Bachelor Thesis

The Influence of Social Media on Consumer Behavior within the Tourism Industry

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Abstract

With the rise of social media platforms and the phenomenon of social media influencers, consumer behavior has drastically changed within the tourism industry.

A case study was conducted by the authors to determine the ways consumer behavior within the tourism industry has been affected by social media. The empirical data in this study were gathered by semi-structured interviews, which is a qualitative research approach. A deductive approach was used for this thesis and it is written from a tourism influencer / destinations' self-marketing perspective. The authors interviewed five travel influencers and two destinations about their perception of their job, their influence and their experiences.

With the gathered data, the authors made a conclusion regarding several ways social media is influencing consumer behavior in the tourism industry.

Keywords

Social media, consumer behavior, tourism, influencer marketing, influencer, tourism influencer, destination marketing.

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SMI = Social media influencer

OSN = Online social network

TDI = Tourism destination image

DMO = Destination management organisation

AR = Artificial reality

VR = Virtual reality

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1 Introduction

The authors will provide a background followed by a brief problem discussion, expanding this introduction. Finally, this chapter shall conclude with a presentation of the research questions, the thesis's aim, and delimitations.

1.1 Background

The decision making process among consumers during complex purchases within the tourism field may be influenced through the usage of social media. Complex consumer behavior issued from a tourism perspective refers to infrequent high cost purchases where consumer involvement and risk is considered high (Smith, 2017).

Throughout the last decade the phenomenon of social media has evolved into complex multidimensional user driven networks, allowing for instantaneous transnational networking through the World Wide Web. These platforms entail blogs, platforms for media distribution and social networks. Collectively those are defined as 'social media' (O'Shaughnessy, 2012). The development of social media enabled platforms for user generated content such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The growth of social media made it a dominant space for consumer feedback, opinions and content sharing as well as growing user generated content while creating communities which are globally accessible (Lee, 2013).

Connecting people through the web brings strength to the voice of the consumer and therefore creates what could be described as a movement which fundamentally changes the way information is obtained and how products and services are consumed. This enables consumers to express their opinions surrounding products or brands while information is instantaneously accessible. This information surge forced brands to adapt in order to meet the demands of consumers creating a paradigm shift. (O'Shaughnessy, 2012).

Social media has become one of the most powerful marketing tools during the last couple of years and is being used more frequently. 'Influencer' is a relatively new term which describes an individual that has a larger than average following on social networks, such as on the application Instagram. Influencers can influence other users on the network which makes them a powerful tool in marketing and they could often fit the framework for independent marketires. Presenting products or offers in this manner can change or alter purchase behavior. Influencers are generally characterized as nodes that can reach and "infect" a substantial section of the system after initiating a spreading process on a network of connections. (Zhou, et al., 2019). Because of Gen Y's (people born between 1980-1999) growing purchasing power and the rise in outbound travel, the number of social media influencers such as destination endorsers among Gen Y has increased (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

Travelers increasingly utilize online social networks (OSN) before and during vacation journeys to gather information on the trips as well as to discuss their travel experiences (Sigala, et al., 2012). With the implementation of Web 3.0 the focus of the internet shifted from selling, seeking, and consuming to producing, connecting, and exchanging. It is defined as a basically better version of the first world wide web, marked by the shift from static to dynamic or user-generated content, as well as the rise of social media. Web 3.0 allows people to create, share, collaborate, and communicate their work with others without having to know anything about web design or publishing (Sigala, et al., 2012). Web 1.0 has its focus on companies, using banner advertisement and page views. Web 2.0 focuses on communities, sharing content and is using interactive advertisement. Web 3.0 is portable and personal, focuses on the individual and uses behavioral advertising and user engagement (Sharma, 2021).

1.2 Problem discussion

In this section, the authors will stress several problems they have encountered during the research process that are vital in order to provide an understanding and answer the research question.

1.2.1 Power of social media

The way travelers capture and share their holiday experiences and memories has changed dramatically thanks to social media. Only a postcard and a holiday photo or video tape could be used to capture and share vacation memories in the past. Anyone can snap wonderful images and share them with people all over the world thanks to the advent of social media and smartphones with built-in cameras. This practice of recording and sharing vacation photos has become a virtual addiction for some people. Vacation memories, as well as the sharing of these recollections, have long been a huge component of the tourist experience (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2016).

Social media gives the consumer a broader voice and audience and in that way E-word-of-mouth (online word-of-mouth) has become a significant tool for both producers and consumers when looking for advice, trips and reviews.
The use of mobile devices and social media created the 'tripadvisor phenomenon' which describes the obsession with reviews. Since a lot of power lies in the hands of the consumers when it comes to reviews, many abuse this power in order to get upgrades or discounts. They threaten to post bad reviews online if they do not get what they desire and in that way blackmail the producer (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2016).

1.2.2 Trust and legitimacy

The internet has fostered the emergence of global consumer-generated media, allowing travelers to seek advice from other travelers whose perspectives they may trust more than travel specialists whose recommendations are based on commercial reasons (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2016). The reasons behind this is human psychology and the attitude behind the made statement. It is a well

known fact that people trust influencers more if they promote something because they really stand behind the product or service and it is their intention to pass on their knowledge or the experience rather than just promoting it for commercial reasons (Stahl, 2006).

When it comes to e-commerce, also known as online retail there are a few issues surrounding trust and legitimacy that have remained since the emergence of the phenomenon of e-commerce. One aspect surrounds the payment procedure, where consumers need to give out information such as credit card number (Stahl, 2006). For consumers to feel comfortable in fulfilling a purchase a certain level of trust is required to feel safe in giving out once credit card information. Naturally as the internet and e-commerce evolved the trust among consumers has risen but the issues surrounding personal information and giving up bank details still discouraged some consumers from proceeding with a purchase (Head, & Hassanein, 2002).

Quality issues is also an issue that arises when purchasing products or services online as that ability of testing the product before a purchase is not possible. Issues surrounding quality and mistrust often can come as a result of bad reviews or product cost being suspiciously low and therefore wake feelings of uncertainty. This may result in consumers questioning the legitimacy of the individual or business selling the product (Head, & Hassanein, 2002).

