SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND TRAVEL DESTINATION CHOICES AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN UMEA.

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have the potential to influence destination choice among potential travellers. Before potential travellers embark on a trip, they are faced with decision-making processes on where to go, what to do, the best time to go, how to get there among other things. These pre-travel planning decisions can be influenced by their expectation of the experiences they will encounter at the destination and based on their perception of the destination. Their perception of destinations is usually informed by information found on social media platforms or passed on by family and friends who have encountered similar travel experiences. Using Crompton’s model of destination choice set, this study explores the roles of social media platforms on destination choice among international students in the Umea university.

Keywords:

Destination Choice, Social Media Platforms, Choice Set Model, Travel expectations, experiences and perception.
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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media platforms are web-based applications that disseminate user-generated content. Social media has been a very instrumental tool in the promotion of the tourism industry. Social media can shape a tourism destination’s image and impact tourists’ decision making through perspectives and experiences (Yoo & Kim, 2013). Traditionally, before the onset of web-based platforms, the mass media was the main broadcaster of information regarding tourism destinations and shaped destinations’ image through several forms of communication including television, radio, newspapers, movies and so on. Besides the mass media, the search for and dissemination of tourist information has been through word of mouth (WOM), by family and friends (Tham, Croy & Mair, 2013). In the past two decades, social media emerged and as a web-based communication platform reportedly reaching a wide scope of audience who can create and share their own contents.

When analysing tourist behaviour, it is apparent that choosing tourism destinations depends on travel motivations of the traveller (Pearce, 2005 p.51). Travellers can have various motivations and purpose of travel. The purpose of travel can correspond with various characteristics like the type or length of trip in question and so on and pre-trip planning behaviour. For example; one may more likely extensively plan a two-week vacation ahead of time whiles a day trip may be more spontaneous and hence unplanned.

As people share their experiences on social media platforms, they inadvertently become a source of information to those who seek similar experiences. Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017, p.4) highlights that the potential traveller uses social media in various stages of a trip including, before, during and after physical travel has taken place. In many ways social media platforms play a role in the choices made when choosing a tourism destination.

However, there is a gap in the research of destination choice and social media use. The focus of current research has been on the various types and channels of communication and dissemination of tourist information e.g. word of mouth and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) ((Litvin et al., 2008), rather than how the channels of information (i.e. eWOM/ WOM) influence destination choice. The main objective of this research therefore is to explore the influences of social media (as a web-based application) on how tourism destinations are chosen with considerations to the planning decisions made before travel, the kind of expectations and transformative experiences that are sought before and during the trip and the perceptions created of the tourist destinations after the trip has been completed. It is important to understand the tourist expectations and experiences because, it informs us of the pre-existing personality traits as well as the social influences during the course of their lives that may influence their personal choices and preferences.

2. AIM & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research is therefore to explore the role of social media platforms on the travel destination choices of international students in Umea university. In order to do so, three main research questions are posed. These research questions are intended to discover in details how
expectations, experiences and perception all work together to influence the decision-making process when it comes to destination choice and the role social media platforms play in it.

Research questions:

- what role does social media platforms play in the decision-making process before physical travel?
- how do the travel expectations created during the decision-making process compare with travel experiences encountered during physical travel?
- What is the role of social media platforms in forming perceptions of tourist destination based on the experience of the traveller after physical travel has ended?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW.

Social media platforms have become a major avenue of influence during the planning and decision-making stage of travel and even after the trip is over to share experiences. Through sharing experiences, tourists are able to influence the decisions of prospective tourists. People may use social media in the decision-making process as a way of researching the benefits or pitfalls of the physical travel to a particular destination. Furthermore, potential tourists find the shared personal travel experiences more relatable and trustworthy which in effect also promotes the use of social networking in tourism (Fardous et al, 2017 p.2) In the long term, tourist destinations can become popularized due to dissemination of information about tourist experiences. The nature of tourist trends promoted on social media can influence behaviours of potential tourists, e.g. buying from local producers. However, the type of social media platforms used also depend on the type of tourists. For example, corporate tourists are more likely to go with recommendations from their companies, whereas leisure travellers follow the recommendations of family and friends, search engines and websites that are connected to travel.

Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017, p.4) highlights that potential travellers use social media in various stages of a trip including, before, during and after physical travel has taken place. As mentioned before, potential tourists before embarking on a trip use social media as source of a collective pool of information in the planning and decision-making process. It is argued by Fardous et al (2017 p.1) that, this is perhaps the most important and influential role social media plays in the entire process of the travel. Some of the most popular social media platforms used during the pre-travel stage includes Facebook, TripAdvisor, YouTube, Twitter among others. During the decision-making and planning process of the pre-travel stage, potential tourists decide on where to travel to, how to get there, how long they will be there, where to stay, what to do when they are there, how much to spend, what to spend on, form their expectations on the kind of experiences they will gain, weigh their potential experiences of the trip against their expectations as well as other million and one plans and decisions.

After all pre-travel planning and decisions have been made, social media continues to influence the “travelling” stage when tourists arrive at the destination. During physical travel, some tourists begin sharing of experiences in real-time, through social media in the textual or visual forms, e.g. contacting family through SMS, or writing travel blogs or journals, shooting and sharing videos or vlogs, images on social media platforms like Facebook. After the trip is completed the story remains the same once tourists return home. Some share their own
experiences and perceptions of the place(s) visited, either privately with family and friends or publicly with the rest of the world, serving as a new source of information for the next set of potential travellers (Fardous et al, 2017 p.2).

3.1 Social Media Platforms

According to Zeng and Gerritsen (2014, p.1), social media is a very important networking tool that is continuously becoming merged with the social and economic aspects of life. As an evolving scope of interest, social media has been defined in several ways, spanning from perspectives such as; “the use of social media as online tools, applications, platforms and media, and therefore depend on information technology; social media as peer-to-peer communication channels, which enables the interactive web’s content creation, collaboration and exchange by participants and the public, facets which introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals; and social media link users to form a virtual community by using cross-platforms, and therefore affects people's behaviors and real life” (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014 p.2).

3.2 Tourism Industry in the wake of social media use

With regards to tourism, social media has been very instrumental in promoting tourism destinations, the search for information and the way people behave when it comes to making decisions all through social interactions on web-based platforms. E.g. the use of Facebook to share travel experience. Social media has been used as a promotional tool for the tourism industry by “both generating and acquiring information related to travel”, through user generated content (UGC) or consumer generated media (CGM) as described by (Narangajavana et al, 2017 p.1).

Through user generated content (UGC), social media impacts choice and perception of tourists. According to Narangajavana et al (2017, p.2), research on the impacts of social media’s user generated content (UGC) on tourism can be approached in two ways; by studying literature on the impacts of “general information” on tourism and the relationship between behavior and UGC on social media; exploring the intention to buy/use, attitudinal factors and their influence on the use and creation of UGC; and the creditability of the websites on which the UGC is posted and their impact on trip planning, and loyalty and the effect of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on the final destination choices”.

