The Influence of Instagram Posts on Millennials' Tourism Destination Attitude

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Submitted to Astrid Dickinger

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AFFIDAVIT

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ABSTRACT

Travel has become one of the biggest Instagram segments, impacting the information search process and influencing travel destinations. This research is aimed to explore the effect of Instagram posts by DMOs and Influencers on millennials' tourism destination attitudes. The research compares how millennials perceive both channels with regards to several indicators, namely informativeness, expertise, trust, enjoyment and benevolence. Therefore, the thesis tested which channel has more influence on millennials' intentions to visit a destination as well as to recommend it to friends and family. The methodological approach is quantitative, the research includes an online survey published through the crowd-sourcing tool Amazon MTurk to collect primary data. This data was further analyzed in SPSS. Linear regression and Mann-Whitney U Test were applied to test the predetermined hypotheses. The results suggest that there is minimum or no difference between two channels in terms of informativeness, expertise, enjoyment and benevolence. DMOs turned out to be slightly more trustworthy than Influencers. Furthermore, the intention to visit a destination is affected by trustworthiness, informativeness and expertise of both channels. Enjoyment and benevolence, however, didn't impact the purchase intention. Lastly, there is no difference in customers' intentions to recommend the destination promoted by either a DMO or an Influencer. Overall, this thesis provided valuable data for the stakeholders and practitioners. It highlights the value of Influencer marketing, as well as the expertise and reputation of the DMOs. The primary suggestion is for DMOs to collaborate with the travel Influencers, in order to increase the reach and awareness.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and previous research

Travel is one of the largest industries worldwide, and many economies heavily depend on tourism performance. The industry presents extremely high employment and an impressive growth rate over the years (Statista, n.d.). Hence, the supply is growing fast providing potential tourists with endless options for different components of the trips. The growth of tourism supply leaves travelers with unlimited choices, which they have to make along their trip planning (Pan, Rasouli, & Timmermans, 2021). Consequently, from a practitioner's perspective, it is important to market destinations in order to be distinguished from the growing competition.

Tourist behavior is one of the key marketing concepts in tourism. It has been studied for decades by various researchers, where some used to base it on the basic consumer behavior models. Generally, major tourist behavior theories have a tendency to focus on decision-making process, motivations, expectations, attitudes, satisfaction and other areas (Pike, & Page, 2014).. This research in particular is focusing on the decision-making process of tourists, and specifically what role DMOs and Influencers play in this process.

The destination marketing has been evolving through years along with the technological advances and keeps changing. Its first developments were registered in the post-war time of the 20th century, with the introduction of first package holiday deals, jets and brochures (Pike, & Page, 2014). Although the first known DMOs appeared back in the 19th century, the real growth in DMOs was in the second half of the 20th century, whereas its current number is unknown (Pike, & Page, 2014).

The introduction of internet changed our life, and definitely transformed marketing operations. With the further development of social media, marketing entered its new era of digital presence. In general, with the Introduction of Internet, people increasingly started to look for information online. This change in tourist behavior triggered the first changes in the destination marketing strategies. The e-Word-of-Mouth quickly gained popularity, and huge amount of online information about practically anything provided consumers with purchasing power.

Naturally, people started searching not only for information from the official sources, but rather user-generated content, particularly consumers' reviews. In the light of new marketing

opportunities, influencer marketing has become an extremely useful technique for brands that started using celebrity endorsements to market their products and services. While influencer marketing has been studied by many researchers, there are still gaps in exploring tourism influencer marketing.

Instagram has become the most used social media platform by Influencers or so-called opinion leaders (Casalo et al., 2020). The platform has existed since 2010, and within a decade, Instagram turned from being a basic social media platform into a critical marketing tool with an access to over 800 million users (Casalo et al., 2020). Interestingly, Travel is one of Instagram's biggest niches, with over 600 million posts using the hashtag #travel , which provided a solid base for the rise of travel influencers (SeaGoingGreen, 2021). However, it has become rather confusing for users to identify whether the information is genuine and honest, or whether it is sponsored advertising content with exaggerated benefits. Consequently, people often choose to consult traditional DMOs due to their editorial type of content and expected credibility, rather than to rely on unknown travel influencers.

Previous studies investigated influencer marketing and DMOs separately, however, in this thesis the two channels will be investigated together through an experiment design. The purpose of such an approach is to compare the influencer of both channels on millennials' tourism destination attitudes.

Worldwide, 2019 is known as a benchmark year for tourism, because it was the most successful year for the tourism industry of all time. However, the spread of the global coronavirus pandemic in the beginning of 2020 paralyzed tourism in most parts of the world and slowed down its further development. Due to continuous lockdowns, entry restrictions and quarantine obligations, many tourism related businesses were forced to shut down. Consequently, it has become more crucial for destinations to stand out from competition. According to Toubes, Vila, and Fraiz Brea (2021) the recovery time period after pandemic will be associated with the increase in use of the online channels, social media and digital marketing. Moreover, due to uncertainty and inability to make long-term plans, the informativeness of advertising messages will be key in converting consumers. Furthermore, research by Femenia-Serra, Gretzel and Alzua-Sorzabal (2022) suggested that influencers were and remain key players during post-COVID period, as they act as mediators between tourism business and social media users.

Overall, the chosen research topic remains highly relevant. Nowadays, Influencers re as powerful as ever, and have their own ways of influencing consumers through their preferred channel – Instagram. This thesis will research the topic in more details.

1.2   Research aims and objectives

The overall goal of this thesis is to compare two channels, namely Travel Influencers and DMOs and to find out which channel is more significant as a marketing tool in the eyes of millennials, specifically which channel causes the desire to visit a tourism destination and changes the attitude towards the destination. Therefore, the research question is:

RQ: How do Instagram posts by DMOs and Influencers affect millennials' attitudes towards tourism destinations?

Relevant hypotheses will be derived after the literature review and will be visualized through conceptual framework accordingly. The results of this thesis can be used by academic researchers in their future works, or thy can be applied by practitioners in the travel industry. Specifically, this thesis will provide recommendations for DMOs on whether they should invest in influencer marketing.

1.3   Structure of thesis

The paper is structured as follows. After the introduction part the literature review chapter follows. It will provide a better understanding of the current state of art of the topic, mentioning the major theories in the field. Next, the conceptual framework will be constructed, in order to provide visual representation of the main concepts. The hypotheses will follow the conceptual framework accordingly, reflecting the pre-set concepts. The third chapter will dive into the methodology part. Firstly, it will explain how methodology should have been ideally done, and then how it was actually done during the research, involving chosen research instruments, sampling, as well as data collection and data analysis processes. Further, the results and discussion chapter will provide visual representation of the results. The last step will include the conclusions for the relevant stakeholders as well as implications for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Information Search

2.1.1 Travel choice overload

Travel is one of the largest industries worldwide, with an impressive growth rate over the years. The worldwide tourism revenue of 2018 increased by almost 4% since 2017, whereas 2019 was the most successful year for the industry (Statista, n.d.). Along the ever-increasing demand, supply is growing as well. In 2017 the tourism and travel industry employed 313 million people worldwide, accommodating 1.3 billion international arrivals (Sofronov, 2018). The enhancement and growth of tourism supply resulted in unlimited number of choices, which travelers have to make along their trip planning. (Pan, Rasouli, & Timmermans, 2021).

Prior research suggested that offering many supply options to the travelers appeals to their individual preferences and increases the chances of a booking. (Oppewal & Koelemeijer, 2005). Moreover, it was believed in economics, that businesses that provide more options attract more customers and as a result have more sales (Benartzi & Thaler, 2001)

Nevertheless, nowadays, too much supply can actually result in the decreased conversion rate instead of growth in revenues (Thai & Yuksel, 2017). Thai and Yuksel determine several negative outcomes of the choice overload, mainly dissatisfaction, regret or absence of final choice. Furthermore, researchers Iyengar and Lepper (2000) identified choice difficulty, limited satisfaction and frustration among other choice overload outcomes.

From 2020, the world faced coronavirus pandemic, that still disrupts our lives today and affects most of the industries including travel and tourism. According to Abbas and others (2021) leisure tourism is among the worlds most damaged sectors. The negative effects of the pandemic on the tourism industry include economic crisis, decreased contribution of the travel industry to the overall GDPs, as well as tremendous job loss (Abbas et al., 2021; Škare et al., 2021). Although Škare and others (2021) compared COVID-19 to previous outbreaks, the authors came to the conclusion that coronavirus pandemic will have much longer negative effects due to its worldwide spread. As part of the recovery plan for the industry, the authors recommended to focus on cooperation between travel organizations rather than engaging in competition due to the choice overload (Škare et al., 2021). Recovery suggestions of Abbas and others (2021) included decreasing practitioners' focus on bednights and occupancy rates, but rather focusing

on comfortable and sustainable travel, high-quality of healthcare measures, service personalization and fair pricing. The authors also suggested that now is the time for innovation and the development of e-tourism.

2.1.2 Decision making process

According to different research studies, on average people make 35000 decisions per day (Hoomans, 2015). Interestingly, with age and responsibilities the number of decisions per day increases as well. According to Schoenfeld (2011), the decision-making process can be broken down into 6 steps: 1. identification of the problem, 2. Generating alternatives, 3. Evaluating alternatives, 4. Choosing an alternative, 5. Implementing the decision, 6. Evaluating decision effectiveness. Such a model assumes, that people make decisions absolutely rationally, taking into account all the advantages and disadvantages of a given choice and looking for an optimal solution to a problem (Lunenburg, 2010). In reality, choices are affected by multiple conditions leading to bounded rationality. Irrational choices may occur due to the changing preferences or incomplete awareness of the choices (Vasconcelos, 2015). In such a way, irrational choices can be seen as inability to maximize utility or benefit of the choice (Vasconcelos, 2015).

2.1.3 Tourism decision-making process

Seddighi and Theocharous (2002) stress the importance of understanding tourist behavior in the travel environment. Moreover, later studies have shown that success of a destination depends on the level of understanding of tourist destination choice process (Pan, Rasouli, & Timmermans, 2021). It is assumed that tourists' decisions include high involvement and are based on the higher-utility preference (Thai & Yuksel, 2017). However, due to the complexity of tourism as a process, in reality tourists often don't choose options that maximize utility. This might be happening due to the cognitive capacity or exhaustion of the previous choices at earlier stages of the trip planning (Thai & Yuksel, 2017).

Additionally, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) suggested that travelers' decisions are shaped around 4 main categories: internal (beliefs, destination image); external (friends, word of mouth); purpose and type of the trip; and travel experiences (including post purchase behavior). Moreover, Karl, Reintinger, and Schmude (2015) mention restrictions as major impacts on the tourism decision-making process, where restrictions can be financial, political, logistical, etc. It is important that practitioners understand tourist behavior and apply the knowledge to the customer experience design (Park & Jang, 2013).

The choice of a destination, is among most significant decisions in the tourism decision-making process. Woodside and Lysonski (1989) created a model that demonstrates the complexity of the tourism destination choice (Figure 1). According to the authors, the final tourism destination choice depends on the series of marketing variables, as well as tourist's own variables and the awareness of the destination. The combination of these multi-dimension factors eventually forms an intention to visit and final destination choice. In such a way, according to the authors, marketing variables can be represented by advertising, channel decisions, pricing and product design. Traveler variables include lifestyle, life cycle, income, age and previous destination experiences. Destination's awareness is split into four categories, namely consideration set, inert and inept sets, as well as unavailable or aware set. In addition, Woodside and Lysonski (1989) connected previously mentioned elements with such variables as affective associations variable, traveler destination preferences and situational variables. Interestingly, 'Intention to visit' is the last stage before the 'travel destination choice'.
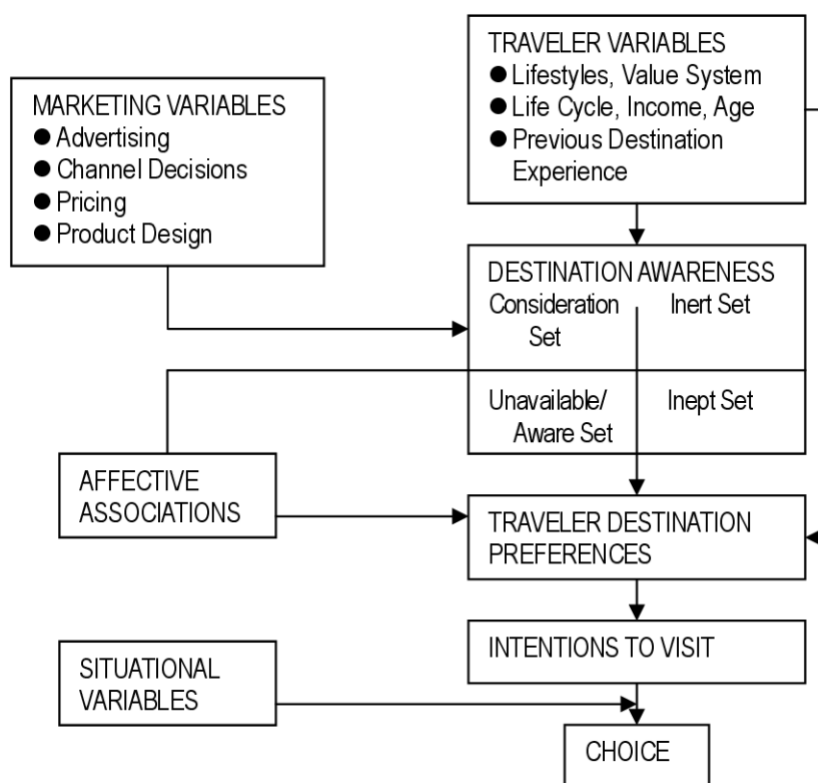
Figure 1 Woodside and Lysonski's General Model of Destination Choice (1989)

According to Agbi (2019), the tourism decision-making process evolves around several questions that future visitors try to answer prior to the trip: why travel, for how long, where to, how much money to spend and other questions. Furthermore, Crompton's Destination Choice Model (1992) is considered to be one of the key models in the tourism decision-making process (Figure

2). The model explains how one destination eventually gets chosen from a vast range of options. The model consists of several stages, that involve evaluation of the awareness versus unawareness sets, initial consideration versus excluded sets, evoked set, inert set and other categories.
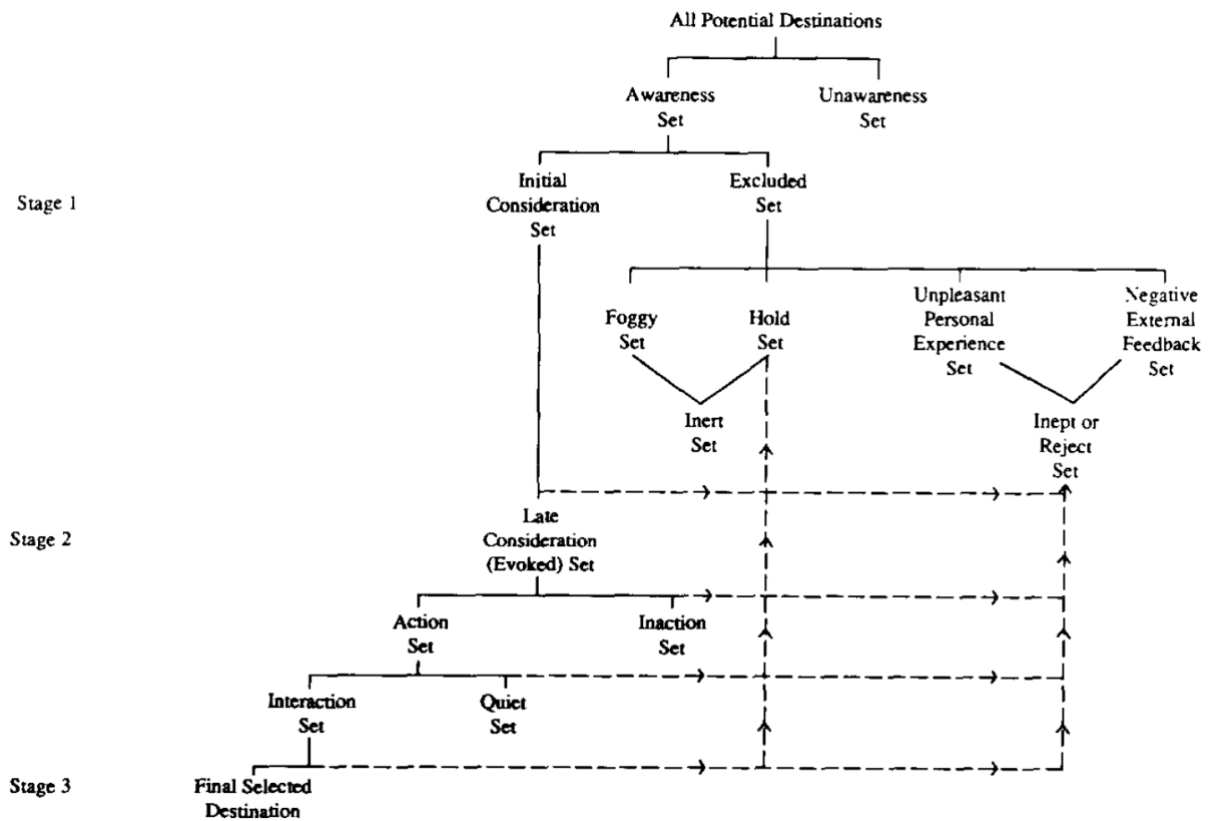
Figure 2 Crompton's Destination Choice Model (1992)

Furthermore, when choosing a destination, tourists are affected by certain push factors from their usual environment as well as pull factors of the potential destination (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Analysis of these factors is essential for destinations to understand its key selling points. In such a way, push factors may involve socio-psychological motivations such as desire for adventure or relaxation (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Pull factors, on the other hand, include tangible factors such as attractions, nature, tourism infrastructure, as well as intangible factors, for instance, marketing image of the destination(Lam & Hsu, 2006).

Tourism decision-making process was heavily affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Many people had to cancel or postpone their trips, some got stuck in lockdowns, others could not get back home from their travel destinations – all of these scenarios created certain traumatic experiences for travelers (Utkarsh & Sigala, 2021). As a result, tourist behavior adapted to the

new 'normal'. Nowadays, when choosing a destination, travelers pay special attention to the local health care systems and coronavirus-related restrictions (Li et al., 2020). Moreover, travel insurance became of more importance. According to Li and others (2020) tourists nowadays spend more time searching for travel information prior to their trips, hence, informative tourism web-sites became more important. Cruises lost their popularity, along with the crowded destinations and trips to big events (Utkarsh & Sigala, 2021). Despite the remarkable work of many DMOs, many destination brand images suffered due to the extensive news coverage during the pandemic. For instance, China's destination image was negatively affected (Li et al., 2020).

Travelers' risk perceptions of coronavirus shape new tendencies in tourism decision-making (Li et al., 2020). Health-related risk is the most frequent type of perceived risk of COVID-19, it concerns travers' safety. Psychological risks associate with potential anxiety after social distancing. Perceived risks of uncertainty with the constant lockdowns and new regulations do not allow travelers to make plans in advance. Tourists tend to avoid uncertainty and prefer short trips. Social risks on the other hand imply social distancing. Moreover, travelers are now more concerned about well-being of their loved ones. Time risks associate with quarantines and compulsory testing. The list goes on with other concerns, such as fear of traveling too far, fear of losing money (Li et al., 2020).

To conclude this section, tourism decision-making constantly changes. New factors become more relevant. Technologies are more and more implemented and tourism and impact decision-making. Due to the perceived risks implementation of robotics, artificial reality and virtual travel have substantially increased (Li et al., 2020).

2.1.4   Information search

Prior to making any travel decisions, visitors experience information search process. Information search in general is a stage of the consumer purchase behavior, which was studied extensively by Bettman (1979). In tourism specifically, information search mostly, but not exclusively, occurs during the pre-trip period. Information search is internal and external. Internal mainly focuses on the existing consumer's knowledge, which comes from their own experience and education. Interestingly, the degree of internal information search varies widely according to the customer's amount of knowledge with a particular product type (Iglesias & Guillén, 2002). External information search, on the other hand, focuses on acquiring information from outside (web, social media, brochures, etc.). Furthermore, external information search can be either

passive or active, where active search requires a certain amount. If a traveler is planning to visit a destination for the first time, then the information search is mainly external, due to the lack of personal experience (Fodness & Murray, 1999). Gursoy and McLeary (2003) proposed a model of tourist information search behavior in order to demonstrate the whole system of the information search. In their model authors combined such parameters as internal and external search, costs of information search, familiarity, expertise, intentional and incidental learning.

Bieger and Laesser (2004) investigated various travel information sources in their work, mainly focusing on three categories: informal, direct and professional sources. The findings concluded that informal sources were used most frequently, including friends and families. The direct sources of information such as hotels or destinations also demonstrated high popularity, and were used by travelers on a higher frequency, if compared to the professional sources (tour operators). However, it is important to mention that direct sources are not fully trusted by the consumers due to their limited fairness and impartiality(Bieger & Laesser, 2004). In earlier studies, prior to the implementation of Internet, Gitelson and Crompton (1983) identified several relevant information sources, including destination literature, families, broadcast and print media. Today this list is extended due to the technological progress and availability of new channels.