1.2.3 Tourism and consumer trends

During the last two decades, social media and Web 3.0 have drastically changed society and in that way also the consumer behavior, from the emergence of e-commerce and the continued decline of physical shops. This resulted in consumer diversity and a need for individualized tailored experiences. In this way the retail environment became ideal for social media (Steenkamp & Sloot, 2018).

Sites such as YouTube remain the most popular platform, with consumers admitting that they primarily use YouTube when researching potential purchases, followed by Instagram and Facebook, while one-third of consumers resort to social media influencers, making influencer marketing an effective means of reaching consumers (Baird, & Parasnis, 2011).

Influencer hot-spots are for example a new trend in tourism, where a destination or sight gets famous due to the exposure of it by an influencer. The destination or sight is then attracting many followers and in some cases this goes over the design of nature and it has to be closed down due to too high tourism flow.

1.2.4 Environmental aspects

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic a lot of travel has been canceled which had a positive impact on nature. The people did not have the chance to upload pictures of beautiful travel destinations as they were not allowed to travel. This was due to restrictions from home and host countries and in that way mass-tourism destinations had the chance to go back to their state they were designed for. In Venice for example, the dolphins have returned to the canals since the gondel traffic has declined as there were almost no tourists coming to the city (Buckley, 2021).

Influencer hot-spots as explained earlier are sights or destinations that gain fame due to exposure on social media by influencers. This has happened at the 'Infinity-pool' at *Königssee* in Bayern, Germany. Influencers posted pictures of the landmark and people were coming in crowds, endangering nature and vegetation. The route to the landmark is quite dangerous and in 2019 two visitors drowned in the pool. In 2020, between 150-350 people visited the landmark each day which had a huge impact on nature. Due to that, the landmark had to be closed for five years in July 2021 in order to restore and regrow the habitat and to protect its nature. Such influencer hot-spots can become dangerous especially if the influencers don't educate their followers

about the risks certain destinations may hold and how to be considerate of nature (Haberlander & Demmelhuber, 2021).

All topics in the problem discussion - power of social media, trust and legitimacy, tourism and consumer trends and environmental aspects - have a great impact on consumer behavior and how individuals in the current society are behaving which will take us to the next section.

1.3 Research question

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to answer the research question:
In what Ways has Social Media influenced Consumer Behavior - a Travel Influencer Perspective on Tourism Consumer Behavior.

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct an examination, researching social media's ability to influence consumer behavior, by testing the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical findings presented in the literature review, subsequently answering the research question above.

1.5 Delimitations

The aim of the thesis focuses on changes in consumer behavior in connection to social media from a travel influencer perspective. Therefore the authors are limited and research will need to be excluded. The authors conducted a case study with a limited number of participants, therefore providing general answers or theories within the research field could lack validity and credibility. As a fault the result of the case study will provide answers in the specific and not general field of research (Simon & Goes, 2013).

The influencers chosen for the case study were all involved in travel influencing mainly operating on Instagram or through websites. Both men and women were present in the case study from varying nationalities. This may provide further delimitations as upbringing can vary both depending on

geographical location and gender. For this thesis they all belong to the specific niche 'tourism influencers'. The authors have opted to use influencers of varying following size, influence capabilities and years of experience. Furthermore, two destinations were interviewed to include their social media behavior and success in this thesis and to examine differences and similarities between individual social media influencers and destinations on social media platforms.

2 Methodology

Methodology is designed for reflecting upon research quality and involves covering sufficient knowledge for a theoretical basis and deciding on the level of appropriateness of the empirical fields. This is done with the intention of creating thoroughness and comprehensiveness. This also enables future research to be conducted if new empirical data were to come forth, this includes determining whether or not the resources available are adequate to address the research question and give a comprehensive overview (Smith, 2010). The Research approach, research strategy, research method, quality of research, type of data, operationalization and selection of cases will be presented in this section.

2.1 Research approach

The authors choose to use the deductive research approach during this thesis. The first step of deductive reasoning is the information collection phase. This was done in order to provide a basis of knowledge based upon previously established theories. The literature review includes recent findings from peer-reviewed journals on a variety of topics, including: consumer decision making, consumer psychology, social media influencers and brand credibility enabling the authors to provide an answer to the research question (Pandey, 2019).

The theoretical principles presented were compared and tested with the empirical findings, theory-testing when it comes to empirical findings brought forth in case studies puts the empirical evidence in relation with theoretical findings to either be able to support or discredit the claims made. All the participants that took part in the case study were individuals from the social media application Instagram, that had a large enough following to fall under the category travel influencer. The reasoning behind this decision is that the

marketplace of Instagram is a good place for influencer marketing and consumer engagement to be examined.

2.2 Research strategy

Instead of focusing on individual opinions, the authors were more interested in gaining a generic understanding of the research subject. This shows the qualitative approach to be the most appropriate strategy to use in this situation. The qualitative approach was created through conducting a case study surrounding consumer behavior and social media influence (Axinn, & Pearce, 2006). Moreover, the qualitative research method is a method that emphasizes quality when collecting and interpreting data. To put it another way, the technique entails selectivity to secure qualification. The qualitative strategies data gathering is non-numeric, which indicates that data is viewable but not measurable in the conventional sense (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

2.3 Research method

The authors chose to do a case study, as this research method describes a detailed study of a specific subject, in this case how consumer behavior has changed due to social media seen from a travel influencer perspective. When one wishes to gather tangible, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world issue, a case study is an acceptable research method. It helps you to investigate the case's essential qualities, meanings, and ramifications and keeps the project focused and manageable, especially if time is a scarce resource (McCombes, 2020).

With this method the authors are not starting with a hypothesis but are using semi-structured interviews and literature studies to come to a conclusion to the research question. Finally, interview questions in conjunction with relevant terms and literature provided us with a probable response to our central research question. (Åsberg, 2001).

Validity in the field of research describes the motion of how relevant the conducted research is to the researched topic and reliability focuses on the reliability of the research and the way it is done. The goal for a study is to have the highest validity and reliability as possible. Validity is best used in the right setting and time, it might not be valid in other contexts or settings. It describes a state in a certain situation or population and makes it only valid for that special situation or population. Reliability resembles the accuration and how reliable and credible the chosen sources are. Low reliability always results in low validity but high reliability does not guarantee high validity and at the same time high validity needs high reliability (Gunnarsson, 2020).

