

# From Inspiration to Immersion: How Social Media Influencers Shape Travel Intentions Through Enhanced Wellness Awareness

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study investigates the influence of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on travelers' Intention to Travel (IT) for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka, with a focus on the mediating role of Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA). The study aims to provide theoretical and practical insights into how influencer-driven content shapes awareness and travel decisions in an emerging wellness tourism market.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A quantitative research design was adopted, collecting data from 384 purposively sampled social media users with prior interest or engagement in wellness tourism. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS to test the hypothesized relationships and the mediating effect of WTA. Reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and mediation were assessed using established criteria (Cronbach's alpha, CR, AVE, Fornell-Larcker, HTMT, and bootstrapping).

**Findings** – The results demonstrate that SMIs positively influence both IT and WTA, and that WTA positively affects IT. Mediation analysis revealed that WTA partially mediates the SMI-IT relationship, indicating that awareness is a key mechanism through which influencers impact travel intentions, while other factors may also contribute to decision-making.

**Conclusion** – The study confirms that social media influencers play a significant role in enhancing wellness tourism awareness and travel intentions in Sri Lanka. Awareness acts as a partial mediator, highlighting the importance of knowledge acquisition in shaping travel behavior.

**Implications** – Tourism stakeholders can leverage SMIs to design targeted, awareness-driven campaigns that promote Sri Lanka's unique wellness offerings. The findings provide guidance for selecting appropriate influencer types and content strategies to maximize engagement and conversion among wellness tourists.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the literature by empirically examining the mediating role of wellness tourism awareness in the influencer-travel intention relationship within the context of an emerging wellness tourism destination. It bridges a gap in research on digital influencer marketing in tourism and provides a framework for future studies in similar contexts.

**Keywords** – Intention to travel, Social media influencers, Travel decision making Wellness tourism, Wellness tourism awareness

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## 1. Introduction

The global travel industry has experienced a significant shift, with travelers increasingly seeking experiences that promote wellness and holistic health. This trend has led to the growth of wellness tourism, which encompasses travel to destinations and participation in activities designed to enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Huang et al., 2024). Sri Lanka, with its rich tradition of Ayurveda practices, scenic landscapes, and growing promotion of mindfulness retreats, provides a prime context for wellness tourism development (Dharmapala & Gnanapala, 2023).

Simultaneously, social media has emerged as a critical influence on travel decisions in the digital era (Fotis, 2015). Social media influencers (SMIs) share their travel experiences, highlight destinations, and engage with audiences in ways that can shape perceptions, preferences, and intentions. Through authentic and personalized content, SMIs can foster trust, aspiration, and perceived credibility among followers (Bastrygina et al., 2024; Seeler et al., 2019). Research has demonstrated that SMIs can affect general travel decisions (Kapoor et al., 2022); however, their specific impact on wellness tourism intentions, particularly in emerging markets like Sri Lanka, remains underexplored.

A key mechanism through which SMIs may influence travel intentions is Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA). Exposure to influencer content may increase awareness of Sri Lanka's wellness offerings from Ayurveda treatments to yoga retreats and immersive nature experiences shaping travelers' perceptions and aligning with their wellness goals (Prabuddha et al., 2025). In turn, heightened awareness is likely to increase Intention to Travel (IT), suggesting a mediating role of WTA in the SMI-IT relationship. Despite its potential importance, this mediating effect has received limited empirical attention. Existing studies tend to focus on traditional marketing strategies or the economic impact of wellness tourism rather than exploring digital influencer-driven awareness (Perera et al., 2023).

Intention to travel is similar to intention to buy or purchase something new, such as green financial products which is often shaped by a combination of personal reasoning and perceived control over the behavior (Pokhrel et al., 2024), and such intentions are triggered when individuals' underlying beliefs, attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control align with their personal reasons for acting, leading them to form stronger motivations to engage in the desired behavior. This study is theoretically grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence behavioral intentions. In this context, SMIs can shape attitudes and perceived control by enhancing awareness of wellness tourism options, while WTA serves as a mediator translating these influences into concrete travel intentions. Additionally, the Media Influence Theory provides a conceptual basis for understanding how exposure to curated social media content affects awareness and subsequent decision-making (Bandura, 2001). By integrating these frameworks, the study provides a strong conceptual rationale for examining the SMI-WTA-IT pathway in Sri Lanka's wellness tourism context.