2.1.5   Online travel information search

With the introduction of Internet in 1990s, the online information search process has changed, along with the advertisement which entered a new era of online presence (Kumar et al., 2004). Because of the internet, travel choice overload became a phenomenon for travelers' online information research (Jun et al, 2007). Tourists are now facing difficulties in finding the particularly desired information and extracting it from the huge amount of data available online (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). As a result, the online travel information choice becomes a rather irritating experience. The research by Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) suggested, that trip planning has a hierarchal structure, when tourists split their online search into several chapters. Moreover, the authors highlighted one of the benefits of online information search, as an opportunity for travelers to find information in their own context, rather than exclusively promotional context; this is possible due high variability of platforms providing user-generated content (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Interestingly, online information search can be implemented at any stage of the trip, in comparison to other sources (Jun et al, 2007). Furthermore, users search for travel information that could show them what their future trip could be like (Hyun et

al., 2009). Looking for reviews and recommendations is also a typical information search behavior (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016).

Travel information search is often split into the following categories: pre-travel, on-travel and post-travel information search. Each stage has its own preferred information sources. In such a way, pre-trip information search usually includes Internet and friends and family. In general, pre-trip period is associated with planning (Fodness & Murray, 1999). Moreover, pre-trip period is often split into sub-categories with various time frames, such as 1 month before the trip, up to 6 months prior, and more than 6 moths prior to the trip (Zins, 2007). 'On-travel' period suggests consulting local Travel Agents directly at the destination for information about, for instance, activities and entertainment. Post-travel behaviour associates with sharing of experiences, user-generated content and recommendations.

On the other hand, study by Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) stated that tourism information search does not necessarily indicate an actual intention to travel. Motivations for such research may include entertainment, visual purposes, aesthetic needs, creativity, education and other goals.

2.1.6   Social media information search

The introduction of social media completely transformed the marketing industry, as well as overall business models. In general, the social media concept represents online technologies which allow users to interact, share, review, connect, so to say co-exist in the online environment (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016).

With the introduction of social media, businesses received certain advantages, namely a chance for a direct communication with the customers. Social media brought consumers and producers closer, allowed them to connect, increased the brand's reach and consequently brand's awareness (Labrecque et al., 2013). Interestingly, according to Kadekova (2018) an average person spends 2 hours per day on social media, whereas an average teenager spends up to 9 hours per day on social media platforms.

Although, effective use of digital marketing and social media in particular provides organizations with a certain power, consumers got power of their own. Previously unique ability of businesses to generate content became now available to customers with the expansion of social media (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016). In addition, apart from gaining access to unlimited information, users are able to share content and write reviews, which can directly influence public's attitude towards a brand or destination (Labrecque et al., 2013). Online reviews took a form of the digital

word-of-mouth, where public opinions represent one of the most credible information sources (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016). In the meantime, while good reviews positively impact future travelers' destination choices and generate trust, negative reviews threat destination's success. Interestingly, the more similar the respective reviews are, the more credible they are in the eyes of consumers (Sotiriadis, 2017). Stepchenkova and Belyaeva (2020) analyzed travelers' intentions to revisit as well as to recommend previously visited destinations. Positive word-of-mouth usually results in a recommendation of the particular destination, consequently, such recommendations represent an external pull factor of the destination. On social media in particular, recommendation can be indirect, in a form of a 'like' or 'comment'.

A previous study of Narangajavana et al. (2017) showed that user-generated content on social media results in visitors' expectations and trust. That is why tourism related organizations should exercise this opportunity and provide adequate information on social media platforms with a certain content quality level, in order to generate visitors' trust. Moreover, tourists tend to evaluate information from several various sources, before forming an opinion; hence, the development of comprehensive social media is essential for the destination's success (Xiang et al., 2015). Narangajavana et al. (2017) developed a framework (Figure 3) showing how social media user-generated content produces tourist expectations. On the other hand, in the research of Marchiori & Cantoni (2015), authors argued that destination image can be altered through user-generated content on social network websites. However, the destination image mostly changes for those users who have not been to a destination before or have little knowledge about it. Travelers who have travelled to the destination, are less expected to change their destination image perspective because of the user-generated content on social media (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015).
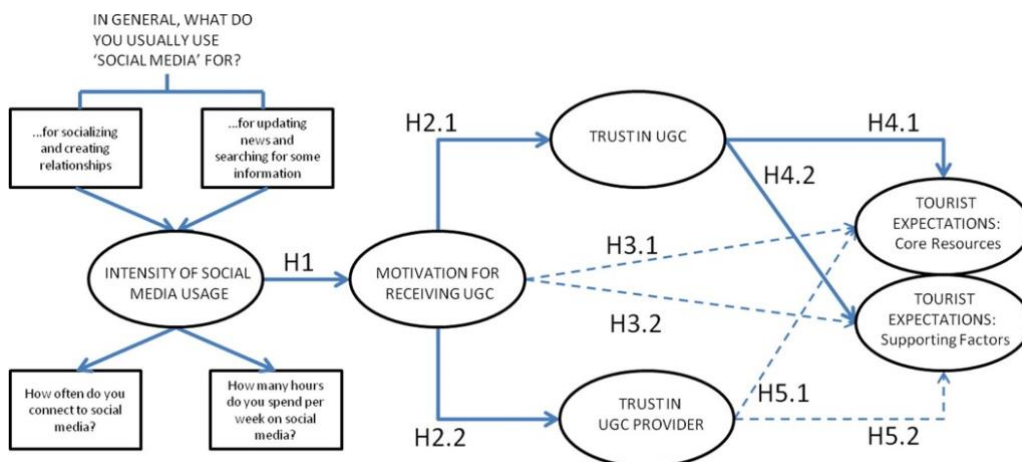
Figure 3 Theoretical model by Narangajavana et al. (2017)

According to Lou and Yuan (2019), social media advertising generally has three major values: informativeness value, entertainment and credibility. As per their research, all three value types positively impact the perceived value of advertising as well purchase intentions and recommendations.

The use of social media in travel was further investigated by Singh and Srivastava (2019). In their research, authors came up with a conceptual model, that describes the process of social media use for travel purposes (Figure 4). In such a way, authors identified 3 factors that could influence the degree of social media usage, namely: perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness and perceived trust of the channel. Interestingly, frequency of international travel and frequency of social media usage were also affecting the intention to use social media as well as the final actual usage.
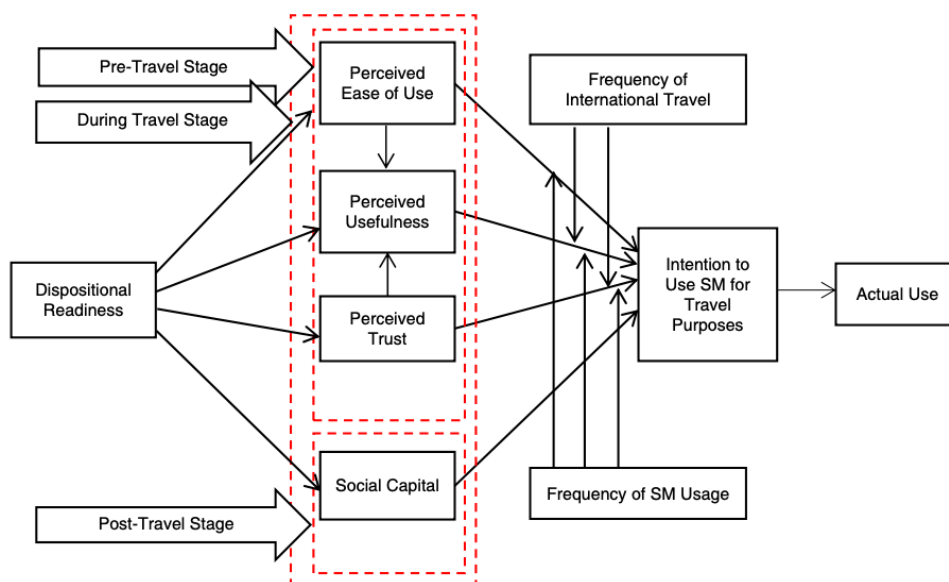
Figure 4 Use of social media for tourism by Singh and Srivastava (2019)

2.2 Trustworthiness of social media

Trust has always been an important factor in various segments, including economy, politics and social environment. It is usually educated since childhood and is mainly applicable in human interactions (Hakansson & Witmer, 2015). Social media on the other hand is a technology enabling individuals to socialize online and to communicate through different means. Nevertheless, in recent studies, authors argued that digital media could not be trustworthy (DuBois, Golbeck & Srinivasan, 2011).

A few years later, scandals in the United States around Snowden and American Intelligence confirmed pre-existing assumptions. In such a way, it became a public knowledge that American government was vastly surveilling internet search and digital communications (BBC News, 2014). Such an event was and remains a major hit on social media, as some people still do not use social media due to the trust concerns. The contradicting trustworthiness of social media production gets more complicated when users face difficulties identifying which information is actually trustworthy and which is not.

In the recent research on trustworthiness of online channels, the overall trust of the online channels was analyzed by Dickinger (2011) from four perspectives: informativeness, integrity, benevolence, and ability (Figure 5). The results showed that Informativeness had the highest positive impact on the overall trust for the online channels, where user-generated content turned out to be very informative. However, the actual ability of the users to provide informative content was not clear. On the other hand, benevolence had the second highest impact on trust for the online channels. Warner-Søderholm and others (2018) continued researching trustworthiness from the above-mentioned perspectives and came to a conclusion that younger female heavy-users have more trust in social media compared to other demographic groups. The findings also showed that Instagram users experience higher level of benevolence compared to non-users, they expect and believe in genuineness and kindness of the other users. Interestingly, the perceptions of Integrity of the social media posts, vary significantly depending on the demographics, namely age, gender, media preference and other parameters. Overall, authors suggest further research on users trust and social media, since more information about this field can help businesses to increase their revenues.
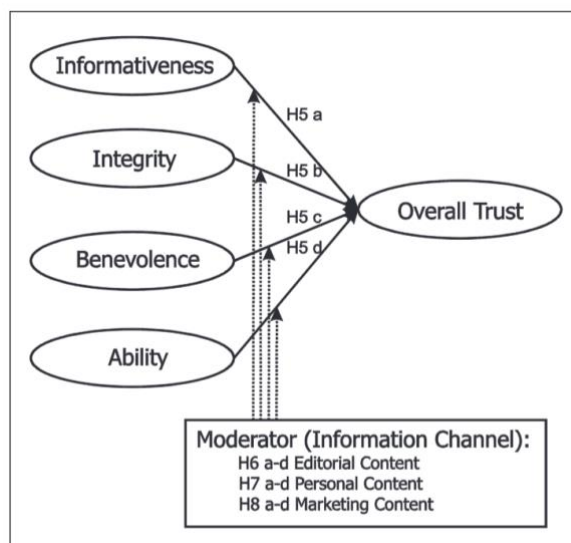
Figure 5 Trustworthiness research Model by Dickinger (2011)

Interestingly, Fotis et al. (2012) highlighted in their research, that user-generated content was perceived as a more credible source of information compared to the information provided by travel organizations, such as tour operators, DMOs, travel agents and online advertisement companies. Such content is considered to be more trustworthy as well. In addition, reviews and posts by users with open identity get more credibility comparing to the anonymous reviews.

Another issue regarding the trustworthiness of social media is fake information and manipulation of the reviews. Tourism as a fast-growing field is extremely competitive with a lot of players at every level. In order to overcome the competition, practitioners tend to 'play' with the online feedback. Fake positive review can be posted anonymously by the company representatives in order to improve their score and attract more customers, whereas fake negative reviews are usually posted on the competitor's sites to diminish their success (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). That is why consumers are being urged to pay attention to source credibility before believing the reviews. Deleting negative feedbacks is another thing about social media, where profile owners can delete any comments for a better image (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018) had another theory about trustworthiness. The study proved that the more users were sharing online about themselves, the more they trust online content created by others.

2.3 Instagram

2.3.1 Instagram overlook

As an old saying goes, " a picture is worth a thousand words" or "one look is worth a thousand words". Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social network platform, which exists since 2010. According to the Statista report (2021), today Instagram is 4th most used social media worldwide, coming right after Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. In such a way, 1.39 billion users of Instagram are available to experience brands' content. The platform, however, allows organizations not only to market their brands, but also to connect with the audience, to share the 'behind the scenes' and to get-to-know each other. According to statistics, over 31.2% of all Instagram users are between 25 and 34 years old, and right next comes the age group of 18-24-year-olds, which represent 31% of the overall users. The third place belongs to 35-44-year-olds who represent 16% (Statista, 2021).

Travel is an important and widely used segment of Instagram. As of 7th December 2021, there are 602 million posts with a hashtag #travel. According to the tourism consultancy company

SeaGoingGreen (2021) Instagram travel-related posts affect attitude towards destinations of almost 50% of all users. In the meantime, 35% of those users learn for the first time about unknown destinations through Instagram platform. Moreover, according to Zhou and Xue (2021) suggested that Instagram is a more popular social media platform for travel planning, compared to other platforms such as Facebook.

Overall, photos are a huge part of advertisement, whereas consumers tend to be attracted by visual content (De Veirman et al., 2017). Moreover, pictures can tell consumers the whole story, and this is one of the reasons why Instagram became a popular, widely-used platform. In such a way, 'instagrammability' of destinations is an important factor in social media. Tourists tend to travel to places where they can take beautiful photos and then share with their friends and families (Putra & Razi, 2020). Destinations, in their turn, try to create those 'instagrammable' spots to attract travelers. In some studies, researchers include 'instagrammability' as key performance indicator for the marketing (Greenwald, 2018). Interestingly, according to the research of Kim et al. (2021), images with people on it, are perceived by the audience much better rather than just images of the scenery. The authors described this trend through the audience's imagination and an attempt to project themselves in the location, which works easier if there is already someone on the picture.

Greenwald (2018) in her article for Forbes, stated that millennials tend to trust Instagram more than other forms of visual advertising, because through the platform they can see how things look in actual life. User-generated content also seems more credible in the eyes of millennials (Greenwald, 2018). According to Kadekova and Holienčinová (2018), if a user decided to reveal the truth about the nature of an advertising post – to give a post a publicly-seen 'advertisement' status, then such a post receives less engagement from other users – namely considerably less likes, compared to those posts without any confirmation of an advertisement.

Connolly and Bannister (2007) investigated trust in Internet shopping and identified that trustworthiness is directly related to the perceived risk. Perceived risk is based on customers' uncertainty about paying procedures, sharing of personal data and credibility of the marketing messages. Lack of control over customers' personal information decreases overall trust and increases customers' vulnerability. Hence, control over perceived risks and attempts to mitigate those risks can positively impact brand's trust.

2.3.2 Instagram as information source

In addition, Gumpo and others (2020) analyzed Instagram as an information search tool when choosing a tourism destination. The Information adoption model (Figure 6) explains how Informativeness of the posts can be measured through information usefulness, source credibility and argument quality. Authors state that credibility and quality are the two main factors to measure information usefulness.
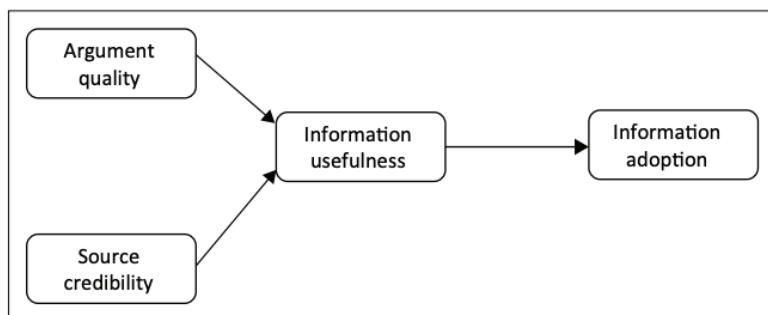
FIGURE 6 THE INFORMATION ADOPTION MODEL BY GUMPO ET AL. (2020)

Moreover, Lockie (2019) explored perceived usefulness of blog content. According to the author, if consumers consider blog information useful, then they also experience increased trust towards the Instagram account owner. Interestingly, the author points out that negative information about products is perceived more useful rather than positive information. In such a way negative information is also trusted more. On the other hand, consistency of the provided information has a direct impact on the perceived usefulness as well. Casalo and others (2011) explored perceived usefulness as a parameter to assess an advice from an online travel community. In their case perceived usefulness was associated with sharing knowledge and getting access to certain benefits; benefits which users would not be able to get without access to this particular online travel community.

2.3.3 Psychological impacts of Instagram

Regardless of countless benefits that Instagram provides its users with, there are also undeniable negative outcomes that certain consumers might experience, specifically psychological problems. Latif and others (2020) researched different psychological outcomes of Instagram usage, including benign envy. According to the authors, users tend to compare their own lives with the life style portrayed on social media. As a consequence, these users can then experience benign envy, meaning a desire to have the portrayed idealistic life. Belk (2011) analyzed the concepts of benign and malicious envy. The research results suggested that benign

envy encourages and motivates people for better results and promotes positive thinking. While benign envy can motivate users to improve their lives, there is also a possibility of a more dramatic effect of Instagram, such as depression and reduced wellbeing. Ponnusamy and others (2020) studied addiction to social media, in particular to Instagram, as well as threats to the users' psychological well-being. The authors analyzed certain types of needs that lead to Instagram addiction (Figure 7). Those needs were classified as recognition, information, social and entertainment needs. Consequently, Instagram addiction might have a negative impact on psychological well-being, resulting in loneliness, shyness and poor academic performance for younger generations (Ponnusamy et al., 2020).
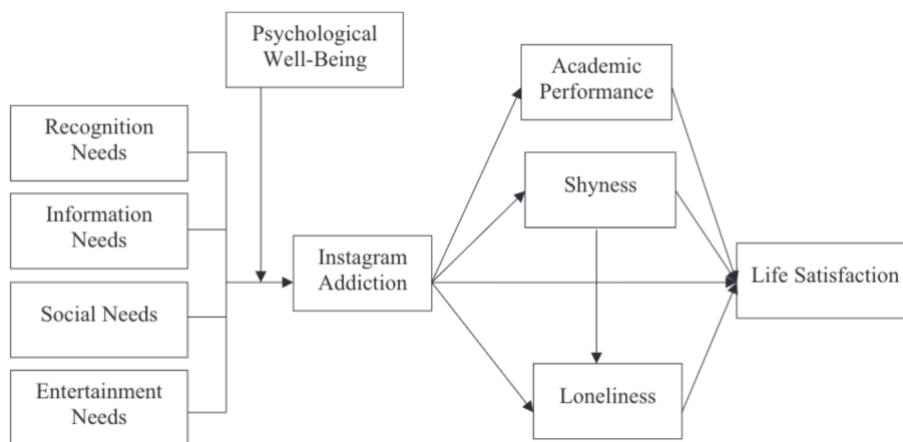
Figure 7 Instagram Addiction Model by Ponnusamy et al. (2020).

2.3.4 Instagram content

Instagram being a photo-sharing social network platform, has a primary focus on the published content. Therefore, published content varies in its volume, frequency and quality. In general, the more active influencers are and the more content they produce, then, the more expertise they are believed to have in the area (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Active use of different types of the user-generated content, such as posts, stories or reels showcases user's creativity. Nevertheless, too much user-generated content might question influencer's novelty and posts' originality, which can eventually drive subscribers away (Casaló et al., 2020). Influencers are supposed to find a balance between being an active expert and not over-producing the content. Interestingly, even when influencer's postings are original, users' perception of the posts' originality can still be altered because of too high frequency of the content production (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Casaló et al., 2020).

On the other hand, Instagram being a visual social media, highly depends on the quality of the content and content design. A proper design affects account's accessibility, usability, appeal and attractiveness. The way influencers structure their content can help them to convert users into followers (Lockie, 2019). At the same time, users can get frustrated if the content is not structured well or not formatted properly (Lockie, 2019). Same as with the posting frequency, consistency is key for a well-organized social media account (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Lockie, 2019). The visual parameters such as colors or brightness has a direct effect on the user conversion rate as well (Lockie, 2019).

In general, advertisement content is supposed to possess informative value, entertainment value and attractiveness in order to catch the attention of the audience (Lou & Kim, 2019). While informativeness of the influencer marketing as well as the social and physical attractiveness have been discussed earlier in this study, entertainment value of the social media content is highly important for a successful marketing campaign as well (Lou & Kim, 2019). Hence, entertainment value of the content positively impacts parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers. Furthermore, entertainment goes hand in hand with enjoyment, however one does not necessarily require another. According to Chung and Koo (2015) perceived enjoyment, although is necessary for social media usage, can eventually threaten reliability of the provided content and its informativeness.