Validity and reliability in qualitative research refers to the capacity to describe how data was acquired and handled in a systematic and honest manner. It also explains the project's conditions and how the outcomes evolved during the procedure. Internal validity consists of a pre-understanding description, a data gathering description and a selection description. Triangulation is also included in vaility and describes the phenomenon of looking at the problem from different perspectives and getting new perspectives from different people of interest. During the writing process of a qualitative study, the author does not define the generalization of the topic but more describes the way to the result and once the work is published, the reader defines the generalization. This process is called external validity where the authors receive a confirmation of their expected validity. Reliability in a qualitative research defines the credibility and reliability of the research and the researcher. The researcher is responsible for the capability of understanding, interpreting and analyzing the answers in the right way (Gunnarsson, 2020).

By actively incorporating the previous criteria of the qualitative research of this thesis the authors aim to achieve a well structured research strategy. With this technique the authors also aim to enhance the trustworthiness of the thesis (Davies, 2003).

2.4 Quality of research

In the following chapter the authors present standards necessary for ensuring quality of research. The authors had to judge what methods would be best to implement during this thesis. Similar judgment was needed when it comes to the questions and the individuals that were chosen for the case study. Furthermore the authors actively chose a variety of subjects from different nationalities and backgrounds to get rid of any potential biases. To achieve this, the authors took inspiration from guides in research design and also methodology these preparations create the basis for quality assurance.

2.4.1 Validity and reliability

Qualitative research within tourism studies can in some cases be lacking in credibility since it belongs to the social sciences. Therefore the authors will assess the trustworthiness by deliberately considering criteria to ensure a trustworth result. Firstly: The authors chose to assess internal validity assessing how truthful the findings were. As some data was collected through semi-structured interviews the truthfulness among participants is impossible to guarantee. However for this thesis participants are assumed to be throuthful. Secondly: The authors assessed external validity and the applicability of the research findings when observed in other settings ultimately assessing the transferability of the research findings. Thirdly: Assessing the reliability of the thesis through asking questions such as can the findings be reproducible and if so would the result stay consistent. Lastly: Are the findings objectively neutral without bias (Davies, 2003).

This research is limited to interview participants who are social media travel influencers or have experience with this kind of work. Validity is created through taking answers only from interviews with the participants and credible literature and no other non-credible sources.

The reliability of this thesis is created by only interviewing experienced people but might be influenced by the fact that some interviews were conducted via mail. This way it is easier for the respondent to falsify answers

in order to protect themselves or their reputation. Respondents that are being interviewed in person or via platforms such as Zoom tend to be more spontaneous with their answers and their thinking in the author's experience.

2.5 Type of data

To provide an answer to the research question, the authors will collect both primary and secondary data. The primary data will be collected through an instrumental case study by the authors themselves. This will be done through semi-structured interviews with the aim of gathering empirical findings that align with the thesis purpose and assists in answering the research question; *In what Ways has Social Media influenced Consumer Behavior - a Travel Influencer Perspective on Tourism Consumer Behavior.*

When collecting primary data assuring that the data is both correct and accurately represents the topic is key to avoid presenting falsified or inaccurate research. (Hox, & Boeije, 2005).

Secondary data is information that has previously been gathered from primary sources and made accessible to researchers for use in their own studies. The secondary data in this thesis entails qualitative data of standing consumer behavior theories such as Books, journals, articles, websites, which are all examples of secondary data sources used throughout this thesis (Hox, & Boeije, 2005).

2.6 Operationalization

The interview questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing respondents to be honest and precise with their responses rather than steering the conversation. Due to the fact that this thesis is written in English it was only logical to directly conduct the interviews in English. The researchers provided participants the option to be honest with their replies by using relevant and open themes. Furthermore, the writers were very careful when transcribing the acquired primary material to avoid leaving out important details.

2.6.1 Interview design

The interviews were mostly conducted via email but also digitally. Before starting the digital interviews, the authors asked the participants for their permission to record the interview, so that they had the chance to listen to it afterwards and in that way not to lose any important information mentioned. All participants were given the possibility to remain anonymous in the beginning of the interview. The interview method used was semi-structured interviews which gives the authors the chance to have an open dialogue and to evolve the questions during the interview. This also can further develop the given answers and provide a fuller and more suited answer to the questions asked (Raworth, 2019).

To ensure the quality of the information gathered during the interviews the authors made some precautionary measures such as conducting test interviews to make sure that the questions could be answered and that would provide answers that could bring forth an open dialogue where more comprehensive answers could be given. This also gives the interviewee the possibility to ask questions and reflect (Rowley, 2012).

As the interviews were recorded it gave the authors the possibility to listen through each individual respondent staying vigilant for similarities and discrepancies to build the basis for an empirical analysis. (Rowley, 2012).
The reasoning behind counting the interviews online were due to both geographical restrictions and with consideration to the ongoing pandemic situation of Covid-19.

2.6.2 Instrumental Case Study

Good theory organizes information in such a way that it can be used to explain other circumstances. The process of developing theories entails attempting to construct a larger tale out of specific anomalies. However, since the authors choose to conduct an instrumental case study providing findings in the generic

is not possible but rather the findings can be used to answer elements of the specific (Davies, 2003).

When deciding upon what kind of case study would be the most appropriate for this thesis, the authors decided to do the instrumental case study in which theories are evaluated for their ability to improve insight into the problem, as a fault, theoretical saturation becomes increasingly difficult to assess. This is due to the fact that the actual example is less important than the theoretical knowledge it may provide (Davies, 2003).

The authors thought this to be the best form of case study since theoretical saturation is less important and systematically examining instrumental case studies are well suited to extend or develop existing theories through primary findings. Furthermore the authors thought this form of case study would best represent the stakeholders while assisting in answering the research question (Yin, 2011).

2.7 Selection of case

In this thesis the purposive sampling approach has been used to find participants that are helpful for the overall result of the study and their influence on it. Purposive sampling is known as a subjective and judgemental sampling method where the researchers chose participants by their own judgment. The homogeneous sampling method was used which focuses on individuals who have comparable attributes or traits. Participants in homogenous sampling, for example, would be comparable in terms of age, culture, occupation, or life experiences. The goal is to concentrate on this specific resemblance and how it pertains to the research topic (Etikan, et al., 2016). All participants of the case study in this thesis were carefully selected by the authors based on the criteria of activity on their social media, experience and independence. The participants were studied and looked at before contacting them in order to get a clear picture of them, their work, their vision and their motives.

