

The Role of Social Media Influencers in Country Image Formation

Mohammed A. S. Ibrahim*, Vardan Aleksanyan

Department of Management and Business, Faculty of Economics and Management, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

*Corresponding Author's Email: ibrahim.saif@ysu.am

Abstract

Background: The impact of social media influencers on public perceptions extends beyond product promotion, shaping the global image of nations as well. Nevertheless, their contribution to the discipline of nation branding has not been sufficiently examined. This research aims to ascertain whether influencers shape the national image, the magnitude of that influence, and the factors that contribute to their effectiveness. **Methods:** A quantitative approach was adopted using a structured online questionnaire distributed via convenience and snowball sampling. A total of 140 valid responses were analyzed. Favorable constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Data analysis included reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.972$), descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis. **Results:** According to the data, country image is positively impacted by influencer effectiveness in a strong and statistically significant way. The degree of exposure to influencer content also shows a noteworthy, albeit much smaller, impact. When taken together, influencer-related characteristics significantly affect how people perceive a nation. Correlation data also show strong, favorable relationships between influencer efficacy, influencer qualities, and country image. The results show that, compared to exposure alone, perceived influencer efficacy is the most reliable and significant factor influencing a nation's image. Although it is challenging to separate the specific contributions of qualities like relatability, authenticity, and credibility, they all work together to strengthen this influence. Even modest interaction with influencers' content influences positive opinions of nations. **Conclusion:** Social media personalities, often overlooked, have an important role in shaping global perceptions of countries. What matters most is not reach but whether audiences believe the message feels genuine, trust it, and act on it. Trust grows when interaction feels real, not staged. Influence now shifts less through volume, more through credibility. This quiet shift reshapes who holds the power to build a nation's reputation.

Keywords: Country Image; Digital Marketing; Influencer Effectiveness; Nation Branding; Social Media Influencers

Introduction

Governments and official institutions no longer exclusively shape how a country is perceived. Recently, social media influencers have become increasingly visible in this space, contributing to how countries are experienced, interpreted, and evaluated by international audiences (Yang *et al.*, 2025). Unlike traditional celebrities, whose recognition typically originates from television, sports, or film, influencers build their visibility directly through social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.

Their popularity is largely driven by their online presence and the relationships they develop with their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencers are most associated with promoting products and services through what is widely known as influencer marketing. This form of marketing involves brands collaborating with influencers to create and distribute content that reaches both existing followers and target audiences (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Prior research indicates that influencers can shape consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions, especially when they appear relatable and authentic (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). These characteristics often allow influencer content to feel less like traditional advertising and more like a personal recommendation.

More recently, this influence has extended beyond commercial contexts into areas such as nation branding. Through curated content and personal storytelling, influencers contribute to how countries are presented and understood by global audiences (Lee & Alhabash, 2025). Their ability to communicate experiences in a relatable and engaging manner allows them to shape perceptions in ways that differ from formal communication channels (Pan *et al.*, 2025).

Despite this growing presence, the role of influencers in shaping a country's image remains relatively underexplored. Existing research has largely focused on commercial outcomes, including purchase intentions and brand attitudes, while paying less attention to broader perceptual constructs, such as how countries are viewed. As a result, it remains unclear whether the influence of social media influencers extends meaningfully beyond products and services to the perception of nations.

This study addresses the following research questions.

1. Are social media influencers effective in shaping a country's image?
2. To what extent do they influence perceptions of a country?
3. What factors influence their effectiveness in this context?

To address these questions, a quantitative approach is adopted to examine the relationship between exposure to influencer content and country image, as well as the factors that may strengthen or limit this influence.

This study contributes to the emerging body of research examining social media influencer effectiveness and how it may shape perceptions of countries, rather than only consumer products or tourism destinations. By examining influencer impact through the lens of nation branding and country image formation, the study adds to the understanding of how social media personalities can influence broader public perceptions of nations, beyond commercial outcomes (Sattar & Sfodera, 2026).

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are recognized as essential contributors to digital communication, particularly for their ability to shape audience perceptions through content shared on social platforms. They are often defined as individuals who build an online following and leverage their credibility to influence their audience's attitudes and behaviors (Lou & Yuan, 2019). It is worth noting that they are unlike celebrities, who are famous people who gained popularity on TV or as public figures. If people feel the influencer aligns with both them and the product, they are more likely to like, buy, and recommend the product, or adopt the message it is trying to deliver, because they feel connected (Belanche *et al.*, 2021).

