# Social Media Influencers in the Travel Industry:

# an analysis

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Submitted to Prof. Irem Önder

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# Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Master's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

The thesis was not submitted in the same or in a substantially similar version, not even partially, to another examination board and was not published elsewhere.

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# Abstract

This thesis reviews the history of travel, the experience economy, the emergence of Web 2.0, millennials and social media to better understand the development of the social media influencer (SMI) and the tool of storytelling. The top 30 SMIs were analyzed through various measures: demographic, social media and audience targeting to determine that SMIs are in fact easily categorized. This new way of categorizing SMIs in the travel industry will help new cooperation between brands and SMIs in the travel industry. Based on the analysis of these SMIs, new travel trends going towards experience travel and highly personalized travel were predicted.

# Acknowledgements

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# List of Abbreviations

SMI- Social Media Influencer

USP- Unique Selling Point

# 1    Introduction



*Figure 1 Instagram from the user theblondeabroad (theblondeabroad)*

Blue crystal waters move below you, the sea breeze caresses your face, and white long beaches sprawling in the distance. Who is ready to book their next vacation right about now?

In the past years, it has become clear whether one looks at social media outlets, newspaper articles, or professional advertisement: the new hype is travel. This trend, especially spread in social media outlets. Facebook overwhelms their users with their friends and colleagues most recent weekend trip in the mountains, or which coconut cocktails were the best while relaxing in a hammock on the Seychelles. Similarly, Instagram publishes a vast number of pictures of white sandy beaches, stunning rock formations, views of mountain tops all over the world, people enjoying colorful drinks, or people watching the most stunning sun sets. YouTube, displays people filming their adventurous mountain climbs, culinary highlights, or video bloggers sharing their best travel advice. Social Media Channels that focus on visual presentation are the most popular for sharing travel experiences. This is a change in society to display personal travel experiences in such a public format, but is has also changed the way we travel. The picture of the first page was posted on Instagram by the user "the Blonde Abroad", wishing everyone a good Sunday morning by posting "easy like Sunday mornin'" (theblondeabroad). Her Instagram page displays herself and beautiful destinations. Her 446 000 followers suggest that a lot of people enjoy watching her travel picture and videos.

Travel has changed drastically not only in the way we travel but how we share these experiences. This thesis analyses Social Media Influencers (SMI) in the travel industry. The literature review focuses on the history of travel, how experience in travel has evolved, generation Y, Web 2.0,

and the development of social media and marketing through storytelling. The following section analyzes how travel has changed in the last 15 years and develops the research question of this thesis.

# 2 Literature Review

## 2.1 History

Historically speaking, travel had never been associated with leisure experience or enjoyment, but rather a necessity. Business owners, entrepreneurs, sailors, soldiers had to travel to earn money. Others had to travel because they had to get from point a to point b. In the 13th and 14th century a lot of tourists travelled through pilgrimages, but these were strict travels to appease to a religion trend rather than enjoyment.

In the 16th and 18th century, travel became something for the elite, for the scholars that went and traveled to widen their horizons. Travels like these included going to museums, art galleries or visiting cultural artifacts. These travels were neutral and based on highly emotional experiences (Urry and Larsen 5). In the 19th century travel for leisure became more common, mainly for the upper class. Common destinations included beautiful libraries or spas. However, this type of travel was solely sought out by those who could afford it. At that time, it was unusual to travel for sightseeing or solely to relax (Urry and Larsen 6).

With the first industrial revolution, when cities became less livable and strong differences between the countryside and the city arose. About that time the notion of leisure travel (Urry and Larsen 32) became a broader topic. What aided this new urge for leisure trips was the invention of the train, in the middle of the 19th century. Due to this innovation more, people could afford a means of transportation and travel was no longer reserved for the elite. The industrial revolution brought a lot of new rules such as punctuality, no bad language, no drinking and the need for resting period became greater among workers (Urry and Larsen 42). The industrial changes made it necessary for a holiday season to be developed to better control the work shifts. This development also includes the planned workweek that would allow for regular working times and recovery times. By 1920 the first developments for mass tourism such as holiday camps and the first commercial flights arose. Furthermore, the first beach resorts for pure leisure were opened. Beach resorts existed before but their purpose was for sick people to recover and breath better air at the sea (Urry and Larsen 43).

In the years between 1955 and 1960, after World War II, the travel industries began to flourish and the concept of mass tourism was established. The development was accelerated by many tourist bureaus that offered travel packages, and airlines offering chartered flights. However, at that time, most packages only offered trips to neighboring countries – Germans going to Austria for a hiking summer vacation and later Italy and Spain became more popular destinations (Gyr 32-34). These tour operators experienced a high in travel in the middle of the 1990s and the beginning 2000s, offering packaged vacations with air travel and accommodation. The main selling point was that everything was organized and all travel costs included.

Starting in the year of 2000, 3 major influences changed the way people thing of travel to this day: highly individualized travel that builds mainly on experiences, further development of technology (such as the Web 2.0, social media, and telephone apps), and low-cost travel facilitators. Amongst others, the low--budget airlines "Ryanair", "easy jet", "euro wings" or "spirit airlines" were all founded between 2000 and 2010. Furthermore, the rise of low-cost accommodation and the

sharing economy such as couch surfing founded in 2004 or Airbnb founded in 2008 allows for even more people, regardless of their income, to start to travel (Onyx Center Source).

Travel is an industry that keeps growing and adapting to future demands. As technology develops further and progressively jobs are automated, people will have extra leisure time. In this context a prediction says that "by the year 2020, tourism will be the world's largest industry" (Delener). The travel industry will continue to grow and give into demands of its customers. Nearly all travel nowadays is booked online and numerous people are consulting social media for travel advice. Furthermore, customers are seeking out increasingly travel based experiences. They are keen on discovering and feeling something different, and the demand for highly personalized experiences rises.

In the next two sections, individualized travel experiences and the development of technology in this context will be further examined. The next section focuses on experience and why they are becoming more important. Starting with the year 2000 individualized travel for personal experience emerged as a new market.

## 2.2    Experience:

Today, there is a strong demand for individualized travel and experiences. In the article the *History of Tourism: Structures on the Path to Modernity*, the author Gyr states: "For the historian of tourism, the traditional touristic consumption of symbols (sights, other worlds) have been extended or replaced by an experience-laden entertainment culture that is part of a new way of perceiving the world" (Gyr 27). Nowadays, travel is not only individualized but should evoke emotions and manifest an experience. "The travel industry is becoming more and more user-centric. This is especially prevalent in tourism, where individualism and experiences are held in high regard" (Shoutem). This means that experience and individualism is a central part of the way we travel today.

However, this phenomenon is not completely new. Pine & Gilmore coined the term experience economy in 1998 explaining that: "economists have typically lumped experiences in with services, but experiences are a distinct economic offering, as different from services as services are from goods (Pine and Gilmore)". Thereafter, unlike a service or a commodity, an experience brings the customer closer to the product and lets them interact with it.
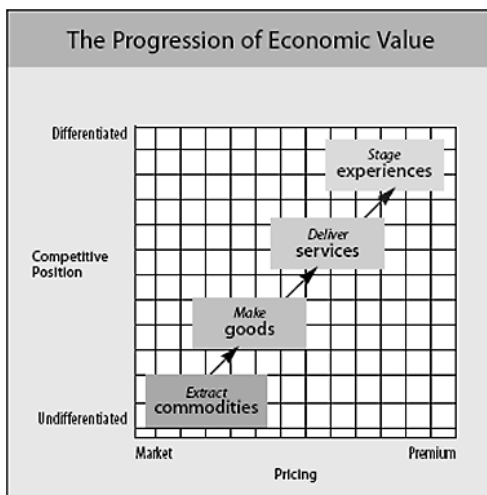


*Figure 2 The Progression of Economic Value (Pine and Gilmore)*

Experience design is a way for a travel agent to adhere to the demands of a customer by giving them a highly-individualized treatment. Moreover, this individualization differentiates a business from its competitors. To achieve a touristic experience, it has to significantly differentiate itself from a daily experience. The touristic experience must be distinguished also from other consumer experiences to leave a positive memory bound to a specific product.



*Figure 3 The Structure of Tourism Experience (Fesenmaier)*

The most important factor of experiences is that they can create lasting memories that are highly individualized for each consumer as everyone experiences the same products differently.



*Figure 4 Experience become Meaning (Fesenmaier)*

Figure 4 shows that various elements (attractions, activities, social settings) create the experience. It is important in experience design that the experience created is significant enough to become a memory. These memories are processed through stories and sharing in social circles, generating a meaning for the client. The experience must be engaging to the visitor so that he or she can create meaning for himself later from this experience. There are different elements to the tourism experience. First, there is the physical and sensory element. Second, there are often social components involved, for example, the staff of a hotel or fellow concert goers. Third, there is a learning element, also known as a cognitive experience. For example: if you discover something new about a destination or learn something at a museum. Fourth, there is the emotional experience, which should be carefully designed that there are no negatives cues, otherwise, it can quickly become a negative one. Additionally, the intensity of the emotion experience must be considered (Fesenmaier).

Experience design has become a vital part of vacation design. Travel today must fulfill more than just a nice getaway. Lohmann and de Bloom go as far as saying in their paper *Happiness in a Tourism Context* that the main motivation for tourists to travel during a holiday is to get a benefit: "Happiness for tourists can be regarded as one of the customer values of holiday travel. Other customer values may be e.g. recreation, better health, learning a language, deeper affiliation in relationship, etc." (Lohmann and de Bloom). People travel because they seek personal benefit and/or happiness and the only way to gear customer towards benefit repeatedly is to create an experience where this feeling of happiness is guaranteed or more likely.

This new phenomenon of looking for more in travel than just an enjoyable time but to desire a memorable experience is a mark of this time. The next section investigates generation Y and how they have influenced modern travel trends.

## 2.3    Generation Y (1980-2000):

"The United Nations estimates that 20 percent of all international tourists, or nearly 200 million travelers, are young people, and that this demographic generates more than $180 billion in annual tourism revenue, an increase of nearly 30 percent since 2007" (Machado). Older generations tended to consider travel a luxury. Millennials on the other hand view travel (especially international travel) as a vital component of their personal growth and life experience (Swartz). This generation differentiates itself from previous generations in 2 main ways: first, they want authentic travel experiences and, second, they want the technology readily available to create their own personalized travel experiences.

This generation has a desire for an emotional connection to everything they are doing. "They want to be engaged and have a personal experience that resonates with them" (Wheeler). This is also true for other brand experiences but it reflects the necessity for the travel industry to adapt to these new challenges. Customers want an experience, as discussed in the previous section. Not only a product is the main characteristic but also how the product is experienced. When it comes to travel, generation Y is looking for adventure or special learning experiences.

Most millennials travel to experience a new culture, and 78% say they want to learn something new while traveling:  "They're extremely curious about the world and intend on exploring it on their own terms " (Shallcross). Every product given to generation Y needs to be individualized to their liking. They are a very independent generation that wants to make their own travel arrangements, routes, and itineraries.

Most millennials have the wish to travel abroad, but even more than this, they are looking for experiential travel- allowing them to get to know the local culture and discover something new and adventurous. "They love customized, unique experiences – not cookie-cutter big brands…" (Goldberg). This generation likes to be autonomous and find their own deals. They want to discover the world on their own terms, and through recent advances in technology, this is readily possible. This generation's preference for authentic experiences and self-guided booking is likely to shape the future of the travel industry. "Providing transparent, self-serve booking experiences can meet this generation's need for autonomy" (Vivion).

Figure 5, explains that to over 70% of millennials it is of vital importance to learn and explore and try new food experiences especially local cuisine.



**But millennials don't like to spend a lot of time in their rooms.
Instead, you can find them:**

**Learning**
78% want to learn something new when traveling.
HVS

**Exploring**
78% are looking for a thrilling and active vacation, as opposed to a lazy trip.
A Dangerous Business

**Eating**
And 98% want to experience the local cuisine.
Forbes

**In general, they're looking for experiences.**
When they head home, millennials want to take unique stories and share-worthy photos with them, not souvenirs.

Fortunately, millennials are always prepared to capture those Instagrammable moments. Only 8% would ever consider taking a trip without their smartphone or tablet, compared to 24% of boomers.
Hipmunk

*Figure 5 Millennials Travel Habits (Patrick)*

Another key factor for this generation and how it sets itself apart from other generations, is the emergence of the internet. The internet opened many new opportunities for marketing and things such as online travel reviews, online booking tools and social media.

The millennials grew up with modern technology and 90% use the online world to book their travels and inform themselves about it (Vivion). They have lots of travel apps at their disposal, and this technology is not only a tool for them but also an extension of their experiences. This view is consolidated by only 8% of the asked millennials saying they would have considered going on vacation without their smartphone or tablet (Patrick). This generation is armed with its smartphone from the second they wake up to the time they go to bed. The primary means of communication is email, text message, social media. They are so used to the virtual world that they sometimes prefer virtual- to face-to-face communication. Important to this generation is that things are moving fast and they get a response right away. Nearly 90% said they have been disappointed with the responsiveness of mobile apps or internet sites (Price).

Millennials are mainly influenced by user-generated content meaning they take their decisions based on what friends post on Facebook or what travel reviews say- more than 80% agreed with this statement at the questionnaire. This generation is constantly connected and they rely on social media as well travel reviews to help them find travel ideas. The influence of their family and

direct friends is becoming a less crucial factor. That is because todays communication relies mainly on text message, email or social media and it is vital to have helpful reviews of products and services for them to even consider them.

