BRIEFING

High-flying influencers

How do airlines push environmentally damaging flying behavior in digital advertising and via travel influencers?

Briefing published: November 2026
Lead author: Aiza Rodrigues Akhtar, aiza.rodrigues.akhtar@transportenvironment.org
Contributors: Denise Auclair, Diane Vitry and Erin Vera

Summary

This briefing is based on the T3 Transportation Think Tank study commissioned by T&E. This study examines the environmental footprint of travel influencers, and the role they and social media play in the advertising strategy of airlines. The first part analyses travel influencers' associated emissions, travel frequencies and routes. The second part focuses on airline digital advertising investments in five European markets: France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Key data points

1.8 million km

Distance flown by a sample of 25 travel influencers in 2025, which is equivalent to approximately 45 trips around the globe.

10t CO_2e

Full climate impact from the average of 16 flights that travel influencers took in 2025. European tourists take an average of four leisure round trips per year, emitting 0.6 t CO_2e from all transport modes for the 95% of their trips taking place in the EU.

€0.5 billion

Estimated spending by airlines on digital advertising in 2025. Social media accounted for roughly one third of this spending.

Travel influencers are digital opinion leaders that travel frequently and who shape the destination's image, attitudes and behavioural intentions of their audiences through personal narratives. Most often, air travel is their main mode of transportation and they cover large distances by taking long-haul journeys. They post content all year-round, meaning they travel a lot and generate a substantial climate footprint. Through their posts, they display luxury, comfort and aspirational locations.

This constant posting of glamorised photogenic locations shapes their audiences' destination preferences and can incite them to fly long-distance, fuelling air travel demand and contributing to overtourism and crowding of tourism hotspots. However, influencers are confronted with transparency issues: research suggests that too much sponsored content can undermine an influencer's credibility, and at the same time identifies a lack of hashtags, used to explicitly disclose sponsored content (#ad or #sponsored), in such content.

Airlines' advertisements promote carbon-intensive behaviours through frequent and long-distance flying. Although airlines don't publicly disclose their digital advertising expenditure, social media forms one of the largest portions of their digital budgets. Social media is a powerful driver for travel inspiration, destination promotion and direct bookings. It exerts a high level of influence on consumer choices. Partnering with travel influencers offers airlines high returns on investment. Likes, shares and reposts ensure airlines secure continuous, long-term exposure and significant quantifiable marketing value.

Currently, regulatory standards specifically targeting influencer content and brand collaborations remain underdeveloped. There is also no regulation asking airlines to disclose their advertisement budget spend. In addition, the EU lacks a unified and robust regulatory framework that taxes, restricts or prohibits advertising for carbon-intensive advertisements, such as airline ads. Finally, aviation taxation and carbon pricing, needed to curb excessive emissions such as those from long-haul flights, are weak. To effectively fill these gaps, existing policy mechanisms as well as those currently being developed must be strengthened and expanded.

Key recommendations

Travel influencers often disregard the significant carbon footprint of their long-distance trips, and encourage environmentally damaging lifestyles and excessive travel among their audiences. **Airlines** publicly commit to sustainability while actively funding social media campaigns and influencer promotions that encourage frequent, long-haul flying.

Together they drive **carbon-intensive behaviours and air travel demand,** which also contributes to overtourism. **Regulatory measures need to be robust, strengthened and unified across the EU to enforce accountability of both parties:**

- **Enhance transparency regulations** regarding influencer-sponsored promotional content and **regulate disclosure of paid promotions** - such as those financed by airlines - under the EU Digital Fairness Act. **Disclose** the digital and social media budget of airlines.

- Explore options for **taxation, limits and bans on fossil fuel airline advertising** at municipal, national and European level. The EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive should **classify ads on flights** as high-carbon advertising **promoting harmful behaviour**.

- **Strengthen** distance-based taxation and carbon pricing of long-haul flights (EU Emissions Trading System). Make use of **aviation carbon budgets and airport slot allocation measures** to reduce the number of high-carbon flights.

01

Aviation and long-haul flying climate impact

In 2025, emissions from flights departing from European airports surpassed pre-pandemic levels. The sector emitted 195 Mt of CO_2, a 2% increase compared to pre-COVID levels. In addition, emissions from international tourist arrivals by air are projected to rise over 60% between 2016 and 2030 in Europe.