2.4   Influencer Marketing

2.4.1   Influencer marketing overview

Extensive development of social media marketing motivated brands to become active on various platforms, however, soon enough cliché branding posts lost consumers' touch and stopped bringing expected profits (Jacobson et al., 2020). After experimenting with various approaches, influencer marketing proved to be a successful technique to connect with audiences and promote brands (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). An influencer is an experienced social media user, who publishes unique content on social media and, at the same time, who managed to create an authentic profile and a certain personal image. Moreover, an influencer is supposed to have power and influence on the audience. Often influencers are referred to as authentic people, with an expertise in a certain niche (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Cotter, 2018). In the meanwhile, influencer marketing is designed to use the existing power of influencers to promote various brands. In this way, influencers' power represents their connection with the followers, certain amount of trust and a personal brand image (De Veirman et al., 2017). Interestingly, according

to Masuda et al. (2022), social media influencers are used by brands not only as a marketing channel for financial profits, but also as a tool to establish a connection with the consumers through an influencer.
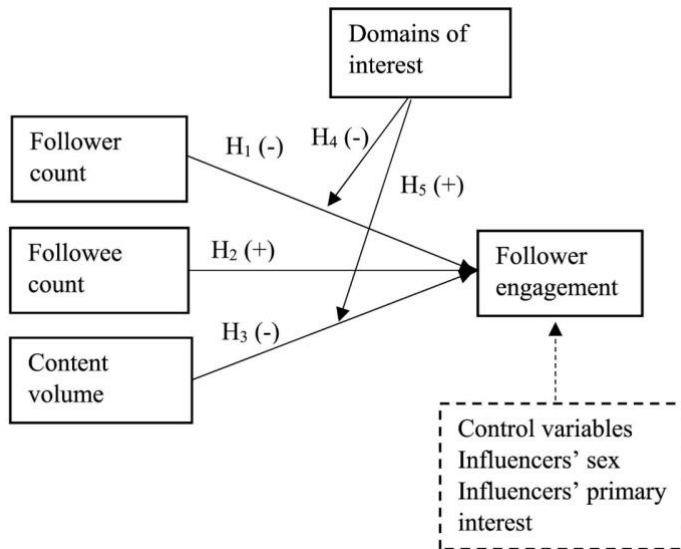
FIGURE 8 FOLLOW ENGAGEMENT MODEL BY TAFESSE & WOOD (2021).

It is important to mention that social media influencers are not entirely new in marketing. In traditional media, such as TV, celebrities often used to promote certain brands, which could be done both directly or indirectly (Masuda et al., 2022). Consumers, on the other hand, tend to trust celebrities' opinions, since their taste seems more trustworthy and down-to-earth, comparing to salespeople. The same approach applies in social media, where customers find influential people more trustworthy rather than directly salespeople from organizations (Masuda et al., 2022). Same was proved in the research of Giakoumaki and Krepapa (2019), who realized that influencers' social media posts encouraged much more consumer engagement compared to the brands' direct posts.

Campbell and Farrell (2020) argued that all influencers, regardless of scope or area of expertise, possess three marketing forces. Firstly, they have an access to the unlimited audience. Through this audience, they can target specific groups of consumers and they can draw attention to the advertised products, usually better then brands themselves. Second marketing aspect in Campbell and Farrell's model was the endorser persona. In such a way, influencers can be seen by the consumers as celebrities, experts or "fellow consumers". Endorser persona comes with certain qualities such as credibility and informativeness. The third marketing component in the model is social media management skills. Influencers can not only create and publish content, but also strategize and lead further interactions with the consumers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Furthermore, according to George, Staintin and Adu-Ampong (2021) influencer marketing as a form of the e-WOM, where there are parties known as opinion-givers and opinion-seekers. The authors discuss the difficulties in measuring the outcomes of the influencer marketing. While there are many ways for influencer marketing to actually work, there is no common quantifiable measure of the true effect of influencer marketing.

According to Casalo and others (2011), Influencers and other online communities tend to recommend certain products and services, however, it is up to users whether they want to actually follow those advices. The authors studied consumers' 'intention to follow the advice', and their research findings suggested a direct relationship between trust and intention to follow the advice, as well as perceived usefulness and intention respectively.

2.4.2   Influencer classification

There are many ways to categorize influencers on Instagram. The most common way is by number of followers. Karagür et al. (2021) identified several size-categories for influencers, mainly nano, micro, mid, macro and mega influencers, based on the size of the reachable audience; the exact tier sizes vary from one researcher to another. Tafesse and Wood (2021) advocate that the number of followers demonstrates the degree of the influencer's popularity and reach. Moreover, according to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), bigger number of follows increases credibility of the influencer. Interestingly, authors emphasize that the large number of followers does not guarantee engagement. Followers' engagement directly reflects their connection and similarity with the influencers. However, influencers with larger number of followers tend to lose personal touch. Moreover, the artificial way of getting more fake followers doesn't generate any engagement, which results in a paradox of high number of followers and low amount engagement. That is why, many users prefer following influencers with a lower follow-count and with a more personalized approach (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). According to the Statista report (Figure 9), most followed travel influencer on Instagram in May 2020 was 'natgeotravel' with over 38 million followers, the next in line was 'julianapaes' with over 25 million followers.

Most-followed travel influencers on Instagram worldwide as of May 2020
(in millions)
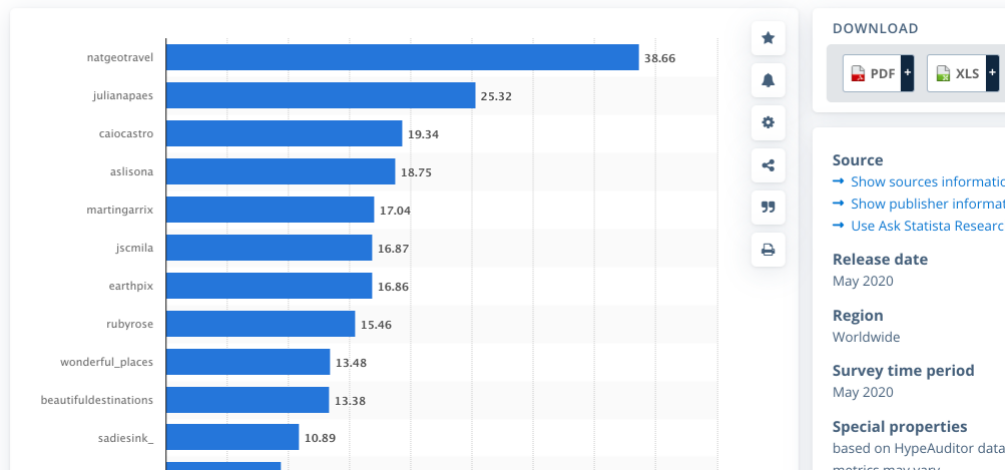
FIGURE 9 STATISTA: MOST FOLLOWED TRAVEL INFLUENCERS (2020)

Followee count is another quantitative characteristic of influencers, which can be controversial as well. On one side, the more accounts the influencer is following, the more they stay up-to-date with the trends and in touch with the audience. On the other side, when an influencer follows many users, in the eyes of those users, influencers don't look inaccessible anymore, but rather regular and insignificant (Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

Moreover, influencers are classified by their area of expertise (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In general, influencers are often focused on a specific theme, such as travel, fashion, food, cosmetics or literally any other theme. Once the area is chosen, classification applies for further product category choices and different age groups (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). After all, an influencer occupies a particular 'niche' that they provide expertise for. Lockie (2019) stated in her study, that content of the blogger (influencer) directly impacts the perception of the account's trustworthiness. In such a way, content design and validity of the provided information directly effects users' perception and, consequently, level of their engagement (Lockie, 2019). Furthermore, the mood of the posting, specifically language style, its level of emotionality vs restraint, positivity or negativity – all of these parameters directly reflect influencer's personality, hence, dictate how the audience will see the influencer. While the image of the influencer is being built based on their content, the users then decide where there is a fit and whether they are going to follow this particular influencer (Lockie, 2019).

Another classification of influencers was introduced by Ruiz-Gomez (2019) and focused mainly on the origin of not particularly successful influencers. The following types were included in the classification: micro celebrities, accidental internet celebrities, parasite social media celebrity

and 'wannabe' influencer. In this classification, accidental internet celebrities are temporary popular due to their short-term fame, because of some sort of a public event. Parasite celebrities, was first introduced by the author as influencers who are simply related or connected to true celebrities (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Wannabe influencers are junior influencers, who did not manage to get a big audience or credibility, and keep on copying existing content from more successful influencers.

According to Kadekova (2018), Millennials as a generation are interested in visual content, social media advertising and shorter texts compared to older generations. Interestingly, the author combined both generations Z and Y under the 'Millennials' age group, and then compared the two subgroups and their attitudes towards social media influencers. The results suggested that generation Y followed influencers on social media for such reasons as inspiration and reviews, whereas generation Z was motivated by the reasons of inspiration and being on social media as part of their job.

Travel Influencers form a separate section in the influencer marketing range. Nevertheless, according to George, Staintin, and Adu-Ampong (2021) this niche is lacking research. According to the authors, influencer marketing is quite different across different industries, and it is important to differentiate it. On the other hand, Travel Influencers in particular do not prefer to be referred to as 'travel' influencers, but rather prefer differentiation by type of social media that they use, such as blogging or Instagram (George, Staintin, & Adu-Ampong, 2021).

Moreover, some researchers stress the difference between travel influencers from travel journalists. According to Stoldt and others (2019) travel journalists are being paid by organizations to promote destinations, where their trips have a business purpose. DMOs prepare a specific plan for the travel journalist to follow, as well as provide them with the material and photos that need to be advertised. Travel influencers, on the other hand, travel on their leisure time for personal needs, while collaborating with organizations at the same time. Travel influencers choose by themselves what and how to promote, without following a strict agenda from the DMO (Stoldt et al., 2019). Moreover, travel influence require much more flexibility in comparison to travel journalists.

2.4.3 Influencer characteristics

According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), the way the influencer characteristics have a direct impact on the influencer's attempts to persuade customers into buying promoted products and services. Hence, influencers' characteristics directly affect influencer's overall likability. Users

identify and categorize influencers based on their personal attributes such as physical and social attractiveness, attitude homophile, etc. (Masuda et al., 2022). Kim and Kim (2021) analyzed how influencers characteristics affect consumers' trust in 3 different forms – users' loyalty to the influencer, product attitudes and purchase possibility.

2.4.3.1 Social attractiveness

Social attractiveness is one of the major influencer characteristics. The more socially attractive an influencer is, the more chances they have to change consumers' attitudes towards promoted products and services (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Social attractiveness motivates millennials into being similar to the influencers, adopting their lifestyles. Interestingly, users that are socially attracted to the influencers are more likely to make purchases of the advertised products (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to Masuda and others (2022), the degree of the influencer's social attractiveness represents the likeliness of the influencer, their credibility, expertise, as well as users' loyalty. Masuda and others (2022) suggest that social attractiveness is similar to the brand love concept. Moreover, social attractiveness is related to the emotional attraction, whereas physical attractiveness is about visual attraction.

2.4.3.2 Physical attractiveness

Physical attractiveness is another important characteristic of the influencers. Since Instagram is a visual tool, physical attractiveness is crucial for influencers' popularity (Masuda et al., 2022). Physical attractiveness was studied by several authors, and it was found to have a positive impact on credibility and expertise. Colucci and Cho (2014) identified in their research its positive impact on users' trust as well. Interestingly, physical attractiveness also has a positive impact on the parasocial relationships (Masuda et al., 2022). Lockie (2019) identified parasocial relationship as a meaningful relationship between a media user and media persona (influencer). Such a relationship can be inspired by the influencer through personal content, contact with the audience and direct communication (Live Instastories). In this case, physical attractiveness enhances parasocial relationship between the influencer and its followers. Nevertheless, results of the research by Kim and Kim (2021) suggested that there was no relation between physical attractiveness and trust in the influencer. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), physical attractiveness can affect influencer's credibility and expertise. This relationship applies mostly in fashion and beauty segments, but doesn't exclude other industries. Lastly, both physical and social attractiveness indirectly impact purchase intention.

2.4.3.3   Credibility

Credibility of the influencers is another characterization type, which is based on two pillars - influencer's trustworthiness and reliability. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), influencer's credibility is directly affected by how consumers see and assess the quality of the provided content. Profound knowledge of the topic makes an influencer an expert in the subject, hence, increases his or her credibility and expertise. Trustworthiness was defined by the authors as sub-category of credibility, which represents a degree of the influencer's honesty in consumers' eyes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Hence, high degree of credibility gives power to the influencers in their persuasion actions and endorsements (Lockie, 2019). In general, influencers' posts are perceived as credible information, since influencers themselves have a power of sharing their own opinions and not belonging to the corporate world. In theory, influencers are supposed to discuss topics fairly which gives their information credibility (Lockie, 2019). According to Kim and Kim (2021) credibility leads to increased perceived information quality. Yuan and Lou (2020) analyzed credibility of the source from several perspectives: expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, similarity and different types of fairness. The combination of these factors resulted in a certain level of consumer's interest in the promoted product or service (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Interestingly, Gumpo's research (2020) suggests governments to introduce certain legal regulations, that would guarantee reliable and secure information on social media, and prevent information fabrication. Such measures would increase the overall credibility of social media as an information source. Lou and Yuan (2019) found out in their research that an influencer's credibility not only positively affects their trustworthiness, but also brand awareness of the promoted products. Since influencers are believed to be a credible source of information, their e-WOM of promoted products and services encourages users to learn about new brands.

2.4.3.4   Reputation

Influencers' reputation goes hand in hand with their credibility and trustworthiness (Lockie, 2019). Overall, there are several reputation types concerning influencer marketing, namely influencer's reputation, promoted product's reputation and the reputation of the social media platform itself. According to Lockie (2019) reputation has the initial impact on the overall trust, and it can be a defining factor on whether the influencers' published content is going to be considered as trustworthy. Moreover, wrong matches in the collaborations between influencers and brands, may put influencer's reputation at risk (Lockie, 2019). According to Connolly and Bannister (2007) benevolence has a direct impact on the brands reputation as it signifies good motives and usually comes with the consumers' trust. Moreover, according to Tervo (2021) ,

Influencers who post a lot of sponsored content are considered less trustworthy with a questionable reputation. Hence, according to the author, micro-influencers in general have a better reputation compared to macro-influencers. Interestingly, influencers with a good reputation can easier convince their audience in the credibility of the promoted goods and services (Tervo, 2021; Lockie, 2019).

2.4.3.5   Authenticity

Newman and Dhar (2014) studied authenticity as an important dimension for consumers. The authors interpreted the term of authenticity as something real and true. Authenticity goes hand in hand with the product value, which was split into 3 categories by Lee and others (2019), namely social, emotional and quality value. High level of authenticity leads to increased product quality expectations; hence authentic products and services are often considered to be more genuine and overall have a higher quality. However, it goes only one way, meaning that high quality does not necessarily guarantee authenticity for a product or service (Newman & Dhar, 2014). In the research by Lu and others (2015) it was proved that authenticity leads to successful and affirmative destination image. Moreover, according to the authors authenticity positively influences tourists' satisfaction, however, significance was not very high. Furthermore, authenticity of the influencers was studied in Lockie's research (2019). It was identified as one's ability of being real, honest and genuine rather than fake. The author identified direct positive impact of authenticity on influencers' trustworthiness. In addition, uniqueness of the influencer's behavior and content is supposed to remain consistent and stable through different scenarios, in order to remain authentic (Lockie, 2019).

Furthermore, Grayson and Martinec (2004) studied authenticity as well. According to the authors, there is always consumer demand for authenticity, which is something that marketing specialists use to make profits. In marketing authenticity can be easily constructed, hence the concept of authenticity ends up being a mix of physical evidence (e.g. unique architecture) and social construction. Therefore, it is up to anyone's imagination on how authentic a destination might look like afterall. Commercialization of authenticity leads to the consumers' exceeded expectations, which are not met afterwards. Moreover, this commercialization of authenticity contradicts its very definition, where authenticity is considered to be something honest and genuine. The bias leads to consumers distrust, when they notice how authenticity is manipulated for monetary gains (Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

In addition, Eigenraam and others (2021) analyzed the effects of entertaining and informative activities of different brands on their perceived authenticity. According to the authors' research, when entertaining initiatives match brand type, then such activities project authenticity of the brand and positively impact customer engagement. Informative initiatives, however, do not depend on the brand type and do not correlate with perceived authenticity of the brand (Eigenraam et al., 2021). Kim and Kim (2021) described social media authenticity as influencers' genuine intention.

Existential authenticity is another phenomenon, which describes a state of being, and is mainly about one's emotions and sense of himself (Lee et al, 2019). However, in the travel sense, the location matters and it has direct influence on one's state of being. Hence, it is important for destinations as well as advertising agents to take into account the geographic locations when focusing on authenticity (Lee et al, 2019).

2.4.3.6 Attitude homophily

Homophily is another influencer characteristic. It focuses on the similarity between a particular influencer and a consumer. Attitude homophily can also be represented by a perfect consumer image that he or she would want to be. Bu et al. (2022) investigated homophily from a broader perspective. According to authors homophily can occur in four different forms, namely attitude homophily, background homophily, appearances and values. Whereas attitude homophile is about similarity in attitudes and behavior, background focuses on similarity in socio-economic status, education and other background factors. Similarity in values might occur in the form of same cultural values or personal moral standards. Lastly, similarity in appearances is specifically about visual representation. According to Kim and Kim (2021) similarity can be also in experiences or lifestyles. Interestingly, people who are similar to each other tend to communicate and connect better, rather than people with different characters and attitudes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Moreover, according to Masuda and others (2022), attitude homophily positively impacts trustworthiness. Hence, influencers that are similar to their audience in terms of attitudes and behavior, are more likely to be liked by their followers. Masuda and others (2022) also stressed that attitude homophily increases perceived expertise of the influencer and potential e-WOM from followers. Furthermore, Bu et al. (2022) in their research confirmed that attitude homophily increases customer engagement, such as followers' involvement in interactions with each other.
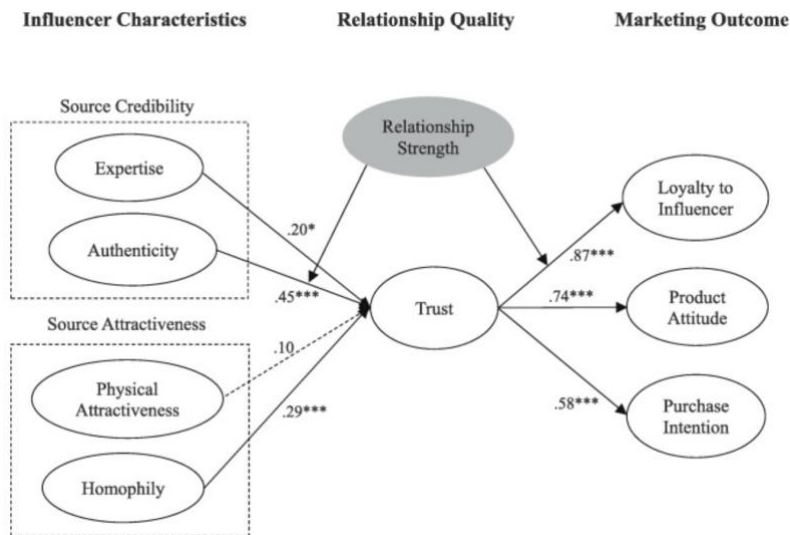
FIGURE 10 INFLUENCER POWER BY KIM AND KIM (2021).

2.4.4   Influencer marketing issues

Influencers and overall influencer marketing have their own issues and limitations. According to Zhou and others (2021), such problems can affect audience, brand or influencers themselves. From the brand's perspective, it might be difficult to find the right influencer, who would reach the appropriate audience and fit to the product. A non-appropriate symbiosis of a particular brand and influencer can undermine influencer's credibility and authenticity, as well as decrease audience's desire to purchase. Moreover, when brands partner with influencers, they lose a certain level of control over their campaign, in particular spread of the e-WOM, content and whom this information reaches. Hence, brands can be damaged due to wrongly communicated information by the influencers.

Another challenge concerning influencer marketing is sponsorship disclosure. Interestingly, consumers do not always understand that the information communicated by the influencer is 'paid for'. When influencers decide to disclose the sponsorship nature of their posts, it may stop many consumers from considering the promoted brand. Whereas in certain countries, sponsorship must be disclosed in order to prevent misunderstanding, some influencers still hide the sponsorship fact under personal opinions. In order to overcome the sponsorship challenge, Zhou and others (2021) recommended two solutions for influencers: implementation of the brand attribute evaluation, as well as self-identity construction. In addition, according to the Advertising Standards Authority, influencers must make it clear when they are promoting anything for monetary gains; in other words, followers must clearly understand what material is being 'sponsored' (Advertising Standards Authority, 2018) . ASA confirms that there are many

frequent violations to these rules, when influencers either do not know about the rules or do not want to disclose it (Advertising Standards Authority, 2018; George, Staintin, & Adu-Ampong, 2021).