According to Skidmore studio, 42 % choose their travel destination or hotel based on pictures they have seen online on Instagram or Pinterest. Some inspiration is taken from movies but only a mere 18%. The deciding factors are still experts. These experts can be industry leaders, peers or personal contacts. This shows that all social media created content is significantly influencing this generation and their travel decisions (Patrick). Furthermore, this generation is always online not only for travel recommendation but always looking for the best possible travel deal. It is important for them to have a good deal and they will check various travel sites before deciding (Price).

## 2.4    Web 2.0:

A tool that shaped the behavior of Generation Y but also many other consumers is the emergence of Web 2.0 and user-generated content has completely transformed consumer behavior online. The term web 2.0 is defined as "the second stage of development of the Internet, characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media" (Oxford Dictionary). There are various key principles to Web 2.0 and one of them is the Rich Internet Application (RIA). These are not only bound to desktop computers or software packages and are still under constant development. Moreover, as the definition of web 2.0 according to the Oxford dictionary states, another significant difference is the user-generated content. The key element is that the end user becomes part of the development of a homepage. A complete shift has occurred, instead of presenting information towards the world, people are presenting each other with information. Companies have gone "away from pushing things out toward enticing consumers to put things into the companies to create a fully interactive and mutually relationship" (Li and Wang).

There are various Web 2.0 web applications. Let us start by looking at online communities. Online communities can be portals such as Facebook and LinkedIn but they are also websites such as trip advisor, sky scanner or Urlaubsguru. These are all websites where the idea is to share ones' experiences with family and friends and possibly also the whole online community. Specifically, for travel these online communities often have subgroups or special interest communities. Here people can chat with each other, share impressions or ask questions about travels or hotels. The idea is to exchange experiences. For example, whenever on Urlaubsguru an offer is posted the user has diverse

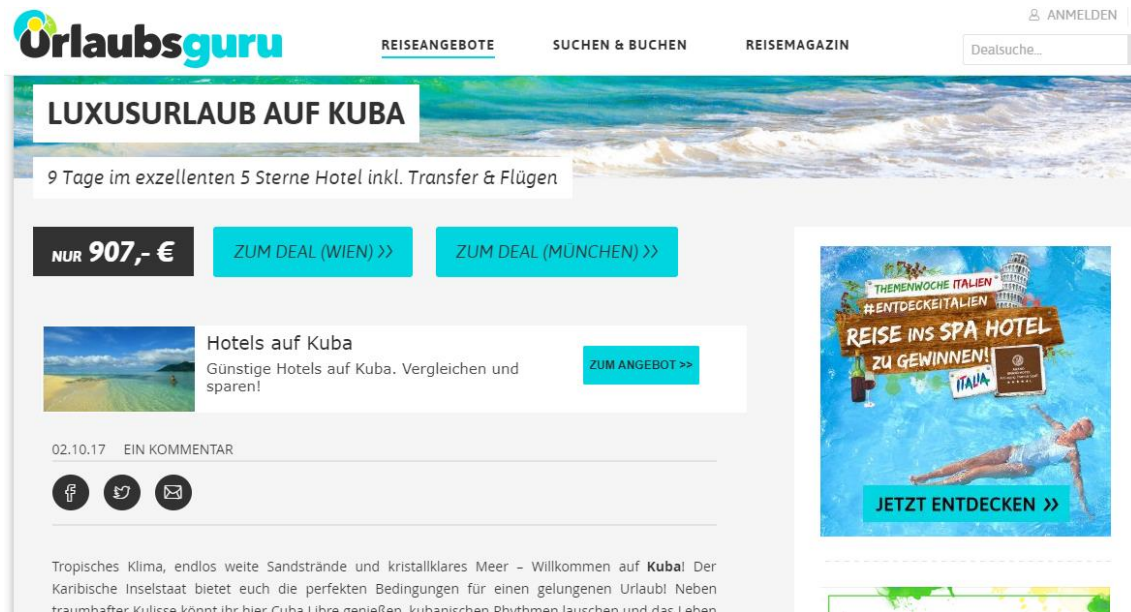options to share this with friends and discuss the deal.



*Figure 6 Urlaubsguru Screenshot (Urlaubsguru)*

Another example of the Web 2.0 is photo and video portals. The most well-known meta
sharing portals are sites such as Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest, or snapchat. This medium is
becoming one of the most popular, user can freely share on these portals their videos and others can
rate and comment on them. Especially for the travel industry, this offers great opportunities in
marketing. "Since people can't try travel-related products and services before they consume them on
actual travel sites, they usually involve a dynamic process with various amounts and types of
information sources" (Kang and Schuett 94). Pictures and video content are especially important in
the display of the individual experience. The millennial generation relies greatly on user-generated
content and wants to experience part of the feeling before booking.

Other popular Web 2.0 applications include blogs (vlogs), podcasts and wikis. A "Web log, or
blog, is a Web site where entries are made in journal style and displayed in reverse chronological
order" (Hepburn 4). Blogs are essentially online diaries that share one's life or give advice to the
travel communities. They often range in quality and can be unpredictable. Other applications such as
podcasts are audio files that can be downloaded from a website. While a wiki is an online
encyclopedia that can be edited by its users.

This quick introduction to the web 2.0 should facilitate the readers understanding of how
social media is influencing consumers with regards to travel. "Travel consumers have until now relied
heavily on travel journalism and traditional media to help guide them through the best places to go
and most content has shifted to the customer and the traveler using blogs, podcasts, wikis and map
mashups the consumer can share, experience and research their own travel adventure" (Hepburn 2)

## 2.5    Social Media:

"Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-
based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Websites and applications dedicated to
forums, microblogging, social networking, social bookmarking, social curation, and wikis are among

the different types of social media" (whatis.com). There are many websites and applications that are considered social media. Figure 7 is a social media chart that shows how many social media channels already exist. Most known are social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. However, one can see that that these well-known platforms are just a few compared to the overall number of social media outlets. Web 2.0 allowed for social media outlets to come into existence with these user-generated content. This also influenced travel industry.
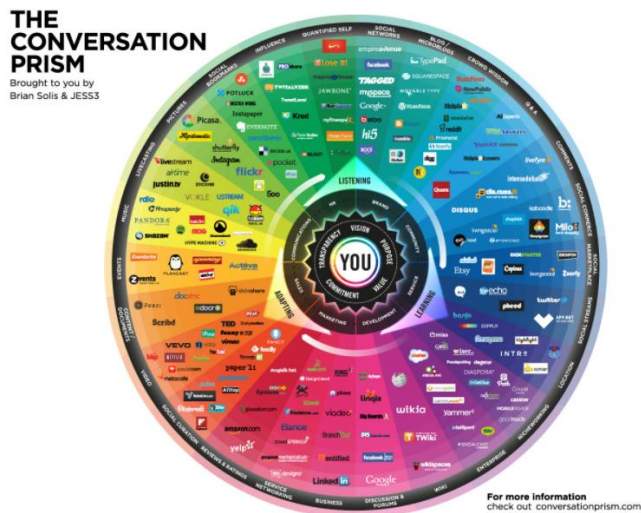


*Figure 7 Social Media Chart (whatis.com)*

With the emergence of Web, 2.0 people rely mainly on user-generated content when planning their vacation. "Social media are fundamentally changing the way travelers and tourists search for, find and read information regarding tourist suppliers and tourists destinations, and travels can share their travel experiences through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube" (Chung and Koo 1). Social media is influencing the industry tremendously. Especially as travel, unlike other products, is something that cannot physically be touched or experienced more travelers are relying on advice and comments of others to make their decisions as explained in Web 2.0.

Most important what has been found out through research is that basically everyone relies on social media and what people or bloggers say about certain destinations (Brown). Forbes magazine writes "Millennials aren't just looking to social media to enjoy pictures and stories about exotic locations. They're using it to determine where to go, when to get there, and what they should do when they arrive" (Rohampton). A travel agent states that "Many clients actually start by finding inspiration on Pinterest, then find deals on Twitter, then they share photos on Facebook and Instagram. They use everything from apps to sites to social media platforms to create their own deal" (Nicole). Meaning before she can even influence her clients, they will already have made a great part of their decision online. "In fact, more millennials indicated that social media was an influencing factor in travel choices than travel agents" (Rohampton)

Consultancies such as Edelman are supporting this pattern saying that large part of marketing budget is spent on considering "yet insight from this research note suggests that consumers seem to be influenced more during the "evaluation" and "enjoy-advocate-bond" stages (Edelman). It seems that a great part of social media is to get inspired and evaluate the changes. Social media has another

part to it and that is the social pressure of doing what your friends are doing. So if there are many people posting about their great vacation, millennials have a fear of missing out: "Taking holidays relieves stress and more than half of millennials report dreaming about vacations while on Facebook. Many even go through the initial research and planning stages. Much of this can be attributed to fear of missing out" (Rohampton). Even more social media is not only some random sharing a memory but it the sharing of actual people opinions and this enables: "individuals to share individual meaning and convey social benefits" (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier).

## 2.6    Social Media Influencer

However, not only social media influences the market but also certain online celebrities, called social media influencers (SMI) that shape the entire online community. Even though it is difficult to find a definition of this new phenomenon in a proper dictionary, many online portals have already come up with descriptions trying to explain this phenomenon. The website Pixlee explained the term as: "A Social Media Influencer is a user on social media who have established credibility in a specific industry. A SMI has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach" (Pixlee).

One key element of an influencer is a following niche and active engagement with the audience. The market size for followers varies from niche to niche. The idea of an influencer is nothing new per say. There have always been influencers such as celebrities that have given their name or face to brands to influence their fans to buy a product or support a cause. Also, industry experts or thought leaders such as journalists and politicians have been around for decades influencing what we think to be right or wrong or what cause we should support. However, social media influencers established a new type of influence. They are often bloggers or content creators on the internet and establish themselves by being an expert in a certain product or gaining celebrity-

like status through their witty content (Influencer Marketing Hub).



*Figure 8 Infographic on Social Media Influencers (Estefania)*

The principal question is if the SMIs have become a major influence and how exactly they influence customers. Just as much as there has been a business developed for these influencers, there are also various agencies that will match potential influencers with brands so they can find the right influencers for them.

An SMI will collaborate usually with a business or a cause to create campaigns that will raise brand awareness and drive sales by promoting a brand to their social audience. Most important here is the content that they create. They share content about a product or service that is then shared with their blog reader or social channels. The turning point comes that they post this content and thereby engage their audience. By encouraging reviews, feedback, offer competitions or offer things to win and share their personal products about products or service. They share this content over various channels to reach their target audience.

For companies, it becomes increasingly important to look for certain qualities in an influencer. Does this influence have a high engagement? Does this influencer post actively online and does he also work on gaining the trust of their followers? Amongst these, the quality of the produced content is one of the most crucial factors of an SMI. Is the quality fluctuating or can it be found anywhere on the internet? Lastly, and this is very important to a brand, has this SMI established a niche and personality for himself? Who is their media channel catering to? Who is the audience and what do they want to achieve with their blog? Is their tone of the blog as well as their personality the same as you want to portray the company? These are important questions that bloggers as well companies need to consider when they choose their business partners.

For SMIs in the travel industry, we see similar trends. Travel, just like fashion, is big on visual images to convey the feeling or experience. The experts say that also for travel bloggers and

influencers, great content is the key to reach the audience and to be selective when it comes to creating content and finding a niche (Renee). It is necessary to stay on top of the technology and post in relevant channels. Moreover, for all influencers, it is important to work with the right companies and be selective where their persona is featured.

In conclusion, SMIs are new type of influencer on the horizon. There have always been influencers but social media allowed new channels for the SMIs to arise and to evaluate a product from a distinct perspective. However, like political leaders or celebrities they must stay relevant, keep high engagement with their followers and create high quality content to stay popular. The question that remains is who are these influencers exactly and can they be categorized.

## 2.7    Storytelling:

Storytelling has been part of society long before we could even write. Storytelling enabled us to share experiences, "as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation or instilling moral values" (Chaitin). These stories are simply part of human culture. In recent years, we have gone back to storytelling as a means of marketing. Marketing personnel is increasingly using stories to develop brand loyalty. Marketing strategist Tim Leberecht writes: "What has changed, though, is the importance of storytelling. The more data you deal with, the stronger the need for storytellers who make sense of it all. Perhaps, that's the biggest value marketers can bring to the table." Brand strategist Giles Lury, writes, "This trend echoes the deeply-rooted need of all humans to be entertained. Stories are illustrative, easily remembered, and allow any firm to create stronger emotional bonds with customers" (Impact-information.com). Storytelling nowadays is still used like in the stone ages to share experiences but nowadays it has become also an economic tool to entice people to buy products.

Storytelling has become a valuable tool in marketing. This tool is changing how we interact with the audience and how we reach them. For years advertisers have used the method more frequency and interrupting the experience of the consumer for example while watching a TV show and the 30-minute Mr. Porper advertisement interrupted the entertainment. Nowadays, consumers have the choice, when and how to consume content. For example, Netflix, Hulu and TV on demand all have the option to skip advertisement. People do not want to be interrupted anymore in their entertainment. Thus, the media industry is changing as companies change how they interact with the end users (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series).

David Beebe, the Chief Marketing officer for Marriott says that especially travel as product lends itself to storytelling perfectly. "You are telling people when you are traveling, where you are going and that automatically creates content" (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series). This shows already that storytelling is a great tool for anyone working in tourism advertisement, and how important this tool has become to travel. Furthermore, storytelling is also something that SMIs do automatically by constantly creating more content and travel lends itself perfectly for that.