Another scholar, Sotiriadis, (2017 p.11) asserts that, the impact of social media on tourism can be seen from three perspectives; the consumer and provider perspectives and content analysis of published literature. From the consumers perspective, it is important to understand the impacts of the factors that motivate and influence tourists to generate UGC, as well as the impact of online reviews on the consumers behavior. From the providers perspective, the impacts of online reviews on tourism businesses are determined by the consumers. Contents generated on social media by tourists themselves boosts the level of trust and expectations of potential travelers. These personal experiences are assumed to be credible or verifiable based on similar/ shared experiences (photos, videos, blogs, podcasts, etc) of other travelers, resulting in an increasing rate of usage among potential travelers consulting trusted sources of eWOM.
information when planning a trip. Other sources of information likely to be used during the planning and decision-making process includes government sponsored tourism websites, travel agents, mass media advertising and other kinds of tourism information websites. Schroeder and Pennington-Gray (2014, p.4) includes that, potential tourists collects information from these several sources to form a pool of collective knowledge of information.

Another perspective from other scholars is that, the role of social media in tourism can have an impact on the marketplace; social media shapes the destination image and impacts tourists’ decision-making processes through perspectives and experiences (Munar and Jacobsen 2013, p.3; Yoo & Kim, 2013). Traditionally, before the onset of web-based platforms, the mass media was the main broadcaster of information regarding tourism destinations and shaped destinations’ image through several forms of communication including television, radio, newspapers, movies and so on. In the past two decades, social media emerged and as a web-based communication platform that reach an extensive range of audience who create and share their own contents.

Lueng et al (2013), states that social media can have two consequences on the marketplace in the tourism industry, either it fuels the relationship of consumers through the collection of consumer feedback or alternatively deteriorate consumers faith and market value. A negative portrayal of the destination by social media could also influence a potential traveler’s decision and perception.

In dealing with challenges of social media on the marketplace, destination management organizations (DMO), can use three strategies; advertising strategy, mimetic strategy and analytic strategy (Lueng et al,2013). Mimetic strategy is when the DMO mimics the culture and style on social media for their own businesses, the advertising strategy basically involves the DMO using forms of publicity to solely advertise on social media to increase social media presence however the disadvantage is that it doesn’t facilitate interaction between the consumer and producer. The analytic strategy strives to figure out how user generated content develops in relation to the brand and how to transform it into strategic knowledge through artificial intelligence. The disadvantage of this is that is it quite costly.

From the marketplace perspective, branding is very important in the hospitality sector as it influences the destination image. Companies today have to face the tune of the market and it is mandatory that companies engage in all forms of communication channels, and as well as social media and other interactive technologies that engages generated user engagement in order to keep up with their consumers (Moro & Rita, 2018). This will encourage a positive increase in purchase expenditures.

### 3.3 Destination Choice

According to Karl et al (2015, p. 1), the processes involved in choosing travel destinations are very complex. Keshavarzian and Wu (2017), reason that the decision-making process of travel is multidimensional and multi-layered, taking place even before selection of the travel destination of choice, and occurring during and after physical travel.

Destination choice can be approached from several perspectives including microeconomic input-output approach and psychological, behaviouristic approaches. The main emphasis of the
microeconomic input-output approach is on internal and external factors that influence the decision-making process, whereas psychological and behaviouristic approaches emphasize on the behaviour of tourists through travel (Woodside and Lyonski, 1989).

The decision-making process is characterized by the potential traveller questioning and answering questions like; why travel at all, where to travel, how long to be gone, what to do while travelling, where to stay, etc which are categorized into the cognitive and affective components (Crompton, 1992).

There are various models used to analyse and explain the processes involved in choosing destinations. These models focus on various aspects of destination choice, including but not withstanding travel motivations, destination image, travel decision-making efforts and so on. Some notable models are choice-set models, decision-net models, multi-destination travel models and general travel models.

Choice set model, Woodside and Lyonski, (1989) is a funnelling down process that is used by individuals to select or decide which single final destination to travel to, out of a set of numerous options. Decision net model explores travel decision by analysing the various facets of planning travel and their interrelations at an aggregate level (Dellaert et al. 1998). Multi-destination models are used to describe processes involved when there is more than one destination in question to be visited on a single journey (Lue et al, 1993).

General travel model is constructed under the consumer theory and the main emphasis of the model is to explore the processes that individuals go through in their destination choice and the factors and aspects of their life like culture, reference groups, the relationships between individuals and their environments, perceived risks, and family, that influences the tourist’s behaviour and impacts the individual’s decision processes. (Moutinho, 1987). In reference to the role of social media platform use, the choice set model is the most relevant model in analysing the decision-making process in the funnel-like aspect of decision choice. The choice set model provides information on how potential travelers chose a final destination during the planning stage of the trip and how they manage to make final decisions concerning the trip out of the vast majority of options they may have to choose from.

3.3.1 Choice Set Model

Adopted from the choice set theory by Woodside and Lyonski, (1989), the choice-set model Crompton (1992), explains the process of destination choice where the choice of a potential travel destination is funnelled down from a large set of options of potential travel destinations. The choice-set includes the subcategories awareness and unawareness sets. The awareness set comprises all the potential destinations that were considered in the initial stage of the decision-making process and the unawareness set refers to the all the destinations that weren’t put under consideration because the individuals were either unaware of their existence or had too little information about them.

Within the awareness set, potential destinations will be rejected or accepted based on the possibility to visit the destination in the set. The unavailable set may be rejected because of several reasons, example by being outside the financial capabilities of the traveller. Those that are rejected fall under the inept set and the rejection may be due to neither personal experiences
at the destination or negative information and feedback about the destination from people. Within the inert set however, are the destinations that didn’t make the cut not because of any negative information or experience but rather due to a lack of sufficient information about the destination.

The potential destinations are accepted as options and taken under consideration fall within the evoked set from which a final destination choice is made. The criteria for selecting potential destinations is based on cognitive and affective components as well as the tourists’ orientation. The cognitive components are the physical attributes of the destination that makes them attractive and appealing to the potential travellers influenced by their perception of the place which is based on their motives and values (affective components).
3.4 Tourist Expectations, Experiences and Perceptions.

Social media platforms influence the travel motivations of potential travellers and their perception of destinations, acting as the pull factors that attract travellers and affect destination travel patterns (Lester and Scarles 2013; Butler 1990; Kim and Richardson 2003). Lester and
Scarles (2013 p.13) propose that, through social media platforms, web-based platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc and other forms of media related tourism, the outlook of the world in terms of the observation of and knowledge about people, places, and events is impacted by the continuous communication, dissemination of information and mobility. The visual representation of people and places act as the pull factors that attract potential tourists to travel destinations. These visual representations generate impressions of a destination, creating expectations of what experiences are to be encountered in a destination by the potential traveller.