1.1 European aviation needs to urgently address its growth problem

With passenger traffic projected to double between 2019 and 2050, the aviation sector's growth risks cancelling out its own decarbonisation efforts. Because green technologies such as zero-emission and hybrid aircraft and sustainable aviation fuels will not be available at scale until post-2030, flying less remains the best solution for cutting emissions in this critical decade.

Aviation emissions also have a serious impact on air quality and public health. Ultrafine particles from planes can contribute to respiratory symptoms, heart rate variability, blood pressure problems and have long-term effects on mortality.

1.2 Leisure long-haul flights are climate intensive and highly concentrated

While intra-European flights have slightly declined since 2019, inter-continental flights continue to rise, fueled primarily by leisure trips. Long-haul flights (over 4,000 km) represent just 6% of departures yet account for 47% of jet fuel consumed. Overall, tourism generated 8.8% of global carbon emissions in 2019, with aviation driving 52% of the sector's direct emissions alongside most of its growth. With international air tourism in Europe projected to grow in the coming years, the continent faces an increasing geographic concentration of visitors, contributing to overtourism.

Flying remains highly unequal: fewer than 10% of the world's population flies in a given year, only 2% to 4% fly internationally and less than 20% have ever taken a flight. 1% of the global population produces 50% of all aviation emissions. Therefore, addressing frequent, long-haul travel is essential to reducing the climate impact of aviation.

The EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) makes airlines pay for their pollution, but leaves two-thirds of this pollution unpriced. It currently only includes intra-European short-haul routes, leaving the most polluting long-haul flights outside of its scope. Discussions are underway to extend the scope of the carbon market to more flights.

02

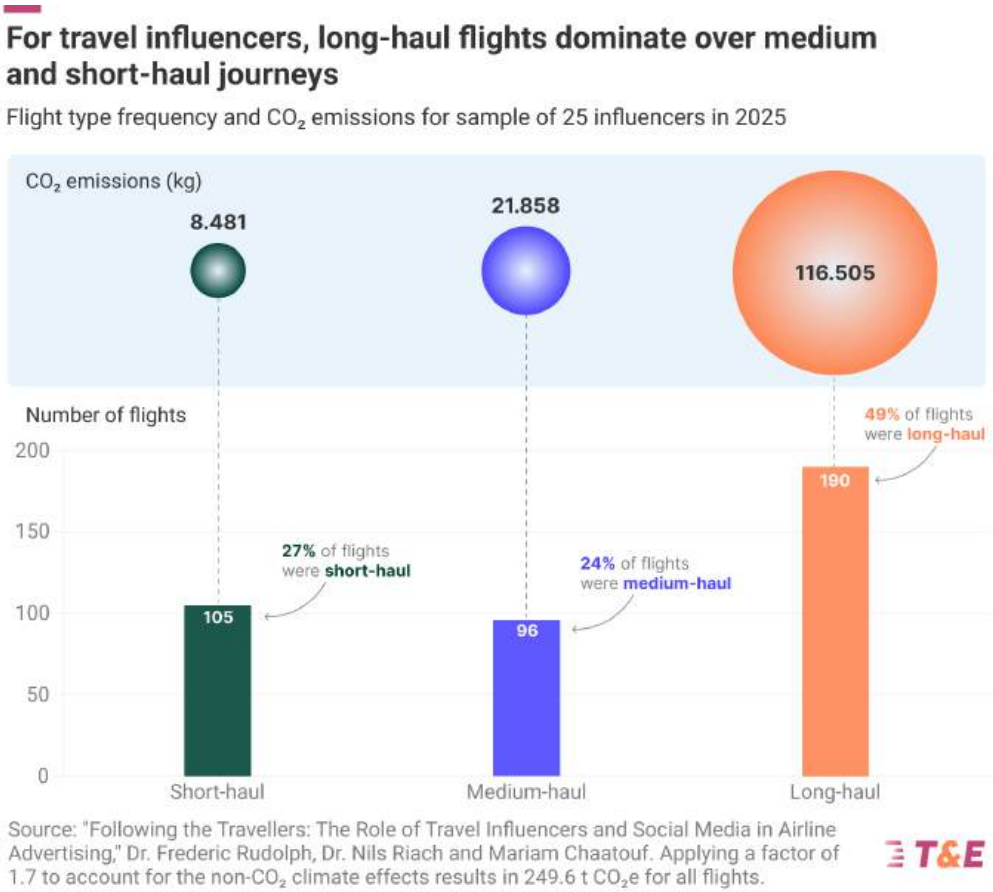
Travel influencers and airline digital advertising spend