Based on this rationale, the study aims to address the research questions such as; 1) What is the relationship between social media influencers and intention to travel for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka? 2) How does wellness tourism awareness mediate the relationship between social media influencers and intention to travel for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka? Understanding the influence of SMIs on wellness tourism intentions offers practical value for stakeholders. Tourism authorities and organizations can use the findings to design targeted social media campaigns that resonate with prospective wellness tourists, emphasizing Sri Lanka's unique offerings. Moreover, insights into the mediating role of WTA can guide the development of content strategies that increase engagement, awareness, and ultimately travel intentions, contributing to the sustainable growth of the wellness tourism sector.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### *Social Media Influencers and Transformation in Tourism*

This section discusses the transformational impact of SMIs on the tourist segment. SMIs use social media platforms to curate travel material, affecting travel choices and destination preferences (Hass, 2022). Researchers here focus on how SMIs promote wellness tourism experiences in particular and work as change agents in the tourism industry. According to Nafees et al. (2021) SMIs are social media users who utilize their influence to market products and services and have a recognized following. Wellness tourism refers to travel experiences aimed to enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Smith, 2021). The development of social media has radically impacted the preparation of trips. Travelers increasingly depend on user-generated content (UGC) supplied by SMIs for inspiration and decision-making (Ghaly, 2023). Compared to conventional marketing channels, SMIs provide a more genuine and approachable voice that builds trust and influences travel decisions (Bastrygina et al., 2024). According to Bardukova (2023), this tendency is consistent with the increased focus on experience and customized travel. Research shows that social media inspiration has an enormous impact on decisions about where to visit, majority of millennials use social media sites like TikTok rather than conventional search engines to plan their travels (Nakhon, 2022). This emphasizes the great potential of SMIs in altering tourist trends, especially within the wellness tourism industry.

Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural history and concentration on Ayurveda, a traditional holistic health method is ideally positioned to profit on the expanding wellness tourism sector (Mahisha & Samarathunga, 2023). However, successfully targeting prospective wellness tourists needs novel marketing tactics. This presents fertile ground to study the function of SMIs in marketing Sri Lanka's distinctive wellness tourism offerings (Sivanandamoorthy, 2021). Sri Lanka's tourist sector realizes the potential of social media; it rises in tourism promotion funds dedicated to digital marketing platforms. However, research reveals a gap in knowing how effectively to employ SMIs to target certain tourist demographics, such wellness travelers (Dawson et al., 2023). While SMIs provide great potential, questions arise surrounding the inauthenticity of influencer marketing and the possibility for inauthentic depictions of locations (Andonopoulos, 2021). Sri Lanka, with its emphasis on encouraging ethical and sustainable tourism practices, wants to ensure influencer collaborations correspond with these ideals.

Limited study analyzes the exact aspects of SMIs that is helpful in marketing Sri Lanka's wellness tourist services. A limitation exists in knowing how SMIs might be exploited to enhance awareness of Sri Lanka's distinct wellness experiences beyond conventional methods like Ayurveda. Understanding these gaps is vital for Sri Lanka's tourism business to properly target wellness travelers via targeted influencer marketing initiatives. This may lead to greater visitor arrivals, economic advantages for local people, and a more sustainable tourism model that corresponds with Sri Lanka's cultural and environmental values. By addressing these research gaps, we can gain valuable insights into how SMIs can best be utilized to raise awareness of Sri Lanka's wellness tourism potential and ultimately influence travel decisions, leading us closer to answering the overarching research question of the relationship between SMIs and the intention to travel for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka.