The main reason behind influencers' effectiveness is their authenticity and credibility. It has been shown that influencers are more trustworthy than ordinary advertising methods (Ibrahim, 2025). Such authenticity makes it much easier to connect with followers and, therefore, more impactful (Ki & Kim, 2019). According to Ibrahim (2025), social media influencers are more impactful when they are authentic and relatable to their followers.

Social media influencers serve a critical role as opinion leaders in the digital sphere, shaping consumer responses, preferences, and more through the content they share on their platforms (Ki & Kim, 2019). An opinion leader is a person who can influence the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of others through their credibility, knowledge, or expertise in each field (Katz *et al.*, 2017). Recent research indicates that the effectiveness of influencers depends on factors such as content quality, audience engagement, and the alignment between the influencer and the message being communicated; simply, how authentic they are; and whether they believe in what they are trying to promote (Ibrahim, 2025; Spörl-Wang *et al.*, 2025).

Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

The literature extensively discusses the effectiveness of social media influencers, given their influence on consumer trust and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). An established theoretical foundation explaining effectiveness is the Source Credibility Theory, which posits that messages from trustworthy, credible sources are more likely to be perceived as persuasive by audiences (Ohanian, 1991). Social media influencers are generally considered credible due to their experience, attractiveness, and relatability, which promotes message acceptability and audience engagement (Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

One of the main factors behind influencer effectiveness is how authentic they come across to their audience. When influencers appear genuine and authentic, people tend to trust them more, which can influence how they feel about brands and whether they are willing to make a purchase (Ibrahim, 2025). This sense of authenticity often creates a connection between the influencer and their followers, in which audiences feel personally engaged, even if the interaction is one-sided. As a result, their content can become more persuasive (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Country Image

The term "country image" dates back several decades and is closely linked to country-of-origin research, particularly to Schooler (1965), who stated that consumers' evaluations and perceptions of a product are shaped by the country of origin. Later, scholars such as Kotler *et al.* (1993) defined country image as the combination of beliefs, perceptions, and impressions people hold about a particular country. Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009) argued that country-of-origin image is a complex and multifaceted concept, formed through cognitive, emotional, and conative elements that reflect consumers' beliefs and knowledge about a country and influence their behavioral intentions. It is also worth noting that perceptions of a country do not emerge in isolation; rather, they are shaped by political, historical, economic, and cultural factors (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002).

Literature has long acknowledged the significance of a nation's image, especially in relation to travel, foreign investment, and product evaluations. By drawing visitors, investors, and international collaborations, a positive image increases a country's competitiveness (Anholt, 2007). On the other hand, a negative reputation might limit the appeal of that nation and affect its economic potential (Fan, 2010). This is why governments and policymakers now consider managing and shaping the nation's image a priority.

Country image is, in a sense, related to the concept of nation branding, which is the purposeful attempt to shape how a country is perceived internationally (Dinnie, 2015). To present a desired image, nation branding strategies frequently rely on communication methods such as public relations campaigns, cultural diplomacy, and media campaigns, thereby utilizing soft power (Fan, 2010). However, opinions of a nation are influenced by a variety of factors that cannot always be controlled, such as media and personal experiences, in addition to official initiatives done by various countries (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002).

Information sources play a big role in how people see a country. In the past, traditional media was the main source, and it often showed countries through politics, the economy, or culture (Avraham & Ketter, 2012). But this situation has changed with the advent of digital media. Today, people see a lot of content online created by other users, which can either support what they already think or make them change

their minds. Social media influencers have an important role in shaping opinions today; they do so in a more direct and everyday way. At the same time, a country's image is not fixed. Kotler *et al.* (1993) explain that it changes over time as new information comes in. Major events such as conflicts, global exhibitions, or sporting events can quickly change how people view a country (Anholt, 2007). Because of these factors, countries need to continue managing their image and adjust their communication as circumstances change.