Beebe also points out that the market has changed in the sense that now the product must first provide information, inspiration or entertainment. In other words, we must give the consumer something first before receiving any hope of their business back. Years ago, we tried to cram 7 minutes' worth of information into a 10-second spot, today we must try to get people into a forum or

discussion on Facebook have the chance to tell them about the product. A major factor is being authentic, and getting the consumer interested. Storytelling is a method of marketing that needs a lot of time and cannot be achieved in a 10-second ad (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series).

One of the substantial changes in the way we think today is that we want consumers to have an authentic experience with the products. The consumer should not to be interrupted but rather advertisements should create an experience. This experience should resonate with the people. Experience is closely linked to storytelling because stories convey experiences in words. The reason social media is so powerful is that it is a platform where storytelling is facilitated and the end user can take part in this process. Thereby the users interact actively with the experience and the product by leaving comments and likes and giving feedback (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series).

The key to stories are the people in these stories. To connect with an experience, you need to connect with them on a personal level. This is also a reason why SMIs are so influential because they are people telling a story. Until recently, the industry did not give influencers the attention they deserved. Influencers are storytelling every day, creating extremely powerful content. With influencers, an audience that is otherwise difficult to reach is now directly linked to SMIs. SMIs are much more creative and are not bound by commercial structures or rules. They reach their audience in a creative way and they grow their audience authentically. "Omina" for example, a media company that has specialized themselves in matching brands with the right influencers, explains that one needs to know specifically what an influencer does and who the respective audience is, this influencer attracts, to match a brand well. A reason why it is important to be able to categorize influencers is to better match them with brand partners. Rose Ferraro SVP of "Omina Media" says it is important to understand the influencers: what Is their style, frequency of posting, content and what audiences do they attract (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series).

Influencers want to maximize the experience for their audience and collaborating with an influencer can be useful for brands. The crucial point of an influencer is bringing credibly to the brand and if it is not authentic, both the brand and the influencer reputation can be damaged. This suggests that in the future storytelling marketing will be an increasingly important part of marketing. Moreover, the market is developing especially towards a bigger focus on niche audiences. This is another reason it is so important to have the right influencer for the right audience. Storytelling will continue to stay significant factor as it is the main form that influencers capture their audiences (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series).

Specifically, in the tourism industry, storytelling opens a new dimension of marketing. The tourism industry lives off experiences, and storytelling is nothing more than conveying past experiences. The destination of a tourism experience is the environment for the experience. However, there are many other factors such as personal preference, product awareness etc., that add to this tourist experience. The true key here is that tourist experience comes together through so many factors: "The tourists will perceive visual signals, colors, sounds, artifacts, et cetera and interact with personnel and other tourists" (Mossberg 71). These are all parts that can be used for storytelling
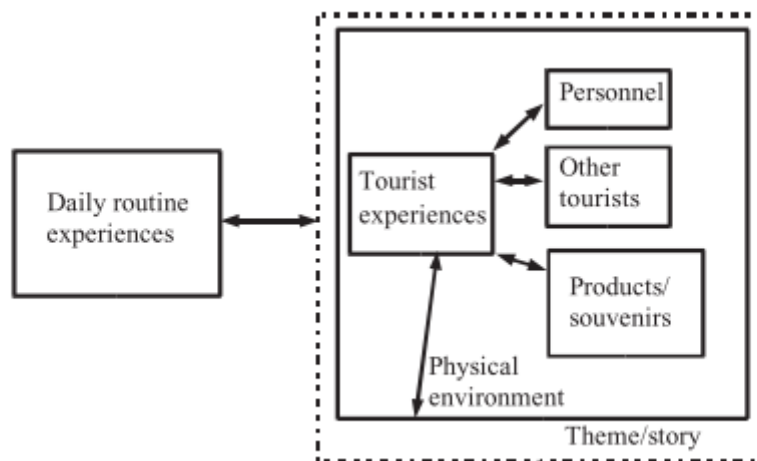
and that make an experience of a tourist real.



*Figure 9 Factors influencing the consumer experience within the context of tourism (Moscardo)*

Storytelling, in general, has become such an important part of today's tourism. Millennials see sharing their experiences online as vital part of their social life. Rebecca Pera author of *Empowering the New Traveler Storytelling as a Co-Creative Behavior in tourism* explains that the passive gaze is tourism of the past and that today's travelers actively engage to create their own experiences and the share it with others (Pera). Platforms such as couch surfing rely on sharing stories to build value for customers and trust.

Stories play a prominent role in the tourist experience and the narratives that have been often told about a destination. In the paper, the shaping of tourist experiences: the importance of stories and themes explains that often myths are told to enhance a tourism representation. For example, that being out in nature as renewing force or to find paradise when you travel abroad (Moscardo 46).

Storytelling in tourism industry is powerful as you are marketing experiences and those are best told through stories. Travel as Davide Bebee said in the documentary lends itself to storytelling as it is an experience (Brand Storytelling: A Docu-Series). SMI can capture this tourist experience that was described the previous section.

This literature review analyzed the history of travel to show that travel from the beginning of 20th to the 21st century has changed drastically. Nowadays we travel for leisure, and being able to afford leisure is not only a symbol of status but is has become a necessity to break loose from their daily lives. For these reasons extra focus was laid on experience in travel. The main factors change from having a beach and swimming in the ocean to what the experiences you had during a vacation. How did the vacation make you feel? Did you learn something new? Did you have the chance to connect more with your family, friends or even yourself? This context perfectly fits the introduction of the internet. With all these new experiences, the Web. 2.0 allows for user-created content and thereby for people to share these experiences. And where better to share your experiences then on social media? Social media with its many channels has given way to sharing experiences online. This was the chance for the SMI to be born. Based on these developments in travel as well as these societal changes, the SMI is a new phenomenon of its time. Even though the field is in rapid

development still, this thesis already established some crucial factors about SMIs. Who these influencers are and how they keep themselves modern. It is, however, yet to be answered how SMIs are categorized and used as business partners.

# 3  Research Question

There are diverse types of SMIs. How can they be categorized to better understand what each SMI does? Claudia Springfeld claims in her thesis *Tourismus 2.0: Chancen und Herausforderungen des Online Tourismus im Web 2.0* that these online travel communities can be dived into 3 types: advice, networking and evaluation (Springfeld 23). With ever evolving developments in technology it is important to differentiate these technological and societal phenomena and to categorize them in order to work with them.

The main research questions of this thesis are:

1)  How can SMIs be categorized?
2)  How can SMIs be used to predict future travel trends?

It is important to research SMIs in travel to better understand who they are, and how they gain the trust of their followers. Did these online travel personalities and/or influencers get popular by giving advice or just because people admire their travels? Did these influencers choose a niche or do they talk about unrelated topics that interest them? How do they interact with their followers and what kind of social media channels do they use? Is there a trend that the SMIs in travel follow?

Another aim of this thesis is to examine, based on the reception of these SMIs, how the future in travel will develop. How is the interaction with SMIs going to change and how can the travel industry use the SMIs in the future to create better co-operations.

This research should also establish basic guidelines of how to approach and work with SMIs and how to choose the write partners for a specific brand or product. It is hypothesized that there are several types of SMIs. If categorized correctly it will be easier for travel companies to choose what SMIs to work with and how to best predict new travel trends. Also, these SMIs help market destinations, travel products and services. Furthermore, they could play a significant role in predicting the next travel trends as they are heavily dependent on followers.

# 4    Methodology

This section explains the research methods and the instruments used to better understand SMI in travel industry. This section will explain the sampling methods, defend why the qualitatively method is best for this type of research. The research design is based on the grounded theory and will further alliterated in this section. Lastly, it will be reviewed how results were analyzed and the possible limitations of this research.

## 4.1   Sampling

The sampling done for this research paper should be representative of the best and most influential SMIs. Running various Google search on lists of the best SMI´s in the travel industry showed that there were many different lists that that named the best SMI. Therefore, various limitations were made for the selection of a proper list:

First, the SMI would have to publish everything in English so most of the SMIs are Americans or come from English speaking countries.

Second, a limit of 10 different websites (see annex) that all had listening of the best SMIs in travel.

Third, all lists were crossed checked and the SMIs that appeared most often on all 10 of these websites were selected to be the representative sample.

This sample even though small in comparison on how many SMI in travel already exist is representative because there is a limit on how many have a wide reach. These top SMIs will easiest to categorize as they have the most elaborate profiles.

## 4.2   Research Design:

This study is combination of both qualitative and quantitative data. The reason both are necessary because numerical figures of SMIs are easier to compare, yet on the other hands it is important to describe each SMI individually to see what and how they wrote to gain influencers. The focus is on the qualitative data however, known methods to analyze qualitative data is through the grounded theory and content analysis. In the book, *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches*, the author explains that grounded theory is "the idea is to let understanding emerge from the close study of texts" (Bernard 244), while content analysis involves "tagging a set of texts or other artifacts (photos, magazine ads, TV commercials, buildings) with codes that are derived from theory or from prior knowledge and then analyzing the distribution of the codes- [again], usually statically" (Bernard 244). The content analysis and grounded theory differ by inductive or deductive research. This research design uses inductive reasoning.

The research design is inductive. I started out with the collection of data of the SMIs. Through the study of this data more ideas and elements become apparent. These elements then are tagged and grouped into codes later concepts and then categories and from this a new theory about SMIs derives. "The basic idea of the grounded theory approach is to read (and re-read) a textual database

(such as a corpus of field notes) and "discover" or label variables (called categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships. The ability to perceive variables and relationships is termed "theoretical sensitivity and is affected by a number of things including one's reading of the literature and one's use of techniques designed to enhance sensitivity" (Borgatti). As explained by the author, I will use the same method for my research. Going through my collected data of text to see if I can discover any recurring patterns or categories. Then I will move on to see if these various SMIs and based on how they represent themselves relationships between number of followings or niche can be detected. For example; if an SMI is easily categorized does this mean he is more influential? Or does the method of money making also reflect on how successful an SMI is? Then with the knowledge I already gathered from my literature review, I hope to bring new theories to live about how SMIs in travel behave, influence and ultimately how they can be categorized.

Grounded theory allows for more freedom and flexibility (Braun und Clark). This type of research design allows the user to start with an idea and let this analysis of the data become into a theory. Especially for SMIs where thus far there has not been much academic research yet, it allows to design a new theory. Especially in fields that are new such as social media it is a great research theory to use.

This type of exploratory research method has allowed to derive on a hypothesis based of the literature review. Exploring the various SMIs will allow to further explore and test the theory of categorization within this group of people.  Next, I examine the method of data collection.

## 4.3    Data Collection

The gathered list of the top 30 SMIs were analyzed through distinct measurements. The method used for data collection was observational. I went through the various blogs, Instagram, twitter, Facebook accounts and websites to determine if a clear categorization would be possible. The distinct measurements were carefully selected to analyze various possible categorizations. Below I examine each measurement and the reason it was important to better understand SMIs.

1)    Number of followers

Most often the SMIs are categorized by how many followers they have. Often the number of followers is also a good indicator if they have wide reach of people that they can influence on. It is also a good indicator of their status in the online community. Large number of followers are a status symbol for the amount of influence.

2)    Purpose

There are 3 types of SMIs in the travel industry: advice, inspirational and factual. This became apparent doing the first initial research on these influencers. There are those SMIs that give advice and they tell the reader what restaurant to go to or what exact beach to choose, how to pack, and what to look out for when traveling to a certain destination. These blogs are often not as glamourous, rather they are full of text and information. They are more like a guide book to a destination like the lonely planet guide book. The experience SMI on the other hand uses a completely different method to gain followers. They try to capture a feeling, an essence of the place they are traveling to. These bloggers often just talk about their experience, post many pictures and

make everything they do very visual. You will see a lot of videos on these blogs and read stories rather than read advice. Another big phenomenon of experience bloggers is that they push themselves more into the forefront. These are their stories and they sell themselves just as much as part of this brand. Lastly, there are also some blog, that are purely factual and focus on information. There are blogs that are all about informing about culture, the country and language and they do so be writing close to textbook like articles. These blogs do not push themselves into the forefront at all. Sometimes you will not even know who is behind the blog unless you do some extra searching.

3)        Which kind of medium is predominant? What social media channels are used?

Different influencers use different social media channels. Most of them, as they have already established themselves as great influencers, have multiple channels and use each channel to their advantage. The blog website or just a general website where traffic comes through but also programs such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest are used. The purpose of these measurement is to see which channel they use most predominately and what channel do they use to achieve what kind of outreach. In this research the top three social media channels will be examined.

4)        Number of posting per week

Many forums about social media influencing, say that key to building followers is posting regularly. With this measurement I want to see how often people post per week and if they post regularly and if this has influence on how they are perceived.

5)        Number of recommendations

In this measurement I wanted to see whether they make actual recommendations of products or if they just write about experiences. Do they recommend specific hotels or airlines or do just speak about them generally? To answer yes about this measurement the influencer had to specifically endorse and recommend a hotel or service.

6)        Destination

This measurement will look at the various destinations the influencers have been to and are writing about. It will show what destinations in the moment are most interesting for travelers and are most being written about. Further, it will hopefully show if there is a tendency for a destination at all or if travelers nowadays travel the entire world.

7)        Method of making money

More influencers are starting to make their own business. Question however is how do they make money? Does the money-making process differ from influencer? Do the ones that make more money have nicer websites? Do all of them make money and do they talk about it openly on their website? Do SMIs use sponsored ads, post, reviews and if they have any partnership with other brands?