### *Social Media Influencers and Wellness Tourism Awareness*

This section analyzes the effect of social media influencers (SMIs) on wellness tourism awareness. Wellness tourism, a rapidly growing travel market, focuses on boosting general well-being via travel experiences (Luo et al., 2018). SMIs have a big influence on how people behave as consumers (Wang et al., 2016). Understanding this association between SMIs and wellness

tourism awareness is vital for establishing focused marketing tactics in the Sri Lankan setting. This chapter primarily investigates how SMIs employ social media to generate awareness of wellness tourism locations and experiences. Researchers describe SMIs as persons who have developed credibility and influence over a certain audience group (Mabkhot et al., 2022). Wellness tourism awareness refers to the amount of information and understanding people possess regarding wellness tourism offers in a given area (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). The emergence of social media has transformed travel marketing, with SMIs becoming as significant influencers (Pop et al., 2022). SMIs harness their authenticity and ability to connect with audiences on a human level to promote places and travel experiences (Bastrygina et al., 2024). This effect extends to the wellness tourism industry, as SMIs display wellness retreats, wellness travel practices, and mindfulness activities, encouraging a demand for such experiences among their followers (Audrezet et al., 2020). There is a paucity of worldwide data relevant to wellness tourism influencer marketing; however, studies imply a considerable effect. Some surveys suggest that majority of the marketers employ influencer marketing, underlining its rising relevance. Considering the prevalence of social media in trip planning it's plausible to believe SMIs play a key role in creating wellness tourism awareness internationally (Belova, 2023).

Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural legacy, natural beauty, and concentration on Ayurveda, has the potential to profit on the wellness tourism boom. However, restricted marketing expenditures and a desire to reach a worldwide audience demand researching novel marketing tactics. SMIs, with their enormous local and worldwide followings, may be effective partners in marketing Sri Lanka's distinctive wellness tourism offers. However, other research highlighted social media as a crucial marketing medium for tourist promotion. This shows a receptive audience for influencer driven wellness tourism advertising. There is minimal study on the particular influence of SMIs on wellness tourism in Sri Lanka (Devaraja, 2013). Limited research exists on the exact sorts of social media content most successful for promoting wellness tourism in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the effect of local vs foreign SMIs on domestic and international visitor sectors warrants examination. Understanding successful social media content and the reach of local and international SMIs would help Sri Lankan tourism stakeholders to build targeted influencer marketing campaigns to boost wellness tourism awareness. By addressing these study gaps, we may acquire useful insights on how SMIs can most successfully promote wellness tourism awareness in Sri Lanka, eventually contributing to the success of the country's wellness tourism objectives. SMIs possess great potential to change wellness tourism awareness on a global basis. In the context of Sri Lanka, employing SMIs effectively may considerably enhance awareness of the country's unique wellness tourist options. Further, study is required to understand the subtleties of successful SMI marketing within the Sri Lankan environment to enhance its effectiveness.

### *Mediating Role of Wellness Tourism Awareness*

This section explores into the mediating function of Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA) in the interaction between Social Media Influencers (SMI) and Intention to Travel (IT) for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka. The emergence of social media has radically impacted tourist marketing (Munar et al., 2013). SMIs exploit their internet power to alter travel patterns and customer choices (Bastrygina et al., 2024). In the wellness tourism industry, SMIs display locations, treatments, and experiences, encouraging WTA and influencing travel choices (Allen, 2016). While research studies the influence of SMIs on general travel intentions, the mediation function of WTA in the context of wellness tourism remains under-investigated.

Sri Lanka offers a long tradition of Ayurveda and indigenous healing practices, making it an ideal destination for wellness tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2008). However, the sector lacks

substantial internet marketing presence compared to regional rivals. SMIs may play a vital role in increasing WTA worldwide and bringing wellness visitors to Sri Lanka. Studies demonstrate a favorable association between WTA and travel inclinations for wellness tourism (Koswatte et al., 2021). Limited research addresses how SMIs moderate this connection especially within the Sri Lankan setting. A contrarian viewpoint highlights possible difficulties surrounding the authenticity and legitimacy of SMI information. However, for this study, the emphasis falls on how efficiently SMIs can create awareness and influence favorable opinions about Sri Lanka's distinctive wellness offers. Addressing these gaps is critical for establishing customized marketing strategies employing SMIs. Understanding the mediating function of WTA would assist Sri Lanka's tourism sector to harness social media successfully to attract wellness travelers and increase its position in the global wellness tourism market. The mediation function of WTA gives a possible path for exploring how SMIs might impact travel intentions for Sri Lankan wellness tourism. Addressing the highlighted research gaps can give vital insights for the sustainable growth of Sri Lanka's wellness tourism industry.