Authors identified commercial-personal tension as a separate issue in the influencer marketing. Influencers present commercial intentions in a hidden way, so that it becomes difficult for a consumer to differentiate between commercial and non-commercial content. Such techniques are implemented by the influencers because consumers tend to ignore highly-marketed content. Hence, hidden commercial messages appear in a personalized and authentic form (Zhou et al., 2021).

Cultural barrier is another potential challenge for social media users. The social cultural meanings include certain values, attributes and beliefs, that have to be communicated through the posts, or, at the very least, they must be not contradicted. Influencers are expected to know well the culture of the advertised product, its origin and customers, and hence, adjust to its cultural specialties.

One of the social media's benefits, is that people can appear as whoever they want. Since legally they are not obliged to disclose their true identity, people can stay anonymous. According to Lockie (2018), anonymous posting encourages users to be more trustworthy, since they do not fear the consequences of their potential negative posts. On the other hand, consumers consider personal postings to be more credible, compared to the information provided by the anonymous sources (Lockie, 2018). Ferchaud and others (2018) pointed out the importance of personal appearance in the social media content, in order to increase the account's credibility and a feeling of realism – presence of a real consumer, rather than a marketing specialist.

2.4.5 Travel influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the years 2020-2021, many countries had to restrict travel in order to stop the virus spread. As a result, most travel influencers could not travel, which is a necessity for their content production. Therefore, due to the cancellation or postponement of the pre-planned collaborations, many influencers had to face decreased or even no income (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). At the same time, due to various national lockdowns, the new trend for content creators evolved, where people massively started taking pictures and posting it online, sometimes turning themselves into nano- or micro-influencers (Geyser, 2022). Such a trend naturally created additional competition for the pre-existing influencers (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). For instance, according to TikTok social media platform, there was a 45% increase

in the number of platform's influencers during 2021. (Geyser, 2022). The above-mentioned pandemic-related trends produced additional pressure on the travel-influencers. Facing the difficulty to find appropriate information, some influencers stopped posting travel content at all, which led to the diminishing audience (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). The solutions, that influencers came with so far, include switching to the education roles and consulting new generations of marketers and influencers. Some influencers found new segments or niches to focus their content on, in particular segments that would not be disrupted by the pandemic (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). The ease, with which influencers switched to new segments, threatened their credibility degree, since expertise of the topic is acquired with time.

2.5   Destination Marketing Organizations

2.5.1   DMO Introduction

A DMO appears to have two definitions in tourism. On one side, a DMO can have a broad meaning of a Destination Management Organization. UNWTO describes a DMO as an organization that brings together many different tourism-related elements, effectively plans and manages tourism in a specific region, and ensures a particular destination vision. Destinations in this case can be countries, regions or cities. DMOs are in charge of the competitiveness of the destination, hence, overlook its marketing activities and other business strategies, involving enhancement of sustainability, innovation, and governance (UNWTO). Since DMOs are in charge of the destinations' marketing, they overlook the development of the Marketing Plans for both business and leisure segments.

On the other side, a DMO can have a more precise definition, in particular Destination Marketing Organization. Therefore, it is an organization that is responsible for the destination's competitiveness, brand identity and position, and all of its major marketing activities. Therefore, Pike and Page (2014) identified several universal objectives of DMOs, such as stimulation of travelers' interest in the destination, increase in visitations, education about the destination as well as raising awareness about the destination. Overall, a destination is an amalgam, meaning that it is comprised of many different industries, expertise areas and people. It is a DMO's job to differentiate the destination through its comparative and competitive advantages. In the meantime, there is a pool of potential issues the DMOs deal with such as travel seasonality (Pike & Page, 2014).

Fortezza and Pencarelli (2018) compared a DMO with an 'intelligent hub'. Due to tourism heterogeneity, DMOs coordinate activities of the destination's components and in a certain way represent a hub of information. The authors outlined resilience as one of the defining factors of DMOs, due its ability to manage complex and scarce resources.

Furthermore, with the development of information technologies, firstly, internet and then social media, DMOs got a chance to act as a major information source and an agent of destination image formation. According to Choi et al. (2007) , travelers use DMOs to find useful information for their trips, specifically during the pre-trip period. Interestingly, when tourists would use local (city) DMOs to search for specific information – activities or accommodation, and national DMOs for general information search (Choi et al., 2007).

Additionally, Musina and Gao (2016) analyzed persuasiveness of the DMOs' websites. The research stated that high persuasiveness of the DMO's website with the informative and useful content leads to an increased intention to visit the destination as well as to a stronger destination image. Overall, according to the authors, the primary goal of the DMOs' websites it to convince users to visit the destination, whereas other goals include establishing a destination image, promotion, increased awareness, generating interest in the destination and increasing travelers' trust.

2.5.2   Destination image formation

Destination image has multiple definitions by numerous researchers. It is usually described as a combination of beliefs and perceptions that a person has about a particular destination (Molinillo et al., 2018). Destination image is a vast concept, which many researchers attempted to demonstrate through complex models. The common thing between these models is taking into account several dimensions and combining them in one final image (Molinillo et al., 2018).

Furthermore, destination image has a direct effect on the travelers' destination choice. Interestingly, travelers can have a destination image of a certain region, that they have not visited before. This happens due to the combination of all available information, personal characteristics and involvement, which eventually forms a perceived destination image (Molinillo et al., 2018).

According to Költringer and Dickinger (2015) destination image is formed through a combination of several image formation agents, that involve online social media, DMOs and user-generated content. Interestingly, different sources follow different goals, which then forms a complex

destination image along with the personal interpretations. As a result, Költringer and Dickinger (2015) recommended DMOs to apply a holistic approach, encouraging UGC, which plays an important part in the destination image co-creation.

Qu et al. (2011) analyzed destination image as a combination of three components: cognitive, unique and affective image. Therefore, the best effect was reached not through separate analysis of different images, but rather through a complex overall impression. Consequently, the results of the study confirmed direct relationship between the destination image and tourists' intention to visit or to recommend the respective destination. In such a way, cognitive image is basically represented by the tourists' beliefs (Lu et al., 2015). Moreover, cognitive image can be split into three categories: service attributes (friendliness of locals, ease of reach, etc.), environmental attributes such as weather; and perception of safety. According to the authors, destination image has a direct effect of the destination choice decision-making process. Research by Zins (2010) identified two major strategies for destination image formation, namely differentiation and niche. The research suggests that differences between various trip types and travelers' perceptions of those differences are key in creating a strong destination image.

Interestingly, such concepts as destination authenticity have a direct positive impact on the destination image (Lu et al., 2015). On the other hand, involvement in the local activities further improves travelers' perceived destination image.

Moreover, the consumer demand in destination marketing highly varies between generations. Hence, DMOs must consider the needs of the potential visitors. Hence, Hamed (2017) analyzed destination marketing activities that targeted specifically millennials. Building a strong online brand image was one of the requirements to fulfill millennials needs and expectations, according to the author. According to Zins (2010), it is important to understand who is DMO's target, since different age groups have different needs. In Zins research, the chosen sample mostly consisted of students, hence price and proximity were key factors when choosing a travel destination. In the meantime, for other age groups there could be different priorities. Therefore, DMOs should have clear strategies in their marketing activities.

2.5.3 DMOs and social media usage

The worldwide increase in the use of social media has touched every kind of industry (Lee et al., 2021). Since a long time, businesses have recognized the effectiveness of social media as a marketing channel, companies use social media to connect with their customers and build relationships. Therefore, in tourism and hospitality, DMOs and other travel organizations have

not neglected the worldwide trend. According to Lee et al. (2021) DMOs actively use social media to increase the reach and keep their marketing costs low. While DMOs use social media to advertise themselves, tourists use it in the trip planning processes. Interestingly, according to the research by Lee and others (2021), the higher the user-engagement is – the more active a DMO acts on social media. Fortezza and Pencarelli (2018) highlighted a persuasive role of social media for DMOs. The opportunity to reach users and provide useful and entertaining information increases DMOs' persuasiveness.

Fortezza and Pencarelli (2018) investigated advantages of social media for the DMO's brand awareness. Since social media's nature allows DMOs to reach any audience, it increases its chances in reaching a 'right user' or potential visitor. This is specifically convenient when reaching international tourists. In additional, in comparison to other marketing channels, social media provides a more comprehensive overview for the destination due to its various formats and low costs for frequent publications.

Huerta-Alvarez and others (2020) studied how destinations can impact their brand image through social media and, consequently, attract more tourists. The authors explored social media communication generated by both DMOs (controlled communication) and Tourists (uncontrolled communication), its impact on the destination awareness, perceived quality of destination and further on the brand loyalty and brand engagement (Figure 11). The research outcomes proved the connection between the above-mentioned dimensions. According to Huerta-Alvarez and others (2020), social media remains one of the most, if not the most important tool in building destination image. Furthermore, the destination image, that was earlier impacted by the social media content, is positively impacting the destination loyalty and the level of the perceived quality. Interestingly, Huerta-Alvarez and others (2020) suggest encouraging both controlled and uncontrolled social media content for the destination image development.
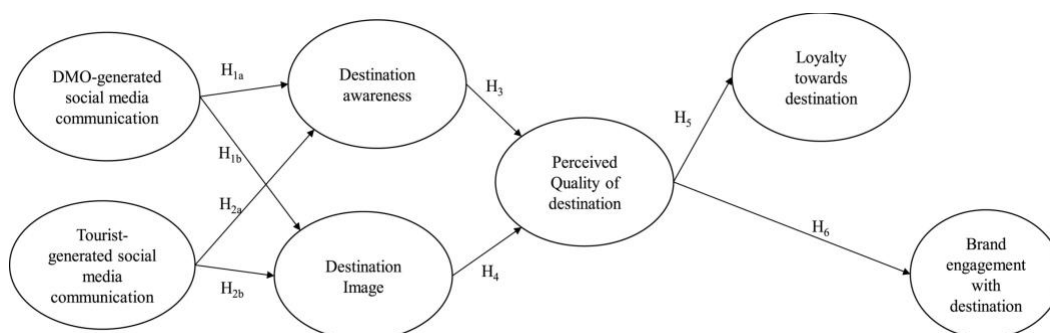
Figure 11 Customer-based destination brand equity model by Huerta-Alvarez and others (2020)

In addition, resilience of DMOs' social media was investigated by Fortezza and Pencarelli (2018). Due to the always changing nature of social media, DMOs must adapt not only to the technological advances, but also to any inside-DMO political shifts. Moreover, Fortezza and Pencarelli (2018) brought up authenticity of the published content as a major factor in social media story-telling. Story-telling must be consistent when the content comes from a national DMOs to its partners, so that it remains authentic.

Furthermore, Gálvez-Rodríguez and others (2020) analyzed user engagement as a primary goal of social media use by DMOs. The authors highlighted the importance of the two-way communication, specifically for DMOs to engage in replying to the users' comments and encouraging continuous communication. Moreover, the author's research recommended to add the 'advisory' content to the DMOs' social media postings, namely various recommendations, weather conditions, unique spots and further advices, in order to foster visitors' motivations. Sharing positive sentiment is another requirement for a higher user engagement rate. Furthermore, the authors stress the importance of the deep analysis of users' feedback on internal process, in order to improve the pull effects and motivate potential visitors to choose the respective destination for their future trips. Interestingly, according to Gálvez-Rodríguez and others (2020) the mere existence of social media is not sufficient anymore. DMOs must engage in the continuous communication and relationships for a successful marketing strategy, hence, manage the social media accounts pro-actively.

Pabel and Prideaux (2016) further analyzed the usage of social media by destination marketing organizations. The authors specifically uncovered high potential of social media to promote last minute deals for DMOs. In such a way, published on social media deals and special offers can reach specifically targeted audiences (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016; Terttunen, 2017).

In addition, further research by Iglesias-Sánchez and colleagues (2020) supported the above-mentioned ideas, that Instagram travel-related posts help to evolve the destination image, whereas DMO's engagement and communication is key. DMOs must follow a certain strategy on Instagram, keeping the content consistent, following certain quality standards and keeping up the posting frequency, in order to increase the followers, likes and user engagement (Iglesias-Sánchez, 2020). DMO's posts that showed or caused emotions in the audience were found to be most successful, whereas professional 'journal type' pictures did not get that much engagement from users. Interestingly, Iglesias-Sánchez and others (2020) also came up with a suggestion for the DMOs to collaborate with influencers, where mini-bloggers or mini-influencers would be even preferred, since they project more trustworthiness.

Furthermore, Usakli, Koc and Sonmez (2017) explored presence of the European DMOs on various social media platforms. Their results suggested, that out of 50 analyzed destinations, only 5 didn't have any presence on social media. Interestingly, Instagram was implemented only by 31 DMOs, which made Instagram the least favored social media platform for the selected DMOs, compared to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. According to the authors, the major themes of the DMOs' posts on social media include natural attractions, followed by cultural and historical attractions. As a result, Usakli, Koc and Sonmez (2017) came to the conclusion that implementation of social media by DMOs is crucial for several purposes: destination's marketing, management, communication and sales.

Similar results were supported by the research of the same authors in their next study (Uşaklı et al., 2019), where they investigated usage of social media by several major European DMOs. The authors concluded that currently the primary goal of these DMOs is to use social media platforms as a marketing tool, rather than a communication mediator. Hence, European DMOs provide a wide range of promotional posts through different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Furthermore, posts related to the customer service were extremely limited, according to the authors (Uşaklı et al., 2019). In the current thesis it was observed that several previous research papers recommended DMOs to implement communication, engagement and customer-service related activities on social media sites (Uşaklı et al., 2019; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Rahman, 2019).

2.5.4   DMOs and Instagram

Terttunen (2017) researched the topic of Instagram's influence on travel-related decisions, specifically from DMOs' perspectives. The results of the research showed that images taken by other users had the largest impact on the travelers' destination choices, whereas majority of the study group preferred images to text overall. To prove this point, the author provided several successful examples of the national tourism Instagram accounts, such as Tourism Australia and Visit Finland. Both accounts had massive audiences, with whom they constantly engaged in discussions in the comments area. These national accounts encouraged users to tag them and use specific hashtags, the pictures were then reposted by the national accounts. Furthermore, another outcome that Terttunen came across in her research, was that people generally prefer to observe several information sources, before making any decisions, hence a combination of channels was recommended by the author.

Incorporating user-generated content in the Instagram accounts of DMOs and other travel organizations is crucial for a successful marketing campaign (Terttunen, 2017). Instagram as a platform provides organizations with an opportunity to easily share user-generated content without any legal complications. According to Terttunen, such content increases credibility of the account, as well as adds some realism to its posts. The collaboration between DMOs and Influencers has also been advised by Terttunen, in order to maximize the marketing effect.

Furthermore, Rahman (2019) studied the implementation of the human values and characteristics through Instagram posts by DMOs. While the author acknowledges social media's role to promote and increase sales, Rahman argued that promoting human values through DMOs' posts increases revenues, aligns the destination image and positively impacts cultural tourism.

2.6 Collaborations of DMOs and Influencers

Travel and tourism industry is changing due to the new technologies. Marketing requirements change as well, where user-generated content and e-WOM become a necessity. According Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2019) DMOs lost control over destination branding due to extensive e-WOM. Zhou and Xue (2021) investigated reasons why travelers consult user-generated content when planning a trip. Findings suggest that the main reasons are fun and little effort in the information search. In such a way, entertainment purpose of social media marketing along with the ease-of-use are of high importance to users. The authors suggested implementation of user-generated content in the destination's marketing activities, specifically user-generated content provided by popular social media influencers (Zhou & Xue, 2021)

Influencer marketing can be implemented by DMOs in order to achieve its goals, for instance, to increase awareness, to improve the destination brand or to reach new market segments (Stoldt et al., 2019). Furthermore, influencer marketing allows DMOs to regain some control over destination branding and guiding e-WOM by the means of influencers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2019). The collaborations can focus not only on the destination as a whole, but also on specific spots, hotels, airlines and other tourism components (Stoldt et al., 2019). The engagement of these third-parties can increase brand awareness and user-engagement. Furthermore, collaborations can also aim to promote certain events in the destination or its cultural heritage, for which foreign influencers are invited to come, in order to attract international markets (Rössler, 2021) Usually for a relatively small fee and coverage of the

expenses, influencers can not only emphasize on the hotspots of the destination, but also draw their audience's attention to less-known spots (Fortezza & Pencarelli, 2018).

Research by Stoldt and others (2019) showed that the gap between travel influencers and DMOs is getting smaller. Although influencers still lack formality in business partnerships, intermediaries or brand managers are there to facilitate such collaborations. Intermediaries seek to professionalize influencer marketing and bring it to the new level. At the same time, due to the fact that influencer marketing is still new, DMOs struggle in identifying which influencers are worth to invest in, how much and when to pay these influencers and how to measure the success of the campaign (Stoldt et al., 2019). The possible measurements of success of the DMO and Influencer campaign include measuring audience engagement. Intermediaries' services include evaluating influencer's posting, commenting, interactions with followers as well as authenticity of the influencer's posts. These checks reduce risks for DMOs and provide ideas for the pricing strategy. In addition, Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2019) recommended introducing more advance KPIs, such as website traffic, correspondence with the bookings and sentiment analysis. Furthermore, intermediaries can help to assign specific influencers for different campaign. Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2019) stress the importance of a proper allocation of an influencer to the specific objective, where influencer's reputation must correspond with the goals and ideas of the campaign.

2.7 Intention to travel

Purchase intention is the eventual goal of tourism marketing activities. In terms of travel and tourism, purchase intention is associated with the destination choice, an intention to visit this particular destination and eventual booking of the trip (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). In order to persuade tourists to visit the destination, DMOs focus on creating a strong destination image by the means of various marketing strategies (Ayeh, 2013; Molinillo, 2018). The intention to visit a destination correlates with various factors, such as trustworthiness of the information source, its expertise, credibility and authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). The use of influencers proved to be beneficial by several academics in persuading potential tourists to visit a destination (Kim & Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Masuda, 2022). According to Molinillo and others (2018) destination image has a direct effect on the intention to visit a destination, whereas social media is a useful tool to improve the destination image. Moreover, according to the authors, implementation of different social media platforms along with the website increases the intentions to visit and revisit the destination. Furthermore, according to Chen and

others (2014) the intention to visit a destination is positively affected by interesting and informative content produced by travel experts.

2.8 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

After extensive review of the existing literature, the conceptual framework has been developed (Figure 12). This framework shows connections between different variables of the research. Based on the conceptual framework, several hypotheses were developed respectively. As a result, 7 different hypotheses were formulated, whereas 3 of them were further split into 2 additional sub-hypotheses. Furthermore, conceptual framework involves 2 extra moderators, namely authenticity and existential authenticity, which will be discussed in the descriptive analysis.
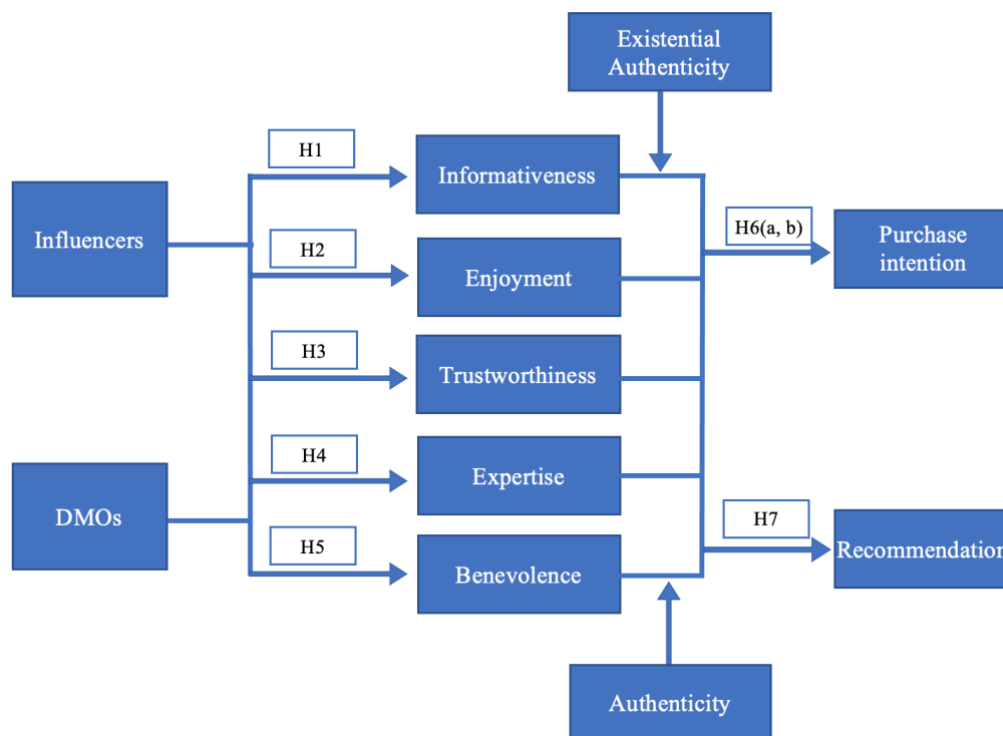
Figure 12 Conceptual Framework

Firstly, the concept of Informativeness will be tested in the research. When choosing a destination, tourists are looking for information. Since this thesis is comparing two channels, the informativeness of each channel needs to be assessed. According to Dickinger (2011), Informativeness has direct positive impact on the overall trustworthiness of the online channels. Same was brought up by Lockie (2019), who investigated the impact of usefulness of the provided information. According to Li and others (2020), nowadays tourists spend more time on

the information search prior to their trips. People generally prefer to observe several information sources, before making any decisions (Terttunen, 2017). Fotis et al. (2012) argued that user-generated content was perceived as a more credible source of information compared to the information provided by travel organizations, such as DMOs. When talking about influencers, it is important to note that informativeness value is one of the three major values of social media (Lou & Yuan, 2019). On the other hand, according to Choi et al. (2007) , travelers use DMOs to find useful information for their trips, specifically during the pre-trip period. Furthermore, different channels have different goals when communicating information (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). DMOs represent the tourism information centers and provide necessary travel information for the pre-trip period, such as sightseeing, attractions, etc. Gon and others (2016) mention managing the information process as one of the core functions of DMOs. Research by Dickinger (2011) stated that editorial information providers such as DMOs are the most informative source. Although user-generated content is highly trustworthy , its informativeness is not consistent (Dickinger, 2011). Since there is previous literature supporting both channels and advocating for both Influencers' and DMOs' informative content, the hypothesis is:

H1 There is no difference in the level informativeness of the posts by DMOs and Influencers.