8)        Off branding

This measurement explains how many influencers used their power to influence as a launching pad. Often based on their success on their website influencers, will start their own business relating to this subject. This will show if they are using their influence to branch out and use their influence do start something new.

9)        Segment

There are so many blogs that exist already on the web. Do bloggers choose segments or an audience to targets? Do some bloggers only speak about corporate travel or about luxury travel and yet the next ones only about budget travel? Or do bloggers not differentiate about the type of travel? I want to see if they have found a group or an audience that they associate themselves with and target their posts and influence on. It would be interesting to see if most bloggers keep to the formats of marketing as to how to attract an influence. This is also a key point about how to categorize these blogs if they have segmented themselves it will be easy give them a category. Further, it would be important to see if certain segments are repeated often by various bloggers or if segments are equally divided,

10)    Niche/ Unique Selling Point (USP)

Even if SMIs are segmented, it is an important measurement to see if they have one unique selling points. How do the many different influencers set themselves apart? Also, how do these bloggers set themselves apart within their same segment?

11)    How long already active

This category is supposed to show how long they have been already working on their blog until they reached some followers. Basically, this will show if there is a difference influencer on how will know they are based on how they have been working on becoming travel SMI

12)    Provided virtual experience

Travel is an extremely visual product; this measurement is a rating on a scale from one to five. How good is their visual presence? Key factors used for this measurement are: how easy is this website to navigate, picture quality and how well developed regarding links and further information.

13)    Age

This measurement will help categorize by age and to see if a conclusion can be drawn what ages do become influencers

14)    Gender

It will be interesting to see if gender plays a role on how popular they are with their audience and if more females or males in the travel industry are influencers.

## 4.4    Analysis

My data from the top 30 SMIs is analyzed through the above-named measurements. Since my research design is focused on getting information form the data it was important that when selecting the data, the data captured the entire online presence of this SMI. I wanted to make sure the SMI could be analyzed not only by his number of followers but also how he influences and how he captures his audience. Further, I analyzed how they choose to represent themselves, what story are they telling their audience?

This analysis goes deeper than just the categorization because the idea from looking at these influencers is to understand how several factors: 1. who is influencing this generation and 2. who will be the next strong purchasing power and voice in the next coming years. It is crucial to understand the influencers because they are online markets that understand this generation and the coming

one. SMIs are also the gateway to new travel trends therefore my analysis looks in depth also how, what, why they influence and with what marketing tools.

## 4.5      Potential Limitations:

A limitation of this research paper is 1. I only looked at English speaking blogs, and therefore the outcomes can only speak mainly for the English-speaking market. 2. Collecting only a sample of 30 SMIs is limiting as there are hundreds of SMIs that come into online world monthly. I have however, discovered that blogging is mainly done in English also from other countries to reach the biggest amount of potential readers and therefore, I believe this limitation is minor. Further, even though there are many SMIs, there are only a small percentage that have wide enough reach to influence purchasing decisions. Another possible limitation is that is thesis only looks at travel SMIs and not at other influencers from other industries. However, this limitation I will minimize by later looking at the discussion section briefly also at other SMIs.

Further, the research design of grounded theory is often critiqued for not following one specific approach. The research paper *Using Grounded Theory as a Method of Inquiry: Advantages and Disadvantages* explains that there are various limitations: multiple approaches as well as methodological errors. In the table below, one sees that nonetheless this approach for this type of research is the best method as I will have the potential conceptual literature and it is a systematic approach to data analysis that otherwise would be very random. Further it provides me with depth and richness of the data and allows me to come up with new concepts and patterns for this less researched topic of SMIs.

| *Advantages* | *Disadvantages/Limitations* |
| --- | --- |
| Provides for Intuitive Appeal | Exhaustive Process |
| Fosters Creativity | Potential for Methodological Errors |
| Potential to Conceptualize | Reviewing the Literature without Developing Assumptions |
| Systematic Approach to Data Analysis | Multiple Approaches to GT |
| Provides for Data Depth & Richness | Limited Generalizability |

*Figure 10 Advantages and Disadvantages of the Grounded Theory (Hussein, Hirst und Salyers 3)*

# 5 Discussion & Results:

## 5.1 Introduction

Even from analyzing the first 3 SMIs in travel it was already apparent that SMIs in travel can easily be categorized. In the discussion and results section, I will go through the different measures to see how each of the top 30 influencers falls under each category. After looking at these specific SMIs and the measurement results, I will move on to the discussing each of the results more in detail and if any correlations can be found.

The second part of my research question asks what is the next trend in SMIs and I hope that through the results one can see more specifics as to what the leading SMIs in travel are doing to keep their followers interested.

## 5.2 Demographic Measurements:

### 5.2.1 Age:

Many SMIs that have a considerable number of followers and are within the top 30 SMIs are within their 30s. Only 3 out of 30 were in their twenties, 21 out of 30 were in their thirties and 6 out of 30 were between forties and sixties.

Millennials or generation Y is considered the generation born between 1980 and 2000, looking at bloggers from this perspective we see that 24 out of 30 of the influencers are millennials. That is 80% of the sample are millennials. It shows that this blogger phenomena lies within this millennial generation. The 6 influencers that are older belong more to the baby boomer's generation but still they managed to become great influencers.

However, it is unusual is that there are no great influencers younger than 23. The generation of people born after the Millennials is known as generation Z or also Post Millennials. This is the first generation that grew up already with the widespread use of the internet and technology. I believe one of the reasons we do not see them here yet is because they are just now in their teen years, and are still too young to be successful influencers. Also, the subject of travel is something that post people start experiencing within college beforehand they either do not have the money or are not allowed by the parents to travel on their own. However, it is important to watch this trend as they will be the next generation leading travel trends. It will be interesting to see if this generation will keep the same attitude towards travel as millennials who are all about exploring.

### 5.2.2 Gender:

If you hear about blogging, taking pictures and creating websites about travel, who would you assume does this most and best? Looking at the data, 6 Females were influencers, 10 couples did the influencing together and the majority were males. 14 males out of total sample of 30 influencers. In general, the distribution is equal among males and females influencing in travel. It was unexpected that there were so many couples being influencers. However, it is logistically easier to travel together rather than by yourself and travel to this day is associated with danger and adventure – a trait more often associated with men than women.

### 5.2.3   How long have they been working on their influence?

The range of how long these influencers have been crafting on their ideas, pictures and travel is long for all of them. The range goes from 2000 to 2014. This reveals that becoming an influencer that influences people on the website takes time and needs organic growth. The majority of these 30 influencers started between 2007 and 2013 to get their social media sites up and only 2 of the top influencers started as late as 2014. Gaining influence is not easy, as these numbers show and it takes time to grow influence over a group of people.

These first figures give a good overview of the demographics of the SMIs. Next, I will consider into the social media measurements. I will look at how they used social media to gain followers and what mediums they used to become most influential, and the virtual experience they provided for their followers.

## 5.3    Social Media Measurements:

### 5.3.1   Number of Followers

Number of followers were measured from their most successful medium. These numbers can even be increased when you are combing these SMI´s social media outlets together. The number of followers ranged from 2,700,000 million followers to 4300 followers. The range of followers is encompassing. There were about 4 out of 30 that had more than a million followers, 12 out of 30 in the range of 100,000 to 600,000 and the rest of 14 SMIs had somewhere below 100,000 followers.

Surprisingly the number of followers did not always align with their popularity rating on the various rating sites (see annex A). This goes to show that number of followers is a poor measurement of true influence on a group of people. Followers could also be bought and this also distorts the picture of how many followers bring influence. Recently the Austrian newspaper, Mein Sonntag ran a story called *the new power in the web* writing that good influencers are authentic, aesthetic photos, are have high quality sites and are targeting on specific niche audience- number of followers is important but no everything when it comes to high quality influencers (Pfligl). My numbers reflect exactly this that it is not all about the number of followers but the overall representation. Especially as multitudinous rules are created as to what influencers can do and what is illegal. Having an authentic follower base that actively interact with post is much more important than a large number of followers. The Austrian newspaper article wrote further that despite business of buying followers is thriving more agencies are looking specifically what kind of followers' influencers have before working with them. Important here is that the influencers can reach its audience.

Another factor to be considered is that the number of followers differ on the various platforms. Some social media platforms allow for big follower basis while others are more prone to less following. For example: gaining followers on Facebook is more difficult than on Instagram. On Instagram it is easy to follow someone, just one click, and it is mainly just liking pictures while on Facebook you must first find their Facebook website and then follow them and Facebook has many more options to interact and it requires also of the follower to stay update with all the newsfeed news. On Instagram you constantly have pictures that you can *like* so having a high number of Instagram followers is easier than on Facebook.

The next measurement looks at the mediums SMIs have chosen. Forbes says that the second most important steps to becoming a successful SMI is to find the right social media platforms: "Now pick two, three, or four (maximum) social media channels that you'll cover. Are you good with videos or are you more written content-oriented? Think about the type of content you want and can create and publish. More Facebook (various of types of media)? Instagram (mainly pictures)? or YouTube (the most challenging but most promising if you feel you're good at it)?" (Quora)

### 5.3.2    Most Used Social Media Channels/Mediums

For SMIs the number one medium was their own website or blog. Only 2 out of the 30 had Instagram as their number one medium. Only 3 out of 30 had YouTube has their main social media channel. The influencers tried to work place emphasis on their own websites to reach the followers. However, all of them but 1 out of the 30 had direct links to their social media channels on their website. All of them used social media extensively to reach followers. A blog or website is easiest as the design is completely left to their influencer and they can choose freely how to set it up. Facebook or YouTube have premade templates that one is limited by.

Another reason why major influencers do not use other social media channels as much as their own website is because they have reached high amount of followers and are able to diverge their followers to their own website, own newsletter etc. When I looked at other influencers that had achieved less fame (see appendix C), they still relied much more on social media channels to reach an audience. When influencers start growing their audiences they must rely on other mediums but their own website. In the next two sections I will talk about other mediums that were used.

The second medium is the next most often used social media outlet. The second most used channel among the SMIs was Facebook with 11 Facebook users, 7 Instagram, 7 twitters and 5 others used a blog or Pinterest as the most important channel. One can see that the distribution is equal among the major social media outlet channel. Other than Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube no other social media channels were used. Often there were links to google plus or Pinterest but the followings were so minimal it was not significant.

The third most used social media channel was in line with the distribution of the second most used channels. The SMI used the channels in the following order: 15 Facebook, 9 Twitter, 4 Instagram and 2 YouTube.

Facebook by far is the most used social media channel after promoting one's own website. Facebook is extremely effective for reaching followers because people are already signed up to this channel. Facebook allows the influencer to do a lot with their followers. Not only can they share pictures but they can actively interact with the followers, write message, invite them to events. These activities are more limiting on other social media channels.

Twitter was a popular medium but not to use Twitter to share short insights about travel but mostly to interact with followers and to point followers to Facebook or their own website. Twitter since it is only about short insights, was most often updated and therefore allowed for the most amount of interaction.

YouTube and Instagram were not as frequented as estimated. Visuals are becoming exceedingly important and therefore social media outlets such as Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram,

snapchat were all immensely concentrated on travel. Travel is a big visual experience. However, these outlets alone were not enough to catch followers. The same for YouTube, even though it is a great visual, it requires expertise on film editing.

Researching on what channel is most effective for a SMI, it became apparent that each channel has a different use and works better or worse for different influencers. Most important is that the influencer is authentic, and knows himself and how he wants to come across. SMIs must build their own brands and then choose what social media outlet works best with that brand. However, storytelling is becoming for influencers a valuable tool. Platforms that allows to tell stories through visuals are becoming more popular. Influencer will flock to platforms that allow them most easily to tell their stories through visuals.

In conclusion, Facebook continues to be one of the most popular outlets because on Facebook the combination of image, video and text comes together. The other outlets such as YouTube or Instagram were important for some influencers but for the minority. However, one can see that for travel, images and videos are important to capture the true experience and therefore will grow in their importance in the years to come. Facebook will have to integrate more video friendly features to stay the number one platform for SMIs.

### 5.3.3 Number of postings

Most sites that advice on how to become a successful influencer have argued that regular posting is the key to growing a successful base of followers. No different from this Forbes article on *How to become a Social Media Influencer in ten simple steps*: "Do it constantly. Your content must attract people; make it considered and consistent" (Quora). Posting regularly was true also for this research sample. Out of the 30 SMIs, 8 post once a week, 5 post multiple times a week, 9 post daily and the rest post either twice a month or just once a month. Only 2 of them did not do so on a regular basis.

These regular postings are important to keep in touch with followers and to keep followers interested. The fight for attention on the internet is endless and everyone wants a slice of the pie and attract more followers to their social media outlet. Postings must be creative, repetitive and entertaining. Most posting are meticulously planned in advanced, only a few are about sudden current events. The consistency is key that followers can rely on the SMI to get additional information regularly. It is crucial to keep followers entertained and interested with posts. A SMI needs to be continuously on top of his postings and know about the happenings in the industry.

### 5.3.4 Virtual Experience:

Another imperative aspect of an SMI is their virtual presence. Their social media channel is their business card and reflects on how they are received or how well they branded themselves. SMIs are online and their only way to portray themselves is through their websites or social media channels therefore it is vital to have a virtual experience that is pleasant. This measure was determined based on how easy they were to find on the web, how easily their channels were to navigate, did they have an holistic appearance? 15 out of 30 had an excellent and professional appearance, 8 out of 30 had a medium well appearance and were lacking in visuals often. The professional sites had interactive videos that encouraged the audience to stay on the website. 7 out

of 30 had okay websites. These websites were simple and were more difficult to navigate. When examining any further SMIs (see appendix C), the virtual experience declined rapidly.