### ***Wellness Tourism Awareness and Intention to Travel for Wellness Tourism***

This section analyzes the link between wellness tourism knowledge and the desire to travel for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka. Here, wellness tourism awareness is defined as an individual's knowledge and comprehension of the concept of wellness travel, including its different components including spa treatments, yoga retreats, and wellness vacations (Smith & Puczkó, 2008). Intention to travel for wellness tourism refers to a tourist's stated intention of travelling on a journey focused on improving their physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Puczkó, 2010). The worldwide wellness business has experienced tremendous expansion, driven by reasons including increasing disposable income, greater stress levels, and a growing awareness of preventive healthcare (Kumar et al., 2023). This tendency translates into an increasing interest in wellness tourism, when tourists select places that provide experiences encouraging holistic well-being. Social media plays a vital role in this context, with influencers exhibiting wellness travel experiences and encouraging a desire for such excursions among their audience (Asdecker, 2022). There is a dearth of particular data on the worldwide wellness tourism market share for Sri Lanka. However, the Sri Lanka Tourism recognized the potential of this area, noting its emphasis on promoting Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation experiences (Perera et al., 2023).

Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural legacy, natural beauty, and concentration on Ayurveda, is well-positioned to profit on the wellness tourism growth. However, inadequate understanding of Sri Lanka's wellness tourism options can restrict its capacity to attract tourists searching such experiences. A survey by the Sivanandamoorthy (2021) found that a considerable share of overseas visitors is interested in wellness activities. However, the survey also highlighted a knowledge gap on the various wellness tourism decisions available in Sri Lanka. While some assume Sri Lanka's natural beauty could be the key motivator for tourism, the rising emphasis on holistic well-being implies that marketing wellness experiences might be a complementing approach for attracting travelers. Limited study addresses the particular aspects impacting Sri Lankan visitors' knowledge and inclination for travelling for wellness tourism inside the country. Understanding these variables would be vital for establishing focused marketing tactics to improve awareness of Sri Lanka's wellness tourism services and promote domestic travel for wellness motives. This research gap directly ties to the topic of how wellness tourism knowledge impacts Sri Lankan visitors' propensity to travel for wellness experiences inside the nation. This section emphasized the rising worldwide interest in wellness tourism and Sri Lanka's potential in this area. However, research reveals a gap in Sri Lankan visitors' understanding of the country's wellness options. Addressing this gap through specific marketing strategies might be essential for developing domestic wellness tourism in Sri Lanka.



## Hypothesis

On the basis of the arguments and information cited in the literature review section, we hypothesized the following hypotheses;

*Hypothesis (H1): There is a positive effect of Social Media Influencers on Intention to Travel for Wellness Tourism*

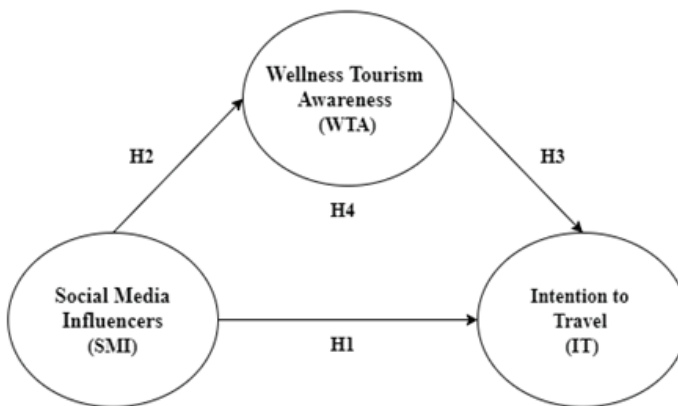
*Hypothesis (H2): There is a positive effect of Social Media Influencers on Wellness Tourism Awareness*