In general, advertisement content is supposed to be not only informative but also entertaining in order to catch the attention of the audience (Lou & Kim, 2019). According to Zhou and Xue (2021), entertainment is one of the main reasons why people use Instagram. Research by the authors confirms that thanks to the fun and entertaining nature of this platform, the information search process becomes more appealing and easier. Their research their states that entertainment was also one of the main factors for consumers to decide whether to use user-generated content in their travel planning. Moreover, when using Instagram content for trip planning, users expect to receive enjoyment from the promotions, rather than just information (Zhou & Xue, 2021). Ayeh, and others (2013) stated that enjoyment is part of the social media experience, and moreover, users are expecting enjoyment. Tourism information is not different. Users expect not only useful and informative information but also enjoyable content (Ayeh et al., 2013). A study by Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) stated that tourism information search does not necessarily indicate an actual intention to travel, therefore motivations for such research may include rather entertainment goals. Moreover, entertainment needs were studied by Ponnusamy and others (2020), as the major reason for social media addiction. Entertainment goes hand in hand with enjoyment, however one does not necessarily require another (Lou &

Kim, 2019). Furthermore, Kim and Kim (2021) stated that production of the enjoyable content is the core of the influencer marketing, its content must be entertaining and useful. Hence the hypothesis:

H2 Information provided by Influencers is more enjoyable than information provided by DMOs.

Trustworthiness is an important aspect when talking about advertising. According to Berhanu and Raj (2020), trustworthiness is a key element of success in the tourism industry. According to Dickinger (2011), official tourism boards such as DMOs are more trustworthy than service providers. Interestingly, DuBois, Golbeck and Srinivasan (2011) argued that digital media could not be trustworthy. In addition, fake positive and fake negative reviews, as well as wrongful information can threaten trustworthiness of online channels (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). In the meantime, Fotis et al. (2012) argued that user-generated content was perceived more trustworthy than information provided by travel organizations, such as DMOs. A potential reason for such an outcome was that reviews and posts by users with open identity get more credibility in comparison to anonymous reviews, including DMOs (Fotis et al., 2012). According to the authors, travelers see recommendations from user-generated content similarly to recommendations of their own friends and families, hence they tend to trust the UGC. Moreover, according to Lockie (2019), trustworthiness in the blog and vlog content or influencer marketing is about trust in the content provider, rather than trust in the content itself. Hence, trust in the user-generated content depends on the content authenticity and content attractiveness (Lockie, 2019). Overall, research by several academics confirms that user-generated content on social media is trustworthy (Berhanu & Raj, 2020; Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021). Hence the hypothesis:

H3 Influencers are more trustworthy than DMOs.

Gursoy and McLeary (2003) proposed a model of tourist information search behavior, where expertise of the information source was one of the main factors, along with such parameters as internal and external search, costs of information search, familiarity, intentional and incidental learning. Moreover, expertise is essential for Influencers, since the very definition of an 'influencer' is someone authentic with an expertise in a certain niche (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Cotter, 2018). Furthermore, expertise can be defined as profound knowledge in a certain field (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to Masuda and others (2022), both social and physical attractiveness were found to have positive impact on expertise. In general, the more active influencers are and the more content they produce, then, the more expertise they are believed

to have in the area (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Lockie (2019) stated that influencer's expertise does not require any physical confirmation such as a certificate or special education. Nonetheless, expertise of the content provider associates with their confidence in the content and quality of the content. Hence expertise in this sense is rather perceived expertise or expertise by experience, rather than expertise by certain qualifications (Lockie, 2019). Moreover, expertise of the influencer positively correlates with the amount of content produced (Lockie, 2019). According to UNWTO, it is the DMO's role to unite different stakeholders and bring together the expertise and knowledge. Moreover, it is one of the strategic roles of the strategic leadership to guide the DMO as an 'expert party' (UNWTO). In addition, DMOs should act as leaders in travel and tourism knowledge. Hence the hypothesis:

H4 Travel Influencers and DMOs are both experts in travel

Benevolence as a quality of being well-meaning and kind is also relevant in advertising. According to previous research, benevolence has a direct impact on trust of the online channels (Dickinger, 2011). Casalo and others (2011) identified benevolence in online communities, as an honest desire to help other users. Authors also assumed that benevolence is a necessary component of trustworthiness, along with honesty and competence. According to Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) benevolence is highly important in personal channels, mainly in user-generated content, where travelers aim to help each other. More specifically, Instagram users experience higher levels of benevolence compared to non-users, they expect and believe in genuineness and kindness of the other users (Warner-Søderholm et al.,2018). Furthermore, Connolly and Bannister (2007) identified benevolence as one of the major dimensions of trust along with integrity and ability. According to the authors, benevolence requires brands to concentrate on the consumers' needs and to give them priority over their own interests. In other words, benevolence requires good motives and intentions. Hence the hypothesis:

H5 Both DMOs and Influencers are benevolent.

According to Woodside and Lysonski (1989) traveler's intention to visit a certain destination is the final step in the decision-making process before making the destination choice. 'To be chosen' is the ultimate goal of all marketing activities by any destination, whether it is done through a DMO or an influencer. According to Ayeh (2013) DMOs aim to create a destination image through their marketing activities, that will eventually provoke traveler's desire to visit a destination. Moreover, according to Molinillo and others (2018) a favorable destination image positively impacts one's intention to visit this destination. The authors suggested that successful

use of social media improves destination image and, consequently, positively affects intention to visit this destination. According to Wang and Pizam (2011) the visuals of the websites and platforms have a substantial impact on the intentions to travel to the destination, whereas the informativeness' influence on intentions was unclear. Furthermore, according to Wang and Pizam (2011) trustworthiness of the website or platform positively impacts user's intentions to recommend it to others. Moreover, Kim and Kim (2021) confirmed a direct connection between influencer's trustworthiness and purchase intentions (in this case intentions to visit). Kim and Kim (2021) expressed trust through expertise, authenticity and other influencer characteristics. Terttunen (2017) stated in her research, that when Influencers actually visit a particular destination and report it on their Instagram profiles, it increases public awareness about the destination. Sokolova and Kefi (2019) identified in their study a positive impact of credibility of the source on the purchase intention. Consequently, according to Masuda and others (2022) influencers' characteristics effect travelers' intentions to visit. Lockie (2019) stated that expertise of a blogger or influencer and their authenticity have a direct influence on the purchase decision. Furthermore, Chen and others (2014) analyzed tourists' willingness to visit a destination 'mentioned in the blog'. The results showed that interesting, informative and enjoyable content motivates travelers to visit a destination (Chen et al, 2014). According to Terttunen (2017), people mostly affected by their friends' and family's recommendations when choosing a destination, whereas Instagram and bloggers overall don't have much of an influence. Since the goal of the current thesis is to identify which marketing channel - namely DMOs or Influencers – has more influence on millennials tourism destination attitudes, as well as to compare the channels, the respective hypotheses are:

H6 (a) Enjoyment, informativeness, benevolence, trustworthiness and expertise of the Influencers' content have an impact on the desire to visit a destination

H6 (b) Enjoyment, informativeness, benevolence, trustworthiness and expertise of the DMOs' content have an impact on the desire to visit a destination

Looking for recommendations is typical information search behavior (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016). According to Lockie (2019) people are constantly looking for recommendations from peers, which is why WOM is extremely important in consumer behavior analysis. The author also stated that people are more likely to make a purchase, if a particular product or service have been recommended to them. Hence, the goal of the destination marketing is not only to make people want to visit a particular destination, but also to recommend it to other potential travelers, family or friends (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016). According to Qu and others (2011), a well marketed

destination image has a direct impact not only on the travelers' intentions to visit this destination but also on their intentions to recommend it to others. Terttunen (2017) stated that consumers are mostly affected by recommendations from their friends and family, especially when making destination choices. Moreover, travelers' intentions to revisit a destination are closely associated with them recommending this previously visited destination to their friends and family (Qu et al., 2011). Hence the hypothesis:

H7 Users are more likely to recommend destinations promoted by DMOs rather than by Influencers.

In this thesis, two major agents of image formation will be evaluated – namely DMOs and Influencers. The research will investigate, how the above-mentioned agents impact attitudes towards destinations, perception of destination images and, as a result, create a desire to visit a destination. Moreover, the two variables - DMOs and Influencers - will be compared by the means of data analysis and the hypotheses will be tested accordingly.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the research design and data collection process. This thesis investigated the problem of the influence of Influencers and DMOs on millennials tourism destination attitudes. In order to contrast two variables, the experimental design has been chosen for this thesis. Experimental design is a widely used approach, and it is the most suitable when comparing two independent variables (Bell, 2009). According to Bhattacherjee (2012) experimental approach is often called 'gold standard' in research area. In theory, experimental design is applied when the researcher evaluates the impact of one or several independent variables on a dependent variable. Subjects are randomly assigned to different independent variables – also referred as treatments. Finally, the researcher explores the influence of those treatments on the dependent variable. Moreover, experimental design ensures a highly objective analysis of the relationships between variables, since the research is designed in a controlled manner without the influence of the interviewer's opinion. (Bell, 2009). The observations of these causal relationships are then applied to pre-defined hypotheses. Therefore, the steps for the experiment design include presenting the research question, establishing hypotheses, determining ways of controlling the variability and proper representative sampling. Establishing causal relationships between independent and dependent variables is the primary cause for experimental approach (Bell, 2009).

In this paper the dependent variable is 'attitude towards a destination' or, in other words, a 'desire to visit this destination'. In the meantime, independent variables would be DMOs and Influencers, along with their characteristics (trustworthiness, informativeness, expertise, etc.). In such a way, this experiment research design identifies the relationships between variables, namely the effect of independent variables on dependent ones.

Laboratory experiments allow a researcher to be in control of the experiment. However, nowadays, laboratory experiments have been widely replaced by online experiments, that are very often done through various platforms such as MTurk or Qualtrics (Viglia, & Dolnicar, 2020). These platforms may have different purposes that vary from providing crowdsourcing to assisting with the survey design. There are many benefits for online experiments. For instance, in comparison to field experiments, it is relatively easy to prepare and conduct an experiment, as well as to control it.

From the philosophical point of view, this thesis is done in a postpositivism form of research. Generally, postpositivism focuses on theory verification, empirical observation and measurement. Therefore, previous knowledge on the subject has been critically reviewed and analysed. Then, this pre-existing knowledge gets tested and verified. The researcher will apply statistical procedures to test the hypotheses.

3.2 Selection of methodology

The author was faced with a choice of qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods design. While all three options have their own advantages and disadvantages, the experimental approach usually goes with a quantitative method. However, a qualitative method makes it possible for the researcher to identify individual differences and understand in-depth specifics of human behavior (Ahmad et al., 2019). Quantitative research method focuses on the facts and numbers, and makes it possible for the researcher to establish causal relationships. Furthermore, whereas quantitative and qualitative methods are basically the opposites and are used for different reasons, mixed methods bring together benefits of the both methods (Ahmad et al., 2019).

For this thesis, the quantitative research method has been chosen in order to provide numerical data, which is required for objective analysis of the causal effects. Overall, quantitative approach provides a numerical representation of observations, that can further explain and explore the studied phenomena. Gathered numerical data undergoes mathematical computations, that can further demonstrate presence or absence of certain relationships between variables (Ahmad et al., 2019).

The research design is fixed prior to the data collection process, ensuring the fixed design strategy. Fixed design is standard and often used in quantitative research, since the researcher is not allowed to change the way the data is being collected, ensuring scientific distance (Ahmad et al., 2019). In such a way, fixed design strategy provides more reliable and objective data results, which at the same time prevent researcher's intervention and limits potential bias. In a fixed design strategy, the research design takes a lot of time before the researcher can actually proceed with the data collection process. In comparison to the flexible strategy, which can be adaptive throughout the research, fixed design stays unchanged, minimizing bias and increasing validity and generalizability (Ahmad et al., 2019).

The current thesis is exploratory: firstly, through the comprehensive literature review, the existing knowledge is explored, namely theory about travel behaviour, information search,

Destination Marketing Organizations, Travel Influencers and Instagram. Through the exploration of the existing theories, the conceptual framework along with the hypotheses is created in order to outline the structure for the questionnaire, necessary for data collection. Furthermore, the hypotheses are tested by the means of an experiment.

3.3   Research instrument

In order to answer the research question, primary data was collected. An online survey has been chosen as a research instrument. There are many benefits of the survey approach, including a capability to access larger samples and specific populations (Wright, 2005). Moreover, participants' anonymity often ensures higher validity of the answers. Flexibility of such an approach is also highly relevant, especially during the pandemic time, since the survey can be easily done online. Online surveys in particular have lower costs, compared to paper surveys or other forms of data collection (Wright, 2005). Overall, surveys provide the researchers with the information gathered from a sample of participants; similar conclusions can then be applied to the entire population.

The current thesis represents experimental research which compares two independent variables – DMOs and Influencers, hence, there are two separate survey links, that provide access to two similarly structured surveys. One link leads to the survey with the questions about DMOs, whereas the second survey focuses on the Influencers. Both surveys are created through the online platform SoSci Survey. This platform provides necessary tools to build a survey with different question types, along with relevant data representation tools to analyze the results. Moreover, the SoSci tool provides free of charge services for non-commercial research – a requirement that is met by the current research.

The structure of both surveys was split into several categories. Firstly, both surveys start with a note from the researcher, guaranteeing participants' anonymity. There is also a study explanation provided for participants, clarifying the purpose of the study as well as basic instructions. Hence, the first question segment is about participants' travel behavior, which is structured in a matrix way, where participants have to choose which information sources they use when booking their accommodation, transportation, activities and sightseeing in the travel destination. The sources vary from personal, to social media and tourism boards. Afterwards, participants get the questions that were structured in accordance with the pre-set concepts (Appendix 1). In such a way, concepts included in the study are: informativeness, enjoyment, trustworthiness, expertise, benevolence, purchase intention, recommendation, authenticity

and existential authenticity respectively. Each concept is represented by several questions in the survey, to avoid errors. The base questions, in scientific language 'scale original', were taken from existing literature (Appendix 1). These base questions were then adapted for the current thesis. Since there are two questionnaires in this thesis, questions differ between two separate survey links: one poses the questions about Influencers, whereas another survey focuses on DMOs. However, it is important that questions are constructed in the same way and are absolutely identical, except for the 'influencers' or 'DMOs' variable. The measurement item for all of these questions is interval-level, with a 5-point Likert rating scale, where the response options included 'strongly disagree', 'somewhat disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', ' somewhat agree' and 'strongly agree'. At the last stage of both surveys, several demographic questions are asked, namely about participants' age, gender, education level, current occupation, along with the specific worker ID and survey code numbers – for tracking and compensation purposes. The measurement items included nominal items (occupation), ordinal responses (level of education), etc. Overall, the questions have a pre-determined sequence, in correspondence with the hypotheses; the order of the questions is not randomized.

1. Which sources do you generally use to collect information before your holidays?
Please check all that apply for each part of your trip.

	Accommodation	Transportation	Activities	Sightseeing
No information was necessary	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends, relatives	☐	☐	☐	☐
From the travel agent in the place of residence	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online information from the official destination website	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online information from travel agencies (e.g. expedia.com)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Information from blogs, etc.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instagram profiles of the official destination boards	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instagram Travel Influencers	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other social media	☐	☐	☐	☐
Public Figures	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other sources	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 13 Travel behavior survey matrix

Once two surveys are created and pre-tested, both links are used on the Amazon MTurk Platform to recruit the respondents. Although surveys are posted on the SoSci Survey platform, the 'workers' from Amazon MTurk have a direct access to the surveys through provided links. Amazon MTurk is a crowdsourcing platform that provides researchers with diverse respondents for their studies. This platform makes is possible to collect large amounts of data in a short time frame, as well as reach respondents with specific sampling criteria. MTurk platform acts as a

mediator between the researcher and respondents or in 'Amazon language' – workers. These workers decide for themselves whether they want to participate in the research and complete the questionnaire. In the same the researcher decides whether the response can be accepted. The anonymity is one of the key advantages of the online survey approach. According to Thomas and Clifford (2017) participants feel more comfortable in anonymous surveys, and provide more truthful responses, when asked personal or controversial questions. The potential drawbacks of using a platform such as MTurk could include getting unreliable data, when respondents do not take the survey seriously, but rather submit it as fast as possible, simply trying to get their profits.

In the case of this thesis, after getting the completed survey responses, they get validated by the researcher. The validation is based on the provided data. The researcher checks whether any data is missing, whether participants provided correct survey codes as well as their worker IDs, whether participants managed to reply to all the compulsory questions and lastly whether all required sampling conditions were met. In case a completed survey passed all the requirements, then it gets accepted and the respective worker gets paid by the researcher. Otherwise, if a response gets cancelled, then this particular response is deleted from the data set, the response is rejected and the participant does not get paid. Whereas this data collection process can end up being rather expensive, it is the researcher who decides on the size of compensations for the accepted responses. The compensation for current thesis was set at $0.4 for a completed and accepted response. The size of the compensation was decided after comparison to other studies in the field, and after checking compensations used by other researchers, who worked with Amazon Mturk as well, such as Kim and Kim (2021). After a response was submitted by a particular participant, the researcher has 3 working days to reject it, in case it does not qualify the criteria. Overall, this study requires 50 accepted responses per survey, hence 100 overall. Sampling frame for the research will be the first 50 respondents for each survey, who represent the target population and pass the necessary requirements. This sample size is arguemented by previous literature. It is common practice for researchers to use 50 participants per group when conducting experiments or quasi experiments.

3.4 Pilot tests

In order to pre-test the questionnaire a pilot study was conducted. SoSCi platform offers researchers a 'pre-test' mode for the surveys. This mode allows participants to provide comments to every section of the survey. Hence, since both surveys are identical (DMOs and Influencers) pilot study was conducted only on one survey link – 'Influencer' survey on particular. The link was sent to 12 acquaintances of the author, with a request for constructive feedback.

As a result, all pre-test phase participants filled out the survey. From the technical side, there were no issues. The researcher could export the data with collected answers, which also looked adequate and clear.

There were some adjustments made in accordance with the comments left by the participants of the pilot study. On the first page of the questionnaire, participants were presented with a 'welcome text', which was revised in accordance with the feedback. Therefore, the purpose of the study was explained in a clearer way. On the second page of the survey, the respondents were presented with a matrix. Its purpose was to understand tourist behavior tendencies, namely which information sources travelers use for different types of information. After the pilot tests, some sources that were more relevant to the current thesis were added (such as public figures, online blogs, etc.), whereas other less relevant sources were omitted (newspapers, etc.). On the page 3 to 5 of the questionnaire respondents were presented with a set of multiple-choice questions, few of which were revised, providing better wording or correcting spelling mistakes. In addition, it appeared that some questions were repetitive, hence to avoid duplication, they were omitted. Lastly, the last section of the questionnaire involved some demographic questions, which were also revised, providing broader inclusion of answer options. Timewise, pilot tests were conducted one week prior to the research data collection. The research data collection was done within 48 hours.

3.5   Sampling procedures

The author used Amazon MTurk platform to employ a certain number of participants from the crowdsourcing pool of the platform. Since these respondents decide for themselves whether they want to participate in the research and complete the questionnaire, the panel sampling method is used for the current research. According to Viglia and Dolnicar (2020), panel sampling is a form of convenience sampling, where the method's greatest advantage is the ease of access of the participants. In theory, panel sampling suggests hiring respondents from a particular website to participate in a survey. Panel sampling allows researchers to target particular participants and filter them based on desired criteria, which could be age, income, occupation, certain hobbies and other forms of segmentation (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). These participants volunteer to participate in the research for a certain compensation fee.