3.4.1 Tourist Experiences

There are several schools of thought on ‘the tourist experience’ and what it means. The various approaches to the study of tourist experience includes, the marketing perspective of Mossberg (2007), the psychological perspective of Larsen (2007), the sociological perspective of Cohen (2008), and the edutainment perspective of Hertzman et al (2008), which all show the dynamic and interactive nature of tourist experiences (Shen and Cheng, 2013 p.2).

Quan and Wang (2004) states that tourist experiences can be viewed as the distinctive contrast between daily life and heightened daily experiences during a trip. Quan and Wang (2004), explained that tourist experiences can be observed from two approaches, the consumer perspective which is presented by the tourism industry and the tourist’s perspective. Each approach provides insights to the tourist experience hence, it is essential for both approaches to be combined in the conceptualization of the tourist experience resulting in an embodied approach.

Urry (1990,p.100) on his perspective ‘the tourist gaze’ proposed that the experiences of the tourist is passively encountered through a ‘frame’ that presents ‘scenes’ that sparks the interest of the tourists’ gaze. Other scholars like McCannell (1976, p.23) argue that, tourist experiences are transformative experiences that are stimulated by the external environment. Furthermore, Sheng and Chen (2013 p. 3) asserts, as there are different types of tourists with different expectations and motivations, tourist experiences can be grouped into two main categories; active and passive experiences, determined by their “level of involvement”. Whereas active experiences include the experiences of travellers who engage in encounters that are escapists in nature and sometimes even create their own experiences, passive experiences are those that does not require active involvement but rather the participation of pre-laid out forms of entertainment.

For the sake of this research, Larsen’s (2007) psychological perspective will be taken into account as the interest is on the tourists’ personal experience rather than the sociological or marketing perspectives. Larsen (2007 p. 5) demonstrates that even though the study of tourism is multidisciplinary, it comprises the study of people, institutions and organizations, hence involving a mental and behavioural phenomenon that is best approached from a psychological standpoint. Tourist experiences is an embodiment of their expectations, perceptions and memories which displays the stages of their overall experience (Larsen,2007 p.5) and in the search of tourist experience, travellers purchase tourist products such as hotel rooms, meals, admission tickets, souvenirs, and tour bus rides among others and today the experiences sought for by travellers have become more experimental, innovative and imaginative (Sternberg, 1997).
Larsen (2007) indicates three stages of interaction between tourist and travel systems including expectations of the trip which occurs during the planning process, events that occur during the trip and memories that are created from the tourist events.

3.4.2 Expectations

As defined by Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011), the act or state of expectation refers to a series of interpretations that range from eager anticipation of an event, situation or person (whether feared or looked to) based on a belief of the consequence of one's action (social norms, cultural etiquette etc) on corresponding positive or negative advantages (e.g. wealth). In tourism, expectations play an important role in determining the choice of destinations among potential travellers (Mlozi and Pesamaa, 2013 p.4).

Mlozi and Pesamaa, (2013 p.4) describe that, expectations shape the experiences of potential travellers whether positively or negatively the outcome may be. Before potential travellers embark on a trip, they expect satisfaction of perceived experiences at the choice of destination will be attained either through completing a sequence of actions and events or that their perceived satisfaction is guaranteed based on certain choice of behaviours. Their imagination of the destination serves as a motivating factor to expect a perceived experience (Skinner and Theodossopoulos, 2011). However, even though individuals can perceive that certain actions can lead to specific consequences, the certainty of those consequences is not assured hence leading them to make different choices as expectation is not comparable to reality (Mlozi Pesamaa, 2013 p.4).

Conferring to Larsen (2007), the positive or negative mood and emotions leading to corresponding outcomes then leads to the question of “why embark on a trip if you expect a negative outcome?”. He further explains that, humans have the tendency of overestimating outcomes and recognize the possibility of outcomes resulting in different consequences. Additionally, Larsen (2007 p. 6) states that the expectations formed before one embarks on a trip can depend on the personality traits of an individual e.g. worry. Worry can lead to fear and anxiety as a result of the way the media portrays situations, events and people in destinations for e.g. media report on terror attacks. The worry of potential tourists can affect the tourism industry in that destination due to perceived negative experiences through the decrease of visitation numbers.

3.4.3 Perception and Memory

Larsen (2007, p. 7) defines perception as the “interaction of the information in the current stimulus situation and various types of processes and mental structures in the individual that makes processing of such information possible”. During the trip, the perception of the overall experiences is mainly influenced by the peak experience (which is the most emotional and memorable moment of the trip) and the end experience (which is the emotional and memorable event at the end of the trip) (Fredrikson, 2000) regardless of the length of the event. This is due to the fact that, peak and end experiences are subjective and based on individual social or psychological traits as well as how they view the world around them especially in their search of uniqueness in their personal travels and experiences.
Furthermore, it is often assumed that the perception of destinations are the main motivating factors that pushes or pulls a tourist to a particular destination. However, Larsen (2007 p.8) argues that, tourists’ in their own right can create their own tourist experiences based on perceptions created by social and non-social stimulus as well their own values, opinions, worldviews, mental structure.

Another notable discussion on tourist experiences is how the expected experience of tourists relates or correspond to their actual experiences. Larsen (2007 p.9) noted that, the ‘moment-to-moment’ accounts of tourist experiences were either greater or lower than their expected experiences and comparably, memories of experiences can push tourists to embark trip to repeat remembered experiences not necessarily in pursuit of the same experience but an experience that is as unique as their past travel experiences.

In conclusion, tourist experiences are influenced by memory and perceptive processes of tourists before, after and during physical travel and, its effect on how individual tourists subjectively choose peak and end experiences as well as their future travel expectation. And as memory is a selective process, it is essential to be aware of the role memory can play in the selection of information that is shared, or its influence on the overall experience and perception after a trip has been completed.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

According to Kothari, (2004) research is the search for new facts that add to knowledge through careful investigation and enquiry. It is important that the right methods are used in the pursuit of inquiry. Quantitative methods can be used to explore out how one is influenced by social media platforms when choosing a tourism destination to travel to, however it can easily neglect the emotional and affective component of understanding tourist feelings and experiences hence, a qualitative research approach must be used as it is the best approach to uncover the depth of role social media platforms have on the choice of tourist decisions. Qualitative research approach will help not only to uncover the depth associated with the explorative nature of this research but also as individual experiences and perceptions are personal details of their lives, a quantitative approach will not be able to attain a well-informed interview or allow for the flexibility that qualitative data collection techniques offer based on the research questions posed.

4.1 Methods.

A qualitative approach will be used for this research as Ritchie et al (2014 p.3) states, a qualitative research concerns, the why, when and how of data, highlighting the richness of data rather than the quantity. Using this approach, data will be conducted through purposive sampling and respondents will answer in-depth questions in a semi-structured informal interview so that they can talk freely about their social media use and travel choices. Another option that could have been used is random sampling and focus groups. This is however not
the best option due to time limitations and as the intent of the research to find the role of social media on choice of destination, it is vital to interview respondents who use social media and travel. Otherwise, the other option is a comparative study of how social media versus non-social media users are influenced during the process choosing a travel destination, but the time limitation will not allow for it.