*Hypothesis (H3): There is a positive effect of Wellness Tourism Awareness on Intention to Travel for Wellness Tourism*

*Hypothesis (H4): Wellness Tourism Awareness mediate the relationship between Social Media Influencers on Intention to Travel for Wellness Tourism*

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



*Source: Developed by the researchers based on the literature (2025)*

## 3. Method

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to investigate the relationships between Social Media Influencers (SMI), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Intention to Travel (IT) for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka. Quantitative measurement provides empirical evidence to address the research question: “What is the relationship between social media influencers and intention to travel for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka?” (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the study explores the mediating role of WTA to examine how influencers shape tourists’ travel intentions. By incorporating survey items that capture perceptions of influencers’ content, credibility, and engagement, the quantitative survey goes beyond identifying correlations to provide insight into the mechanisms through which social media influences awareness and intention. Data were collected using an online survey via Google Forms, which offers an efficient, cost-effective, and flexible method to reach respondents. Online surveys also provide confidentiality and convenience, increasing the likelihood of honest and thoughtful responses, which strengthens the reliability of the findings (Nurmahmudah & Nuryuniarti, 2020).

### ***Sampling and Participants***

This study targeted individuals who were active social media users and have demonstrated engagement with wellness tourism content, either through following wellness tourism accounts, interacting with wellness-related posts, or having participated in wellness travel in the past 12 months. Defining the target population in this way ensures that respondents are relevant to the research objectives, which focus on understanding how social media influencers (SMIs) shape awareness and intention to travel for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). A purposive sampling strategy with screening criteria was applied to recruit participants (Campbell et al., 2020). To ensure that only eligible respondents participated, the online survey included screening questions to verify that participants met the inclusion criteria, such as active social media use and prior interest and experience in wellness tourism. The survey was distributed across multiple social media platforms to reach a broad and diverse sample of potential wellness tourists, while minimizing the risk of self-selection bias. Given that the total population of potential wellness tourists on social media is unknown, the sample size was determined based on recommendations for quantitative studies using mediation analysis, which suggest a minimum of 200 to 300 participants to achieve adequate statistical power (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). In total, 384 valid responses were collected, providing sufficient data for robust analysis while acknowledging the limitations of generalizability inherent to online purposive surveys. This approach balances practical constraints with methodological rigor, ensuring that the data collected are both relevant to the research objectives and adequate for testing the relationships among social media influencers, wellness tourism awareness, and travel intention.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

Data for this study were collected using an online survey developed in Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section captured demographic information, including age, gender, and location, to profile the sample and explore potential demographic influences on the study variables. The second section measured the three primary variables: Social Media Influencers (SMI), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Intention to Travel (IT) using five-point Likert scales. All measurement items were adapted from previously validated studies to ensure reliability and validity. Specifically, SMI items were adapted from Lou and Yuan (2019), WTA items were adapted from Zehrer et al. (2017), and IT items were adapted from Chen and Tsai (2007). Minor wording adjustments were made to align the items with the context of wellness tourism in Sri Lanka, without altering their conceptual meaning. To recruit participants, the survey link was distributed across multiple social media platforms frequented by the target audience, accompanied by a brief description of the study, an emphasis on voluntary participation, and assurance of anonymity (Madondo, 2016). Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the survey, clearly outlining the study objectives and participants' rights. Prior to full-scale data collection, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing with 30 respondents to assess clarity, comprehensiveness, and response time. Feedback from the pilot study led to minor adjustments in phrasing to improve understanding and response accuracy. After data collection, a systematic data cleaning process was conducted. Responses were removed if they were incomplete, contained duplicate entries, or displayed inconsistent or illogical answers (e.g., selecting the same option for all items or conflicting demographic responses). Out of 420 initial submissions, 36 responses were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 384 valid responses. This process ensured the reliability and quality of the dataset for subsequent analysis (Ryan et al., 2012; Abbey & Meloy, 2017).