What is the environmental footprint of travel influencers, and how do airlines use social media and influencers to promote high-emission long-haul flying? The study first explores influencers' travel frequencies, routes and emissions. It then analyses airline digital advertising spend in five European markets.

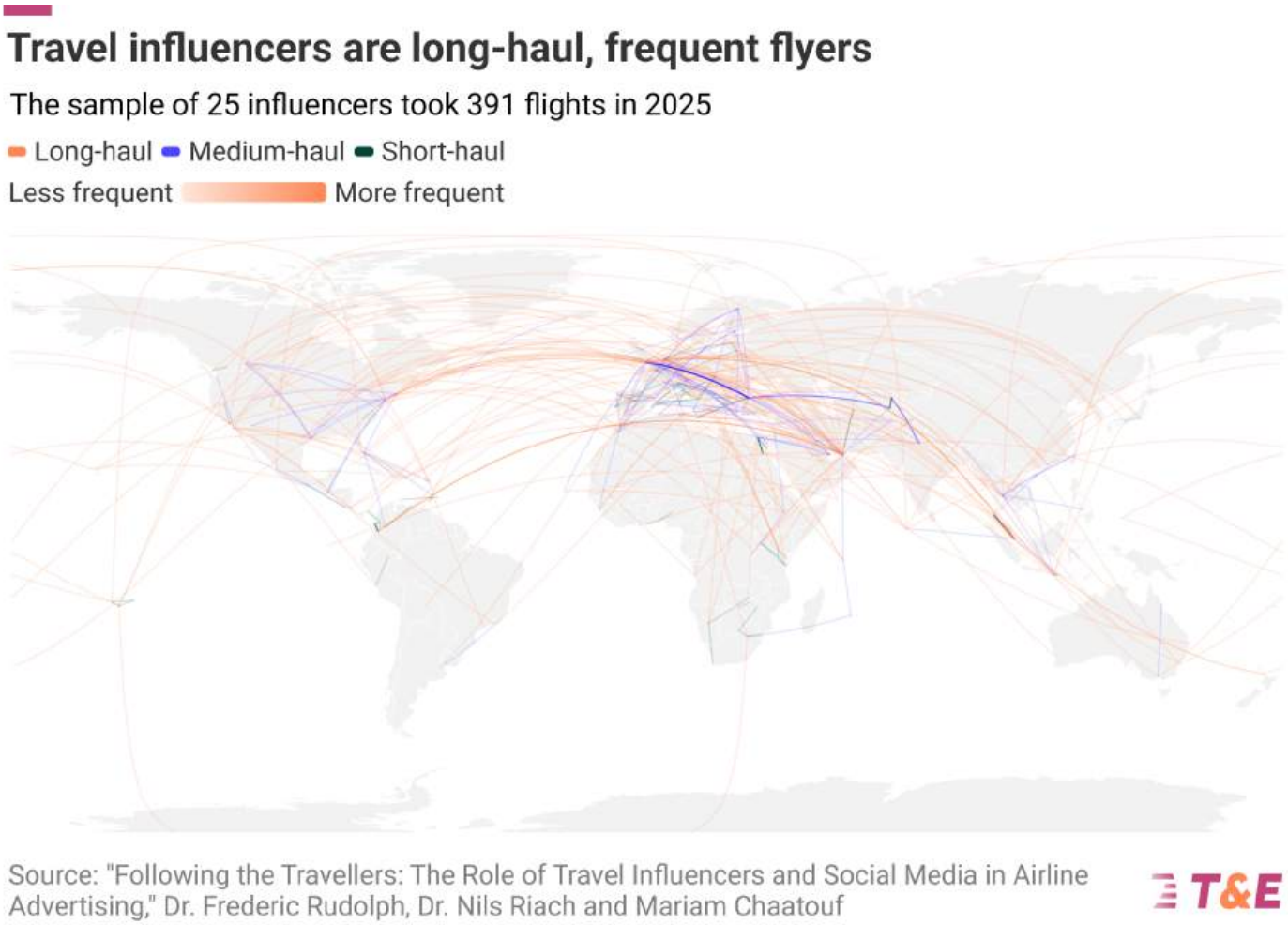
2.1 Quantifying travel influencers' emissions: destinations and flight frequencies