## 5.4    Audience Targeting Measurements:

Most people think of SMIs just as young people who like to be on the internet who share their ideas and thoughts. However, these SMIs have become prime marketing and advertisement agents. Every follower that one can influence on making purchasing choices is an extra win. These results will show that the influence these SMIs have is carefully crafted and targeted towards one specific audience.

Despite that all the measurements are important and are part of becoming a successful influencer, the key is finding your niche. Articles and websites support this statement. Ad week urges to define your channel: "Who are you and what are you all about?" (Gahan) and Forbes writes "find your niche" (Quora). Collabary is also social media agency helping brands and SMIs to get matched with the right brand and they also say that the key is in finding the niche audience "Establishing your niche on social media may make all the difference to how brands view you as an influencer…brands (well, the smart ones at least) are not necessarily looking for a huge following, but the proven ability to inspire an audience to act on your recommendation" (collabary.com).

Consequently, when looking at SMIs it was interesting to see how well did they define for themselves their niche and were they able to pull this through all their media channels and communication? In this section I will look at their purpose, how they recommended and what destinations of the world they promoted on their sites.

### 5.4.1   Purpose

It was apparent that there were 3 distinctive styles on how SMIs carried themselves on social media channels. Some were about telling stories, other gave true advice and yet others listed facts. The measurement of purpose of the blog was created and it became apparent there were three several types of SMI purposes for travel: experience, factual and advice. The results show that 11 out of 30 SMIs were experience driven, 16 gave more advice and 3 were more factual influencers.

This broad differentiation of purpose is necessary because it defines the main cause of the entire influencer. It helps companies to define much easier what kind of SMI they would like to be associated with. For example, a destination marketing agency such as Österreich Werbung would be more interested to work with an SMI that offers more experience as the destination sells experience, while a hotel on the other would be more interested to work with an influencer that gives specific advice about what kind of hotel to use. An experience blogger might mention a beautiful hotel by the sea side yet and advice blogger, would actual give the facts as to where and how to find the hotel and how to book it. Same idea for products such as hiking boots where advice is necessary to choose the correct ones. A factual influencers on the other hand, who truly informs about customs, history and news, who are more like journalist reporting on certain happenings, they would be best for selling museums for example or selling cultural goods.

### 5.4.2    Recommendations:

Another measurement was giving recommendations. 22 of 30 made actual recommendations about accommodation, local attractions, restaurants and sight to see. Interesting enough even those bloggers who were mainly about showing an experience or serving to inspire still all gave recommendations either about what hotel they liked or attraction they would recommend. There were only 8 that did not make any kind of recommendation but rather entertained online through YouTube videos or yielded more towards inspiring other through beautifully crafted pictures. There were some who gave recommendations on destination but they did not mention any specific bike rental or hotel to stay at, those were not considered as giving recommendations.

It is useful for a company to know the differences between if a SMI makes recommendations or not. For products that need more than inspiring pictures or a fun video talking about the destination in an entertaining way should refrain from using inspiring SMIs but focus on factual or advice giving SMIs. An article in Collabary.com says it is important as an influencer to establish your niche that includes also your purpose because "That's why brands…go to amazing lengths to find the influencer that represents the ideal contextual fit for their brand" (collabary.com). Brands need to be sure that the content that is being delivered is also a good match to their own brand. That is why brands must do such extensive research. Travel influencers can be grouped easily by purpose which will give brands an easier time find their right influencer for their travel product.

### 5.4.3    Method of Money Making:

The way SMI chooses to make money might appear less of a measurement of how they target their audience, however it is valid measurement. The influencer as a brand as to give off an image that is wholesome – create an experience for the followers that is comprehensive. The way they choose to make money of their followers is part of that image.

4 out of 30 SMIs choose to make money with placing ads on their social media platforms or websites. Often these ads had nothing to do with their travel site or the information they normally provided. They frankly stated on their website as a disclaimer that they allowed these ads on their website to finance themselves. SMIs who allowed simple ad placing on their sites were the ones who had the least formed brand identity. These ads that had nothing to do with their travel site distracted tremendously and it made them seem less trust worthy.

4 out of 30 had their own travel products or other products that they were marketing on their website. This often helped to establish the SMI brand especially if they had already created their own products. However, most of the travel products offered were other brands that they choose to sell as a distributor or supporter of these products.

Yet, the majority of SMIs made money through sponsorship, giving recommendations or renting out their site for brands or other bloggers to write own to get more exposure. Many influencers are specific about what brand they choose to work with so when they talk about a brand or they do a piece on a hotel or shoe it seems most of the time authentic, however it does come to a clash when these SMIs use brand that clash with their own values or feel of their website. Also, it must be authentic and real as if one was recommending something to a friend. For example, if the budget traveler does a piece on a 5-star hotel it would destroy his entire brand and it would lead to

distrust among the followers. The way SMIs portray ads must seem natural and fitting into their brand concept.

### 5.4.4   Niches:

As mentioned before finding the niche and target audience is key. All the successful bloggers and social media influencers have done exactly this- specified themselves on one specific topic. When looking at the 30 different SMIs one could see what type of audience they were targeting and there were many different segments. Even in their elevator pitches, it would state for what type of traveler this blog or Instagram was for. Below is the listing of the different niches as well as in parenthesis how many out of the 30 SMIs associated themselves with what niche:

- Budget (3)
- Experienced Traveler (3)
- Families (3)
- Luxury (2)
- Vacation Travelers (5)
- Solo Female (3)
- Adventure (3)
- Photo enthusiast (2)
- Recent graduates/ students (2)
- business traveler (1)
- couple (1)
- food (1)
- men/ gay (1)

Each blog had a theme and advice specifically catering to this audience. Within these 30 SMIs there is an amplitude of segments targeting distinct types of audiences. Vacation Travelers were the most often used theme. In business travel there was only one but it also happens to be the most successful blog with biggest range of followers and outreach. Families, Budget, Solo Female also were successful influencers with a good reach. I believe that business travel or bleisure is the new term (business with leisure) is a trend that is still left out now. Another type of vacation is that still has no blog is the idea of staycation. Traveling and having the feel of discovering something new in your own backyard. Even though many segments have already been discussed there are still many new segments and audiences to target such as disabled, teenagers or only train or ship travel sites.

Besides having a niche audience, the SMIs also targeted their specific topics of discussion to match their targeted audience. This was also seen on how they choose what destinations to feature on their social media platforms.

### 5.4.5   Countries or featured destination:

11 out of the 30 SMIs featured the entire world and gave examples from destinations from all over the world without any emphasis on any topic, 13 out of the 30 SMIs focused specifically on Europe and Asia, while only 3 focused on the Americas or USA, and another 3 had completely different destinations such as Iceland for example.

The reason there is this distinction even in the countries they choose to talk about is because they need to appeal to this niche audience. Many first-time travelers, especially those from the US, are interested in the Europe and in Asia. Europe is an easy destination to travel because: easy visa requirements for Anglo speaking countries, travel by train possible and Europe has many well-known sights. Most everyone sees Europe has a romantic destination and many travelers sees it as a must: Eiffel Tower, Big Ben or strolled through the colosseum. These are classics and were often featured by SMIs. Asia was another destination often covered by SMIs because there is a big hype for Asia at the moment and for budget travelers it is great destinations. Other destinations such as Iceland was from an SMI that mainly does photography and he had used destinations mainly with vast landscapes such as Iceland, Greenland and Antarctica. This section demonstrates that not all SMIs travel the entire world, rather destinations are carefully selected for their audience.

### 5.4.6   Unique Selling Point

Each blog had a unique selling point and a clear brand identity. In this section it will determined how these different SMIs were able to create their own brand identity and what made them unique as a brand. A brand identity is as defined by the business dictionary: "The visible elements of a brand (such as colors, design, logotype, name, symbol) that together identify and distinguish the brand in the consumers' mind" (businessdictionary.com). Here I will show several SMIs and how they have created and maintain their brand identity:

The blonde Abroad is the most successful female SMI in the travel industry. Her name the blonde abroad is clear and catchy. There is no wondering what the Blonde Abroad is about: her identity that she is female and traveling. She chose to work with color pink for her logo and with that make her look even more feminine. As seen from her logo and general set up of the site her focus is on females. Also in her "shop" she features things such as make up for the road. Her slogan reads "an award-winning female+ lifestyle blog featuring travel tips, fashion and photography from around the
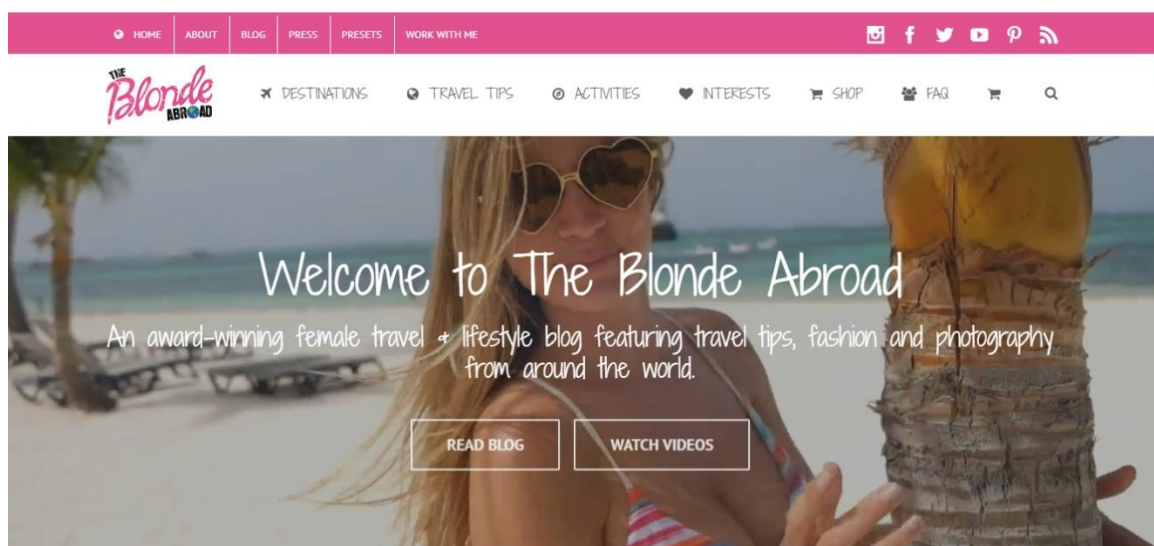


*Figure 11 The Blonde Abroad Homepage Screenshot (Rich)*

world" (Rich). First this slogan defines her as a successful blogger but is also highlights her focus on lifestyle. Unlike many travel bloggers her emphasis is not to inform or educate but rather to inspire.

One of the reason she is so successful, as already seen from her start page, is because she does a great deal of storytelling. All her stories are consistent as she continues to post blogs. The stories are about her having fun in different location however, the picture format and how she reaches her followers stays the same. Her story of being blonde and discovering the world's most beautiful places comes across well. Most of her pictures feature herself.

She mainly uses after her own site, and Instagram to gain followers. She does not give too many specific recommendations in her blog because it is so picture driven rather she uses her online shop to sell travel products for commission. She has an established brand identity as a young female traveler whose unique selling point is that she combines fashion and lifestyle.
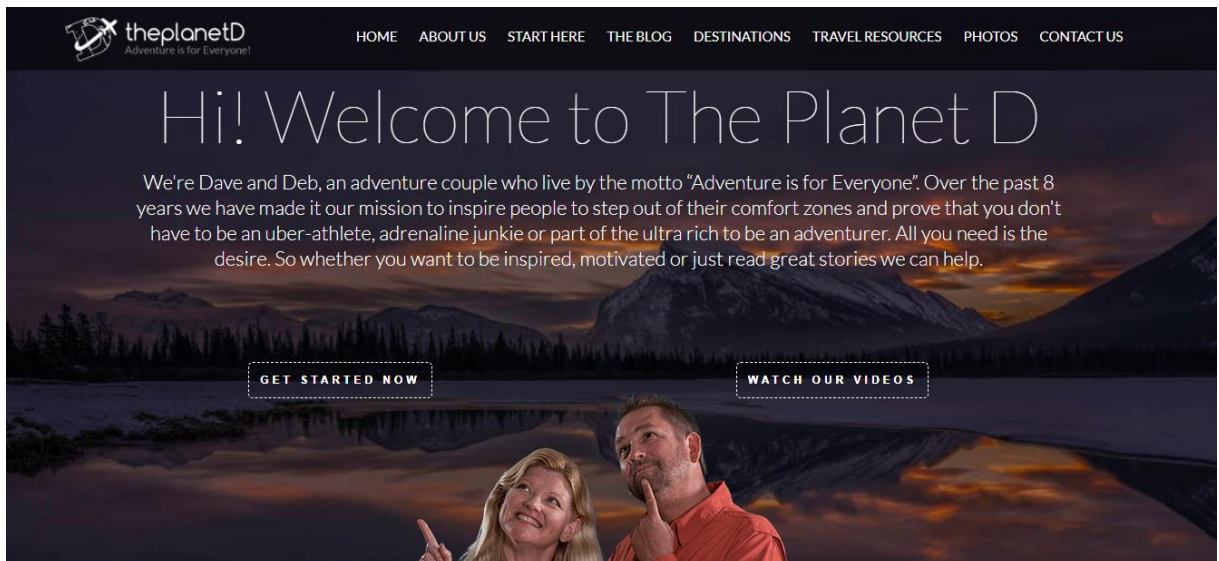