## Data Analysis Procedures

Prior to analysis, the dataset was carefully cleaned to remove incomplete surveys, responses with excessive missing data, or illogical answers, resulting in 384 valid responses (Chapman, 2005). Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS, which is appropriate for testing complex relationships, mediation effects, and non-normal data distributions (Hair et al., 2017). First, descriptive statistics were computed to examine central tendencies and assess normality. Next, the measurement model was evaluated for reliability and validity: internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability ( $CR \geq 0.70$ ), convergent validity was checked via average variance extracted ( $AVE \geq 0.50$ ), and discriminant validity was verified using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios. The structural model was then assessed by examining path coefficients, t-values, p-values,  $R^2$ , effect sizes ( $f^2$ ), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) to test the hypothesized relationships between Social Media Influencers (SMI), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Intention to Travel (IT). Finally, the mediating role of WTA was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to evaluate direct, indirect, and total effects, determining whether mediation was full or partial (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This stepwise procedure ensured that the data were reliable, valid, and suitable for testing the hypothesized relationships in the context of wellness tourism in Sri Lanka.

In order to ensure the protection of study participants' privacy and ethical principles, this research adheres with ethical guidelines. Informed authorization was requested at the beginning of the online survey, clearly outlining the research objective, participant rights to confidentiality and voluntary participation, and how the gathered data would be used. Any particularly annoying disrespectful, or discriminatory survey questions were omitted from the design. Throughout the whole process of gathering and analyzing data, participant identity was preserved.

## 4. Results

**Table 1**

*Demographic factors of respondents*

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	230	60
	Female	154	40
Age	16-25	58	15
	26-35	154	40
	36-45	134	35
	46-55	31	8
	56+	7	2
Province	Western	58	15
	Southern	46	12
	Central	46	12
	North Western	46	12
	Uva	38	10
	Other Provinces	150	39



District (Top 5)	Galle	73	19
	Matara	54	14
	Colombo	38	10
	Anuradhapura	38	10
	Badulla	35	9
Education Level	G.C.E O/L	58	15
	G.C.E A/L	96	25
	Diploma/Vocational	100	26
	Internal/External Degree	108	28
	Master's/MBA/MBC	22	6

### *Descriptive Analysis for Variables*

**Table 2**

#### *Descriptive Analysis for Variables*

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social Media Influencers (SMI)	4.12	0.63	-0.42	0.18
Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA)	4.05	0.69	-0.35	-0.05
Intention to Travel (IT)	4.08	0.65	-0.38	0.12

Scale interpretation:  $1 \leq M < 2.5$  = Almost not accepted;  $2.5 \leq M < 3.5$  = Average;  $3.5 \leq M \leq 5$  = Almost accepted (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

### *Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)*

The hypothesized structures of Social Media Influencers (SMI), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Intention to Travel (IT) were validated via the use of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This provides support for investigating the postulated correlations between the variables and verifies the suggested measurements (Ehido et al., 2022). The CFA assessed the effectiveness of the measures used in the research in accurately representing the desired concepts and their interrelationships. The findings indicated that all three constructs had strong convergent validity, suggesting that the measures accurately reflect their respective ideas.

### *Convergent Validity*

The degree to which several measurements of a construct converge or exhibit high correlations with one another, indicating that they are capturing the same underlying notion, is known as convergent validity (Hair, 2009). Three recognized measures were used in this work to assess convergent validity: Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

**Table 3***Reliability and Validity*

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
SMI	0.83	0.88	0.70
WTA	0.89	0.91	0.76
IT	0.86	0.90	0.73

The convergent validity as shown in Table 3, all three constructs showed significant convergent validity, surpassing the suggested cutoff points for every statistic. All constructions have Cronbach's alpha values above the 0.70 cutoff, suggesting strong internal consistency. All constructions' composite reliability (CR) ratings were higher than the 0.70 cutoff, offering further proof of accurate measurement. All constructs had average variance extracted (AVE) values that were more than the 0.5 cutoff, indicating that the constructs were mostly responsible for the variation in the items (Hamid et al., 2017; Siswaningsih et al., 2017).