Social Media Influencers and Country Image

The two-step flow theory (Katz *et al.*, 2017) helps explain how influencers shape people's views. The idea is simple: people do not always take information directly from media. Instead, they often rely on opinion leaders who interpret and pass it on. Today, influencers play this role on social media. They shape how people see countries by sharing their experiences and opinions. Research supports this assumption, as Djafarova and Bowes (2021) indicate that influencers can strongly affect how people think because they seem relatable and trustworthy; in simple terms, this influence increases when people feel connected to them. Influencers' effectiveness extends beyond products to encompass other areas, including destinations and countries. Similarly, Line *et al.* (2020) found that influencer-created content can improve how people perceive a destination and reduce uncertainty, especially when the place is not well known.

More recent studies add to this idea. Leung *et al.* (2022) explain that factors such as engagement, authenticity, and knowledge make influencers more effective at shaping people's views and decisions. Belanche *et al.* (2021) also noted that trust and a sense of connection with influencers can make their messages more convincing. Spörl-Wang *et al.* (2025) suggest that influencers can act like digital ambassadors, helping shape how countries are seen around the world.

Research Gap

The impact of social media influencers on consumer attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions has been thoroughly studied in previous research, particularly with a focus on business outcomes. However, their influence on nation branding and country image formation remains limited and is not yet fully understood. Although some studies have begun to examine the role of influencers in tourism and destination marketing, this area of research remains underdeveloped and does not adequately explain how influencers shape broader cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perceptions of countries.

Emerging nations, including those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have increasingly relied on large-scale projects, such as mega-events and other national initiatives, to promote themselves and strengthen their nation brands (Badran, 2025; Swart *et al.*, 2021). These initiatives reflect a growing reliance on experiential branding strategies and soft power to influence public perceptions. Despite this, insufficient research has examined the relationship between influencer marketing and nation branding strategies.

In the digital age, where user-generated content plays a crucial role in shaping global public opinion, this study seeks to address this gap by examining whether social media influencers affect a country's image and the extent of their impact.

Methodology

Research Design

This study follows a quantitative approach and is grounded in the positivist research paradigm. In simple terms, this means the study focuses on measurable data and looks at relationships between variables in a structured way (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The choice of this approach aligns with the study's aim to examine how factors such as influencer effectiveness and exposure relate to country image.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data were collected through an online questionnaire created using Google Forms. The study used a nonprobability sampling approach that combined convenience and snowball sampling. Initially, the survey was shared within the researcher's network for accessibility. Participants were then encouraged to share it with others, which helped reach a wider audience. This approach is commonly used in exploratory research when access to participants is limited but broader reach is still needed (Saunders, 2009). The study focused on individuals who actively use social media and have at least some exposures to influencer content.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To keep the data relevant, clear criteria were applied. Participants were included only if they used social media and had some exposure to influencer content, particularly content related to countries or travel. Those who reported abstaining from social media, avoiding exposure to influencers, or submitting incomplete responses were excluded. A screening question was placed at the beginning of the survey to filter responses early and avoid irrelevant data entering the analysis.

Measurement and Data Analysis

The questionnaire covered key variables such as influencer effectiveness, exposure, credibility, authenticity, relatability, and country image. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, which is widely used in behavioral research to capture opinions and perceptions (Malhotra, 2004). The data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Several statistical techniques were applied, including Cronbach's alpha to test reliability (Nunnally, 1978), descriptive statistics to summarize the data, Pearson correlation to examine relationships, and regression analysis to assess the strength and direction of the effects between variables.

Results

Data Screening and Sample Adequacy

A total of 148 responses were initially collected. Screening criteria were applied using two main questions to ensure the accuracy and validity of the results. The screening questions assessed whether respondents used social media and engaged with influencers who shared content about different countries and destinations. Based on these criteria, eight responses were excluded. All remaining participants reported at least minimal exposure to influencer content. Following the screening process, a final sample of 140 valid responses was retained for analysis. This sample ensured that all participants had relevant exposure to social media influencers, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability results (Table 1) show that the scale used in this study is exceptional. All items have high Cronbach's alpha values, between 0.969 to 0.973, and the overall value is 0.972. This is above the recommended level of 0.70, which means the items are consistent and measure the same concept clearly. Based on these results, the instrument is reliable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 1: Reliability of the Instrument