4.2 Data sampling

In order to set clear boundaries for the research, it is important that the chosen sample meet certain requirements in order to produce a well-versed result about the roles of social media platforms. The sample population firstly, must have embarked on a specific type of travel and in this case leisure travel (including visiting friends and relative’s tourism,), within the last 12 months from the date the research is being conducted. This is to ensure that the research participants still hold fresh memories of the trip. Furthermore, even though preferably if the motivations of travelling were not influenced by ties to family and friends, potential travellers may have several motivations for travelling. Travelling due to family and relatives therefore does not necessarily negate the influence of social media on their decision-making process.

Furthermore, the length of transport is also an important factor. As day trips do not take much planning sometimes but rather more spontaneity, it is important that the trip takes at least 1 hour by air transport and 6 hours by land transport. The trip should also be a minimum of one-night stay. This gives an impression that, the trip actually demanded some planning before embarkation.

Since the research seeks to find the influence of the social media platforms on destination choice, respondents will be purposively sampled, with focus on users of social media platforms. Purposive sampling permits the creation of samples that possess and share specific characteristics. In this case, since the research is focused on the influence on social media on travel choice, it is important that the respondent has travelled in at least the last 12 months and is a social media user. Putting a time frame on the most recent time respondents travelled will help to provide contributions to the research that are recent and detailed. The unlikelihood of respondent remembering vivid details of physical travel that took place later than 12 months may become a limitation to the research.

Furthermore, it is important to interview respondents who have in one way or the other used/uses social media. A person who doesn’t use social media cannot be influenced on tourist destination choices by it. It is essential in this research as the main focus is on social media users who have embarked on physical travel recently. A number of six respondents who are social media users and hence suit the characteristics of the population will be interviewed. Only six respondents will be interviewed due to time limitation, furthermore since the research is not a statistical analysis, six respondents is a good number of saturation for providing good quality quantitative results.

4.3 Data Collection.

The respondents have been selected from the Umea university, since there is a large population of students, especially international students who embark on trips in groups or individually. The students were contacted through email and those interested in participating in the research were sent initial short interview questions to see if they fell within the scope of the study. Those
who fell within the scope were interviewed. Another way was to post flyers on notice boards for those who were interested in participating in the research to reach out. The third way was through word of mouth and social connections on campus to find interested respondents.

Umea is chosen as a case study due to its large population of international students. International students have arguably a higher propensity to travel and this provides the opportunity to have the right amount and right people to interview. Through the aid of the research department, emails were sent to students in the department and follow up emails were sent to those interested in participating in the research.

The data was collected throughs semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a semi-formal manner to allow respondents to share information with ease. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are non-binary, and hence respondents were able to produce answers that were not imposed by frameworks set by the research hence limiting the propensity of a biased response.

4.4 Data analysis.

In this study, a thematic method which identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within data (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018) was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is important as it is a Clark and Braun, (2006) “method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data which is a technique, unbounded by theoretical commitments”. Clark and Braun’s (2006) thematic analysis consist of six main steps which includes: becoming familiar with the data, generating coding categories, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and locating exemplars.

In this research, a software called MAXQDA was used in the coding process. Using MAXQDA, 763 quotes and sentences were categorized into 62 different codes. Themes were developed from the codes with a few exceptions of pre-existing themes like tourist experiences, expectations and categories in the choice set model.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The research has been conducted adhering to the ethical codes; objectivity, consent, confidentiality, accuracy, carefulness, integrity and respect for intellectual property during the entire research process. All respondents were treated with respect and confidentiality. They have been well informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation and the format and length of the interview and their right to not respond.

Data analysis and interpretation has been conducted objectively and without bias. Implications of methodological approaches used for the research has been made open to make the research constraints cognizant.

4.6 Work plan

Time is an important factor in research, it is there for important to set a time frame within which the research will be conducted and completed. Based on this research and the questions that
needed to be answered, a period of approximately five months has been used. A desk research that took one month to gather knowledge or data from literary publications, news articles and policy document that were pertinent to the research. Two weeks were used in preparation of survey whereas one month was needed for the execution of the data collection. The data was analysed within a period of one month and another month for synthetization and finalization of the research.

5.0 RESULTS

It is evident from the literature review that the choice of destination among tourists can be narrowed down from a category of choice sets which influence the decision-making process before tourists embark on a trip.

Some of the decisions made can be influenced by several factors including perception, expectation and experiences and so on. The final results are represented in three main categories. The pre-travel stage, during travel stage and post travel stage.

5.1 The Pre-travel Stage.

5.1.1 Decision-making process/ Destination choice.

During the pre-travel phase the students had to make decisions on destinations choice, considering several factors such as their travel motivations. This was influenced by the disposition of the students in terms of the perceptions of destinations and themselves, pre-existing travel interests, and their awareness of destination choice sets. The choices they made was based upon other factors such social media activity, their travel patterns, the purpose of their trip, travel expectations and their overall perceptions of tourism and what makes up a tourist.

5.1.2 Planning

All the students in one way or the other planned their trip. Some important details to them they considered included; where to stay, whether in Airbnb’s or hotels, what to eat, where to eat, the safety of the destination, the best time of year to visit, and accessible transportation among other things. Best described by interviewee 1, she states:

"Yes. I did. To be honest I looked up everything, from hotels to where to eat. Some things are very important to look up before travelling, example how safe it is, the best time of year to visit, how easy it is to get around and etc. I guess, the more I looked up information about the destination, the more I learnt about the places, and the more I learnt about the places, the more hyped I became to visit it."

(Respondent 1)

Some planned their trip based on the activities they wanted to participate in. Example, one of the student’s visited south Africa based on her interest to engage in abseiling, sky diving etc
and during the planning process, found a destination where she could participate in a few of those activities. Questionably, results reflected that some students stated they did no planning whatsoever before embarking on their trip. Example, when asked if they had any planning or itinerary for the trip, interviewee 5 responded as followed;

*Nope. We just winged it. (respondent 5) …Not really. It was mostly spontaneous decision making since we really didn’t have any plan in beforehand (respondent 5) … I know a friend who was on a similar trip and she told me about how it works and what the advantages are when traveling with Interrail. (Respondent 5).*

*Not really, I let my friends plan everything since they knew the place better than I ever would. (respondent 3).*

But even in such cases, the data subsequently reflected there was some planning made whether subconsciously or not. The trip was either planned by friends or family they travelled together with. In the end, all the students had their trips planned one way or the other.

Furthermore, after the respondents had made a decision about where they wanted to travel to, what they wanted to do and where they wanted to stay among other things, they were more hesitant to change their minds about their decisions. This was for several reasons, one being that the whole process of planning had built up anticipation and excitement for them in their choices. They had gained motivations to experience the destinations.

*No not really, I was very excited about my trip to South Africa before it was booked and it was frankly all I could think about. I was looking forward to it so I didn’t give other places much thought if I am being very honest. (respondent 2).*

### 5.1.3 Travel Motivations

The respondents all had several motivations for travelling. However, across the entire study the common denominator of their motivations was on the attractiveness of the destinations especially in meeting their expectations based on their pre-knowledge of the destination.