*Discriminant Validity*

By ensuring that various conceptions are really unique and not just assessing the same underlying notion under different labels, discriminant validity assures that the constructs are indeed separate (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). This research used the Fornell-Larcker criteria and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios, two well-established techniques, to evaluate discriminant validity.

**Table 4***Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*

	SMI	WTA	IT
SMI			
WTA	0.76		
IT	0.72	0.69	

The HTMT findings are shown in Table 4. The correlations between the constructs were found to be lower than their average correlations with their respective indicators when all HTMT values fell below the suggested threshold of 0.90, as per Heseler et al. (2015). This demonstrates how unique the constructions are.

**Table 5***Fornell-Larcker criterion*

	SMI	WTA	IT
SMI	0.83		
WTA	0.67	0.86	
IT	0.70	0.72	0.85

The findings of the Fornell-Larcker criteria are shown in Table 5. The squared correlations between the constructs were shown by the off-diagonal components, which were consistently lower than the diagonal elements, which represented the AVE for each construct. This provides further evidence that the three construct variations were mostly caused by their own indicators rather than by overlapping with other constructs (Hamid et al., 2017). The results demonstrate good discriminant validity overall, indicating that the constructs of Social Media Influencers (SMI), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Intention to Travel (IT) are separate and reflect distinctive ideas within the research. This is supported by both the HTMT and Fornell-Larcker criteria.

### *Hypothesis testing*

After the constructs' validity and reliability were established, hypothesis testing was done to look into the possible connections between Intention to Travel (IT), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Social Media Influencers (SMI). The PLS-SEM technique in the SmartPLS 4 software was used for the structural equation modelling (SEM) study (Hair et al., 2019).

**Table 6**

#### *Hypothesis Testing*

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	t-value>2	p-value	Decision
H1	SMI → IT	0.45	4.50	0	Accepted
H2	SMI → WTA	0.37	3.74	0	Accepted
H3	WTA → IT	0.28	2.20	0.02	Accepted

The findings of the hypothesis testing are collected in Table 6. Using metrics such as the path coefficient, t-value, p-value, and ultimate conclusion, the researcher thoroughly examined each hypothesis. Additionally, the investigator concluded that every calculated probability value for every hypothesis was much less than the significance threshold of 0.05 (Kennedy-Shaffer, 2019). As a consequence, the findings of the hypothesis testing showed that the data supported each of the three hypotheses.

### **Mediation Analysis**

A mediation study was carried out utilizing the bootstrapping technique as advised by Hayes (2017) in order to investigate the possible mediating influence of Wellness Tourism Awareness in the connection between Social Media Influencers and Intention to Travel. With the use of replacement sampling and repeated sampling, this technique creates a distribution of indirect effects that allows for a more thorough evaluation of mediation.

**Table 7**

#### *Specific Indirect Effect*

Hypothesis		Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation(STDEV)	t-statistics ( O/STDEV )	p-value
H4	SMI → WTA → IT	0.153	0.150	0.045	3.34	0

Mediation analysis (H4) is shown in Table 7, and depicted that there is a notable indirect impact of social media influencers on travel intention by raising knowledge of wellness tourism. These results imply that the association between social media influencers and travel intention is strong evidence for the mediating function by understanding of wellness tourism awareness. This suggests that social media influencers not only directly affect travel intentions, but also indirectly increase them by raising knowledge of wellness tourism.