Travel influencers are people that travel a lot and create content related to their travel and experiences with their audiences (followers) via social media platforms. The study examines a sample of 25 travel influencers, the majority based in Europe (12) and the U.S. (9), with over 100,000 followers on Instagram, which serves as the primary social platform for travel content. With this number of followers, they are recognised as professional creators with significant audience reach and strong engagement. They get paid between €269 to €2,692 for their travel content by airlines depending on the format: a 24-hour post (story), a static post or a short video (reel).

In the sample, air travel serves **as the main mode of transportation for trips longer than 250 km**. Travel influencers travel long distances, **with long-haul flights (49%) dominating** over medium (24%) and short-haul (27%) journeys. The **average distance flown** across all commercial flights by the sample was **72,244 km**. Together these influencers flew **a total distance of 1.8 million kilometers** in 2025, which corresponds to approximately **45 trips around the globe**.



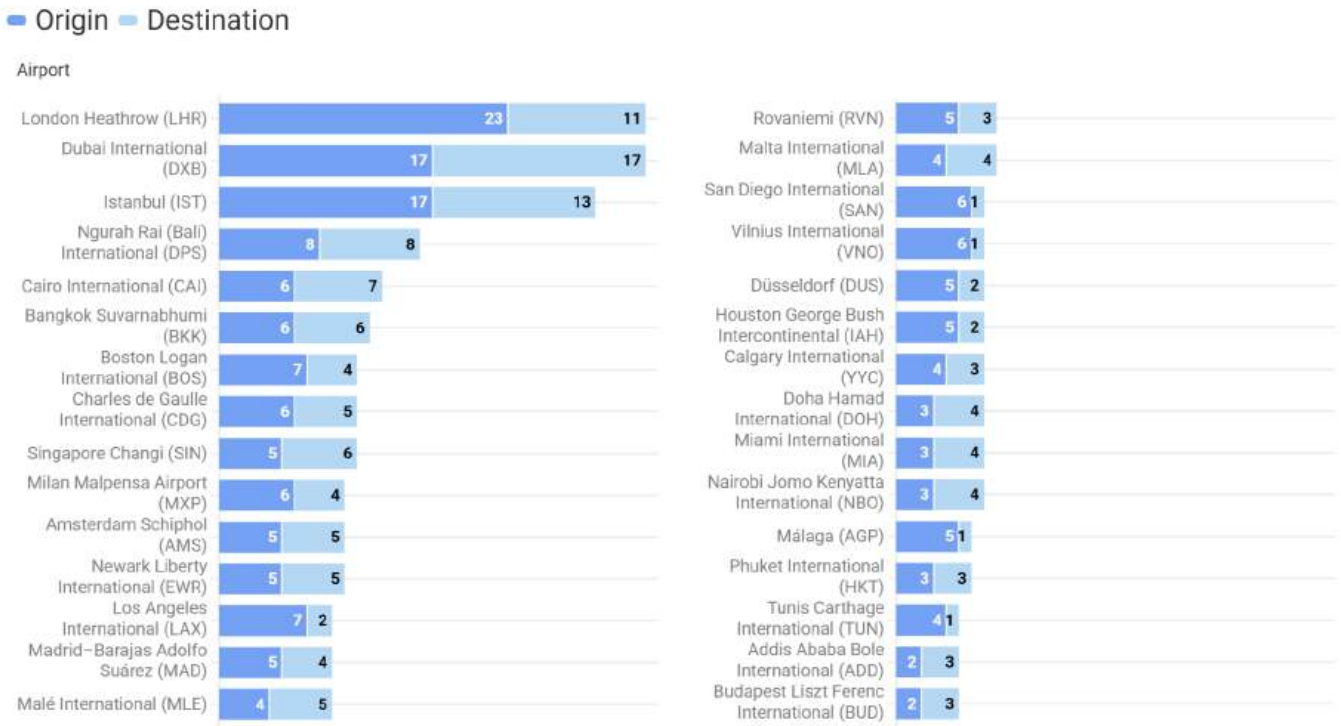
They each took an **average of 16 flights in 2025, producing about 10.0t of CO_2e emissions per person from air travel alone**. In contrast, European tourists take on average four leisure round trips by all modes of transport annually, with 95% staying within their home country or the EU. This results in around **0.6t CO_2e per tourist each year across all transport modes in the EU**. Thus travel influencers visit **approximately four times** as many vacation destinations as typical European tourists.



