they should, using different software to add more brightness, filters and colors will make your pictures look stunning. I am not saying that travel influencers should not use these apps because in the end, their job is to make things look beautiful. However, in some cases travel influencers are over-using them, which makes the pictures look anything else but not authentic. To illustrate this, I would like to introduce my own experience which made me realize the negative effect of super-saturated and edited pictures. While I was working as an outdoor guide in Northern Lapland, famous for the Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis, I was spending the evenings outside in the forest with the customers in order to see the Northern Lights. It happened very often that some of the customers complained about the display and shape of the Northern Lights. In reality, when you see the Northern Lights with your eyes they do not look as bright and saturated in colors as they do in pictures. It takes so many efforts, nights in the forest, a professional camera, a lot of time and luck for travel influencers and photographers to capture the fascinating Auroras that are all over the internet, safari

companies and travel agencies. When people want to travel to Lapland, especially to see the Northern Lights, the image they create in their mind about the Auroras is very different from the reality; therefore, when they see them in reality, which does not meet their expectations, they feel disappointed. One night, while there was weak Northern Lights activity in the sky, one of the customers approached me with his phone showing Aurora pictures from Google and said to me: 'I thought that Northern Lights look like this'.

The lack of direct interaction or communication between travel influencers and their followers makes it almost impossible for the followers to share their experiences when they choose a travel destination inspired by a travel influencer. If there is not a real feedback system such as the ones on websites like Booking.com, Expedia.com and Airbnb.com, how can travelers inspired by digital nomads share their experiences, opinions, criticism and complaints?

To conclude, marketing and advertisement are a crucial part of the travel industry, and there is a mutual relationship between them. Travel influencers or digital nomads are the modern version of traditional traveling magazines but with a wider influence. The aim of this article was to make you aware of the hidden details and scenarios behind the media content of travel influencers. Next time that you are checking your favorite travel influencer's profile, make sure to 'think critically'. Try to go beyond the picture or the caption. If you are able to evaluate the content critically, you will be able to differentiate between scammers or fake travel influencers and authentic ones.

Additionally, I believe that it is important for social media sites such as Instagram to start creating guidelines and restrictions regarding travel influencers. A feedback system and direct communication with their followers must be a crucial part of the travel influencers' campaigns. As a result, it will be much easier for the followers to trust their favorite travel influencers, be aware of the media content, and distinguish between beginner travel influencers and professional ones.

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