One of the major benefits of the panel sampling is that it allows the researcher to collect data in a shorter time period. Secondly, the costs of such an approach are quite low, in comparison to the traditional interviews, for instance. Moreover, participants are motivated to provide reliable

responses, since their contribution might be as well rejected (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). In such a way, if the researcher decides that the response is irrelevant to the current thesis, the researcher has 3 working days to reject this particular response. The rejection happens in case there is missing data in the submitted response or if the participant doesn't satisfy the pre-selected filtering criteria – in this case age of the participants and travel frequency. In the meantime, qualifying responses get accepted by the researcher. Therefore, participants are motivated to provide reliable information in order to earn financial compensation. The panel sampling method is also rather convenient, since the researcher is not required to chase participants, on the contrary, participants chase such opportunities to earn money.

Panel sampling is a form of non-probability sampling. In general, non-probability sampling means selecting samples based on certain criteria, rather than a completely random sample selection. Hence, not every person can participate in the research (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). The Amazon MTurk platform provides an advantage of selecting a particular target group by adding relevant criteria. The target group for the current thesis is millennials. Millennials were chosen for this thesis since they are the first generation to be born during the digital era and they are currently in the financially independent age to afford travel. Moreover, Millennials are one of the world's largest generations. According to Molinillo and others (2018) millennials are mostly influenced by the opinions of their peers in comparison with other generations, they share worldwide connections and are eager to explore the world (Molinillo et al., 2018). Furthermore, millennials are dependable on social media and Internet overall, and highly value access to the unlimited information. This behavior also suggests, that millennials prefer booking the vacations online after analyzing available travel information (Molinillo et al., 2018). Zhou and Xue based their study on the statistics that 35% of millennials in the United States of America search for travel-related information on Instagram. Although the birth years for millennials have been defined differently by various researchers, in this thesis Millennials are identified as people born between 1980 and 2000 – hence, current age between 21 and 42 years old (Goldman Sachs). It was not possible to set this particular age criteria on the Amazon MTurk platform, hence, the respondents were filtered after getting the responses. Respondents, whose age was out of the predefined range, were disqualified – therefore their answers were rejected. Furthermore, participants, must travel at least once per year. In the introduction of the survey, the description part clarifies that current research is for travelers and it is designed to explore tourist behavior and travel information search. The predefined criteria in the Amazon MTurk were set to 'travelling at least once per year'. The location for the respondents was limited to the United States. This decision has been made in order to get more reliable data, since the language of the

survey is English. Moreover, focusing on one country only provides more reliable data and helps to avoid cultural differences.

In such a way, the element of the target population would be an adult who meets all four criteria: 1. age between 21 and 42 years old; 2. travels out of the usual environment at least once per year; 3. Location - USA . In terms of extent, the geographic boundary of the sample is the United States of America. The sampling unit of the research is an adult, who meets the predetermined criteria. Amazon MTurk platform also offers its researchers to invite only 'Master Workers' or workers with a minimum number of successful 'HITs' (or completed questionnaires as per Amazon MTurk terminology). However, it was decided not to limit the required sample any further.

Disadvantages of the panel sampling method include potential self-selection bias, since the researcher has a right to either admit or decline the responses (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). Moreover, panel sampling bias assumes that only people who have enough time at the moment of the research can complete the questionnaire, leading to bias. Hence, the sample might become non-representative of the target population (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). Moreover, although according to American Association for Public Opinion Research, 80% of US population have access to Internet, there is still a tremendous difference in the behavior of Internet-users and non-users. This limitation threatens research representativeness. Moreover, an ethical issue occurs in case the sample is under-sized. Due to the budget constraints, researchers tend to limit the sample sizes, assuming that it will not have a negative effect on the study outcomes. However, under-sized samples may result in the representation bias. Hence, the researcher is faced with an issue of either arguing that the sample size is appropriate, or increasing the budget to obtain a larger sample size (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). Finally, since the researcher has a right to decline or accept any of the responses, the personal attitudes cannot affect inclusion and exclusion criteria, which should be strictly predetermined. Limitations of the panel sampling must be acknowledged when analyzing the results, in order to come up with correct statistics.

3.6   Field phase

Data collection process started on March 15th, 2022 when the survey was set online and got opened to the public. The last data entry was received on March 18th, hence data collection process took 4 days overall. At the moment of switching off the access to the surveys, there were 101 entries gathered in total, with 51 entries for the DMO survey and 50 entries for the Influencer survey. The data was then uploaded in SPSS and prepared for further data analysis.

4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

After all the responses were collected, data was uploaded into SPSS. SPSS is a statistical software, which gives researchers an opportunity to perform data analysis for big samples of data in almost no time. SPSS has a friendly interface and represents data analysis results in various forms. The main features available for users include descriptive statistics, factor analysis, regression, various tests, and other more comprehensive data analysis tools (IBM SPSS Statistics). Furthermore, Microsoft Excel was used for some additional computations.

4.1 Travel Behavior Analysis

Travel behavior data was gathered with the purpose of finding out participants' preferences, in particular which information sources they are using when looking for travel-related information. The results showed that when booking an accommodation, travelers mostly consult their friends and relatives as well as travel agencies. Travel influencers were used as an information source only by 8% of the participants. Instagram profiles of DMOs were used by 13% of the participants when looking for accommodations. Second part of the travel behavior analysis focused on the transportation services. The results showed that participants mostly (39%) consult travel agents when booking any type of transportation. Instagram Influencers were also a popular information source (34% of the respondents). Next, the researcher analyzed information sources when looking for activities at the destination. Interestingly, Instagram profiles of DMOs was the preferred information source with 50% of the participants using the channel. Travel influencers were also quite popular with 47% of the participants consulting them when looking for popular activities to do at the destination. Lastly, the information sources for sightseeing were investigated. According to the results, different social media were most frequently consulted when looking for sightseeing spots. Instagram accounts of DMOs as well as Travel Influencers were also used quite often by the participants, 24% and 21% respectively. Overall, the travel behavior analysis showed that people use a mix of different sources when looking for different types of information (Figure 14). There were no outstanding dominant information sources.

Information Sources Used

■ Transportation　■ Accommodation　■ Activities　■ Sightseeing

Other sources
- Transportation 28%
- Accommodation 10%
- Activities 39%
- Sightseeing 31%

Public Figures
- Transportation 26%
- Accommodation 13%
- Activities 51%
- Sightseeing 16%

Other social media
- Transportation 31%
- Accommodation 11%
- Activities 42%
- Sightseeing 29%

Instagram Travel Influencers
- Transportation 34%
- Accommodation 8%
- Activities 47%
- Sightseeing 21%

Instagram profiles of the official destination boards
- Transportation 23%
- Accommodation 14%
- Activities 50%
- Sightseeing 24%

Information from blogs, etc.
- Transportation 32%
- Accommodation 11%
- Activities 50%
- Sightseeing 17%

Online information from travel agencies (e.g. expedia.com)
- Transportation 37%
- Accommodation 18%
- Activities 37%
- Sightseeing 25%

Online information from the official destination website
- Transportation 29%
- Accommodation 13%
- Activities 49%
- Sightseeing 24%

From the travel agent in the place of residence
- Transportation 39%
- Accommodation 12%
- Activities 46%
- Sightseeing 19%

Friends, relatives
- Transportation 35%
- Accommodation 18%
- Activities 43%
- Sightseeing 21%

No information was necessary
- Transportation 29%
- Accommodation 14%
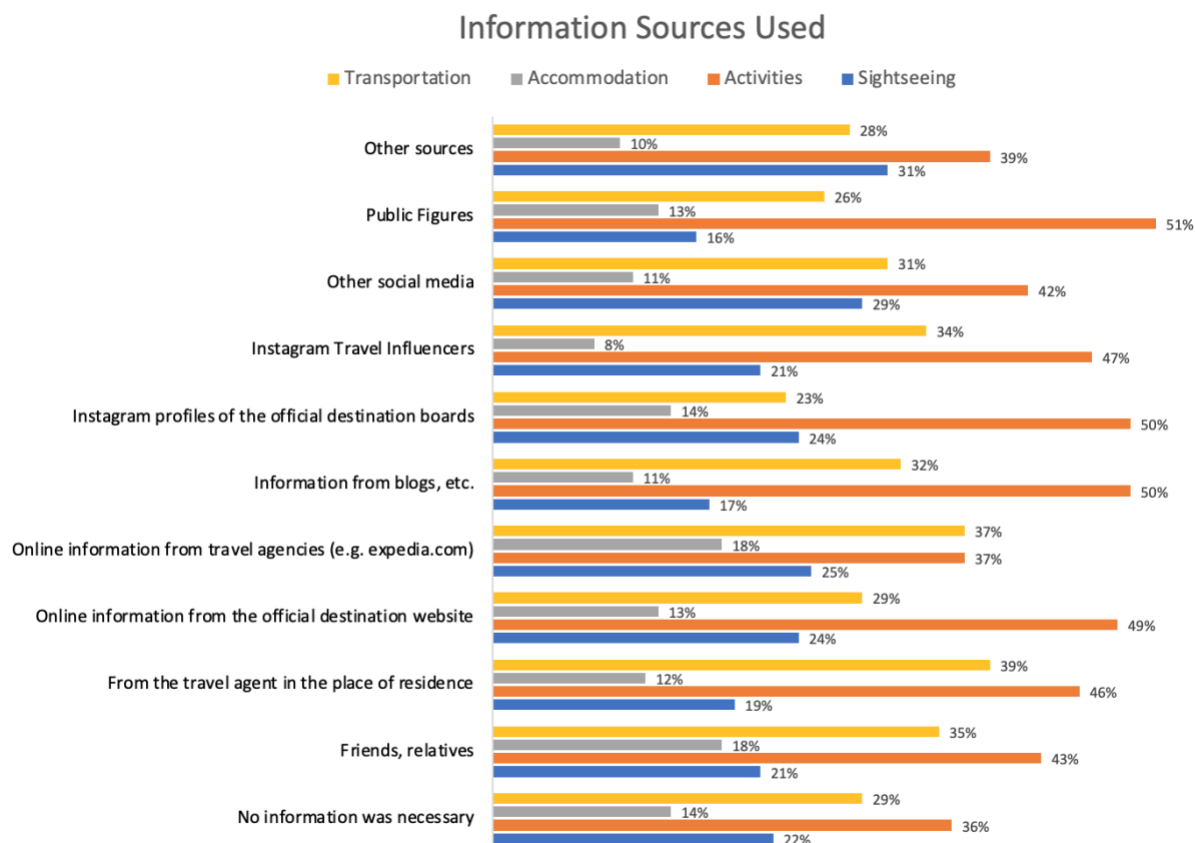- Activities 36%
- Sightseeing 22%

FIGURE 14 TRAVEL BEHAVIOR

4.2 Descriptive analysis

Furthermore, descriptive statistics were done. Firstly, socio-demographic data was analyzed in order to understand how the sample looks like. The results show that the sample is represented by 67% males and 34% females of the whole sample, where N is 101 (Figure 15). The predetermined age frame for the sample was set to between 21 and 41 years old, and the mean value of the sample is 30 years old. As per the education level, 88% of the sample had a completed Bachelor's, Master's or Ph.D. degree, whereas people with a completed Bachelor's degree represented more than half of the whole sample group (Figure 16). Moreover, the majority of the sample was self-employed 30%, a managerial employee 26% or an employee – 27% (Figure 17).

Gender

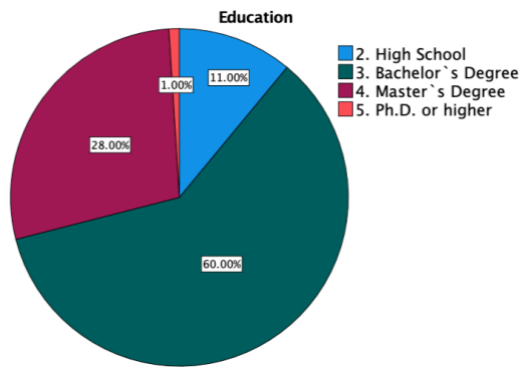|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	female	33	32.7%	32.7%	32.7%
	male	68	67.3%	67.3%	100.0%
Total		101	100.0%		

Figure 15 Gender Statistics
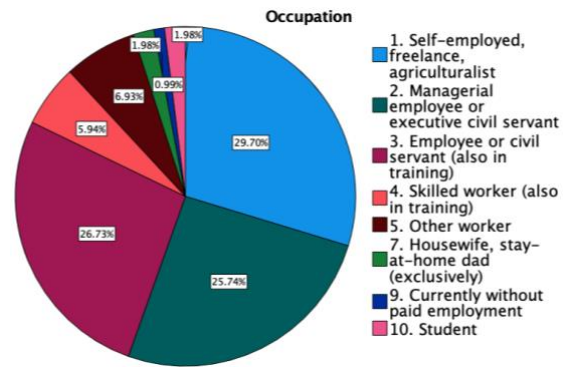
Figure 16 Education Piechart

Figure 17 Occupation Piechart

Before proceeding with the factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and the Barlett test were performed. The KMO measure checks if the data is good for the factor analysis. Since the measure is above 0.5 , in fact 0.857, it means the data is correlated and is appropriate for the factor analysis (Figure 18). Barlett-Test confirms the same outcome, with the significance below 0.05, hence, the data was applied for the factor analysis.

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.857
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1272.190
	df	325
	Sig.	<.001

FIGURE 18 KMO

The Rotated Component Matrix demonstrated the correlations between items and factors. It redistributed factor loadings into respective components. Overall, 8 factors have been identified. However, due to the large number of factors, the results were unclear. Hence, items were run separately with a corresponding factor to assess the loadings. The results show that informative items load in the factor informativeness, where the factor correlates with the items informativeness 1,2,3 (Figure 19). The second component – enjoyment – strongly correlates with the enjoyment items 1, 2, 3 (Figure 19). In the same way, trust, expertise, benevolence, recommendation and existential authenticity items all load in their respective factors. The highest score was for the Existential Authenticity, where the factor strongly correlated with the 2nd item. Overall, factor analysis demonstrated that all items successfully load into their respective factors.

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Informativeness 1	.56
Informativeness 2	.61
Informativeness 3	.65

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Enjoyment 1	.68
Enjoyment 2	.67
Enjoyment 3	.64

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Trust 1	.59
Trust 2	.58
Trust 3	.67

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Expertise 1	.64
Expertise 2	.59
Expertise 3	.67

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Recommendation 1	.57
Recommendation 2	.65
Recommendation 3	.63

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Existential Authenticity 1	.67
Existential Authenticity 2	.81
Existential Authenticity 3	.56

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Benevolence 1	.51
Benevolence 2	.59
Benevolence 3	.61
Benevolence 4	.66
Benevolence 5	.50

FIGURE 19 ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX

Furthermore, the communalities analysis was applied to see, how much each item could be explained by its respective factor. The analysis showed that parameters such as informativeness and enjoyment were well explained. In the meantime, existential authenticity had the lowest communality compared to other variables, which indicated that it is less explained by the respective factor than any of the other variables.

Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Informativeness 1	1.00	.79
Informativeness 2	1.00	.77
Informativeness 3	1.00	.70
Enjoyment 1	1.00	.78
Enjoyment 2	1.00	.83
Enjoyment 3	1.00	.77
Trust 1	1.00	.78
Trust 2	1.00	.80
Trust 3	1.00	.59
Expertise 1	1.00	.77
Expertise 2	1.00	.73
Expertise 3	1.00	.70
Benevolence 1	1.00	.76
Benevolence 2	1.00	.75
Benevolence 3	1.00	.74
Benevolence 4	1.00	.70
Benevolence 5	1.00	.68
Purchase Intention	1.00	.78
Recommendation 1	1.00	.78
Recommendation 2	1.00	.74
Recommendation 3	1.00	.65
Authenticity 1	1.00	.71
Authenticity 2	1.00	.70
Existential Authenticity 1	1.00	.74
Existential Authenticity 2	1.00	.73
Existential Authenticity 3	1.00	.61

FIGURE 20 COMMUNALITIES

Cronbach's Alpha measure is the most common measure, when analyzing internal consistency of the data (Laerd Statistics, 2020). It was used to check the reliability of the data. The measure was above 0.5 for factors such as informativeness, enjoyment, trust, expertise, benevolence, recommendation and existential authenticity (Figure 21). Hence, the questionnaire is relatively reliable. The only factor with the reliability below 0.5 was Authenticity, specifically 0.38.

Informativeness			Enjoyment			Trust		
Reliability Statistics			**Reliability Statistics**			**Reliability Statistics**		
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items		Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items		Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	
.57	3		.55	3		.66	3	

Expertise			Benevolence			Recommendation		
Reliability Statistics			**Reliability Statistics**			**Reliability Statistics**		
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items		Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items		Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	
.66	3		.68	5		.58	3	

Authenticity			Existential Authenticity		
Reliability Statistics			**Reliability Statistics**		
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items		Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	
.38	2		.63	3	

FIGURE 21 RELIABILITY TESTS

Furthermore, Crosstabs analysis was performed in order to find out Pearson Chi-Square. Pearson Chi-Square explains whether two nominal variables depend on each other. The results suggest that education and occupation are consistent with each other; age and occupation are also interdependent as well as age and education. All 3 combinations for the crosstabs analysis had a p-value below 0.05, hence it was significant. Gender, however, was independent from occupation and education with the p-value above 0.05.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2–sided)
Pearson Chi–Square	66.037[a]	21	<.001

FIGURE 22 CROSSTABS EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2–sided)
Pearson Chi–Square	272.942[a]	140	<.001

FIGURE 23 CROSSTABS AGE AND OCCUPATION

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2–sided)
Pearson Chi–Square	83.250[a]	60	.025

FIGURE 24 CROSSTABS EDUCATION AND AGE

4.3 Hypothesis testing

According to Diamantopoulos and Schlegelmilch (2002), when making comparisons, there are many different statistical tests that can be run. It is important to properly understand the nature of the research in order to choose the appropriate testing and, consequently, get reliable results. The first thing to highlight, is that this thesis aims to compare different groups of individuals or

objects across the same measures. There are two groups, namely DMOs and Influencers. The measures are represented through various questions about informativeness, enjoyment and other components. The level is measurement is ordinal, since all the questions are done using on a 5-point Likert scale. According to Diamantopoulos and Schlegelmilch (2002), in the current thesis, the best statistical test to compare variables would be Mann-Whitney U test. This test, sometimes also called 'Wilcoxon rank sum W test', is extremely useful when comparing two variables and when the sample size is relatively small.

4.3.1 Informativeness

Hypothesis 1 focuses on the informativeness component, and is tested throughout 3 independent variables, namely informativeness 1, informativeness and informativeness 3 (Appendix 1). Figure 25 demonstrates the results of the Mann-Whitney U test. Therefore, the results show that p-value for all 3 items is above 0.05, hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers in terms of the Informativeness, across all 3 different angles.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Informativeness 1 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.122	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Informativeness 2 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.492	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Informativeness 3 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.913	Retain the null hypothesis.

Figure 25 Hypothesis Test: Informativeness

Figures 26-28 visualize the differences between two groups across 3 informativeness variables. Mean Ranks' analysis confirms, that there is no significant difference between 2 groups across 3 independent variables.
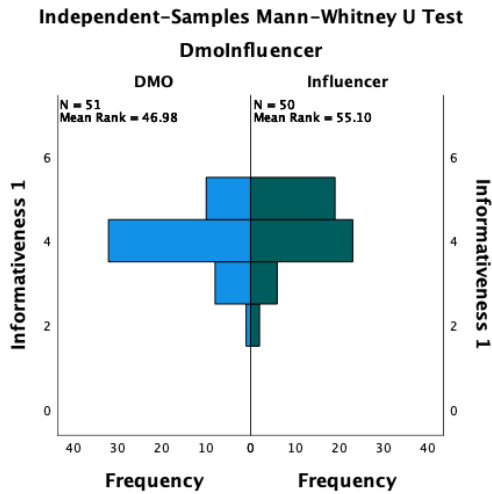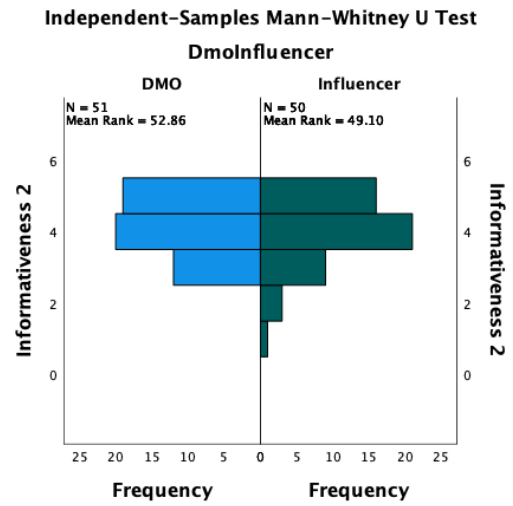
Figure 26 MW test: Informativeness 1

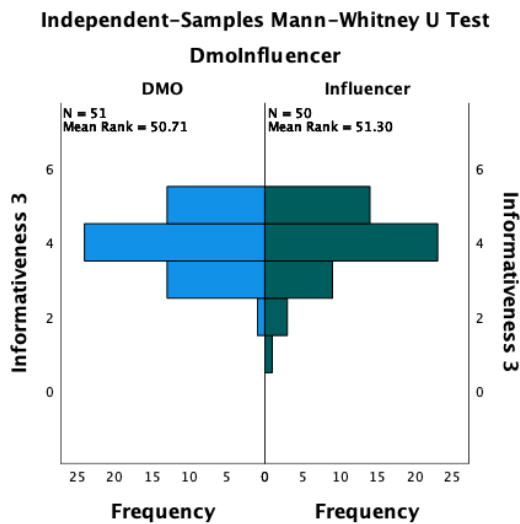Figure 27 MW test: Informativeness 2

FIGURE 28 MW TEST: INFORMATIVENESS 3

Furthermore, according to the Likert scale used for these items, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Figure 29 demonstrates mean values for the variables. Since, all means are around 4, it is safe to state that both DMOs and Influencers are considered to be informative sources. Hence, H1 is fully supported.