In terms of their destinations, **global connecting hubs top the list** - with the main three being London, Dubai and Istanbul. Other airports are top tourist destinations, such as Málaga, Bali and Bangkok. In addition, some airports serve both as a destination and a connecting hub from which influencers explore the surrounding region. For instance, influencers might fly to Bangkok to explore the city before traveling further to other destinations in Thailand like Phuket.

Global connecting hubs and tourism hotspots top the list of travel influencer destinations

Top 30 airports flown to and from by sample of 25 travel influencers in 2025



Source: "Following the Travellers: The Role of Travel Influencers and Social Media in Airline Advertising," Dr. Frederic Rudolph, Dr. Nils Riach and Mariam Chaatouf

T&E

2.2 The problematic effects of travel influencers' behavior and content

While flying can generally be seasonal, travel influencers fly and post regularly throughout the year. Travel influencers portray luxury, comfort and aspirational destinations, and global airlines gain the most from this promotion, because they offer premium cabins and serve diverse destinations worldwide. Rather than guiding followers toward one specific place, these carriers aim to elevate the appeal of long-distance travel overall. At the same time, existing studies confirm that **influencers play a major role in shaping where people choose to travel**.

Through travel influencers, **air travel is normalised and encouraged, especially long-haul travel which has a high climate impact**. They frequently fly long distances, which becomes both affordable and an obligation for their business model, as they are paid by airlines to travel. **Carbon-intensive long-haul travel becomes part of the lifestyles they promote**.

By popularising specific photogenic spots, travel influencers **influence their audience's destination choice and contribute to inducing long-haul flying**, which can be a driver of overtourism and crowding. However, these **posts can be misleading** as influencers often use images of nature (plants, trees or the sea) to counterbalance the climate impact of their flying, a practice that can be seen as greenwashing.

In addition, influencers are often **confronted with transparency issues**, as they don't always clearly say if their content is a paid promotion. Research suggests that too much sponsored content can undermine an influencer's credibility. Analyses have identified a lack of hashtags disclosing such content: in one review of over 1000 tourism-related posts by eight Spanish travel influencers, only 6% included explicit disclosure hashtags like #ad or #sponsored, revealing a gap between brand presence and transparency.