The pre-knowledge of the destination included the information they had found/heard in passing about the destination during the course of their lives either through friends and family, web-based platforms, school, community, social circle and others. Most of the respondents wanted to visit the destinations due to their physical or emotional connection to the place. Some had friends or family who had come from the destination, lived in the destination or just mentioned the destination to them. Due to their emotional affinity, the destinations were imprinted in their memories as destination options or ‘bucket list” destinations.

*I always had a spark of fascination about Moscow since I have interest in the history of wars between Sweden and Russia and the second world war. (Respondent 4)*

Whereas, other motivations for travel included convenience. A few respondents noted that one motivating factor for their trip was affordability. They argued that, being students, they could not afford to travel just anywhere or anytime they pleased as they had no source of income and were busy in school except during the summer and on national holidays. Some attributed their motivation to the convenience of being at the right place at the right time.
However, the most important thing is to have the money and the time to visit this place, other things are coming always second! (respondent 6).

We fantasized a bit about the idea of going to Thailand or Cambodia instead. However, the flights would have been too long and it’d have cost too much. Since we are students, we can’t really easily afford that kind of lifestyle. So maybe in the future we will get the opportunity to visit Thailand and Cambodia. (respondent 1)

It was a dream from my childhood to visit this city one day and since now I’m studying in Sweden it was a convenient and easy destination for me to pick for couple days of vacation. (Respondent 6).

The pre-knowledge of the destination also has positive or adverse effect on their choice of destination. Based on the information they knew beforehand about the destination, their desire or lack of interest in the destination was determined.

I thought about going to Kenya instead but I had heard of recent acts of terrorism in the country and decided against the idea. Besides, South Africa was my first choice anyways so I didn’t think too much about it. Hopefully someday I can visit Kenya too. (Respondent 2).

5.1.4 The role of social circle in influencing the decision-making process.

One notable aspect of the research study was the wide array of different sources of information that influenced the decision-making process of the trips embarked on by the research participants. Undoubtedly, the social circle constituting the family, friends, acquaintances etc had major influences in the way the respondents made choices and decisions as potential travellers. Their influence was multifaceted and present on different levels and at various points in time of the respondents’ lives. The degree of influence is quite complex to ascertain and is based on individual subjective life course experiences. Its important to note that, their personal characteristics, traits, interests and etc can be modelled and impacted by their social circle based on their social environments norms, values, roles, and general social system. Below, shows a few character traits and interests of some respondents and how it influenced their choice of activities.

“I’m a guy that likes to take it easy and relax, not really outgoing, shy and obnoxious at times but I'm trying to be better at it and work with myself. Otherwise I’d say that I am kind and a very caring person that loves to play computer games”. (respondent 3)

“I... enjoy music a lot, maybe a bit too much. Acting is something that burns within me and my goal is to someday become an actor in Hollywood”. (respondent 4)

“As mentioned earlier, I am a bit of an adrenaline junky, so even though I enjoyed sightseeing in cape town, however the main highlight of my trip was bungee jumping from the Bloukrans Bridge (which was a six-hour drive from cape town), canyoning in the Crags near Plettenberg Bay and diving with the sharks”. (respondent 2).

“I like to travel a lot especially with good friends. I am not the type of guy who likes to travel alone. I like to travel to many different and diverse places. If it’s a travel to a city I will pick one with a nice architecture, historical landmarks-museums and nice parks with lots of green. I prefer to travel to cities during winter and spring and not at the summer. In the summer, I like to visit warm and sunny places such as the Greek islands with beautiful beaches, clean sea, good cafeterias/restaurants and
not very busy/crowdy places. I’m not very into night life entertainment, going to clubs, partying, etc. I really enjoy to walk around the city, take pictures of the building, streets, parks, the nature and trying traditional food/snacks from the places that I visit”. (respondent 6).

Looking at each individual respondent, every single one of them had unique personal traits, interests and characteristics that separates them from each other. Having a little peek into the lives of the respondents and understanding how their individuality can influence their choice is manifested in the type of experiences they sought out.

Furthermore, the study showed that in the search of information, respondents associate credibility and trustworthiness with information passed on within their social circle, especially with people they trust, example family and friends.

“I would say that I find word of mouth more reliable since I trust the people I’ve spoken with; they are my friends and I know they wouldn’t lie to me”. (respondent 3)

“I would say it depends. If it is friends or family I trust, it is easy to know if I can trust their information or not. It is usually easier for me to trust the information my family share with me than the information I read up from strangers on the internet”. (respondent 1).

However, even though some of the respondents assume that friends and family are more trustworthy depending on the type of familiarity they share, it is easier to judge if information is credible and trustworthy if you know the person sharing the information. It is easy to assume that a family member who they trust will not lie to them and mislead them as opposed to a friend who is untrustworthy or a stranger.

The various ways in which family and friends influenced the respondent decision making processes before the trip includes; friends and family sharing similar travel experiences and motivations, personal achievements and etc.

Well, with Germany the decision actually came from my family. I have been to Germany a couple of times and I loved it. So, I was happy with the idea of visiting it again. When it came to Spain and Italy, I have always wanted to go but never had the opportunity to. So, I suggested the idea to go with my friends when we decided to take a vacation together. But to answer your question, I guess I’d say I got to know the destinations both through family, friends and social media. It is a difficult question to answer. In the sense that, I have met a couple of people at some point in my life who have told me about their trip to Rome or Spain. They always had such interesting things to say about the places. I have also met people from these places who have talked about things that piqued my interest about the destination (respondent 1).

5.1.5 The Role of Social Media and Web-based platforms in influencing the decision-making process.

Social media and web-based platforms influenced the decision-making process of the respondents in several ways. Results showed respondents used social media platforms in many ways during the planning process, including what destinations, what activities to partake in, how to get there, how to get around whiles there, and down to the nitty gritty of activities, e.g. what to eat.
“Yes. I did. To be honest I looked up everything, from hotels to where to eat. Some things are very important to look up before travelling, example how safe it is, the best time of year to visit, how easy it is to get around and etc. I guess, the more I looked up information about the destination, the more I learnt about the places, and the more I learnt about the places, the more hyped I became to visit it…

…Yes, I did. We looked online for places we could visit during our trip and planned out what we wanted to do, how to do it etc. it was very helpful to read travel blogs that took out similar style trips to give us a little more information on how to do things. For example, the best mode of transport, etc.”. (respondent 1)

“I booked all my tickets online, normally I check the prices in platforms that compare prices between airlines and different dates and then I book my ticket from the official website of the airline/train company”. (respondent 6)

Some respondents argued that their trip was not in anyway influenced by the social media platforms. However, this point of view is linked to their perception of social media platforms and how they perceived the influence of social media on their choices. Especially, respondents who didn’t trust the credibility of information from social media platforms stated that they did not use social media in any way at all before embarking on their trip. Below are the answers of some respondent on if they had used any social media platforms in connection to planning their trip. Some respondents stated that they had not used or been influenced by social media platforms in planning their trip, however their answer was only reflected what they perceived influence to be. Subsequent discussion revealed that they used web-based platforms at some point.