3 Literature review

In the following chapter, various theories will be presented. Furthermore, previous studies in the field of social media, consumer behavior, tourism, and psychological influences that support and strengthen the empirical field will be presented.

3.1 Levels of power

Social media allows destinations both on the demand and supply side of the tourism industry to connect with tourists and respond and monitor their behavior in different online platforms. Web 3.0 created a new business climate and new business models due to the broad availability and relatively low costs of the internet. During its limited existence, the internet has progressed from a static instrument for digital publication to a completely dynamic platform for cooperation (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2014).

Influencers are a relatively new phenomenon that originated mostly on social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. Independent third-party endorsers who use blogs, tweets, and other forms of social media to influence audience opinions are known as social media influencers (Magno & Cassia, 2018). Their job is it to influence their target audience in their purchase behavior and trigger their emotions. It is necessary for a firm or a destination to build an appealing marketing plan in order to attract new visitors, and it is an influencer's responsibility to influence their target audience's buying behavior and stimulate their emotions (Hysa, et al., 2021). There is a very active core group that accumulates and disseminates information, impacting all other levels of the social system, and not all network members have equal effect (Guerreiro, et al., 2019).

The questions regarding levels of power the authors asked the participants were the following.

- *Do you think that you have an influence over your followers and can influence their purchase decisions/ visiting a certain place or destination?*
- *What kind of posts reach most of your followers?*

Social media platforms and sites can have a huge impact on one's everyday lives from behavior, self perception to creating prerequisites for action taking. Internal and external psychological factors may influence purchase decisions and individuals at large. The next section will discuss the topic of consumer psychology in relation to purchase behavior and social media.

3.2 Consumer psychology

Social media puts people under the pressure of comparing one's life with others online. This creates high expectations for things seen online and later on one's experience in real life. Most times those experiences never turn out the way they are imagined and are not close to the things seen on social media. The negative side effects of being an influencer and a public person are some things followers don't really see on social media posts. Research argues that social media harms self-reflection and how one perceives themselves as individuals are under constant pressure to look our best and behave according to society's norms, otherwise one may be seen as an outsider. This is especially true for the younger generation, who grew up using the internet from a young age. Influencers are often seen as gurus and role models for the younger generation creating unattainable standards as the end goal (Dimofte, et al., 2016).

When consumers prepare and consider a complex purchase decision there are many different internal and external factors that affect and influence this decision making process. Psychological factors such as beliefs, desires, intention and action all play some role in influencing the final decision when it comes to whether to consume or not (observe figure, 1). Together the factors collectively make up the reason for action.
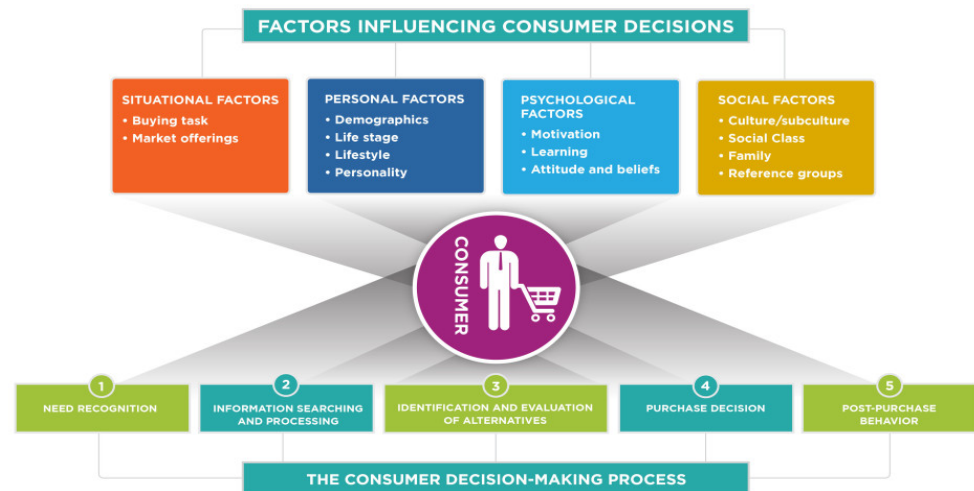
Figure 1 - Factors influencing complex consumer decisions (Lumen Learning, 2020).

Philosopher Jonathan Dancy explains that reasons for doing an action can be found in environmental factors (O'Shaughnessy, 2012). This belief is common in philosophy and a well accepted statement. This highlights a mixture of influences that all play some part in the action of completing complex purchase decisions (O'Shaughnessy, 2012).

As this matrix of factors comes together, the foundation for consumer action making starts to emerge. Folk psychology further explains that people's beliefs and wants activate their behavior and create action. This understanding of consumer behavior psychology is a powerful tool marketers use to predict behavioral patterns. Nevertheless, knowing that a consumer intends to purchase a trip abroad does not reveal the beliefs, wants or influences behind the purchase (O'Shaughnessy, 2012).

Through technological developments in the last two decades, social media and data tracking has made it possible to make educated guesses in intentions behind consumer purchases. Where data mapping can provide a consumer profile, mapping consumer beliefs and purpose. As more data is gathered, this

information can be used to predict current and future consumption desires. In other words, consumer data gathered through the usage of social media platforms can be used to prematurely predict and market potential purchases to consumers that are statistically more likely to activate human desire creating a purchasing action (Dimofte, et al., 2016).

3.2.1 Affiliation

When assessing the motivational factors behind people's intentions to engage with social media, one explanation is based upon the nature of humanity itself. Socializing and tieing emotional bonds makes up the basis for human well-being and life satisfaction. Behavioral psychology supports this claim, explaining that belonging and social relations are critical for feeling satisfied in life (Dimofte, et al., 2016).

Social media caters to these needs and wants, facilitating a platform where connections and existing social ties can be straightened bypassing geographical limitations. The need for affiliation and social interaction is found to be the main driving force behind social media usage (Dimofte, et al., 2016).

3.2.2 Self expression and Identity

Another motivational factor behind social media usage is that social media platforms allow for self expression. Users can share activities, interests and thoughts through text or photos receiving instantaneous feedback in forms of likes or comments. The growth of social media networks further complicates the term identity, where users can provide altered versions of themselves. This phenomenon is known as the 'online self'. This self expression and identity may vary vastly from the actual self that could be presented as the 'offline self'. This often leads users to represent themselves in an idealistic manner, sharing the most interesting aspects of themselves (Dimofte, et al., 2016).