DmoInfluencer		Informativeness 1	Informativeness 2	Informativeness 3
DMO	Mean	4.00	4.14	3.96
	N	51	51	51
	Std. Deviation	.663	.775	.774
Influencer	Mean	4.18	3.96	3.92
	N	50	50	50
	Std. Deviation	.800	.968	.944
Total	Mean	4.09	4.05	3.94
	N	101	101	101
	Std. Deviation	.736	.876	.858

Figure 29 Mean Values Informativeness

4.3.2 Enjoyment

Hypothesis 2 focuses on the enjoyment component, and is tested throughout 3 independent variables, namely enjoyment 1, enjoyment 2 and enjoyment 3 (Appendix 1). Figure 30 demonstrates the results of the Mann-Whitney U test. Therefore, the results show that p-value for all 3 items is above 0.05, hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers in terms of the enjoyment, across all 3 different angles.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. [a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Enjoyment 1 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.575	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Enjoyment 2 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.700	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Enjoyment 3 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.841	Retain the null hypothesis.

FIGURE 30 HYPOTHESIS TEST: ENJOYMENT

Figures 31-33 visualize the differences between two groups across 3 enjoyment variables. Mean Ranks' analysis confirms, that there is no significant difference between 2 groups across 3 independent variables.
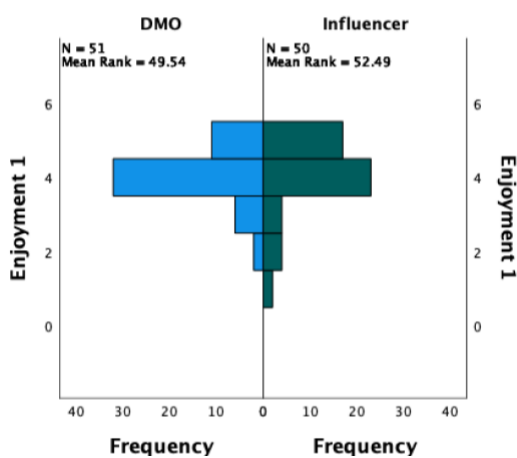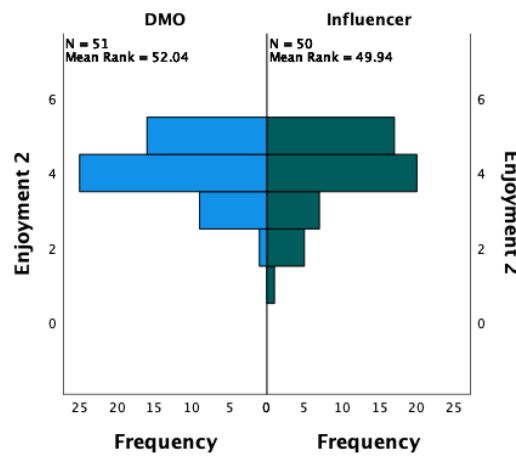

Figure 31 MW test: Enjoyment 1
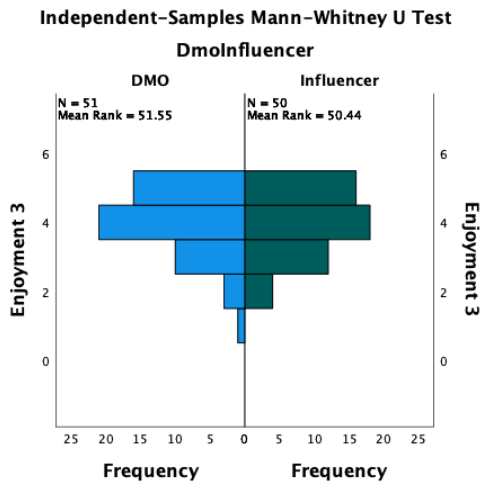

FIGURE 32 MW TEST: ENJOYMENT 2

FIGURE 33 MW TEST: ENJOYMENT 3

Furthermore, Figure 34 demonstrates mean values for the variables. Since, all means are around 4, it is safe to state that both DMOs and Influencers provide enjoyable content. The initial Hypothesis 2 suggested that Influencers' content is more enjoyable. However, according to the results, there is no significant difference between 2 channels. Hence, H2 is fully rejected.

Report

DmoInfluencer		Enjoyment 1	Enjoyment 2	Enjoyment 3
DMO	Mean	4.02	4.10	3.94
	N	51	51	51
	Std. Deviation	.707	.755	.968
Influencer	Mean	3.98	3.94	3.92
	N	50	50	50
	Std. Deviation	1.059	1.038	.944
Total	Mean	4.00	4.02	3.93
	N	101	101	101
	Std. Deviation	.894	.905	.951

FIGURE 34 MEAN VALUES ENJOYMENT

4.3.3 Trustworthiness

Hypothesis 3 focuses on the Trust component, and is tested throughout 3 independent variables, namely trust 1, trust 2 and trust 3 (Appendix 1). Figure 35 demonstrates the results of the Mann-Whitney U test. Therefore, the results show that p-value for variables Trust 1 and Trust 2 is above 0.05, hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers in terms of the Trust 1 and 2. However, P-value for Trust 3 is below 0.05, hence there is a significant difference between 2 groups – DMOs and Influencers.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Trust 1 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.376	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Trust 2 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.918	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Trust 3 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.032	Reject the null hypothesis.

Figure 35 Hypothesis Test: Trust

Figures 36-38 visualize the differences between two groups across 3 Trust variables. Mean Ranks' analysis confirms, that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers for the variables Trust 1 and 2. However, Figure 38 shows that there is difference in the mean ranks (DMOs = 56.72; Influencers= 45.17) for the variable Trust 3.
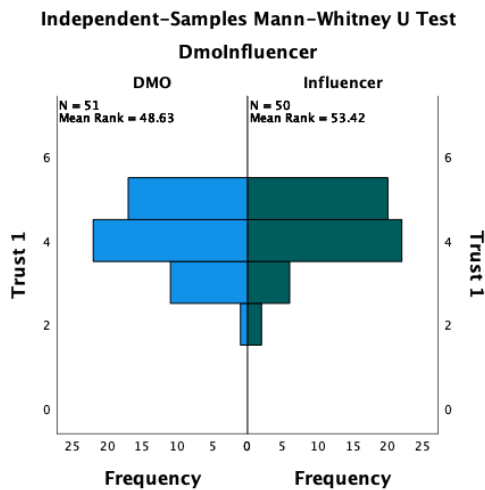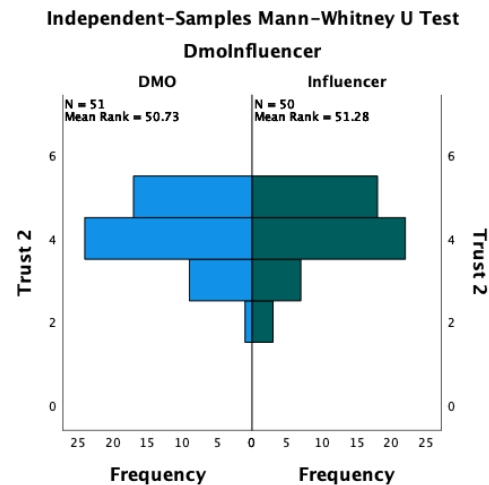

FIGURE 36 MW TEST: TRUST 1
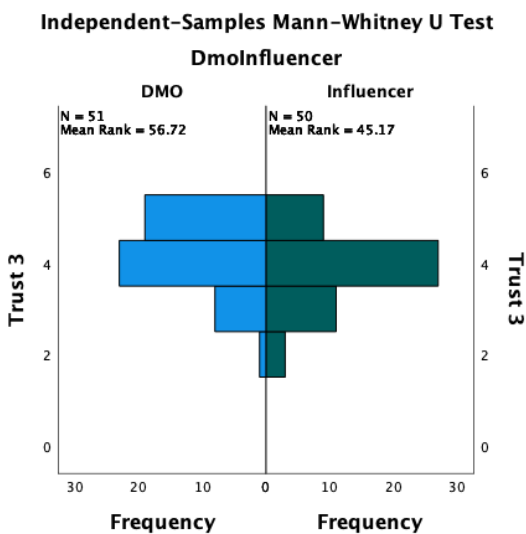

FIGURE 37 MW TEST: TRUST

Figure 38 MW TEST: Trust 3

Furthermore, Figure 39 demonstrates mean values for the variables. According to the given information, participants almost equally graded DMOs and Influencers for the variables of Trust 1 and 2. However, for the variable Trust 3, participants supported DMO more than influencers. The initial Hypothesis 3 suggested that Influencers' content is more trustworthy than the content of the DMOs. However, data suggested otherwise: for variables Trust 1 and 2 – both channels appeared almost equally trustworthy; Trust 3 – DMOs are more trustworthy than influencers. Therefore, the H3 is fully rejected.

Report

DmoInfluencer		Trust 1	Trust 2	Trust 3
DMO	Mean	4.08	4.12	4.18
	N	51	51	51
	Std. Deviation	.796	.765	.767
Influencer	Mean	4.20	4.10	3.84
	N	50	50	50
	Std. Deviation	.808	.863	.792
Total	Mean	4.14	4.11	4.01
	N	101	101	101
	Std. Deviation	.800	.811	.794

FIGURE 39 MEAN VALUES TRUST

4.3.4 Expertise

Hypothesis 4 focuses on the Expertise component, and is tested throughout 3 independent variables, namely Expertise 1, Expertise 2 and Expertise 3 (Appendix 1). Figure 40 demonstrates the results of the Mann-Whitney U test. Therefore, the results show that the p-value for all 3 items is above 0.05, hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers in terms of the Expertise, from all 3 angles.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Expertise 1 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.845	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Expertise 2 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.559	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Expertise 3 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.535	Retain the null hypothesis.

FIGURE 40 HYPOTHESIS TEST: EXPERTISE

Figures 41-43 visualize the differences between two groups across 3 Expertise variables. Mean Ranks' analysis confirms, that there is no significant difference between 2 groups across 3 independent variables.
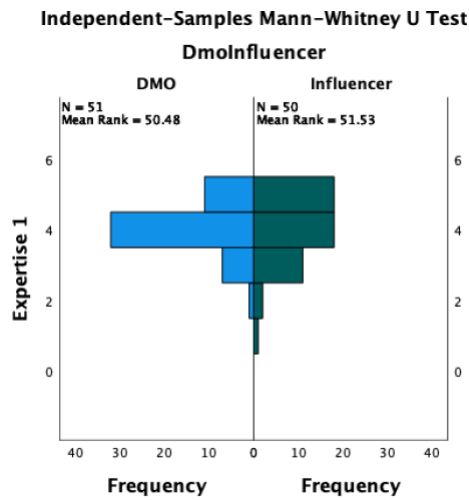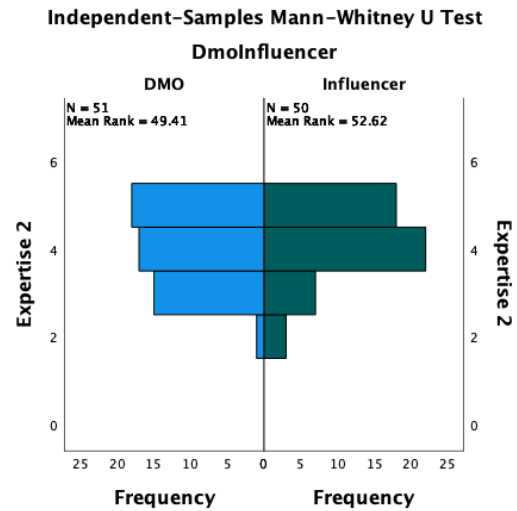
FIGURE 41 MW TEST: EXPERTISE 1

FIGURE 42 MW TEST: EXPERTISE 2
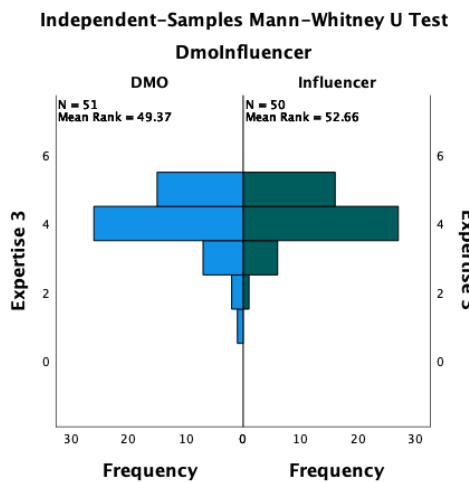
FIGURE 43 MW TEST: EXPERTISE 3

Furthermore, Figure 44 demonstrates mean values for the variables. Since, all means are around 4, it is safe to state that both DMOs and Influencers are considered to have expertise. The initial Hypothesis 4 suggested that both Influencers and DMOs have expertise in travel. Hence, H4 is fully supported.

Report

DmoInfluencer		Expertise 1	Expertise 2	Expertise 3
DMO	Mean	4.04	4.02	4.02
	N	51	51	51
	Std. Deviation	.662	.860	.883
Influencer	Mean	4.00	4.10	4.16
	N	50	50	50
	Std. Deviation	.969	.863	.710
Total	Mean	4.02	4.06	4.09
	N	101	101	101
	Std. Deviation	.824	.858	.801

Figure 44 Mean Values Expertise

4.3.5 Benevolence

Hypothesis 5 focuses on the Benevolence component, and is tested throughout 5 independent variables, namely Benevolence 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (Appendix 1). Figure 45 demonstrates the results of the Mann-Whitney U test. Therefore, the results show that p-value for all 5 items is above 0.05, hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers in terms of the Benevolence, from all 5 angles.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Benevolence 1 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.711	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Benevolence 2 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.497	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Benevolence 3 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.241	Retain the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of Benevolence 4 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.688	Retain the null hypothesis.
5	The distribution of Benevolence 5 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.765	Retain the null hypothesis.

FIGURE 45 HYPOTHESIS TEST: BENEVOLENCE

Figures 46-50 visualize the differences between two groups across 5 Benevolence variables. Mean Ranks' analysis confirms, that there is no significant difference between 2 groups across 5 independent variables.

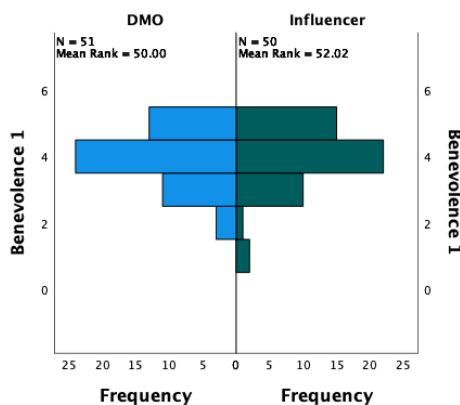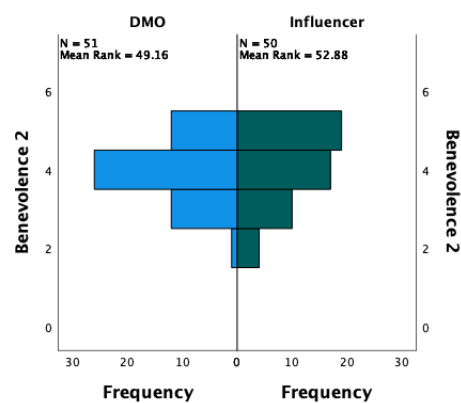Figure 46 MW TEST: Benevolence 1
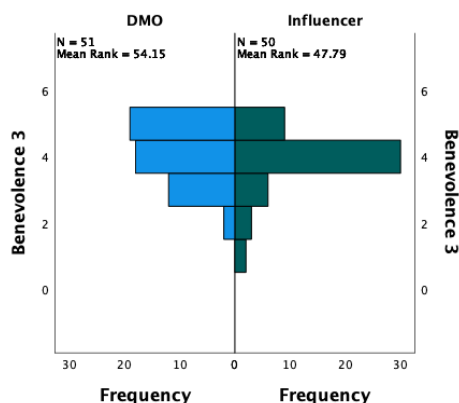

FIGURE 47 MW TEST: BENEVOLENCE 2

Figure 48 MW TEST: Benevolence 3
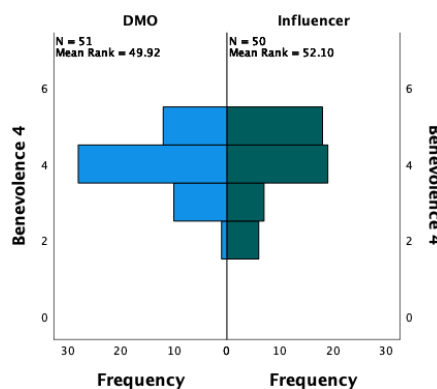
Figure 49 MW TEST: Benevolence 4
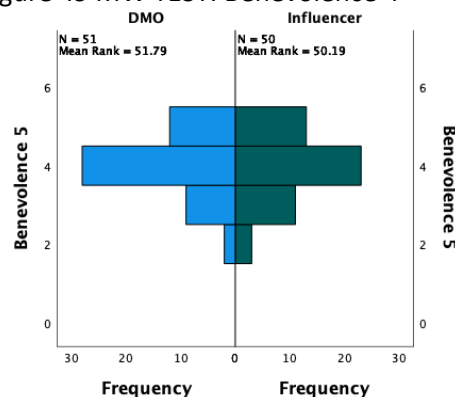
FIGURE 50 MW TEST: BENEVOLENCE 5

Furthermore, Figure 51 demonstrates mean values for the variables. Since, all means are fluctuating between 3.82 and 4.06, it is safe to state that both DMOs and Influencers are considered to be benevolent. The initial Hypothesis 5 suggested that both Influencers and DMOs are benevolent. Hence, H5 is fully supported.

Report

DmoInfluencer		Benevolence 1	Benevolence 2	Benevolence 3	Benevolence 4	Benevolence 5
DMO	Mean	3.92	3.96	4.06	4.00	3.98
	N	51	51	51	51	51
	Std. Deviation	.845	.747	.881	.721	.761
Influencer	Mean	3.94	4.02	3.82	3.98	3.92
	N	50	50	50	50	50
	Std. Deviation	.978	.958	.941	1.000	.853
Total	Mean	3.93	3.99	3.94	3.99	3.95
	N	101	101	101	101	101
	Std. Deviation	.908	.854	.915	.866	.805

Figure 51 Mean Values Benevolence

4.3.6 Purchase / Visit Intention

Purchase intention as an outcome of marketing activities was extensively explored in previous studies (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). In this thesis the researcher tested whether

enjoyment, informativeness, benevolence, trustworthiness and expertise of DMOs and Influencers have an impact on the desire to visit a destination. Therefore, linear regression model was applied to identify which variables impact purchase intention. Figure 52 demonstrates R^2 as well as Beta values for the tested variables. R^2 was calculated in order to understand how many percfent of the dependent variable (purchase intention) is explained by the independent variables (informativeness, enjoyment, etc.). In the meantime, Beta-value shows how much the outcome variable (purchase intention) changes , when predictors (informativeness, enjoyment, etc.) change by one item.

Purchase Intention					
Independent Variable	R^2	Beta	Independent Variable	R^2	Beta
Informativeness 1	0.2	0.45	Expertise 1	0.32	0.56
Informativeness 2	0.12	0.34	Expertise 2	0.12	0.35
Informativeness 3	0.24	0.49	Expertise 3	0.21	0.46
Enjoyment 1	0.05	0.23	Benevolence 1	0.05	0.22
Enjoyment 2	0.32	0.56	Benevolence 2	0.19	0.44
Enjoyment 3	0.06	0.012	Benevolence 3	0.04	0.19
Trust 1	0.14	0.38	Benevolence 4	0.16	0.4
Trust 2	0.16	0.41	Benevolence 5	0.09	0.3
Trust 3	0.17	0.41			

FIGURE 52 R SQUARED AND BETA VALUES

Furthermore, Figure 53 demonstrates the results of the regression analysis, where items for informativeness, enjoyment, expertise, trust and benevolence were tested separately as independent variables in order to analyze their impact on the dependent variable Purchase Intention.

