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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PEOPLE`S TRAVEL DECISIONS-MAKING

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Abstract: Social media is a key source of information and inspiration within the tourism industry. This study investigates the impact of social media and how it affects peoples' travel decisions. It looks specifically at how it affects destination choice, inspiration and social media. A literature review was conducted to identify relevant and focused empirical studies. Secondary data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The study found that social media plays a key role when making decisions about travel. 75% of respondents said they were influenced by social media when choosing where they go. 67% of travellers said they look for inspiration on Instagram and 74% use social media whilst on their holiday. The study also shows that television, news and movies along with family and friends are still key influencers. There is also shown to be a large importance of social media communication and eWOM. This study would appear to suggest that social media can be a source of inspiration for travelling but also a place people share their experiences. As this study was descriptive there are no direct correlations that can be made between social media and travel decisions.

Keywords: Social media, tourism, travel decisions, destination choice, travel inspiration, social media influencers, eWOM, consumer behaviour, tourism marketing.

1.Introduction:

Social media refers to online platforms and applications which allow users to create, share and exchange information, ideas, pictures and videos. Social media is one of the most popular platforms because it helps users to communicate instantly. Social media platforms allow people to connect with friends, family and colleagues from all around the world, regardless of geographical location. Instant Communication & Connection:Global Connectivity – Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allow users to connect with people and communities from all around the world. Real TimeMessaging – Social media allows users to message people in real-time. Group Building –Users are able to join groups, forums and communities based on their interests, hobbies or profession. By working with a social media agency Dubai, you can use this connectivity to reach out to your target audience more effectively. In recent years, social media has become an increasingly influential part of people's daily lives, affecting their opinions, preferences and decision-making processes. Influencers, especially those who create travel and lifestyle content, play an important role in shaping people's travel preferences. By sharing attractive photos and videos of different destinations, they can increase people's interest in visiting these places. This study aims to examine how social media influences people's travel decisions and how online content affects their preferences when choosing travel destinations. Research question:How social media influences people's travel decisions?
Which social media platforms have the greatest influence on people's travel decisions?

2. Literature review

2.1. The role of social media in tourism

According to Živković, Gajić and Brdar (2014), the tourism system mainly relies on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for promotional activities, sales and developing customer relationships. One of the most important sources of information when tourists make their final destination decisions is online interpersonal influence, also known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Authors studying tourism market segmentation have recognised the growing number of tourists who use modern social media platforms. In response to their identified needs, advanced technologies provide customised tourism services. Contemporary tourists have become more active since the emergence of sophisticated Web 2.0 technology, which has influenced the travel decision-making process. The results of many surveys confirm that approximately 50% of people are likely to download travel applications related to their holidays before travelling.

2.2. The Influence of Social Media Platforms on Travel Decisions

According to Pop, Săplăcan and Dabija (2022), the growing presence of social media influencers (SMIs) is increasingly influencing consumer behaviour in the travel industry. Trust is an important factor in influencer marketing and tourism, as it helps create and maintain long-term relationships between organisations and consumers. The study uses customer journey theory to explain how trust in social media influencers affects travel decision-making. It focuses on different stages of the customer journey, including desire, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, satisfaction and experience sharing. Using SmartPLS to analyse the collected data, the researchers found that consumer trust in social media influencers has a positive effect on every stage of travel decision-making. Furthermore, each stage of the decision-making process influences the following stage, creating a continuous effect throughout the customer journey. The authors suggest that tourism marketers can use social media influencers to increase people's desire to travel. They also emphasise that influencers' trustworthiness is an important factor in influencing tourists' destination choices.

2.3. Customer journey in tourism

Customer journey can be defined as the overall customer experience, which includes multiple touchpoints: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase behaviour (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Chen et al. (2015) found that consumers' online holiday decision-making processes consist of three stages: information search, evaluation and purchase. The pre-purchase phase includes customers' experiences before making a purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Due to the intangible nature of tourism products, tourists often cannot evaluate their experiences until after consumption (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Therefore, information, opinions and recommendations shared through social media become increasingly important for potential travellers.

In the first stage of the process, consumers' desire to visit a destination can be influenced by online communication. Videos can increase travellers' interest in visiting particular destinations (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Social media has also changed how consumers search for, read and evaluate information (Sigala et al., 2012). During the information search stage, consumers develop expectations about a destination, which can be further influenced by the trust they place in social media influencers (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

When evaluating alternatives, consumers rely on social networking platforms and learn about the previous experiences of other tourists (Chen et al., 2015). The purchase stage involves interaction with the brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), as consumers select and purchase their preferred tourism products or packages.