“No, I don’t. cause it is usually paid for ads so there is always some bias”. (respondent 5)

“If you are asking for the places that I mentioned before the answer is no”. (respondent 6)

The credibility and validity of information found on social media platforms was perceived differently by respondents. Some respondents thought social media platforms was not a credible source of information, others believed it was credible. Regardless of which group each participant fell under, studies reflected that they all used social media platforms in one way or the other, whether they were fully aware/conscious of it or not.

“The majority of information that I receive from social media according to travelling is about flight ticket sales/discounts. So, the only thing that I have to do is to check in the webpage of the flying company if it’s true. As long as for the pictures of attractions that I will see on the social, I take it as for granted that most of the times are a bit photoshopped and maybe are not so magical sunsets, colorful parks etc. but I don’t really care. I know that making something more appealing is part of the game and the only thing you can do is to visit this place and see it with your eyes if is as good as it is presented! And ok, sometimes I google a bit more if I’m skeptical about the validity of something.” (respondent 6)

“Internet. But just because it is convenient to google than asking and making people tell me about their travels. Also, most people don’t travel in the way I like to”. (respondent 5).

Irrespective of the validity and credibility of social media platforms, respondents used the platforms because of the ease of accessibility of information, lack of alternative source of information and out of necessity during the planning process.
“Nowadays even the word of mouth is so much shaped/created by the information that we all take from the internet because we are all so exposed to it. So, I don’t have less confidence in something that I read on the Internet compared to something that someone says to me. Of course, it depends how trustworthy is the website/source of information but the same is with the person that pass you the information. We always have to be critical in our way of thinking”. (respondent 6)

“I don’t think you can exactly trust every information you find on the internet, sometimes you can read a review about a restaurant, visit it and the food will be terrible. Personal taste is very subjective and doesn’t work for everyone. So yes, whether the information is credible or not, it may also be subjective. But in retrospect, I would say all the information I found about the destinations were credible and I did not encounter any issues”. (respondent 2).

5.1.6 Travel expectations.

During the pre-travel stage, respondents had several travel expectations. These expectations were guided by the personal interests when it comes to travelling which were sometimes confined by financial constraints and limited resources and time. Some respondents expected personal transformative experience and other expected to enjoy routines that differed from their daily lives.

“I like to travel in order to meet new circumstances, cultures, experiences and I think when you go to a different country you know it beforehand that you the people/the system/the customs there are not the same as your home but that is the joy of a trip. To go out of your routine”. (respondent 6)

The expectations of the trip were both positive and negative. Despite the negative expectations of the trip, respondents weren’t deterred from embarking on the trip. In addition, the respondents believed that in order for their expectations to be met was based on the consequence of their own actions. In the sense that, planning travels orderly and properly means their expectations of the trip will be met.

“I was most scared of bungee jumping in Bloukrans bridge. You always hear horror stories about it going terribly wrong and people breaking their spines and other things. Bloukrans Bridge being the world’s highest bungee jump was very scary. I was very close to crossing it off my list of activities.” (respondent 2).

“Criminals, taxi drivers that fools tourists and police officers that are bribable. I did not encounter any of these expectations.” (respondent 4)

“My expectation was to see the museums, churches and the red square. ...the necessary arrangements were done to make sure that I’d attain my expectations”. (respondent 4).

5.2 The Travel stage

5.2.1 Tourist activities

During the travel stage, the respondents had arrived in the destination and participated in the touristic activities they had planned for. These activities were either spontaneous or itineraries based on the individual planning processes and expectations of the trip. Some tourist activities included sightseeing, gastronomy, cultural and heritage tourism etc.
5.2.2 Travel Experiences

Ultimately before embarking on the trip, the respondents had expectations of travel experiences. All respondents had experiences that corresponded with their expectations of the trip. Some described their experience as ‘memorable’, ‘transformative’, ‘as expected’ etc.

“Yes, my daily life is very different from my experiences on the trip. Even my surroundings were different. The landscape was different but also breath-taking, I was in a new continent meeting new people of different cultures, and ethnicities, noticing their very colorful clothing and vibrant personalities. I can’t put the experience in better words but it was very different for sure”.
(respondent 2)

“Yes, indeed! Seeing such an amazing place opened my eyes that the boring life I have back home isn’t at all what has to be written in stone when it comes to my fate. There’s more out there and I can if I want to be extrovert and go out and do things, it’s was really liberating. My most memorable moment was going to the karaoke. Let me tell you, Japanese people LOVE karaoke! It was this huge skyscraper that only had karaoke, like small rooms everywhere with only karaoke that you rented! I sang so much that my throat felt like it was going to explode. A fun thing that happened as well was going to the toilette and see Japanese men passed out on the floor because they can't handle their liquor, that was so funny. I had no expectation of this memorable instance to happen and I'm so glad I didn’t, because it was such a pleasant surprise.” (respondent 3).

5.3 The After stage

5.3.1 Influence of perception of destination on social media platforms and social circle

At the end of the trip, respondent highlighted that they had shared a part of the experiences of their trip both online and with family and friends. On social media platforms, the experiences had been shared in form of blogs, pictures, videos, podcasts etc on platforms like Facebook, twitter, reddit, Instagram. Respondents who used social media platforms rarely also shared their experiences just like the active users. All respondents believed that in varying degrees, their experiences shared on social media platforms can impact potential travellers seeking similar experiences to theirs.

“I did some memes about my experience in Tokyo that were funny and got a lot of upvotes and I did post my adventure on Facebook, and I told everyone I know about the trip. I think it will have a positive impact on potential travelers, maybe even introverts like me to break the chains, gather their courage and go! Have a blast!”. (respondent 3)

“I have a personal blog myself where I like to write about my personal travels. I also shared images from my trip on some social media platforms. I guess, this could provide some sort of useful information to anyone planning to take a similar trip to the one I took”. (respondent 1)
6.0 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS.

6.1 The Role of Social Media Platforms during the Entire Travel Process

Evidently from the results, social media platforms played a major role in the entire processes of travel, right from the beginning of the pre-travel stage, during the travel and even after the trip had come to an end. The major roles it played consisted of the ability to influence travel motivations of the respondents, assist in the planning process, and making decisions about destination choice. However, despite the major role social media plays, the social environment and social circle also plays a major role of influence on destination choice. The roles both social media platforms and the social environments play are distinctive but are also intertwined and interconnected. The subsequent paragraphs delve deeper to explain these statements.

6.2 The Pre-travel Stage

6.2.1 The role of social media platforms in influencing travel motivations, perceptions and expectations.

In the study, the motivation of tourists to travel was influenced by their expectations and perceptions of the destination. Motivation for travel can come in various forms and for many reasons. With the use of social media platforms, the study showed respondents were motivated by information they found online about travel destinations. Information included, travel posts on blogs, pictures / images, videos etc on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, twitter, information posted on websites of tourist boards (both governmental and non-governmental), tour agencies and so on.