*Figure 12 The Planet D Homepage Screenshot (Dave und Deb)*

Planet D is a website done by the couple Dave and Deb who are one of the few SMIs in the travel industry from the baby boomers generation. Their logo Planet D is simple and comes from their first names. Their slogan "adventure is for everyone!" is also clear and to the point. The fact that they created a little abstract about their blog and about themselves is good to establish right away the identity of their brand and their purpose. However, it is a bit long and the name the planet D does not tell one what this blog is about. Both come from a film background and one can see their strong use of videos. Videos are great to illustrate adventure. They did not use the social media platform YouTube which is unfortunate because for their purpose and their brand it would be useful. Their website is all about advice on the locations and insider tips. They do not do reviews of hotels or transport but they specifically talk about activities that one can do in a city. They portray themselves as experts on adventurous travel and they focus their blogs and pictures mainly on this adventure feel.
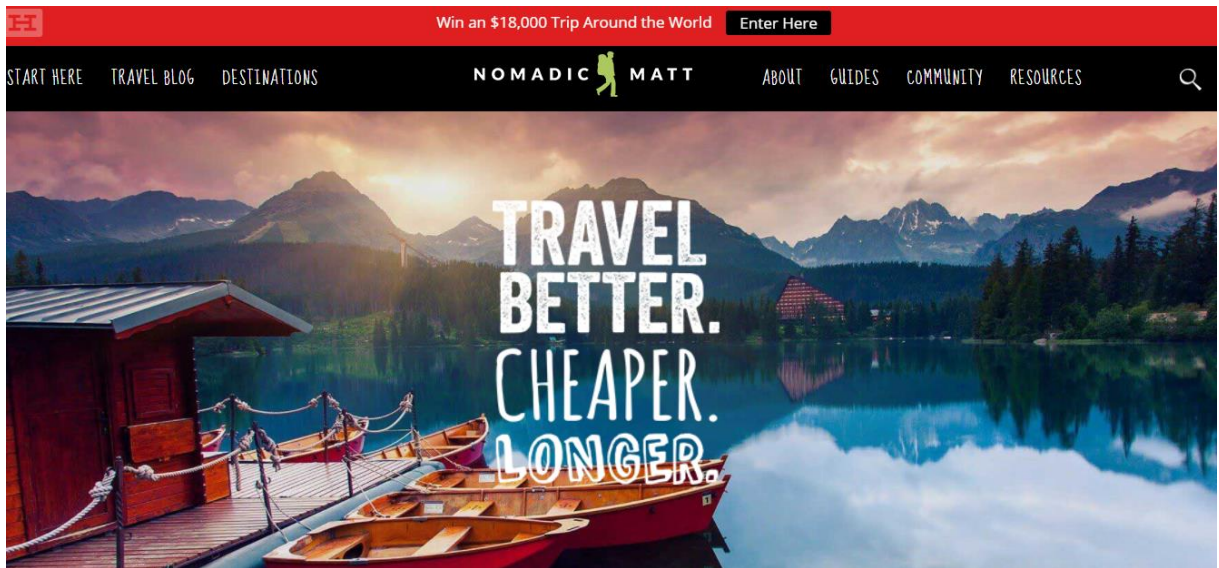
*Figure 13 Nomadic Matt Homepage Screenshot (Matt)*

Nomadic Matt has a clear logo and like the blond abroad the names gives tells right away what this SMI is all about: travelling like a nomad. His slogan "travel better. Cheaper. Longer" is clear and consistent throughout this website. The typography he selected matches his style of do budget travel, it looks like handwriting. All his blogs include a section about costs, transportation and specific booking details. He does not talk about any specific accommodation however, this helps establish his brand identity about being on budget and recommending Airbnb and couch surfing mainly. His targeted audience is predominately male and group travel. He also did a couple articles for solo female travelers and families, however that is not specialty and it does not come across as genuine. He has established his brand identity on budget travel, giving clear and specific advice and tips on how to travel low cost.
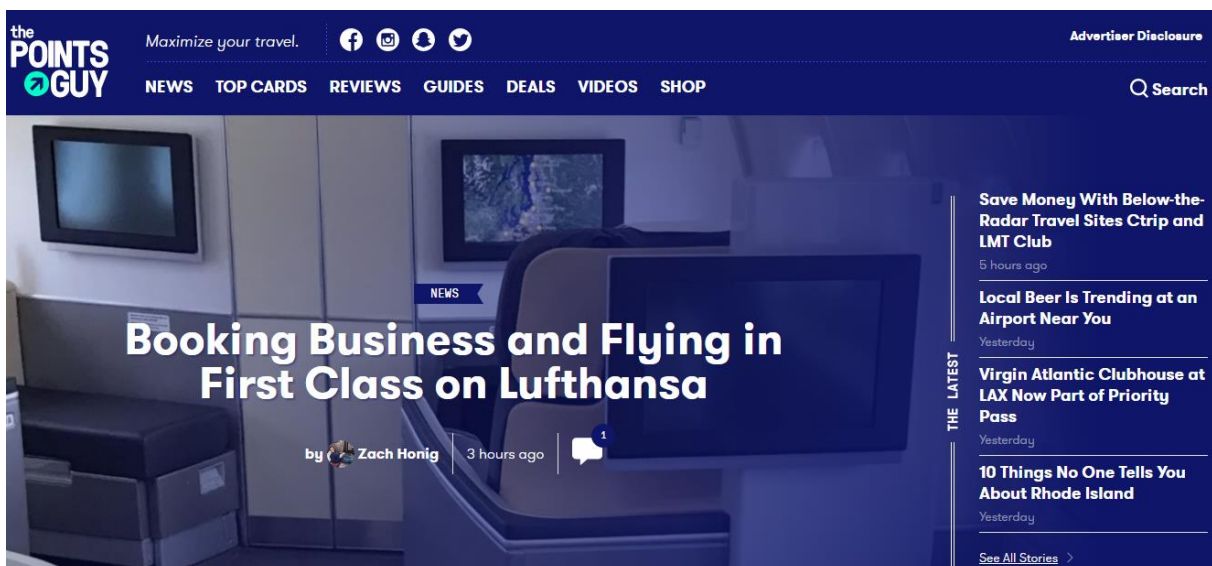


*Figure 14 The Points Guy Homepage Screenshot (Kelly)*

The points guy has a clear logo and his slogan "maximize your travel ", is easy to understand as is his logo. The points guys reviews credit cards, hotels, and flights and has a links to many great deals. His target audience is anyone travelling on business or leisure that want to use these rewards

systems but have a tough time understanding all the benefits. His site uses a simple layout and many articles to click on. The points guy has established himself with his brand as expert on travel rewards systems of all sorts and reviews many travel products such as credit cards. He was named by Forbes to be the most successful SMI in the travel industry. He is making his money through sponsorship of credit cards.  His identity lies in being factual. Just like the next blogger also a factual SMI:
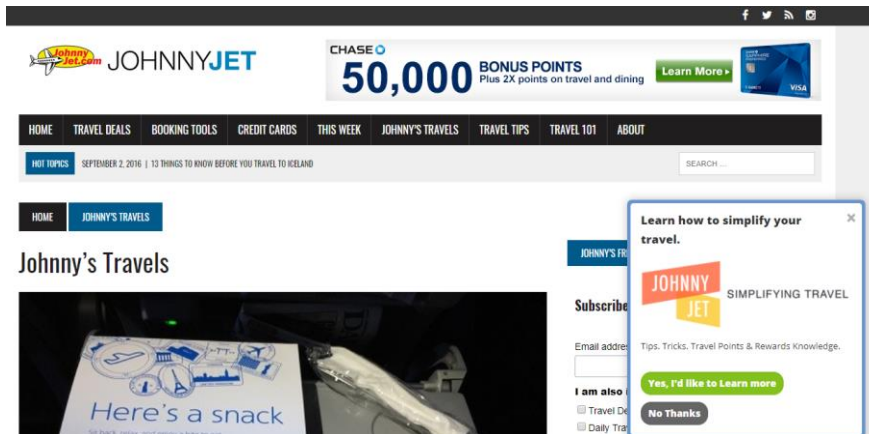


*Figure 15 Johnny Jet Homepage Screenshot (Johnny)*

Johnny Jet his is logo and his slogan "simplify your travel". He advertises with giving tricks, tips, travel policies and rewards knowledge. His website differs greatly from other bloggers as on his website there are only articles. There are no videos or many pictures. In the description about the website he explains "here travel experts share their tips and expertise to make you the expert". He originally started many years ago with a newsletter and he keeps this similar style. Johnny is also from the baby boomer generation so his target audience also includes a different generation. He wants his website to be a portal of travel information rather than a place to inspire. It is combination of all travel news about credit cards, airlines, booking tools, travel news and daily travel tips. His layout is simple and a subscription to the newsletter is easy to find. His blog would also be interesting for people working in the tourism industry as he operates a bit as a newspaper posting numerous articles a day.
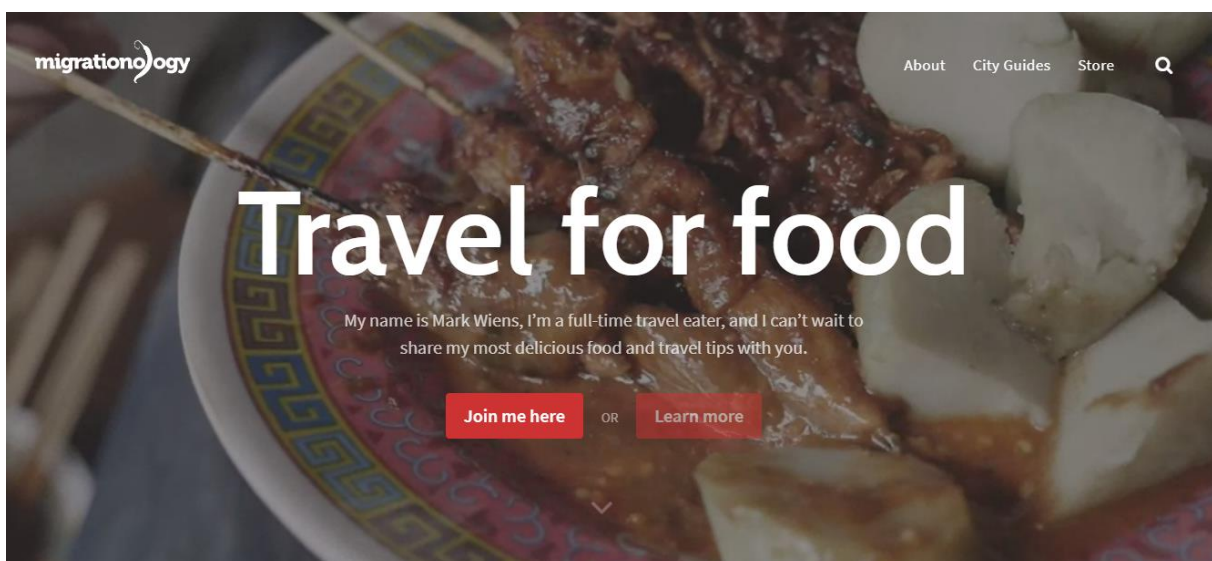


*Figure 16 Migrationology Homepage Screenshot (Wiens)*

Migrationology has a clear logo and an even better slogan "Travel for good. My name is Mark Wiens. I am a full-time travel eater, and I can't wait to share my most delicious food and travel tips with you". Even though his name does not invoke the thought of food right away his slogan helps the reader to get on track. He is all about the food and gives great recommendation on his site on what to eat, how to eat and where to eat. The site is well set up and you can also follow his excursions on video. He does an excellent job with imagery and videos to make everything look appealing. For example, a SMI like him best medium would be YouTube because food needs to be filmed or photographed – it gets the experience much better across than just writing about it. He is travelling with Star alliance around the world to try various foods. This is a great partnership as it will also strengthen his image with followers yet it also promotes star alliance. Both of them the same brand image:  getting to or trying exotic destination.
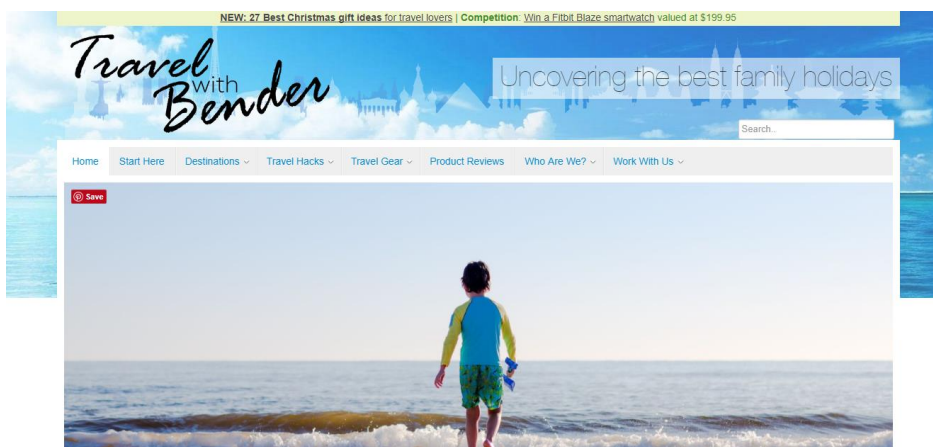