2.3 Airline digital advertising spending is on the rise

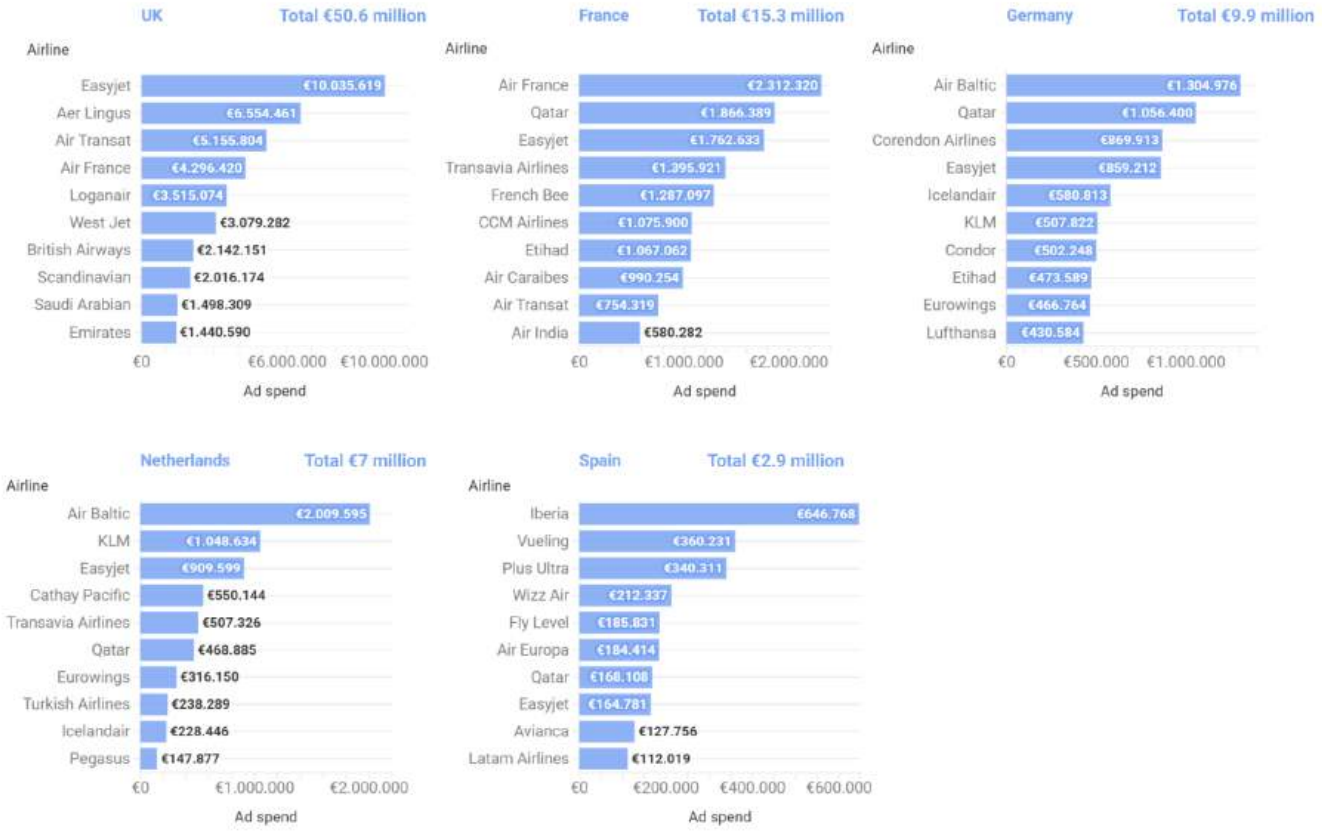
Advertising regulation was identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as a **key tool to progress towards sustainable consumption**. Indeed, advertising **persuades and shapes desires** in line with the industrial and commercial goals of major corporations. It conveys narratives that **idealise products and lifestyles**. At scale, this persuasive power becomes **normative** and **defines what is socially desirable and valuable**. Nowadays, advertising has become **omnipresent**. Social media and travel influencers are new types of advertising that are on the rise.

Airline advertisements promote **carbon-intensive behaviours** of frequent and long-distance flying. Research indicates that exposure to airline advertisements leads consumers to **morally disengage from the environmental impact of air travel**, by neglecting negative consequences, seeking moral justification or displacing responsibility for flying.

Airlines **do not publicly disclose their digital advertising spending**. Data provider Nielsen gathered insights using its own platform analytics alongside third-party data to quantify airline advertising investments. The study examined advertisements across five digital channels (social media, websites, search engines, streaming platforms and retail websites), covering France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. Data for website and social media ads are from 2025, while search engine and streaming platform data reflects Q1 2026 for Germany and the UK only. That led to establishing a ranking of the top 25 airlines with active ad spending in each of these five European markets.

The UK concentrates more airline social media ad spend than France, Germany, Netherlands and Spain combined

Top 10 airlines by social media ad spend in the five European markets in 2025



Source: "Following the Travellers: The Role of Travel Influencers and Social Media in Airline Advertising," Dr. Frederic Rudolph, Dr. Nils Riach and Mariam Chaatouf

The list is dominated by airlines that are headquartered in the respective country and those that hold the most slots at the major international airports in each country. For example Air France spends a lot on social media advertisements in France (€2 million) compared to Spain (€29,000). In addition, there are airlines that serve specific regional routes determined by the country's location.