The information found on these social media platforms were either actively sought or chanced upon. In some cases, a potential traveller scrolling through their feed on Instagram may see a random post about for example Maldives. They may probably have never heard of Maldives before this encounter, but an image showing the beautiful blue beaches of the Maldivian resort islands is enough motivating force for the potential traveller to form perceptions about what sort of experiences they can encounter once they visit the destination.

Alternatively, potential travellers who actively seek travel information can be influenced by social media platforms in several ways at any stage of the planning process. For example, from the very onset of having the desire to go on vacation to someplace warm and sunny to escape from the monotonous routine of daily life and maybe the harsh winter, potential tourists can have the question of; where to go? Such information for instance is sometimes researched on social media platforms informing their decision based on what they see online.

Furthermore, social media influences potential travellers based on their travel interests. A potential traveller is sometimes more motivated if he or she finds tourist information on social media platforms that align with their own personal interests. These personal interests include their hobbies, personal tastes, personal traits and so on. For instance, one of the interviewees of the research was interested in adventure tourism and described himself as fun loving and an adrenaline junkie. His idea of what touristic activities one should partake in includes abseiling, bungee jumping etc. Due to this reason he was motivated to travel to south Africa because the
destination held attractions that offer the activities that could meet his expectation of fun, an
expectation created by a perception of the destination formed after looking up information on
social media platforms.

This presents the fact that even though social media has the ability to motivate potential
travellers, the choices made are dependent upon the traveller’s own personal interests therefore
the roles of social media platforms can be interlinked with personal interests/traits.

Another factor that interconnects with the role social media platforms plays on travel
motivations is one’s social environment and circle. The everyday lives of the respondent were
marked by routines, roles, behaviours, expectations, relationships governed by rules, norms,
values in a social system which influence the actions and thoughts of the potential traveller.
Owing to what information and knowledge the potential traveller is exposed to in their social
systems, they are influenced to make certain decisions or have some particular motivations.

For instance, the respondents in the study were students in the Umea university. Their daily
routines involved studying in semesters resulting in summers as holiday periods. One shared
characteristic among the students was the fact that, they were not available to travel anytime of
the year due to the responsibilities at school. Even further, based on their economic status as
students, they had to make choices that were affordable. The motivation to travel is influenced
by their economic status and time availability. In a sequence of events, some factors that
motivate the students are their expectations to find a cheap hostel that provides a good enough
service quality as opposed to a five star hotel, affordable means of transport with ease of access
among many other things, all information easily accessible through the use of social media
platforms and web-based platforms.

The social circle and relationships can also influence travel motivations through knowledge
transfer. Family, friends and acquaintance transfer knowledge to potential travellers about
travel destinations by sharing their own experiences and perceptions of the destination. Based
of the knowledge acquired, potential travellers create their own perceptions which results in
specific expectations of experiences in the destination.

To sum up this chapter, the perception and expectations of potential destinations can motivate
travel among potential travellers. However, the knowledge about places, people and landscape
in potential travel destinations is disseminated through social media platforms, social
environment and circles. Although, social media platforms influence the motivation to travel,
it works interconnectedly with an individual’s social environment and circle and it is not always
clear cut to determine where one factor starts and ends and where the other begins.
Fig. 2 Adapted from Choice Set Model (Crompton, 1992)
6.2.2 Understanding the role of social media platforms on the destination choice using the choice set model.

6.2.2.1 The Awareness and Unawareness Set

Results from the research showed that when it came to choosing a final destination, the students had to consider a wide range of potential destinations. The potential destinations include all the destinations they were aware or unaware of before traveling. As mentioned beforehand, some of them knew exactly where they wanted to visit even before planning to go on vacation.

They had decided on places of interest long before they decided to travel. As one student referred to, he had always had an interest in the Russian history and had always had the interest of visiting Russia. In this case, Russia was a potential destination that he was very much aware of. This may also include a long list of other destinations. The destinations the students were aware of was influenced by information transferred from family and friends who had visited or learned about the destinations at some point in their lives. In the use of social media platforms, some of the students learned about new destinations through the images, videos, blogposts they had seen from friends, families, acquaintances and even strangers. Some of these destinations became a part of the students’ knowledge of potential destinations, however the ones they are aware of are the ones that actually became part of their memories.

Outside the set of all the information they find and numerous discoveries of new destinations on the social media platforms are the ones they do not find and have no knowledge about. Arguably, the students will not visit a place they never heard of and have no knowledge about but this is a debatable subject. Through active social media platforms use, potential travellers can use web-based platforms that plan mystery holidays. A mystery holiday is planned by a few web-based tour companies like PackUpGo who plan holidays for potential travellers, revealing the travel destination only upon arrival to the airport on the day of travel.

6.2.2.2 The Consideration and Exclusion Set

Within the awareness set are the consideration and exclusion sets. Taking into regards all the potential destinations the students were aware of, they considered only the destinations that were possible or they were able to travel to. This is the consideration set. Among the several factors that influenced their ability to travel includes affordability, accessibility, time available and safety. As students, most of the respondents expressed the financial constraints that comes with being a student due to a lacking source of income. They could not travel anywhere they wanted hence these destinations that were too expensive were excluded from their list of consideration.

Some potential destinations were also excluded because they were either too far away or too remote to reach. During the decision-making process, the respondent planned their trip using information on blogs and web-based platforms like trip advisor to plan itineraries based on others who had undertaken similar trips. However, they changed their mind about going to the destinations after realizing the remoteness of the location or how inaccessible it was by transport. In other cases, with the destinations being so far away, they were no longer considered due to time constraints. Another reason why some of the students decided against
visiting particular destinations was for safety reasons like political unrests, epidemic outbreaks, war and other reasons that makes the potential destinations not conducive and unsafe for traveling.

6.2.2.3 Selecting a final destination

Following all considerations of time constraints, financial constraints, inaccessibility and safety, the students were left with either one or fewer destinations choices to consider. At this stage, the students considered the remaining potential destinations based on their personal interests, the attractiveness of the destinations and so on, again based off information found on social media platforms, family and friends and acquaintances. A final decision is made based on these factors and sometimes no decision is made at all and the whole process of the destination choice set process is repeated.

6.3 During Travel Stage.

6.3.1 Social Media Platforms use and its influence on tourist experience

From the study, it was noted that the students continued to use social media platforms during their trip. The main reasons were to keep in touch with family and friends and maintain social relationships. Besides that, the traveller uses social media platforms in sharing experiences of the trip online and by word of mouth.

Sometimes, the expectations of travel experiences may be different from what one actually experiences. In the study some of the students recounted situations where they arrived at the travel destinations and things weren’t as planned or expected. In situations like this, they used social media platforms, or relied on information from locals to find alternative solutions to the problems encountered.