*Figure 17 Travel with Bender Homepage Screenshot (Josh)*

Travel with Bender does not have a logo but their slogan "uncovering the best family holidays" quickly makes it clear what this site is all about. The website is well structured and they have pictures of the family. This also helps understand their focus. They also focus more on travel advice, they have product reviews, give you example of great travel gear from luggage to camera and this family has traveled a lot- 65 countries across the place. The father was a photographer and so you can see a big focus on images and their Instagram. He is also big on the advice and lists several posts under each destination. His blog is easy to navigate and so are his posts.
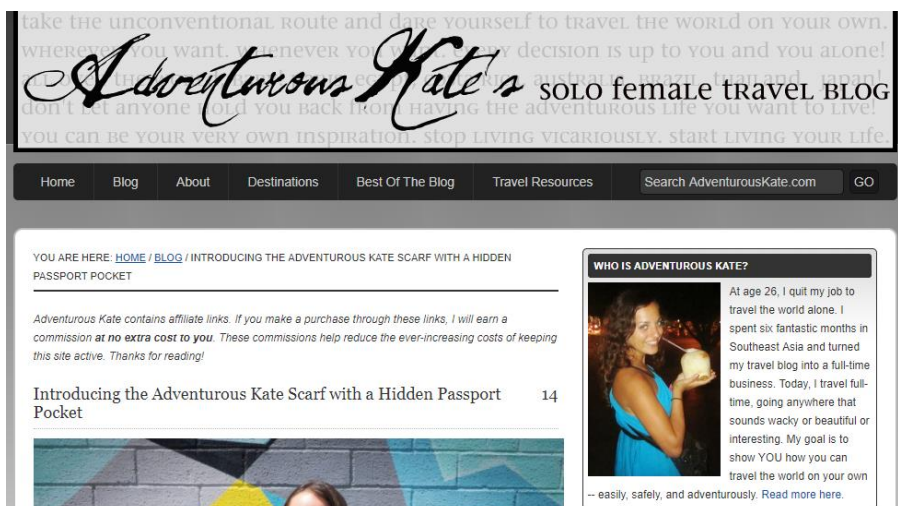


*Figure 18 Adventurous Kate Homepage Screenshot (Kate)*

Adventurous Kate´s is her logo and "solo female travel blog" the slogan. Kate has not put a major emphasis on creating great content with pictures and videos but rather she tried to stay grounded. She focuses on single female travels with an education. Her target audience is exactly the opposite of the blonde abroad. Girls who truly want to discover a destination and she leaves the lifestyle part of it completely out. She herself has done a great deal of international travel and tries to look a little more into the actual culture in her blogs. Her blog centers on finding your place in the world and soul searching. Her brand identity lies in being authentic and asking the big questions about life. Where will I go? How to find your place in the world? – she does so by showing the reality of travel. Her target audience are young women graduating from college looking for their place in the world and that want to do discover other countries. Her brand identity lies in solo female travel. She used mostly her own blog and Facebook to draw in her followers, a medium that matches her brand identity well.



*Figure 19 Goats on the Road (goatsontheroad.com)*

Goats on the road is their name and logo and their slogan "turn travel into a lifestyle". They ethnize the reader right away with breath taking pictures of themselves discovering the underwater world. This couple are experienced traveler and they made their hobby into their business promoting how to travel and make money along the way. They lean heavily on their book. They do not write all their blogs themselves but rely on many guest bloggers whom they charge money to post on their website. Their brand identity is not about showing how to travel as a couple but rather how to become a professional blogger. They promote themselves as experts on the field as they show through their videos and blog how it is done. They want to showcase how good they manage these social media channels and therefore they are active on all of them but the most followers they have on Twitter. Their articles all centralize around becoming bloggers yourself and how to manage a SMI
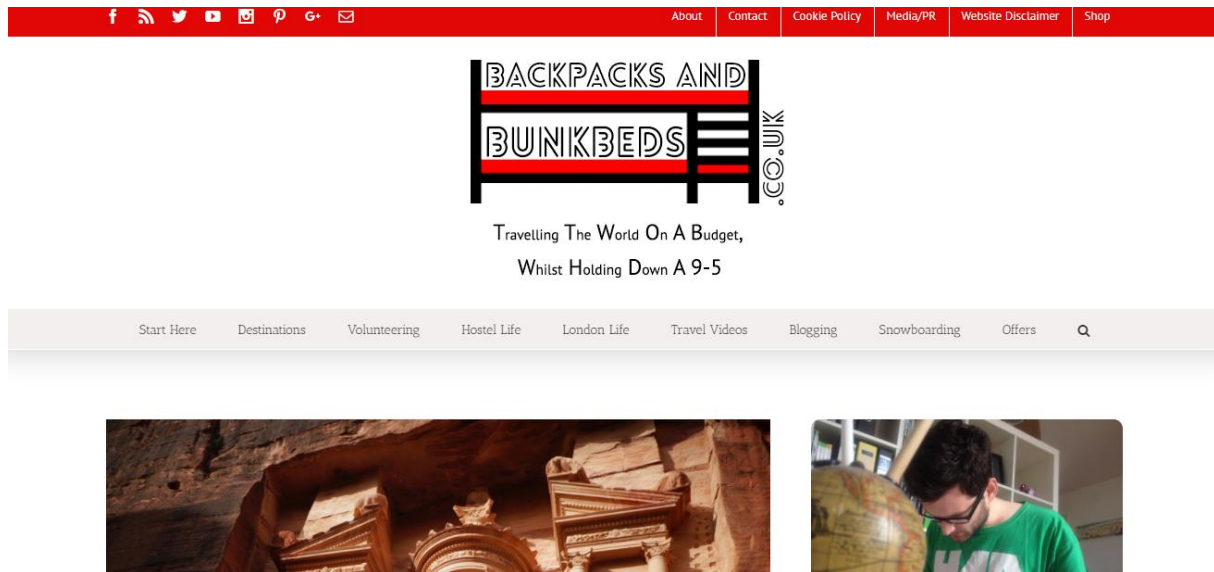
business on the road.



Figure 20 Backpacks and Bunkbeds Homepage Screenshot (Neil)

This SMI is much less well known, and one can already see from the look and virtual presence of this SMI that his brand identity is not as defined. His logo and name is Backpacks and Bunkbeds and the slogan "traveling the world on a budget whilst holding down a 9-5". He talks about many things on his blog and is missing a real focus and consistency. Over the last years his entries become less and less and he mainly talks about blogging itself what it does and how it is positive. He does not give specific recommendations for accommodation and things to do but it is inconsistent across the board. It shows how important it is to select a brand identity that visual language -logo, color palette, typography and what graphics to play a key role in how they appeal to their followers.



Figure 21 Inside the Travellab (Abi)

This is another good example of lacking focus. "A LUXURY TRAVEL BLOG FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE". The best places to visit & the best stories about them" is the slogan and "inside the travel lab" is her logo and name she is lacking the visual language in her appearance. She has does not have any other social media presence and unlike all other travel blogs that directly link and encourage

followers to look at their other social media platforms – this SMI does not of the above. It is difficult to follow or understand what this blog is all about as it has not focus.

The next SMIs to look at are of a completely different category because they do not give any recommendation any place or travel but they are there to entertain. They show travel in a completely different light and are SMIs who have taken the tool of storytelling to the next level.
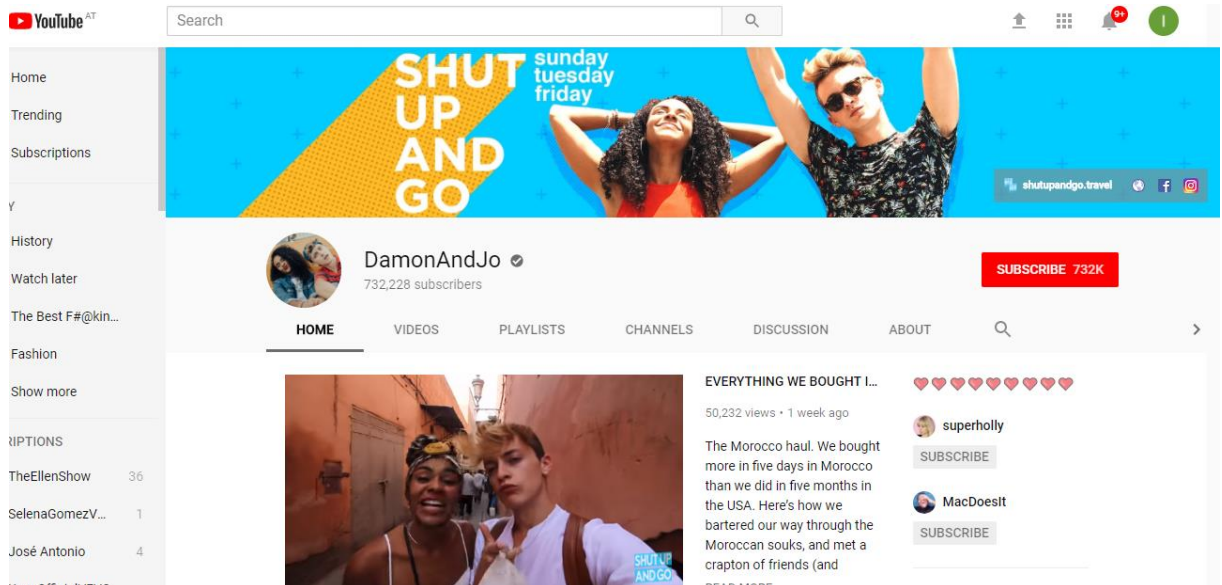


*Figure 22 YouTube Channel of Damon&Jo (Damon and Jo)*

DamonandJo is their name and their slogan "shut and go" is catchy and they are taking the SMI for the travel industry by storm. Most appealing is how sincere their videos are about travelling and all the things that could happen to you while on a trip. They also have a website that has integrated booking system of flights so you can start your own venture after browsing through their blog or website. They do more storytelling of locals and impressions of certain happening in different cities. With tags such as "loving chicago in the cold", "I love new york, I think?" They make 3-4 travel, language, and lifestyle videos per week: Tuesday: Travel Friday: French Saturday: Vlog Sunday: Portuguese. They are consistent and this a big reason for their success among the many SMIs. They are consistent in the appearance, format and style of vlogging. YouTube is their biggest tool and well chosen for their story telling style.

This SMI is only on Instagram and became so well-known through this hashtag "followme". He mainly works stunning imagery therefore Instagram was their most powerful tool. They are also
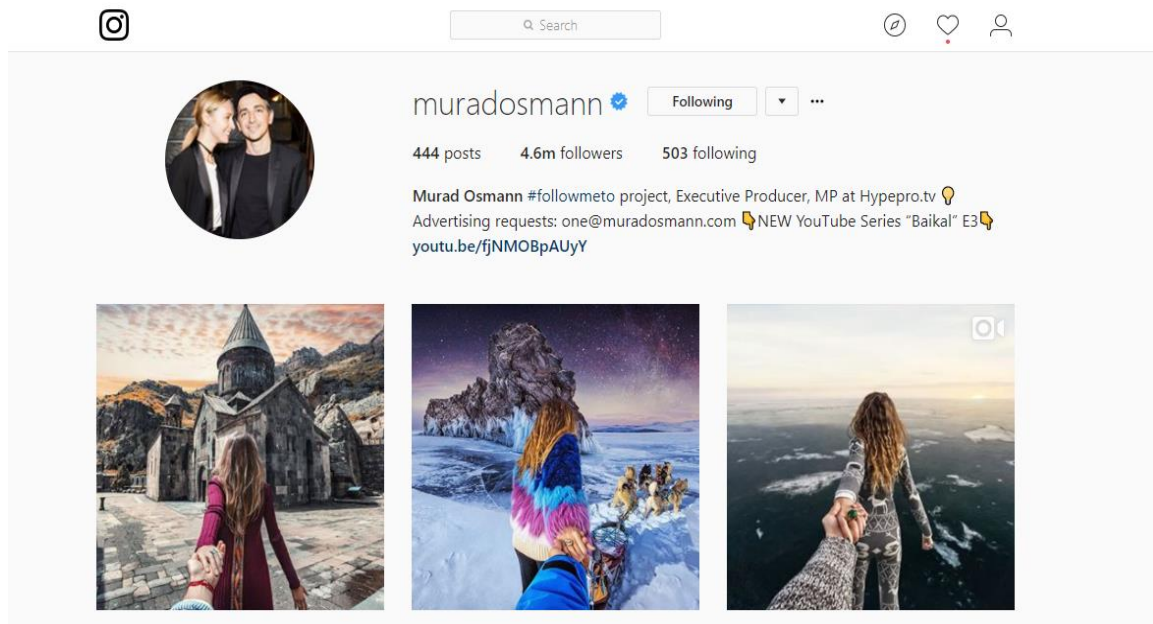


Figure 23 Instagram of "followme" (Osmann)

great storytellers as their pictures always feature the same consistent pose in different countries. As seen from the literature review story telling is one of the most powerful marketing tools and it worked well for this SMI as well. He does not give any recommendation but he is there to inspire about different destinations with his gorgeous imagery. His newest posted endeavor posted 25th of December 2018 was that he would start making short films on YouTube. He will be moving from static imagery to videos. This trend toward videos is big for all SMIs.

These numerous examples of SMIs establishing a brand identity shows that it is crucial step in becoming a SMI. These SMIs have specifically choose a niche to become experts on. They have chosen their target audience on gender and age. Millennial is a generation that sees travel as avital competent of personal development and life experiences something that all the SMIs focused on when setting up their brand. These SMIs showed mainly experiences and a feeling something that is so important to the millennial generation. They build their brand through visual language, creating logos and slogans to be easier remembered and had elevator pitches to explain what each SMI was about. Most of them were consistent about their posting but also kept up the storyline they were telling their followers. Appealing in videos and speaking directly to the followers gives this feeling as if your best friend is giving you travel advice.