Airlines advertising in the UK spend a lot on social media (€50.2 million), compared to the other countries. This suggests that ads on social media are more effective and reach more audiences in the UK than in the four other countries, partly because of the many social media users in the UK.

Global European and Middle Eastern airlines dominate digital advertising spend across the five European markets

Top 10 airlines by social media and internet ad spend across France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK in 2025

Rank	Airline	Sum social media and online		Social media		Online	
		Ad spend	Countries represented	Ad spend	Countries represented	Ad spend	Countries represented
1	Easyjet	€25.847.590	5	€13.731.843	5	€12.115.746	5
2	Emirates	€11.039.760	5	€1.539.103	4	€9.500.657	5
3	KLM	€10.794.078	3	€1.651.783	3	€9.142.295	3
4	Air France	€8.152.774	4	€6.839.396	4	€1.313.378	4
5	Aer Lingus	€7.519.448	2	€6.662.730	2	€856.717	1
6	Air Transat	€7.088.065	2	€5.910.123	2	€1.177.942	2
7	Transavia Airlines	€5.856.672	2	€1.903.246	2	€3.953.426	2
8	Saudi Arabian Airlines	€5.464.282	2	€1.557.586	2	€3.906.696	1
9	Vueling	€4.875.134	3	€464.384	2	€4.410.750	3
10	Iberia	€4.193.750	2	€770.087	2	€3.423.663	2
Total ad spend (Top 25 from each of the five countries - 69 airlines)		€163.4 million		€85.8 million		€77.7 million	

Source: "Following the Travellers: The Role of Travel Influencers and Social Media in Airline Advertising," Dr. Frederic Rudolph, Dr. Nils Riach and Mariam Chaatouf

All global airlines with hub airports in Europe or the Middle East are ranked among the top 30 carriers that spend on social media and websites advertising across the five countries. The figure shows that only a few airlines allocate substantial advertising budgets across multiple countries, (such as Emirates or Etihad airlines). Easyjet spends more than twice on social media and online advertising than the following airlines.

As a rough estimate, airlines spent approximately **€0.5 billion on advertising across the five digital channels** in 2025 in the EU-27, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK, based on Nielsen data and extrapolated using the countries' respective GDP as a scaling factor. **Social media accounted for roughly one third of this spending**, likely the largest marketing budget among digital channels. Global carriers especially are increasingly using influencer marketing to boost visibility and brand awareness.

2.4 Airlines' social media marketing strategy brings high returns

Social media effectively boosts brand awareness and enhances public image, which subsequently strengthens consumer commitment to the airline. Furthermore, social media serves as a **comprehensive tool** for inspiring travel, promoting specific destinations and driving

direct holiday booking. It achieves a **level of influence over consumer decision-making** that other digital channels cannot match.

For airlines, **partnering with travel influencers provides an exceptionally high return on investment**. Engaging these creators costs remarkably little, typically just a few thousand euros, yet leads to significant results. Airline social media ads have **higher recall rates** compared to traditional channels such as TV broadcasts or billboard displays. Ad recall means that airlines gain **extended exposure** as influencer posts are liked, shared and reposted, generating **substantial visibility and significant quantifiable marketing value** (earned media value). Nevertheless, these cost-effective marketing strategies ignore the broader societal and environmental burdens of overtourism and high-emission flying.

03

The digital advertising regulatory landscape and its shortcomings

Currently, there are no comprehensive frameworks regulating influencer content, their transparency and commercial partnerships. There is also no regulation asking airlines to disclose their advertisement budget spend. In addition, there is no unified and strong EU level regulation which taxes, restricts or prohibits airline or fossil fuel advertising. Finally, taxation and carbon pricing, needed to curb excessive emissions from long-haul flights, are weak. Existing regulations and those under development should be strengthened to address these gaps.

3.1 Lack of EU rules to regulate influencers and airline advertising budgets

Travel influencers do not always disclose their commercial partnerships with airlines, which raises significant transparency concerns. This issue is exacerbated by the absence of regulatory frameworks that oversee influencers. For consumers, and especially youth, the most valued travel influencer traits are sincerity and transparency, such as the clear disclosure of financial partnerships and providing "unfiltered" reviews.