## **5. Discussion**

This study examined the relationships between Social Media Influencers (SMI), Wellness Tourism Awareness (WTA), and Intention to Travel (IT) for wellness tourism in Sri Lanka, focusing on the mediating role of WTA. The findings confirm that SMI positively influences IT and WTA, and that WTA also positively affects IT. Mediation analysis revealed that WTA partially mediates the relationship between SMI and IT, suggesting that while influencers increase travel intentions by raising awareness, other factors also play a role in shaping travel behavior. This partial mediation indicates that constructs such as perceived destination attractiveness, past travel experience, or social influence beyond social media may contribute to travel intentions, aligning with multi-stage tourism behavior models (Ajzen, 1991; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). The positive relationship between SMI and WTA underscores the role of influencers in enhancing tourists' knowledge and familiarity with wellness tourism offerings. From a theoretical perspective, this supports the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), as exposure to influencers strengthens tourists' attitudes and perceived behavioral control toward wellness travel, thereby influencing their intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Additionally, the findings validate aspects of Media Influence Theory, highlighting that social media content serves as an informational cue shaping awareness and intentions, rather than merely acting as entertainment (Bandura, 2001). The link between WTA and IT further emphasizes that awareness is a key precursor to travel decisions in wellness tourism. Tourists who are more informed about wellness options in Sri Lanka are more likely to develop concrete intentions to visit, reflecting the central role of knowledge acquisition in tourism decision-making models (Fesenmaier et al., 2006).

While the findings provide valuable insights, practical recommendations should be interpreted cautiously. Although the data confirm the general effectiveness of social media influencers in enhancing awareness and travel intentions, the study did not differentiate between influencer types or content strategies. Therefore, suggestions regarding collaboration with yoga instructors or wellness-focused influencers remain speculative. Future research should empirically examine which types of influencers or content formats are most effective for promoting wellness tourism in Sri Lanka. Finally, the study highlights opportunities for theoretical advancement. By demonstrating partial mediation, it suggests that models of tourism behavior should account for multiple mediating factors beyond awareness, including motivational, social, and contextual variables, to better explain the pathways through which social media influences travel intentions.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research examined the relationship between social media influencers and intention to travel for wellness tourism with the mediating effect of wellness tourism awareness. The findings show the significant impact that SMIs play in determining travel choices within the wellness tourism sector. Exposure to social media influencers positively affects the desire to travel for wellness motives in Sri Lanka. This aligns with the increasing acknowledgment of SMIs' persuasion power in influencing travel decisions. Furthermore, the study reveals that SMIs efficiently increase awareness about wellness tourism options, performing as a bridge between potential travelers and Sri Lanka's unique tourist attractions. The study's primary

contribution is in exposing the mediating impact of wellness tourism awareness. Social media influencers significantly impact travel intentions by promoting awareness of Sri Lanka's wellness tourism potential. This highlights the importance for offering memorable and valuable social media content that reflects Sri Lanka's different wellness experiences. The research findings provide useful insights for the Sri Lankan tourist segment. By cooperating with relevant SMIs and generating customized content promoting Sri Lanka's capabilities in wellness tourism, stakeholders can effectively reach tourists seeking holistic experiences. Effective influencer campaigns may highlight Sri Lanka's unique characteristics, such as Ayurveda practices or locally-sourced food, in order to resonate to specific target audiences. While limitations like the emphasis of the sample on social media users and the geographical focus on Sri Lanka remain, this study offers an excellent foundation for future investigations. Richer insights may be obtained by examining the effectiveness of multiple social media content types and these connections throughout a broader geographical region.

## 7. Limitations of the Research

This research has numerous limitations, despite its intended purpose of offering insightful information on how social media influencers affect travelers' intentions to visit Sri Lanka for wellness tourism. Initially, the study used a self-reported survey design, which may be susceptible to errors. Respondents' replies can be affected by social desirability or memory spaces. Second, while useful for concentrating on a population that is suitable the purposive sample approach restricts the implications of the findings to the entirety of social media users with a desire to travel. Additionally, the research focuses on Sri Lanka as a unique wellness tourism destination. The findings may not be instantly transferable to other wellness tourist locations with different influencer landscapes and cultural contexts. Finally, the research explores the relationships at specific point in time. Since consumer behavior and social media trends can shift rapidly, long-term investigations of these relationships could be carried out in the future to better understand their dynamism. The study makes a significant addition to the area of wellness tourism by examining the impact of social media influencers on travel intentions in the Sri Lankan context, despite limitations.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest while preparing this article.

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