Most of these SMIs have developed such strong brand identities for themselves that they were able to create new products under their name.

### 5.4.7   Off Branding

Many of the SMIs created strong brand identities and therefore also created their own products to match their brand. They expanded their brand identity to reach out in different areas of the business. In fact, 21 out of 30 SMIs according to my research created their own products. Products included their own t-shirt line, pillows, coaching or social media agency or they wrote books.
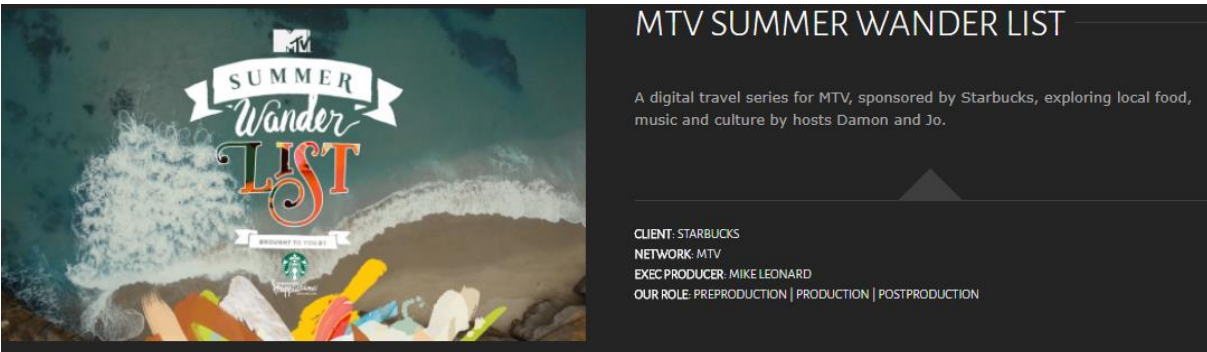


*Figure 24 Offbranding Nomadic Matt (Matt)*

Nomadic Matt for example wrote his own book about travelling around the world on a budget. He already established himself through his SMI career as an expert in the field and expanded his brand to include also this book to further display him as an absolute expert.



*Figure 25 Offbranding of Damon&Jo (Damon and Jo)*

Damon and Jo got their own MTV series called Summer Wanderlist. Exploring the USA on fun things to do during the summer. Since their YouTube channel was so successful it allowed them to bring their followers along to a different partner – MTV.

Another fitting example of off branding is Migrationology. He has created his own t-shirts and cookbooks. This shows how once the brand identity is visibly established how it can be spread and stretched to also include other items. Most important however, is that the additional items or products align with the overall brand identity of the SMI.
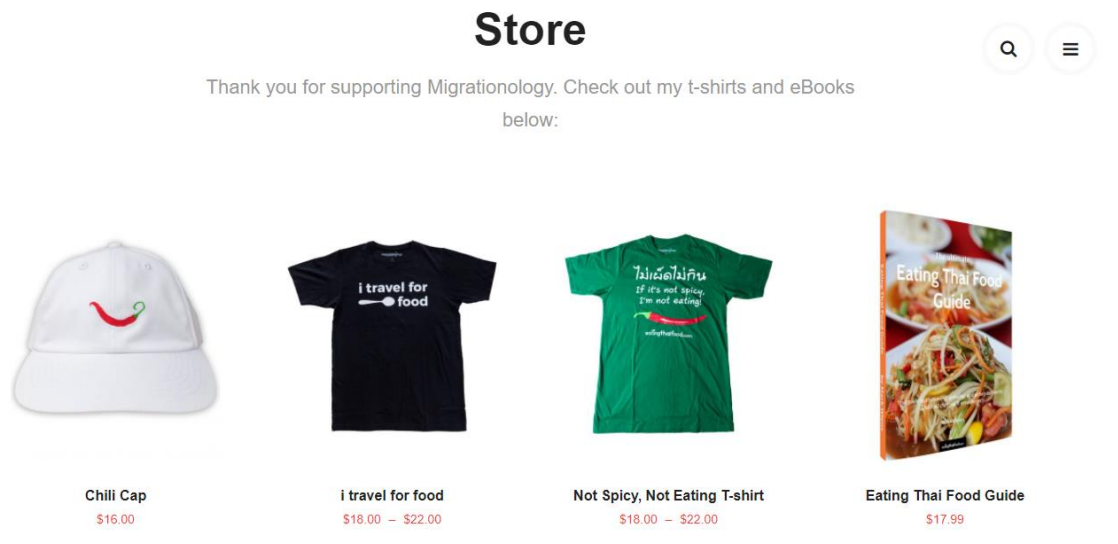


Figure 26 Offbranding of Migrationology (Wiens)

The majority of SMIs use their brand identity they created and strengthen it by providing additional services or products underneath this brand.

## 5.5    End Results

Based on this discussion and the data provided about SMIs in the travel industry various conclusion can be made already.

- SMIs have become an innovative marketing tool for brands. Brands want to partner with SMIs to "rent" their followers for their advertisement or message. These influencers have a group of people that they can influence and brand wants to use this innovative marketing tool.

- SMI must be categorized so they can be better matched with the right brands. It is crucial that influencers can matched with a brand that mirrors their values and interest. If an SMI talks about a brand it should not seem like advertisement but like an authentic recommendation given from a trusted friend. If SMIs are categorized it is easier for brands to find their match

- SMIs must meet specific criteria to be successful as an influencer. First, they must have a specific target audience. Second, they need to develop a brand identity that is consistent. It is important that the influencer builds his persona like a character so it is easy to identify with him. If he breaks his brand identity followers may lose trust. Third, most SMIs in travel industry are active story tellers. The travel industry lends itself perfectly to storytelling as travel is a product of experiences. Fourth, nearly all the top 30 appealed specifically to the millennials. Millennials are the main users of social media platforms and therefore the logical target audience. Lastly as SMI they had to be consistent in everything they did. This links to brand identity but also consistency in their number of postings, in how they made money or what destinations they highlighted. It all had to be in sync with their portrayed persona

- SMIs in travel appeal now only to millennials. Generation Z is still too young to show interest in travel. Travel is something that most people get to spend money on for the first time during or after college. Before that travel is often still planned by parents and it is a product that most kids do not have a say or interest in

- For the travel industry the SMI were gender neutral. This industry is equally distributed between males and females and interested in is this subject is also equal between females and males.

- An SMI cannot be measured on his success on his number of followers alone. An SMI is successful based on how many influencers he can reach and how loyal is followers are to him.

The above conclusion is helpful as they help explain how SMIs work in the travel industry. However how does an influencer look in another industry? In the next section I will look at SMIs from various industries.

### 5.5.1    Other industries:

SMIs have not only become an important part of the travel industry but there are also considerable number of influencers in pets, parenting, fashion, entertainment, gaming, home, beauty, food, tech & business, fitness, travel, and kids. Forbes magazine has a done especial on the most influential influencers of each industry and determined how many followers combined each of the above industry has looking at the top ten influencers of each industry (O´connor). Entertainment and Gaming had over 200,000,000 follower each beating the other industries in followers by far. The reason that these numbers are so high is because people that are interested in gaming are already online a lot anyhow the same goes for entertainment. Most people go online today to be entertained- to watch comedians or others do silly stunts. It has become a trend and demographics for those followers are different from those in the travel industry.

Parenting, home and travelling had to lowest number of followers. Ranging from 7,000,000 to 17,000,000 in travel. These industries are niche industries and do not apply to everyone. Additionally, for home, parenting and travel there are enough other resources out there that are not online so the fight for the consumers attention is still very divided. However, this also shows that there is still potential for travel to grow in how influential it is as travel agencies are closing and travel is becoming more digitally focused. (see appendix D)

It would be interesting to see in future research how these industries differ when it comes to their SMIs. I believe that many of the measurements in this research would also apply for the other industries, however it would be motivating to know how the industries vary. What must a successful SMI do in parenting? How important is virtual presence among these different industries? Do they use the same platforms? Do they also mainly appeal to millennials?

# 6    Conclusion

In the conclusion, I will revisit the original research question of the thesis to see where the evidence has lead us. My research question was:

1)    How can SMIs be categorized?

2)    How can SMIs be used to predict future travel trends?

The question if SMIs can be categorized, was answered through the evidence early on and in the literature review. Further researched showed that SMIs must be categorized to work with them successfully. Through the research various measures were proposed. However, in conclusion the following measures are the most important for judging how successful a SMI is in the travel industry:

A.    Demographics (age, gender or how long they have been on social media)

B.    Audience (niche/segment they focus on, purpose of the SMI, USP- also here other measurements can be added such as method of money making, type of recommendation etc.)

C.    Social Media Measurements (how many posts, frequency, what social media channel do they use, how many followers etc.)

The above measurements are important and vital to get a good understanding of the SMIs. Being able to categorize them helps companies choose the right SMI for them. The most important measurement seems to be how they segment themselves and target a niche audience. Based on this niche that an influencer chooses, they build their entire brand identity. They need to have great consistency to keep this brand identity alive. The entire SMI ecosystem is like a row of dominos, everything relates to another and only if all the dominos stand in position can the SMI be successful. An SMI needs a target a niche, this is in turn gives the SMI his brand identity which he can only keep alive if the story that he tells is consistent and authentic and reflects his specialized target.

In conclusion, yes SMIs in the travel industry can be categorized. The measurements of *social media*, *demographics* and *audience targeting* are the best measurements to get quickly a good understand of this SMI.

The second question asked how can SMIs be used to predict future travel trends? To answer this question, I looked at the current trends in the world to see how SMIs have influenced where the travel industry is today.

Feeling and experiencing has found new importance with the millennial generation. They expect highly personal experience only catered to them. This generation today is between 18 and 38 grew partially up with technology and got used to using this tool from an early age and grew up during a time that was very prosperous for the western world. They want things now and fast; they are not about to give up any comforts. They have found new priorities and material possessions such a car or a house are less important, and travel and experience have become a priority for this generation.

Social media influencers are so successful with these millennials because they offer an experience through storytelling and visual language and are able incorporate this new-found technology. They are the product of a revolution that come together due to various phenomena that

I described. SMIs have a whole unique way of communicating with their audience. On one hand they have technology so their communication is mainly digital and unlike advertisers before- SMIs must inspire, educate or entertain otherwise no one would have interest in listening to them. Influencers have become more story tellers and many other industries have followed this trend.

So how will all of this change influence the way travel or will it change it at all? The future based on this research evidently shows that audience targeting will become more specialized and the importance of experience will continue to grow.

The travel industry will continue to become more specialized and offer more personalized products. Mass products in the future will not lead to success and one needs to get to know the audiences. In the future, there will be also improved tools to get to know audiences better. Everyone will want to travel in their own style, own length and get to know a destination that is fitting for them personally. For example, a hotel will provide their favorite drink upon arrival, their preferred seating in a plane is pre-registered and itineraries will be synced before they arrive so staff can react more specifically to their needs.

Another trend that will develop further in the future is experience. I believe that from this evidence from SMIs the trend is going more towards experience. SMIs are using mainly visual language to make this experience come to live. The rest of the travel industry will do the same. For example, there will be extreme experience travel such as seeing animals that are endangered through distinction one last time, or other habitats/species that are endangered. Or travel to see for the first time politically unstable countries again after years of closure. Hotels will become more experience driven as well- hotels under the water, hotels in the sky, hotels that are part of the jungle or airplanes with panoramic views. Further, to create this vast experience I believe we will continue to share experiences with others and it will become even more important to do so – to share those experience. I think more collaboration between tourist and the people of destination will occur as we become more interconnected and those nationals again can offer very special and personalized experience of their country to tourists. Further, it will be fundamentally important to create tools to better search for these experiences. Airbnb has already started with offering experiences online and I think – social media will evolve to bring like-minded people together to create these unforgettable experiences.

SMIs will be the leaders in communicating in the travel industry these current trends and testing these experiences. They are the experts on these social media platforms and they will continue to grow and develop their skills and match the trends. SMIs in the travel industry are vital tool and will continue to grow in their importance for us.

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# 8   Appendices

## 8.1   Appendix A- List of websites used for the sampling the top social media influencers

1. http://www.theexpeditioner.com/the-top-50-travel-blogs-3rd-quarter-2016/ (theexpeditioner.com)
2. http://www.startofhappiness.com/travel-blogs/ (startofhappiness.com)
3. http://gamintraveler.com/2015/12/13/top-50-traveling-around-the-world-blogs/ (Arribas)
4. https://izea.com/2017/07/11/top-travel-influencers/ (izea.com)
5. http://fathomaway.com/postcards/quirk/best-travel-blogs-and-websites/ (fathomaway.com)
6. https://www.stagweb.co.uk/blog/2017/04/25-top-travel-blogs-2017/ (stagweb.co.uk)
7. https://www.flipkey.com/blog/2014/12/08/top-10-video-travel-bloggers-to-follow-in-2015/ (flipkey.com)
8. https://travelblogsuccess.com/stunning-travel-videos-blogs/ (Robinson)
9. https://matadornetwork.com/abroad/25-travel-vloggers-follow-2016-2/ (Kosova)
10. https://www.buzzfeed.com/alxptrc/12-best-travel-blogs-for-2017-2p27v?utm_term=.lvnEoNygW#.vrwlY3KeX (Alex)

## 8.2   Appendix B

# Supplementary Data File

**Description:**

The accompanying Excel spreadsheet contains:

- The data of the top 30 SMIs
- The data of other SMIs in the travel
- SMIs in other industries and their follower base

## 8.2   Appendix B