Items	Cronbach's Alpha
I pay attention to influencer content about countries or travel	0.970
Influencers affect how I see different countries	0.970
Influencers make countries seem more attractive	0.972
Influencers shape my opinion about countries	0.970
Influencers have changed my perception of a country	0.970
Influencer content influences my travel decisions	0.970
I trust influencers when they talk about countries	0.969
Influencers provide reliable information	0.970
Influencers seem genuine when sharing travel content	0.970
Their experiences feel real	0.969
I relate to the influencers I follow	0.970
I feel connected to them	0.970
Countries presented by influencers seem attractive	0.970
These countries seem interesting to visit	0.973
I have a positive impression of countries promoted by influencers	0.969
Overall Reliability	0.972

Demographics of the Study

The sample is slightly skewed toward older people. The largest group is those aged 55 years and above, followed by respondents aged 25–34, while the smallest group falls within the 35–44 category. Regarding gender, males make up most of the sample, while females represent a smaller proportion. Looking at nationality, most respondents are American, followed by Canadians, with very limited representation from other nationalities.

Figure 1 below presents the demographic profile of the respondents, including age, gender, and nationality distributions.

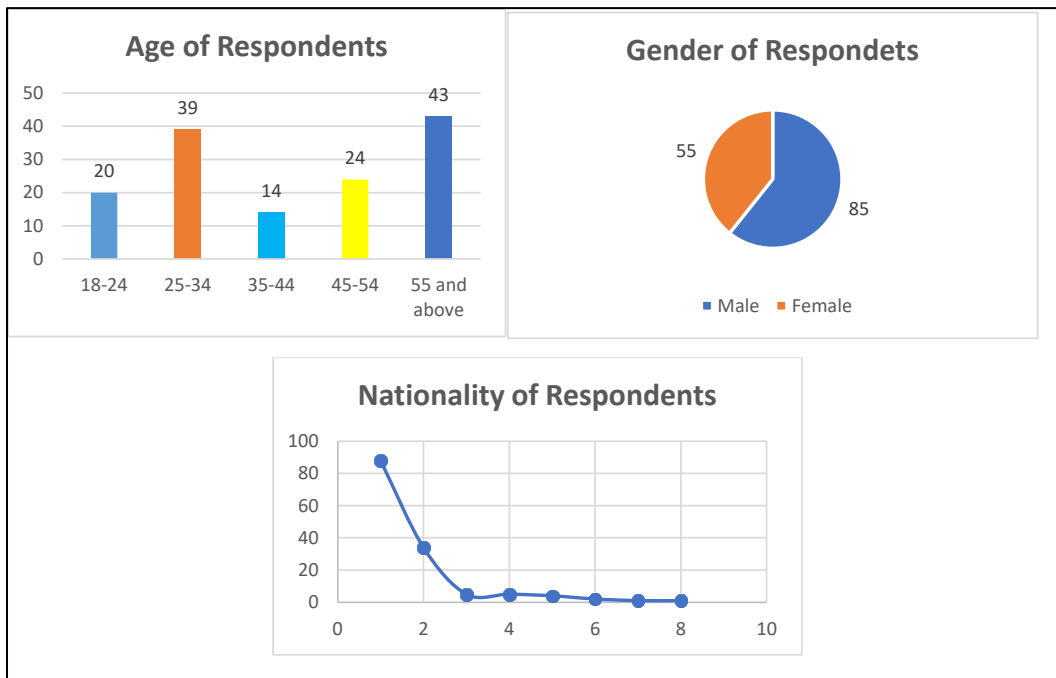


Figure 1: Demographics of the Study

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive results indicate that respondents generally believe influencers are affecting how countries are perceived. The mean score for influencer effectiveness is slightly above the midpoint ($M = 3.02$), suggesting moderate agreement. However, the extent of influence is lower ($M = 2.73$), indicating that while influencers do have an impact, it is not strong.

Among the influencing factors, authenticity has the highest mean ($M = 2.86$), followed by credibility and relatability (both $M = 2.69$). This suggests that being genuine matters slightly more than being trusted or relatable, although all factors remain at a moderate level.

Country image records the highest mean ($M = 3.29$), indicating that respondents generally have a positive view of countries presented by influencers, which is an answer to one of the research questions, even though the perceived influence itself is moderate. Overall, the results indicate a correlation between even a moderate level of influencer impact and more positive perceptions of countries.