The post-purchase stage sees travellers comparing their actual experiences to their

expectations and forming positive or negative views. This information is often shared on social media (Kang & Schuett, 2013). In turn this can influence other potential tourists when making their own travel decisions. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) also highlight the importance of trust within a customer experience. This can be developed through positive experiences.

3.Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study will use an exploratory and descriptive approach using a focused literature review alongside two secondary data sources (online polls). The literature review provides a foundational background and will be used to understand the influence of social media in tourism. The data collected by the polls will provide descriptive evidence to support this. Overall the research focuses on how social media is influencing people when choosing where to go on holiday and which social media platforms have the most influence. As the polling is informal and not using a probability sampling technique we cannot claim to find any representative data from the population.

3.2. Polls and Data Collection

There were two polls online that were used throughout my research. The first was about the impact social media has on someone choosing their travel destination. The second was about which social media platform has the most impact on someone's travel decisions. I gathered answers from the polls which gave me an insight into peoples opinions and how different social media platforms play a part. These were used as secondary data.

3.3. Data Analysis

A descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative results has been undertaken looking at the frequency of responses given. By analysing and comparing the data we can determine which answer options were most chosen and which social media platforms had more influence on their travel decisions. The results have been interpreted in relation to themes identified within the literature review. To aid readability the results have been presented in tables and bar charts. No inference statistical tests have been carried out and no cause and effect relationships have been stated. Each poll was analysed individually as they were looking to answer different research questions.

3.4. Ethical and Methodological Considerations

The results of the polls provided limited information about the demographic details, age, method of recruitment and location of the participants. It was also unclear if the participants were the same people for both polls. With this in mind, the findings have been interpreted whilst considering these factors. These results only relate to those who participated within the polls. This study does not claim that the results reflect all international tourists. Further research could be conducted using a larger and more diverse sample and a more structured data collection process.

4. Results

4.1 The influence of social media in tourism

The infographic presents statistics on the role of social media in tourism. According to the displayed data, 67% of travellers use Instagram to find inspiration for new trips. Furthermore, 74% of travellers use social media while on vacation. The highest percentage, 97%, refers to Millennials who share photos while travelling. These findings highlight the importance of social media at different stages of the travel experience, including finding travel inspiration, using online platforms during holidays and sharing travel experiences. The full statistical overview is presented in Table 1.

Indicator	Descriptio	Percentage

Travel inspiration	Travellers use Instagram to find inspiration for new trips	67%
Social media uses during holidays	Travellers use social media while on vacation	74%
Sharing travel experiences	Millennials share photos while travelling	97%

Source: MDG Advertising, as cited in the Walls.io infographic.

Overall, it shows how important social media is within the travel journey. Travellers often look to social media for inspiration for their next trip and are active on social media whilst on holiday. A high percentage of Millennials shared their travel photos showing how important social media is when sharing travel experiences. This suggests that social media can be used as a way to gain inspiration for travel as well as a form of communication for sharing experiences.

4.2. Social Media's Influence on Travel Destination Choices

Looking at the data within table 2 you can see that social media has had the largest impact on travel destinations. 75% of people responded that they were influenced by social media when deciding to visit a specific destination. The next highest percentage was television, news and movies which had an overall of 64%. Family/friends came next with 47%. 48% of people said they travelled to specific destinations so they could post about them on social media. The full breakdown of these responses can be seen below in table 2.

Source of influence	Percentage of respondents
Social media	75%
TV, news or movies	64%
Family and friends	47%
Travel to destinations to share experiences on social media	48%

Source: Statista, based on American Express and Morning Consult (2023).

Social media was seen to be the most influential source of information for choices of travel destinations. However, television, news and movies also gained a large percentage of responses from participants showing that traditional sources of media are still being used when choosing travel destinations. Family and friends were also an important source of influence. The findings also show that some people choose where they go as they want to share their experiences on social media.

4.3. Summary of the main findings

There are two key trends that can be seen from this data. Firstly, social media has been mentioned as an inspiration for travel by many participants. Many people used social media during their holidays to share their travel experiences. Secondly, social media was found to be the most influential source when choosing where to travel.Television, news and movies were next in line as the second most influential sources.Family and friends were also seen to have an important role. However, the polls do not show how many trips were actually taken, or whether social media has an actual causal effect on the decision to travel.

5. Discussion

This suggests that social media is an important aspect of tourists' travel. The first table indicates that travellers use social media (Instagram) to find new places to visit whilst on holiday and to share pictures. It shows how social media can help inspire people to travel.The second table demonstrates how social media was the primary influence on where people travelled with television, news and movies coming next. Family and friends were also a influence in the decision of where tourists go. Some respondents stated they travelled to places so they could share their experiences. This suggests that social media does have an influence on where people choose to travel. However these results are descriptive and there is no evidence that social media actually directly causes someone to make a travel decision.

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