Consumer psychology is a big part of today's marketing strategies and society and influencer marketing comes with both positive and negative effects. Those will be discussed in the next two sections, starting with the positive ones and continuing with the rather negative ones.

3.3 Developing effects

In a multitude of industries, including tourism, the rapid transformation in how people interact, combined with user-generated content, has produced a new dynamic in marketing communication (Guerreiro, et al., 2019). Citizens' access to a range of social media platforms has changed how people search for, analyze, rate, buy, and consume things and services in this market substantially (Guerreiro, et al., 2019).

Influencer marketing has both positive and negative implications. Influencers can provide their followers with information, advice, and suggestions. Influencers' effects on their audience can be divided into four categories: informative effects, motivational effects, role model effects, and community impacts are all possible outcomes (Asan, 2021). There are many influences, yet each one has their own 'style' and artistic way of visualizing themselves. Travel influencers in particular, are conscious of their footprint and seek to extend their followers' minds by sharing extraordinary experiences and forging social bonds with the communities they visit (Asan, 2021). Influencers have the capacity to boost low-competitive destinations' competitiveness, reposition stable destinations, and reinforce weak destinations.

Following a stay at a destination, rural businesses should take advantage of the personal relationships they've built with their customers and expand them on social media. Visitors form an impression of a location as well as a set of expectations based on prior experiences, word-of-mouth, press reports, advertising, and common beliefs before visiting it (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2014). Even while influencer marketing is a tremendous tool for advertising,

word-of-mouth is still the most potent strategy, and if someone had a great experience, they will tell their friends (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

When we travel, we create our own memories, but we also provide secondary experiences and stimulate our followers through the content we share online. Influencers do the same thing, but to a much larger audience. People do not need to be physically present to view it; instead, they can view it virtually (Seeler, et al., 2019). Our perception of space and place is both locally fixed and globally extended as a result of social media (Deuze, 2012). This means that we are physically in one place but at the same time can be all over the world with the help of social media.

In context to the rather positive outcomes from social media, the authors were interested in the following two aspects when interviewing the participants.

- *How did you become a travel influencer?*
- *In what ways has being a social media influencer changed your life?*

The interviewed destinations were asked a similar question regarding the topic.

- *How did you as a company start working with travel influencers?*

Not only are there positive effects of the work of and with influencers but also negative ones which will be further discussed in the next part.

3.4 Demolishing effects

A tourist destination is a natural entity with unique circumstances and characteristics that distinguish it from other tourism destinations (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2014). The destination will get attention as a result of an influencer's endorsement of an unusual or outstanding location, but it is possible that a previously unique destination may become a mass tourism destination in some aspects. It's critical to set a limit on the number of people who can visit a location in a given amount of time; otherwise, landscapes will be imperiled, and the opposite of what sustainable tourism stands for will happen (Palazzo, et al., 2020). Many people go to extremes just to obtain the ideal Instagram photo, and it's critical for such destinations to convey not just their beauty, but also the danger that lurks behind it if one does not respect barriers and signs (Justianto & Morley, 2020).

Social media platforms have become a vital part in everyday life of consumers but even if influencers can influence our emotions and behavior, it is still difficult to predict the exact behavior of a customer (Alvy, 2021). As well as since most pictures that are posted online are edited and staged, many people get very high expectations upon their journey and expect it to be like in the pictures, which it most likely will not be (Molinas, 2019).

Regarding the rather negative aspects of social media, the authors asked the influencers the following question.

- *Have you ever experienced something that made you rethink being an influencer?*

Knowing the benefits and drawbacks of influencers and their work allows for the development of a partnership and strategy plan that will hopefully result in a successful collaboration between a destination and an influencer.

3.5 Collaborations

Social media is gradually persuading destination marketers that it should be an integral part of their campaigns as a tourist marketing strategy (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2014). Visitors want a personalized experience, as well as insightful, imaginative, and engaging communication and messaging that involve empathy and emotions. They want to be a part of the tourist product creation process and want to buy with confidence. Social media may help places stay competitive if they create entertaining content, use innovation, and promote and stimulate collaborative debate (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2014).

The popularity of social media stems from the fact that it has grown into a tool for shaping perceptions, attitudes, and experiences, and as a consequence, it has become a vital source of information when making travel decisions (Pop, et al., 2021).

When people/followers haven't seen the location in person, social media and media depiction in relation to 'storytelling' are crucial (Waldburg-Zeil, 2020). Viral marketing is a word that refers to marketing tactics that employ social media to create brand awareness through the spread of self-replicating viral messages (Kiss & Bichler, 2008). Although social media marketing may now reach many more people than any other medium, it is critical to use dependable and trustworthy sources, otherwise the destination's brand reputation may be jeopardized (Waldburg-Zeil, 2020).

Positive social media feedback motivates other people to visit a certain destination or stay at a particular hotel, but negative feedback and remarks can be hazardous to the business.

Companies can use social media to track their visitors' activities and learn about their preferences (Hysa, et al., 2021). Local communities can benefit from sustainable tourism by being included in the tourist process at their destination. Locals can work as tour guides, sell goods and souvenirs, and do

other tourism-related tasks. This also adds to the destination's authenticity (Palazzo, et al., 2020). If data about the customer network is available, centrality measurements provide a structural metric that can be used in decision support systems and to spread viral marketing campaigns throughout the customer network. The marketing of an odd or outstanding place on social media may bring attention to the destination, but it is possible that a previously unique destination could become a mass tourism attraction. (Kiss & Bichler, 2008).

Informational, entertaining, social, and aesthetic aspects are all woven into the posts on social media platforms like Instagram (Justianto & Morley, 2020). In terms of sustainability, Jusianto & Morley (2020) discovered that influencers and destinations have contributed to an increase in tourist awareness and accessibility. According to Molinas (2019), social media has influenced the natural evolution of tourism in recent years, as well as spawned a new business model and altered customer/visitor decision-making processes.

Because of the internet, consumers now have considerably more options and may obtain products and services from a larger number of sources than before but have less time to make a purchase decision (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2016; Királ'ová & Pavlíceka, 2014).