6.4 After Travel Stage

6.4.1 How the experience encountered during the trip informs tourist perception

The experiences encountered on the trip informed the tourists during the travel, formed perceptions of their destinations. In the study, the respondents compared their expectations pre-travel to their experiences during travel and believed their expectations were more than met. Their positive experiences were met by careful planning. They discussed the possibility to revisit the destination in the future again or recommend it to others seeking similar experiences.

However, the limitation to this is, satisfaction can be subjective and relative to individuals. Perhaps if their trip was followed temporally, an observer may be able to adjudicate if the
satisfaction was met according to a standardized unit of measurement. Furthermore, tourists may talk about the overall experience leaving as it may be what remains in memory, as memory fades over time it is hard to see which vital information was missed.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION.

Overall, the study shows that in various ways, social media as a web-based platform, influences destination choice. It informed the students of this research on the available destination options, the range of activities they can engage in, information about the people, place and landscapes in the destination.

Social media also influenced the motivation to travel. As pointed out by Lester and Scarles (2013); Butler (1990); Kim and Richardson (2003), social media can influence travel motivations and perception of destinations by acting as the pull factors that attract travellers. In the sense that, through knowledge about the attractiveness of destinations, the desires to visit was either developed or increased. However, travel motivation can be attributed to other factors other than social media influence, example pre-existing knowledge of the destination, emotional connection to the destination, the convenience of affordability, time availability and place accessibility.

Furthermore, the influence of social media may not always be recognized or appreciated by the potential traveller. In this case, some of the students due to the lack of trust and credibility in the information found on social media, denied any influence it may have had on their trip albeit the fact that, they used the platform in one form or the other. Their need to use social media platforms is attributed to a lack of alternative source information. This shows an example of the multi-dimensional and multi-layered processes of the decision-making described by (Keshavarzian and Wu, 2016).

Moreover, as articulated by Sheng and Chen (2013 p. 3), as there are different types of tourists based on sought after experiences; i.e. active and passive experiences, determined by their “level of involvement” and the experiences they seek, social media was used in a personalized way. The students sought out the travel experiences on social media that they found most stimulating to them. With this in mind, the influence of social media on choices is possible when the information found match with personal interests. Therefore, they may have come across several motivating and potentially influential information on social media but ignored them due to lack of interest.

The study shows the linkages between social media platform use and destination choice. Social media, has potential for influence at all stages of the trip, from the pre-travel to the end of the trip. In the early stages of travel, all pre-travel decisions, planning and destination choice are made. Although social media platforms play a major role of providing pertinent information about tourist destinations, activities, attractions etc, social circles and environment also influence the decision-making process, travel motivations, expectations, satisfaction and perception. In fact, the influence of social media platforms and social circle is interconnected and works hand-in-hand to create an individual’s motivations and expectations. This is indicative of Larsen’s (2007) three stages of interaction between tourist and travel systems.
including expectations of the trip which occurs during the planning process, events that occur during the trip and memories that are created from the tourist events. In addition, experiences of the research participants indicate that careful planning can lead to satisfactory experiences. Tourist experience can be both negative and positive, however there is a circular link between tourist experiences and perception of destinations among tourists and future influences on other potential tourists.

With regards to Crompton’s (1992), choice set model, destination choice is influenced by knowledge of potential destinations. In most cases, the vast knowledge of destinations corresponds with vast options of destination to choose from after the considerations of factors like safety as well as ease of access in tourist destination and financial constraints and time limitations. In the case of this study, social media platforms provide knowledge of a numerous number of destinations from which a destination is chosen after the consideration of factors which (Crompton,1992) describes as the cognitive and affective components.

A limitation of this study was the insufficient use of a proper multi-destination choice analysis. Although Crompton’s (1992) choice set model was purposeful in providing insights on how social media influences destination choice, it does not give much theoretical underpinnings associated to choosing multiple destinations. Further research should arguably include the use of multi-destination choice model to analyse and understand influences in this area of research.
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APPENDIX 1 - Research Interview Questions.

BACKGROUND

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. What are your personal interests when it comes to travelling?
3. How often you travel annually and what places you have been to within the past 12 months?
4. How did you come to know about these destinations? Through Family and friends? Social media?
5. What was your purpose of travel? What kind of activities did you partake in?
6. Are you an active social media user? What do you usually use social media for? What platforms do you frequent?

What role does social media platforms play in the decision-making process before physical travel?

1. What did you consider when choosing the travel destination to visit? How did you end up choosing that destination?
2. Was your choice of destination influenced by any means of physical attributes/attractions or emotional connections to the chosen destination?
3. Did social media influence your choice in anyway? If yes, how? What other sources of information influenced your decision?
4. Did you have any other destinations on your list of choices and why didn’t they make the pass?
5. After booking your trip, is there any destination as an afterthought, you would have preferred to visit instead of the one you ended up planning for? If yes, why would you have preferred it? If no, why not?
6. Do you trust the credibility of information you gather on social media? If yes, how do you usually verify this credibility?
7. Would you say you use and rely more on information passed by word of mouth or found on the internet?
8. How do you feel about online reviews? Do they have an impact on your decisions?
9. Did you have an itinerary for your trip? If yes, how did you plan your itinerary?
10. During the decision making of choosing a destination of travel, did you search for information about chosen destination? Did you find information that strengthened your desire for chosen destination or did you find information that created doubt about the chosen destination on social media? If yes, can you share any instances or information that motivated or discouraged your choice?

How do the travel expectations created during the decision-making process compare with travel experiences encountered during physical travel?
What was your overall expectation of the trip? For e.g., a luxurious experience? Backpacker? Did you attain that expectation? Did you make the necessary arrangement to attain those expectations? Did you meet circumstances beyond your control?

How was your experience during the trip different from your daily life? Did you have any expectation of some differences?

Would you say you had any transformative experience during the trip? What would you say was your most memorable moment? Did you have any expectations for this happening?

Did you have negative expectations of the trip based on information learned about the destination before you embarked on the trip? If yes, what negative experiences did you expect and what did you actually experience?

What is the role of social media platforms in forming perceptions of tourist destination based on the experience of the traveller after physical travel has ended?

What was your overall perception of the destination? Was it to your expectations?

Did you share your experiences online or by word of mouth? If yes, how did you think they will have an impact on other potential travellers?

Did you have any previous knowledge of the destination you visited before you decided to even embark on a trip? If yes, what were your perceptions about the destination?

How did you feel at the end of your trip?

Looking back now, will you embark on the trip again? If yes, why? And what will you do differently? If no, why?
**APPENDIX 2- PRESENTATION OF THE RESPONDENTS.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Type of interview</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Type of travel</th>
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<td>Face-to-face</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Leisure</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Tokyo, Japan</td>
<td>Visitation of Family and Friend + Leisure</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2019-04-08</td>
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<td>Interrail. European Cities</td>
<td>Leisure</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>2019-04-09</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Stockholm, Sweden Crete, Greece</td>
<td>Leisure</td>
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</tbody>
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