The table (2) below presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables. The country's image recorded the highest mean score among the constructs.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Study

Constructs	Dimensions	R	Mini	Maxi	M	SD	SK	KR
RQ1: Are social media influencers effective in shaping a country's image?		4.00	1.00	5.00	3.02	1.05	-0.35	-0.74
RQ2: To what extent do influencers influence perceptions of a country?		3.00	1.67	4.67	2.73	0.71	0.22	-0.46
RQ3: What factors influence their effectiveness?	Credibility	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.69	1.01	0.26	-0.22
	Authenticity	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.86	1.13	-0.09	-1.04
	Relatability	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.69	1.13	0.25	-0.98
Country Image		4.00	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.04	-0.23	-1.34

Note: R means range, Mini means minimum, Maxi=maximum, M means mean, SD=standard deviation, SK=skewness, and KR means kurtosis.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

The correlation results (Table 3) show strong and positive relationships between all variables. Influencer effectiveness is strongly related to country image ($r = 0.818, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher perceived effectiveness is associated with more positive country perceptions. The extent of influence is also positively related to country image ($r = 0.626, p < 0.001$), although this relationship is weaker than that with effectiveness. The strongest relationship is found between influencer-related factors (credibility, authenticity, and relatability) and country image ($r = 0.867, p < 0.001$). This suggests that these qualities play a key role in shaping how countries are perceived. There are also strong relationships between the independent variables themselves, which indicates that they are closely connected. Overall, the findings suggest a clear and consistent pattern where influencer-related factors and perceived effectiveness are strongly linked to country image.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Analysis

Constructs	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	Country Image
RQ1: Are social media influencers effective in shaping a country's image?	1			
RQ2: To what extent do influencers influence perceptions of a country?	0.714**	1		
	0.000			
RQ3: What factors influence their effectiveness?	0.843**	0.762**	1	
	0.000	0.000		
Country Image	0.818**	0.626**	0.867**	1
	0.000	0.000	0.000	

Regression Analysis

RQ1: Influence of Social Media Influencers on Country Image?

The results of the regression indicate that the effectiveness of influencers is a robust and significant predictor of country image ($\beta = 0.82, p < 0.001$). The model accounts for 67% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.67$), demonstrating a strong degree of explanatory capability.

This indicates that as the perceived impact of influencers rises, the viewpoint of the country improves. The model shows statistical significance ($F = 279.52, p < 0.001$), and autocorrelation problems are absent (Durbin–Watson = 2.17).

Table 4: Regression Analysis RQ1

Constructs	B	B	t	Sig	Tolerance	VIF	F	R	R ²	Durbin-Watson
(Constant)	0.84	0.82	5.44	0.00	1.00	1.00	279.52	0.82	0.67	2.17
RQ1	0.81		16.72	0.00						

RQ2: To what extent do social media influencers influence the Perception of the Country?

The regression analysis for RQ2 presented in Table 5 indicates that the level of influencer exposure significantly forecasts country image ($F = 89.08, p < 0.001$), albeit with a relatively lower explanatory strength ($R^2 = 0.39$). Engagement with influencer content accounts for approximately 39% of the variation in country image. The standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.63, p < 0.001$) indicates a moderate-to-strong positive correlation, implying that increased engagement with influencer content correlates with more positive views of the country. The Durbin-Watson statistics (1.64) stay within the permissible range, signifying no significant issues with autocorrelation. Unlike RQ1, the impact is notable yet less emphasized, indicating that perceived effectiveness carries more explanatory power than mere exposure.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of RQ2

Constructs	B	B	t	Sig	Tolerance	VIF	F	R	R ²	Durbin-Watson
(Constant)	0.78	0.63	2.85	0.01	1.00	1.00	89.08	0.63	0.39	1.64
RQ2	0.92		9.44	0.00						

RQ3: Factors Influencing Influencer Effectiveness

The regression model for RQ3 in Table 6 demonstrates statistical significance ($F = 145.16, p < 0.001$) and accounts for a substantial share of variance in country image ($R^2 = 0.76$), signifying strong overall explanatory capability. The composite RQ3 construct exhibits a notable positive impact ($\beta = 1.46, p < 0.001$), validating that factors related to influencers collectively contribute significantly to the formation of a country's image. Nonetheless, when analyzed separately, credibility shows a notable yet adverse effect ($\beta = -0.46, p = 0.02$), whereas relatability is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.17, p = 0.21$). The occurrence of very high VIF values (credibility = 19.67; relatability = 10.33) and low tolerance levels signifies significant multicollinearity, implying that the separate effects of these variables cannot be interpreted with confidence. The Durbin-Watson statistics (1.96) show no signs of autocorrelation. Consequently, although influencer-related elements collectively affect the model, multicollinearity constrains the clarity of each predictor.