Influencers' level of influence can be rated in three categories, trustworthiness, expertise, and attitude (Rössler, 2021). Trustworthiness relates to the level of trust followers have towards an influencer. Expertise describes the level of competence and expertise an influencer is meditating. There is a strong bond between trustworthiness and expertise. Attitude then relates to the attitude of influencers toward different destinations / services. There is a strong bond between attitude, trust and booking intentions as well.

The way influencers communicate their message and how credible it is is a significant component. People will believe an influencer more if they know a lot about a place, a topic, or a sight and provide their honest opinion about it. This makes them even consider visiting there themselves. Travel influencers claim to be experts in their industry, therefore they should utilize their platform to share their expertise with others who aren't. Knowledge is seen as more authentic than just mentioning theoretical truths (Rössler, 2021).

Tourism service providers, such as destinations and hotels, are increasingly incorporating social media influencers into their digital marketing strategies and leveraging them as a promotional tool. In order to promote a vacation or a hotel, social media influencers should generate a reasonable, objective, and attribute-value message for their followers, since these types of messages are more powerful than merely suggestion-messages (Kapoor, et al., 2021). Although the opinions of digital influencers do not appear to have a substantial impact on the purchase choice phase, it appears that those who closely follow them are more inclined to visit the places they promote and value their qualities of authenticity, sincerity, and trust (Guerreiro, et al., 2019).

To find out more about collaborations, the authors asked the interviewed influencers the following questions.

- *Does it differ from regular posts and sponsored posts, in what ways can you tell the difference?*
- *Do you say no to collaborations with certain brands and if yes, why?*
- *Do you consider yourself a brand?*

The interviewed destinations were asked similar questions that were the following.

- *When you are promoting the destination, what things do you focus on?*

- *Do you say no to collaborations with certain brands/ influencers? If you, why?*

In the way a destination is representing itself on social media platforms and interacts with social media influencers, has a serious impact on the tourism destination image which will be explained in the following part.

3.6 Tourism Destination Image

The initial image construction stage prior to a visitor's travel is the most critical point in their destination choosing processes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). They discovered that both sensory and visitor characteristics have an impact on a destination's image.

The Tourism destination image (TDI) is described as the following: "A voluntary, multisensory, primarily picture-like, qualia-arousing, conscious, and quasi perceptual mental experience held by tourists about a destination. This experience overlaps and/or parallels the other mental experiences of tourists, including their sensation, perception, mental representation, cognitive map, consciousness, memory, and attitude of the destination" (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018, p. 236). The TDI describes an organic image, created by a person's individual experiences and perceived image upon arrival, shaped by outside sources such as advertising and promotion (Chenini & Touaiti, 2018).

The total TDI is divided into two parts: cognitive and affective. Affective relates to emotions and sentiments about the environment, whereas cognitive refers to the core processes by which an individual knows its surroundings. The preceding two components, which involve action, doing, or striving in response to both, combine to make conative (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).

Motivations, perceptions, psychological features, experiences, rumor, tourist marketing, media, education, and socioeconomic characteristics are all

variables that impact the formation of a tourist image in a consumer, as can be observed in figure 2 (Jenkins, 1999). Destination managers should consider visitors' viewpoints when selecting which groups to target with marketing campaigns, and they should engage the assistance of other key stakeholders in this respect (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).
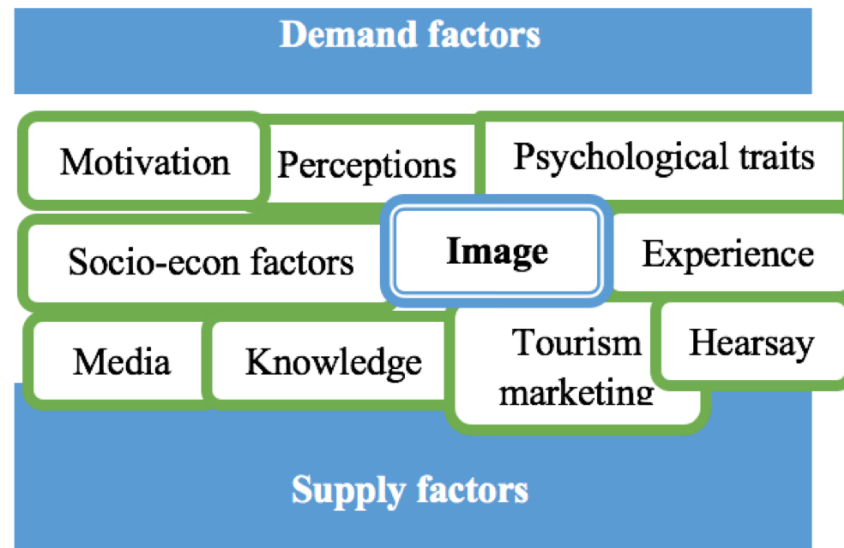
Figure 2 - Factors Influencing the Tourists Perceived Image (Jenkins, 1999).

The similarity between social media influencers (SMI)' perceived images and consumers' ideal self-images is proven to have a considerable beneficial influence on visit intentions to the recommended places (Xu & Pratt, 2018). It has been argued that, in contrast to an organic image, an induced image is the most faithful to the reality of the destination, and that managing image (in)congruity between tourist representations is important not only for marketing purposes, but also because it may affect the transformation of the reality of destinations on social, cultural, economic, and even physical levels as it can be observed in figure 3 (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).

Figure 3 - Stage theory of destination image (Jenkins, 1999).