H6 (a) suggests that the above-mentioned variables of Influencers have an impact on the desire to visit a destination. According to the results (Figure 53), Informativeness, Trust and Expertise do have an impact on the purchase intention across all tested items (p-value for all items below 0.05). In the meantime, Enjoyment and Benevolence items only partially impact the purchase intention, where variables Enjoyment 1, Enjoyment 3, Benevolence 3 do not have a significant impact. Hence, H6 (a) is partially supported.

H6 (b) suggests that the above-mentioned variables of DMOs have an impact on the desire to visit a destination. According to the results (Figure 53), Informativeness, Trust and Expertise do have a significant impact on the purchase intention across all tested items (p-value for all items below 0.05). In the meantime, Enjoyment and Benevolence items only partially impact the

purchase intention, where variables Enjoyment 1, Enjoyment 3, Benevolence 1 and Benevolence 5 do not have a significant impact. Hence, H6 (b) is partially supported.

Independent Variable	Influencer Significance p-value	DMO Significance p-value
Informativeness 1	<.001	<.001
Informativeness 2	<.001	<.001
Informativeness 3	.008	.039
Enjoyment 1	.056	.314
Enjoyment 2	<.001	<.001
Enjoyment 3	.066	.094
Trust 1	.048	<.001
Trust 2	.006	<.001
Trust 3	.016	<.001
Expertise 1	<.001	<.001
Expertise 2	.003	.03
Expertise 3	<.001	.01
Benevolence 1	.054	.289
Benevolence 2	.002	<.001
Benevolence 3	.545	.024
Benevolence 4	.013	<.001
Benevolence 5	.016	.074

FIGURE 53 REGRESSION MODEL PURCHASE INTENTION

4.3.7 Recommendation

Hypothesis 7 focuses on the Recommendation component, and is tested throughout 3 independent variables, namely Recommendation 1, 2, 3, (Appendix 1). Figure 54 demonstrates the results of the Mann-Whitney U test. The results show that p-value for all 3 items is above 0.05, hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between DMOs and Influencers in terms of the Recommendation, from all 3 angles.

Hypothesis Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Recommendation 1 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.441	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Recommendation 2 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.642	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Recommendation 3 is the same across categories of DmoInfluencer.	Independent–Samples Mann–Whitney U Test	.796	Retain the null hypothesis.

FIGURE 54 HYPOTHESIS TEST: RECOMMENDATION

Figures 55-57 visualize the differences between two groups across 3 Recommendation variables. Mean Ranks' analysis confirms, that there is no significant difference between 2 groups across 3 independent variables.
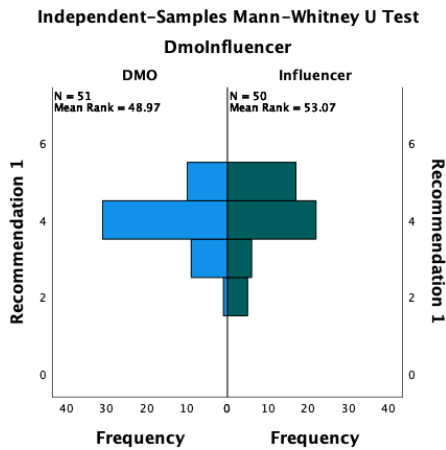

FIGURE 55 MW TEST: RECOMMENDATION 1
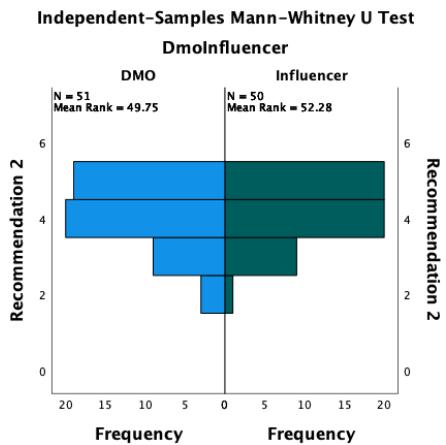
FIGURE 56 MW TEST: RECOMMENDATION 2
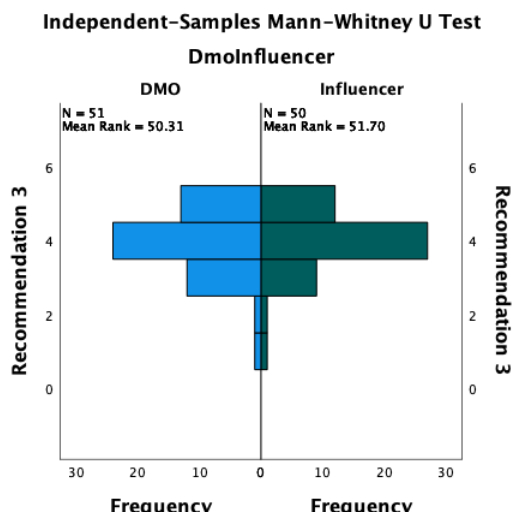
Figure 57 MW TEST: Recommendation 3

Moreover, Figure 58 demonstrates mean values for the variables. Since, all means are fluctuating between 3.92 and 4.18, it is safe to state that content produced by both DMOs and Influencers is further recommended by users. The initial Hypothesis 7 suggested that users are more likely to recommend destinations promoted by DMOs rather than by Influencers. Hence, H7 is fully rejected.

FIGURE 58 MEAN VALUES RECOMMENDATION

Furthermore, Figure 59 summarizes the results of Hypotheses Testing.

#	Hypotheses	Test	Component	Result
H1	There is no difference in the level informativeness of the posts by DMOs and Influencers.	Mann-Whitney U Test	Informativeness	Fully supported
H2	Information provided by Influencers is more enjoyable than information provided by DMOs.	Mann-Whitney U Test	Enjoyment	Fully rejected

H3	Influencers are more trustworthy than DMOs.	Mann-Whitney U Test	Trustworthiness	Fully rejected
H4	Travel Influencers and DMOs are both experts in travel.	Mann-Whitney U Test	Expertise	Fully supported
H5	Both DMOs and Influencers are benevolent.	Mann-Whitney U Test	Benevolence	Fully supported
H6 (a)	Enjoyment, informativeness, benevolence, trustworthiness and expertise of the Influencers' content have an impact on the desire to visit a destination.	Linear Regression	Purchase intention	Partially supported
H6 (b)	Enjoyment, informativeness, benevolence, trustworthiness and expertise of the DMOs' content have an impact on the desire to visit a destination.	Linear Regression	Purchase intention	Partially supported
H7	Users are more likely to recommend destinations promoted by DMOs rather than by Influencers.	Mann-Whitney U Test	Recommendation Intention	Fully rejected

FIGURE 59 HYPOTHESES TESTING RESULTS

5   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Results of the travel behavior analysis confirmed that people prefer using a mix of channels when looking for travel information. Interestingly, the combinations of channels vary depending on which information tourists are looking for. In such a way, for accommodation and transportation services people still prefer to consult Travel Agents. These results contradict the existing literature, since several academics stated that user-generated content is perceived as a more credible and trustworthy source of information, compared to travel agents (Fotis et al., 2012). Furthermore, for the sightseeing information as well as activities at the destination , people tend to consult social media, inclusive of travel influencers and Instagram profiles of the DMOs. Overall, Instagram profiles of DMOs appeared to be slightly more popular for the information search compared to travel influencers. However, it is important to keep in mind that travelers tend to use a mix of channels when looking for travel information; same results were demonstrated in the existing literature. According to Terttunen (2017), people generally prefer to observe several different information sources, before making any decisions, which was confirmed in the current thesis.

The results of the comparison between DMOs and Influencers demonstrated that there is less difference than expected according to the existing literature in the way the two channels are perceived by the public. In such a way, both DMOs and Influencers are perceived as informative sources by the respondents of the current thesis. Same is confirmed in the existing literature. In the same way, both channels were found to be experts in the travel industry.

Furthermore, according to the previous studies, production of the enjoyable content is the core of the influencer marketing (Kim & Kim, 2021). Hence, the hypothesis was tested whether influencers' content is more enjoyable than DMO's content. The results of the research suggested, that both channels provide enjoyable content, supporting the theory by Lou and Kim (2019), who stated that enjoyment and entertainment value of the social media content is highly important for a successful marketing campaign.

The component of trust was tested next. Since many researchers suggested that user-generated content is more trustworthy than content from the service providers or tourism industry professionals (Narangajavana et al., 2017; Lockie, 2019; Fotis et al., 2012), the hypothesis suggested that Influencers are more trustworthy than DMOs. The results were not equal throughout the testing items; whereas, two items suggested that both Influencers and DMOs are trustworthy, one item contradicted the hypothesis, suggesting that DMOs were more

trustworthy than Influencers. Interestingly, both channels were found to be benevolent to their audiences. According to the literature, benevolence is an honest desire to help others and a necessary component of trust (Dickinger, 2011; Casalo et al., 2011), which fits this study's results. Moreover, according to Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) benevolence is highly important in personal channels, including user-generated content.

According to the previous literature, tourists' intention to visit a destination correlates with various factors such as trustworthiness of the information source, its expertise, credibility and authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Moreover, according to Chen and others (2014) the intention to visit a destination is positively affected by interesting and informative content produced by travel experts. Hence, this thesis tested which concepts affect the tourists' intentions to visit a destination. It was established that informativeness, trustworthiness and expertise of the source positively impact the intention to travel, which agrees with the pre-existing literature. However, benevolence and enjoyment didn't have a clear effect on tourists' destination attitudes. Further research is suggested to identify whether these concepts have any influence on the destination choices. Whereas the results for two groups – DMOs and Influencers – were similar in terms of which concepts affect the intention to visit a destination, there were still minor differences. Literature suggests that the use of the influencers is beneficial in persuading potential tourists to visit a destination (Kim & Kim, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Masuda, 2022), and same conclusions are made as a result of this thesis. Moreover, there is almost in difference in the likelihood of tourists to recommend destinations promoted by either DMOs or Influencers. According to Berhanu and Raj (2020) recommendations from friends and relatives have one of strongest effects on the tourists' destination attitudes; hence, it is important that the content by influencers and DMOs gets recommended further. Therefore, both channels can affect someone's attitude towards a destination.

Consequently, the advice for the travel destinations is to implement both channels in their marketing activities. Technologies change the world and affect consumer behavior. In order to succeed, DMOs have to adapt to the new normal and accept that influencers play an important role in persuading consumers (Stoldt et al., 2019). Whereas DMOs remain an important source of information for travelers - as per the results of this thesis, collaborations with the Influencers can be adapted in order to increase awareness and to reach new market segments (Stoldt et al., 2019). Furthermore, influencer marketing can help DMOs to regain their control over destination branding and to guide the e-WOM by the means of influencers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2019).

6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

6.1 Contribution to knowledge in the field

Influencer marketing has been widely researched in the recent years. However, there is a gap in literature about the tourism influencer marketing; particularly, what role does the influencer marketing play comparing to other marketing channels. The current thesis attempted to compare Influencer marketing and DMOs, in order to understand the differences in public perception as well as in the marketing power of the two channels.

The analysis was based on several independent concepts which were compared across two groups. This thesis brought up such important factors as trustworthiness, expertise, informativeness and benevolence of the information sources, as well as enjoyment and authenticity. The results provided knowledge that there is little to know difference in terms of trust and informativeness between the two channels, despite the pre-existing literature. Although previous researchers argued that user-generated content is much more trustworthy than the traditional information sources, the results of the thesis confirmed that DMOs are also considered trustworthy and benevolent. Moreover, regardless of the previous statements, that DMOs are experts in travel, travel influencers also gained expertise in the field and are considered as experts in their niche markets. Whereas entertainment and enjoyable content was considered to be the necessary trait for an influencer, the results suggested that DMOs are also entertaining and provide enjoyable content. Hence, in accordance with the literature, social media advertising generally requires entertainment value, as well as informativeness value and credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Furthermore, it is important to note, that tourists still use the combination of the information sources for their travel information search, whereas the source mix varies according to the type of information required. This knowledge is important to remember, when analyzing any of the marketing channels in the travel and tourism industry.

6.2 Implications for Relevant Stakeholders

The goal of this study was to compare two channels and provide reliable advices for the practitioners. The results provide valuable data for both DMOs and Influencers, as well as other travel professionals (hoteliers, etc.). This data is applicable for destinations, to plan and strategize their marketing activities.

The research conducted in this thesis benefits DMOs by showcasing what is important for the travelers when looking for destinations. While Informativeness and expertise are expected from DMOs, trustworthiness, benevolence and enjoyment appeared to be important factors as well. Although, according to some academics DMOs lose their influence in the destination marketing, participants of the study still consult DMOs' social media for travel tips. Importantly, DMOs are even slightly more trusted than Influencers. DMOs should focus on these concepts and make sure they maintain high standards in terms of trustworthiness and other indicators.

In the meantime, Influencers represent an expert information source, which is considered to be benevolent and informative. Whereas, previous research stated that user-generated content is more trustworthy than DMOs information, the results of the study do not show any privilege of Influencers over DMOs in terms of their persuasiveness. The study suggests for DMOs to collaborate with the travel Influencers. Both channels provide affect customers' purchase intentions as well as willingness to recommend the promoted destinations to their friends and family. Moreover, the rise of intermediaries that connect and bind DMOs and Influencers might be beneficial to produce more profitable and fitting partnerships. Furthermore, when talking about destinations in a narrower way, resorts might want to promote themselves through both DMOs and influencers.

7 LIMITATIONS

The major limitation of this study is a relatively small sample size. Although it is common to use 50-participant groups for experiments, 101 participants in total is rather limited to provide reliable results and generalize the outcomes. Whereas hypotheses were tested and certain conclusions were drawn, larger samples might have provided more precise data, especially for benevolence and enjoyment indicators which had unclear results.

Furthermore, the survey design was rather long, with different section and high number of questions, which could have threatened reliability of the answers and did not necessarily provide true opinions of the respondents. According to Thomas and Clifford (2017), crowd-sourcing for online surveys, such as Amazon MTurk crowd-sourcing, threatens data quality, however it is not less reliable than traditional research methods or lab experiments. The research method being an online survey, could have also created a bias among participants by excluding the sample or including the technology-driven people, hence, attitudes towards social media (Instagram, Influencers, etc.) could be biased.

8 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this thesis open doors for future research. Whereas the current thesis presented rather broad analysis and results, future studies can focus on the discussed concepts separately.

Firstly, in this thesis, the term 'destination' was rather broad, which could apply to a city, nation or a specific spot. Future studies might find the differences in marketing channels for different destination types. For instance, according to Stolz et al. (2019), influencer marketing can be implemented by DMOs in order to promote specific spots, hotels or even airlines (Stoldt et al., 2019).

Secondly, the result of the study suggested that tourists use different channel mixes for different information. Hence, future studies can limit the searched information to accommodation or activities, for instance, and then analyze marketing channels for this specific information. The potential results might indicate how to improve in financial resources allocation when organizing marketing strategies.

Furthermore, this thesis focused on different concepts such as informativeness, enjoyment, expertise, benevolence and trustworthiness. Further research might focus on each concept separately, in order to provide additional insights for the practitioners and academics. Focusing on each concept separately would also provide guidelines for better allocation of the information across different channels. Specifically, since the results about benevolence and enjoyable content of the information sources have been unclear, additional research on these concepts would provide more information on how these factors impact tourists' intentions to visit a destination. Moreover, regarding the benevolence of the information source, according to Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018), Instagram users experience higher levels of benevolence compared to the non-users, they expect and believe in genuineness and kindness of the other users. Hence, benevolence should be tested not only among technology and Instagram users, but among a broader sample for more reliable results. In addition, authenticity of DMOs and Influencers hasn't been tested as a factor influencing tourists' intentions to travel or recommend destinations, due to the overload of the required analysis. Further research could provide useful information on the authenticity concept as well as on the existential authenticity.

Moreover, this research mainly focused on Instagram when talking about influencer marketing. However, since Influencers also use different social media, it would be useful to compare which information has more effect on different social media channels. For instance, TikTok has recently gained popularity among younger generations and influencers are actively increasing their presence on this platform.

In the context of technological advancement, this research was done through an online survey link, which could create bias in regards to the information channels (social media versus print media).

Lastly, the conclusions of this thesis included suggestions for the Influencers and DMOs collaborations. There is already existing literature on how DMOs might include influencer marketing in their strategies, however, further research could provide more details on how to pick right influencers for the right information type (Terttunen, 2017; Stolz et al., 2019.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Questionnaire Formation

Author	Concept	Scale Original (Original questions)	Influencer	DMO
Lockie, 2019	Informativeness	It is a good source of information.	Influencers are a good source of information	DMOs are a good source of information
		It supplies relevant information	Influencers supply relevant information	DMOs supply relevant information
Yuan & Lou, 2020		it provides timely information	Influencers provide timely information	DMOs provide timely information
Voss et al	Enjoyment	The information is enjoyable.	Information provided by Influencers is enjoyable.	Information provided by DMOs is enjoyable.
		The information is entertaining.	Information provided by Influencers is entertaining.	Information provided by DMOs is entertaining.
		The information is exciting.	Information provided by Influencers is exciting.	Information provided by DMOs is exciting.
Lockie, 2019	Trustworthiness	How much do you trust the institutes and people 'running blogs and vlogs?	How much do you trust Influencers?	How much do you trust DMOs?
		I consider this YouTuber trustworthy	I consider Influencers trustworthy	I consider DMOs trustworthy
Masuda, 2022		I feel this YouTuber is honest	I feel Influencers are honest	I feel DMOs are honest
Yuan & Lou, 2020	Expertise	I consider XYZ sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.	I consider Travel Influencers sufficiently experienced to make assertions about travel.	I consider DMOs sufficiently experienced to make assertions about travel.
		I consider ____ an expert on his/her area	I consider Travel Influencers to be experts in travel.	I consider DMOs to be experts in travel.
		I feel ____ is competent to make assertions about things that they are good at.	I feel Travel Influencers are competent to make assertions about travel.	I feel DMOs are competent to make assertions about travel.
		I feel ____ knows a lot about their areas.	I feel Travel Influencers know a lot about travel.	I feel DMOs know a lot about travel.
	Benevolence	I expect the tourist board is ready and willing to assist and support travellers.	I expect that Travel Influencers are ready and willing to assist and support travellers.	I expect that DMOs are ready and willing to assist and support travellers.
		I expect that tourist boards have good intentions toward me.	I expect Influencers to have good intentions toward me.	I expect DMOs to have good intentions toward me.
		I expect that the tourist board puts customers' interests before their own.	I expect that the Influencers put customers' interests before their own.	I expect that the DMOs put customers' interests before their own.
		I expect that the tourist board's intentions are benevolent.	I expect that the Influencer's intentions are benevolent.	I expect that the DMO's intentions are benevolent.
		I expect that the tourist board is well meaning	I expect that Influencers are well meaning.	I expect that DMOs are well meaning.
Masuda, 2022	Purchase Intention	I think I will buy products or services recommended by this Youtuber	I think I will visit the destination recommended by the Influencer.	I think I will visit the destination recommended by the DMO.
Sokolova & Kefi, 2020		I would encourage people close to me to buy products promoted by the blogger	I would encourage people close to me to visit the destination promoted by Influencer.	I would encourage people close to me to visit the destination promoted by DMO.
Stepchenkova, Belyaeva 2020	Recommendation	I am going to talk positively about this destination	I am going to talk positively about the destination promoted by an Influencer.	I am going to talk positively about the destination promoted by a DMO
		I would leave a like/positive comment.	I would leave a like/positive comment for Influencer's Instagram post.	I would leave a like/positive comment for DMO's Instagram post.
		I would recommend this destination to family/friends.	I would recommend the destination promoted by an Influencer to family/friends	I would recommend the destination promoted by a DMO to family/friends.
Newman & Dhar 2014	authenticity	When thinking of what it means to be authentic, you would have to say that this destination information is:	When thinking of what it means to be authentic, you would have to say that destination information provided by Influencer is:	When thinking of what it means to be authentic, you would have to say that destination information provided by DMO is:
		authentic (completetly agree - completely disagree)	authentic (completetly agree - completely disagree)	authentic (completetly agree - completely disagree)
		genuine (completely agree - completely disagree)	genuine (completely agree - completely disagree)	genuine (completely agree - completely disagree)
Lee, Suang, Phau, Lim, 2019	Existential Authenticity	In this place one can experience local culture.	In destinations promoted by Influencers one can experience local culture.	In destinations promoted by DMOs one can experience local culture.
		In this place one can have authentic experiences.	In destinations promoted by Influencers one can have authentic experieneces.	In destinations promoted by DMOs one can have authentic experieneces.
		In this place one feels connected with history.	In destinations promoted by Influencers one feels connected with history.	In destinations promoted by DMOs one feels connected with history.