While the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) requires influencers to disclose advertising and sponsored content, it is fragmented due to diversity in Member States' enforcement of the law. In the Netherlands, for instance, influencers face financial penalties for non-disclosure and are subject to consumer complaints, whereas France has established targeted national legislation to curb influencers' commercial influence and abuses on social media.

The EU Digital Fairness Act, currently under development to address misleading marketing by influencers, presents a key opportunity to close transparency loopholes and strengthen regulation of influencer marketing. Because travel influencers promote harmful high-emission flights, disclosure of paid promotions must be clearly and comprehensively defined and mandated.

There is no EU law that requires airlines to disclose their advertising budget. Therefore, it isn't possible to know how much airlines spend on advertising, especially on social media and on influencer content, which perpetuates climate-intensive behavior.

3.2 Fossil fuel advertising regulations in the EU are incomplete

The IPCC has recognised advertising regulation as a key for behavioral changes needed in order to achieve the 1.5°C global warming limit. According to its report, daily lifestyle choices can deliver 40–70% of the emissions reductions required by 2050. This transformation relies significantly on role models, citizens and social movements to establish sustainable social norms, while governments and policymakers must implement measures to address consumerism. Specifically, the IPCC highlights how marketing frames luxury goods as essential needs, pointing to long-distance holiday advertising as an example in creating and normalising carbon-intensive desires.

Under Article 9 of the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive, commercial communications that encourage behavior harmful to the environment are prohibited in the EU. Authors of a recent legal analysis stated that the current legislation actively mandates a rigorous interpretation of banning advertisements for high-emission activities such as flying, on the grounds that they promote behaviour "grossly prejudicial to the protection of the environment". In practice, however, this provision is frequently interpreted too narrowly. Airline advertising, which promotes carbon-intensive behaviour, should be included in its definition.

3.2.1 Cities and municipalities: leaders in banning fossil fuel ads

Numerous cities and municipalities have implemented or proposed restrictions on fossil fuel advertising. A prominent example is Amsterdam, which became the first capital to enact a legal ban on ads promoting fossil fuels and meat. Similarly, Spain has proposed a nationwide ban on ads covering fossil fuels, petrol cars, short-haul domestic flights and greenwashing. Nevertheless, these legislative initiatives face strong opposition or are weakened by the fossil fuel sector, as seen in France, where industry pressure has weakened the initial draft of a proposed ban on fossil fuel ads.

Recommendations

On the one hand, **travel influencers** are disconnected from climate considerations, as they often overlook the carbon footprint associated with their long-haul travel. They continue to travel without restraint by promoting choices and a lifestyle which are harmful to the climate, and amplify its impact by encouraging large audiences to do the same.

On the other hand, **airlines** claim that they are concerned about the climate; however, their advertising shows otherwise. Instead they are encouraging people to fly more and further away, by paying influencers to promote flying and advertising on social media.

Together they drive **carbon-intensive behaviors and fuel air travel demand,** which also contributes to overtourism. **Regulatory measures need to be robust, strengthened and unified across the EU to enforce accountability for both parties:**

01 **Enhance transparency** regarding influencer-sponsored promotional content and **regulate disclosure of paid promotions**, such as those financed by airlines, under the **EU Digital Fairness Act**. Disclose the digital and social media budget of airlines.

02 Explore options for **taxation, limits and bans on fossil fuel airline advertising** at municipal, national and European level. The **EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive** should **classify ads on flights** as high-carbon advertising **promoting harmful behaviour**.

03 **Strengthen** distance-based taxation and carbon **pricing of long-haul flights** (EU Emissions Trading System). Make use of **aviation carbon budgets** and airport **slot allocation measures** to reduce the number of high-carbon flights.

About this briefing

This briefing is based upon *Following the Travellers: The Role of Travel Influencers and Social Media in Airline Advertising* commissioned by T&E, written by Dr. Frederic Rudolph, Dr. Nils Riach and Mariam Chaatouf.

For details on data, analysis, methods and sources referenced, see the full study.

Further information
Aiza Rodrigues Akhtar
Aviation Campaign Officer
aiza.rodrigues.akhtarl@transportenvironment.org
Mobile: +33 669 20 74 68
www.transportenvironment.org | BlueSky | LinkedIn