In addition to economic concerns, image dissonance or congruence has been connected to socio-political, societal, and economic problems (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Un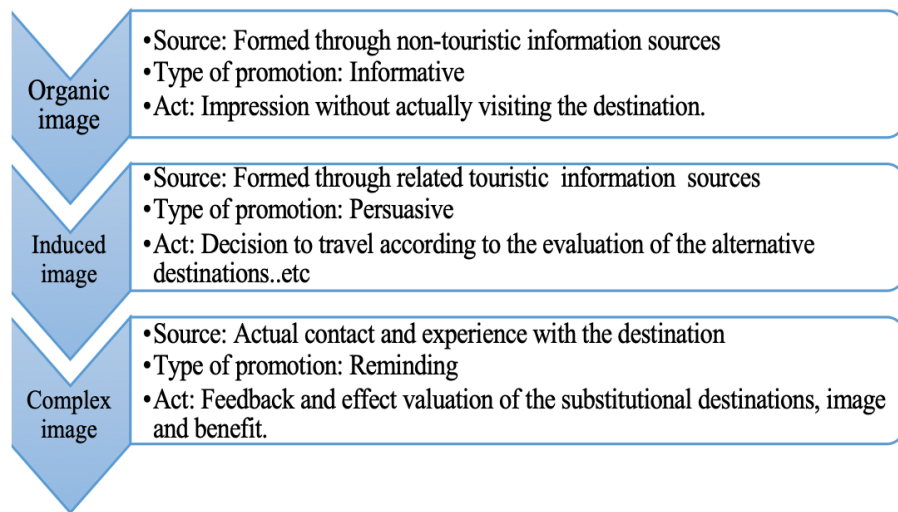derstanding the perceived image and how it differs from the projected image may assist national tourism organizations (NTOs) and other destination marketing organizations (DMOs) improve tourism destination planning, branding, positioning, and promotion (Aicher, 2021). The closer a destinations' projected images are to visitors' perceived images, the more likely it is to meet their expectations and establish strong, unified brands, according to marketing theory (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).

Marketers must know that both destination attributes and tourist reasons must be considered in order to influence emotional judgments of their locations. Word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family were the most important source for building tourism perceptions. As a result, locations should keep in mind that providing a positive tourist experience has a substantial influence on forming good perceptions among non-visitors (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). A distinct tourist destination image can not only assist a destination attract more people, but it can also help the destination promote sustainability, which is a critical issue nowadays.

Making tourists satisfied benefits the marketer much. A satisfied tourist is more inclined to stick with the destination. They will tell others about the items or services and encourage them to buy or utilize them. As a result, tourist satisfaction is critical to tourist loyalty, as it appears to have favorable effects on both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty outcomes (Chenini & Touaiti, 2018). Tourist satisfaction results in tourist loyalty and therefore destination loyalty is linked to tourists' perceptions of a locations' worth visiting, as well as their willingness to promote it to others (Chenini & Touaiti, 2018).

Even though social media platforms can influence our emotions and behavior, it is still difficult to predict a customer's exact behavior (Alvy, 2021). Pictures only record a single point in time, not the entire tale, and on social media, we only show our frontpage, not the real us or our so-called backstage. Everything may be crammed into flashy marketing and promotion, and we will unwittingly devour the tears and blood of employees. Both media technologies and social media provide meaning, but they also have the potential to ruin things on so many levels that we don't even consider (Maxwell & Miller, 2012).

In connection to the TDI, the authors have asked the participants the following question.

- *Do you feel that your posts are authentic and to what level do you think your followers trust you?*

The destinations were asked the following question.

- *Do you feel that your posts with influencer engagement are authentic and to what level do you think your followers trust you?*

The way a destination is represented on social media by a destination or a social media influencer has also sustainable impacts. Those will be further examined in the next section.

3.7 Sustainability

Sustainable tourism aims to reduce negative social and environmental impacts while also improving local economic viability, well-being, health, education, and infrastructure (Falatoonitoosi, et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism development can be considered as an alternative to traditional techniques of poverty alleviation while boosting affluence to create a better living for all concerned parties, as a sustainable lifestyle is no longer an option but a requirement (Falatoonitoosi, et al., 2021). Sustainable tourism does not necessarily aim to generate a large amount of income or attract a large number of people, but rather to improve the quality of life for residents by empowering sociocultural development and environmental quality (Falatoonitoosi, et al., 2021).

The social and environmental ramifications, reactions, and indicators of the mainstream tourism sector can be divided into five categories: population, peace, prosperity, pollution, and protection (Buckley, 2012). Economic issues are prioritized in the tourism industry, with social and environmental concerns limited to regulatory obligations, political maneuvering, and marketing and public relations. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) encourages sustainable development in many destinations, but many firms in less developed areas are opposed to such restrictions since they would harm their operations, preventing the UNWTO from implementing its sustainability objectives (Zhu, et al., 2020).

Even though the UNWTO emphasizes the positive benefits of environmental conservation through sustainable tourism development, many less developed destinations lack the connection and capital guarantee to incorporate environmental competitiveness into tourism demand (Zhu, et al., 2020). Regulation, rather than market forces, is the fundamental driver of progress.

Some tourism proponents are still using political maneuvering to get over environmental restrictions and get access to public natural resources (Buckley, 2012).

Sustainability communication strives to inform travelers about the availability of environmentally friendly products and services, illustrates how these offers fit sustainability requirements, and encourages pro-environmental purchasing. Despite significant resources and efforts, eco-friendly hotels' or destinations' sustainability policies may go undetected and ignored in the lack of targeted and effective sustainability marketing. As a result, sustainability communication is gaining traction as a beneficial technique for expressing a hotels' or destinations' attention to environmental concerns and influencing guests to make environmentally conscious decisions (Kapoor, et al., 2020).

Sustainability communication, on the other hand, is problematic because of the abstract nature of sustainability, making it difficult for tourists to understand sustainability practices and their added value.

More and more destinations and companies in the tourism sector are using social media channels for sustainability-related dialogues and communication. In this way they also are able to include stakeholders and third-party representatives in their marketing. According to a recent survey included in Kapoor et al. (2020), 40% of respondents acknowledged buying something only because of an influencer's post. Despite their rising popularity, few studies have looked at how successful SMIs are at influencing passengers in the hospitality industry.

SMIs may involve their followers in the sustainability discourse and ethical consumerism by using their storytelling abilities and realistic narratives about their life choices, experiences, and beliefs, and even induce shame for their irresponsible consumption patterns. The guilt argument is said to be more successful in influencing tourists when SMIs employ it in their sustainability communication on social media. This is because in public moralization, the guilt appeal in sustainability messaging will look more real and elevated

(Kapoor, et al., 2020). The guilt appeal will elicit negative feelings like regret and remorse, resulting in existential social responsibility guilt. This prompts passengers to think about the sustainable practices of the eco-friendly hotel or destination featured in the SMI's article. The guilt appeal's cognitive dissonance and demand for revenge may lead to travelers' pro-sustainable activities (see figure 4). Furthermore, because followers see the SMI as an opinion leader and role model in sustainable travel, the guilt appeal promotes the information's authenticity and reliability (Kapoor, et al., 2020).