Table 6: Regression Analysis of RQ3

Constructs	B	β	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF	F	R	R ²	Durbin-Watson
(Constant)	0.90	-0.46	7.13	0.00	0.05	19.67	145.16	0.87	0.76	1.96
RQ3_Credibility	-0.47		-2.46	0.02						
RQ3_Relatability	-0.16	-0.17	-1.26	0.21	0.10	10.33				
Overall RQ3	1.49	1.46	5.27	0.00	0.02	43.68				

Discussion

The results reveal a clear and consistent trend: social media influencers shape perceptions of countries, albeit with limited influence. The significant role of perceived influencer effectiveness indicates that what truly matters is not just how much exposure an influencer has, but how credible and impactful they appear to their audience. This is consistent with recent research papers touching on that effectiveness comes more from perceived authenticity and audience engagement rather than from visibility alone (Ibrahim, 2025; Leung *et al.*, 2022; Spörl-Wang *et al.*, 2025).

The moderate overall influence suggests influencers are only one element within a broader set of factors. Country image remains a complex construct shaped by various sources. And those are not only influencers but factors such as media exposure, personal views, and situational context (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002).

A notable finding is that attributes linked to influencers collectively account for the largest share of the variation in country image. This supports recent insights indicating that authenticity, relatability, and engagement should be considered together, not in isolation, to influence audience attitudes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Leung *et al.*, 2022). The results as per the model show how audiences generally perceive influencers rather than considering specific characteristics individually.

The generally positive perception of the country image, even with only moderate influencer impact, suggests that limited exposure to influencer content can still shape a favorable impression. The idea is that the power of influencers cannot be neglected.

Limitations

The findings of this study offer important practical implications for policymakers, nation-branding strategists, and tourism marketers. Since influencer effectiveness—especially authenticity, credibility, and relatability—has a significant impact on country image, official campaigns should collaborate with influencers who demonstrate these qualities rather than simply those with high reach. Authentic partnerships can help shape positive perceptions of a nation, even with moderate content exposure.

Moreover, these results emphasize the necessity for governments and tourism entities to consider social media influencers as key partners in their nation-branding efforts and not to neglect their impact, leveraging their unique ability to connect with audiences by being both credible and relatable.

The limitation of this research is that the sample collected is not fully representative, as it relies on convenience and snowball sampling; adding other sampling techniques could have enriched the results. Furthermore, male respondents and primarily American participants dominate the data, limiting diversity. These factors may affect how well the findings apply to other groups or cultural contexts, reducing generalizability.

Conclusion

This study indicates that social media influencers play a real role in shaping how people see different countries. What matters most is not just how often people see influencer content but also how effective the influencer is. Exposure to content has a limited impact. Instead, qualities like authenticity, credibility, and relatability make a bigger difference, even if it is challenging to separate their individual effects in practice. Both people's perceptions of influencers and their interpretations of shared content seem to shape the country's online image. This points to a clear shift in nation branding, where influence is no longer controlled only by official sources but is increasingly driven by personal, experience-based content on social media.

Future research could use probability sampling methods and aim for a more diverse sample with respect to demographic factors. This would help improve generalizability and provide a deeper understanding of how different groups perceive influencer content and country image.

Another direction would be to use longitudinal or experimental designs instead of a single survey. Such studies could help track how perceptions of countries change over time or test how different types of influencer content directly affect audience views.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

M.A.S.I: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing. V.A: Supervision, Review and Editing.

AI Assistance Declaration

Generative AI tools were used in a limited capacity to refine language and enhance clarity during the preparation of this manuscript. All content, analysis, and interpretation were developed by the authors. The manuscript has been carefully reviewed and revised, and the authors take full responsibility for the final version.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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