On the other hand, using the guilt appeal in sustainability promotion on social media by an eco-friendly hotel may be regarded as greenwashing. The guilt appeal may appear overbearing to potential customers and the hotel's social media followers, who may believe the property is preaching environmental principles. As a result, leveraging the guilt appeal in sustainability advertising may work against eco-friendly hotels, resulting in fewer favorable outcomes (Kapoor, et al., 2020).

The authors did not specifically ask the participants about sustainability in their job, the topic rather got addressed by the participants themselves which made the semi-structured interviews more interactive.

In the next section, future aspects of influencer marketing, social media and future tourism trends will be discussed which also have a great impact on all previous mentioned sections. The future is hard to predict but the constant changes in social media, tourism demands and trends will create changes eventually and possible outcomes will be thematized below.

3.8 Future aspects

Social media is constantly evolving, the social media of today is not the same as it was even a year or a decade ago. This is due to ongoing innovation in both the technology side of social media and the user/consumer side (Appel, et. al., 2019).

3.8.1 Future influencer marketing and social media

Prior studies have looked into the marketing potential of social media. For instance, research has shown certain types of social interactions that are currently taking place on social media may have a favorable impact on critical marketing outcomes like sales and new customer acquisition. While the decision-making funnel is undoubtedly becoming flatter, social media has the ability to affect the whole consumer decision-making process from start to finish (Appel, et. al., 2019).

Some brands have begun to experiment with the use of virtual influencers such as artificial intelligence (AI), and research believes that as computing power and AI algorithms improve, they will play a vital role in the future (Appel, et. al., 2019).

Another trend that already exists is augmented reality (AR) which combines reality techniques such as filters on the app Snapchat or Apple's Memoji which interfere with a smartphone's camera to create real-time video or visual features (Appel, et. al., 2019). Those trends will in the future probably be more extravagant and even better developed than they are now.

While AR allows users to interact inside their present contexts, virtual reality (VR) transports them to other locations, and this technology is anticipated to become more prevalent in social media interactions. As virtual reality technology becomes more inexpensive and widespread, research believes social media will undoubtedly play a role in its further adoption (Appel, et. al., 2019).

Appel, et. al. (2019) also discusses that there currently are integration strategies for marketing online/offline and that the future will blur the lines between online and offline. This will not only raise the effectiveness of marketing promotions, but to completely change the way customers and companies interact with one another, as well as the way social media influences consumer behavior both online and offline.

Dwivedi, et.al, (2020) suggests that new marketing techniques for the new social media platforms may be required in order to generate customer leads and improve consumer engagement.

3.8.2 Future tourism trends

As new technology such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial reality (AR) are becoming more developed they bring forth interesting possibilities for future tourism trends. AR technology is revolutionizing most industries of today, providing new and different perspectives on how we experience products and what services can entail (Dieck, 2019). This creates huge future growth potential for the tourism industry, allowing tourism experiences to be enhanced through the means of digital transformation (Han, et al., 2018).

The future potential is endless, however there are some future trends that seem to be emerging faster than others such as the enhancement of perception. This means that through usage of AR devices, destinations can be reinvented or highlighted in a new light providing consumers with even more personalized and unique experiences (Han, et al., 2019). Travel itself has been described as a temporary escape into a different reality. One example of this is Disneyland, where consumers have emerged into a perceived or constructed reality (Bryman, 1999). This is in many ways similar to what the future of AR can have in store for future tourism trends.

When it comes to experiencing a new destination prior to arrival, the trends of today are commonly based upon recommendations from friends and family or through the usage of social media. Future tourism trends may likely take this one step further through the usage of technology such as VR headsets where consumers are able to 'test' a destination prior to physically arriving. This also enables the capabilities of comparing one destination with another, allowing for better informed decision making. Subsequently AR & VR holds some interesting opportunities and avenues for future tourism trends (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019).

4 Empirical findings

In the following chapter, the authors will shortly present the respondents and the empirical findings collected from the participants of the conducted case study.

4.1 Outline & Questions

In order to get an answer on their research question, the authors asked the travel influencers participating the same 13 questions during their interviews. The questions for interviewing the destination were adapted to fit a destination's point of view and reduced to four questions. Both destinations answered the same questions. All asked questions can be found in the appendix.

4.2 Respondents case study

The tourism influencers were chosen due to the fact that they have been working in the area for a long period of time to ensure the quality and expertise. The destinations that were interviewed are Destination Kalmar and Göteborg.com that actively work with representation and promotion of those Swedish cities on their social media channels.

4.2.1 Travel influencers participating in case study

4.2.1.1 Daniel James - @danflyingsolo

Daniel has to this date 28,1k followers on Instagram and started his blog danflyingsolo.com in 2013 with now over one million page views a year, where he writes about his travel experiences, people he has met, do's and dont's and other recommended things he stumbles over on his way. He is originally from London, England and has been a full-time traveler for the last five years. He has visited over 60 countries. Traveling for him is all about authenticity, education and the people he is meeting during the trip which he has further explained in his interview with the authors.

4.2.1.2 Alyssa Ramos - @mylifesatravelmovie

Alyssa is a 33-year old cuban-american who has been traveling full-time for the past eight years. She has been to 85+ countries on all 7 continents and has 204k followers on Instagram. What drives her with her Instagram and her blog is helping and inspiring others. She has started a travel saving and making project called 'the Wanderlust Workers', where she helps people to save a fair amount of money for their travels with a 'spending diet' and other helpful tips. Alyssa also organizes group trips to extraordinary destinations such as Antarctica.

4.2.1.3 Andrea Vetrano - @andreavetrano

Andrea is a luxury travel expert from Italy with his own website and 411k followers on Instagram. Through his website and his Instagram page he has established himself as an authority figure in the travel business and on social media. Andrea has had the honor of representing and collaborating with some of the world's most famous and well-known companies, including Four Seasons, Kempinski, Aman, Small Luxury Hotels, and many more. His mission in sharing his experiences is to encourage people to love, explore the globe, make a significant effect, contribute value to others, and challenge standards.

4.2.1.4 Franziska André - @swissmountainview

Franziska is a 54 year old female travel influencer from Switzerland. She has her own website and 251k followers on her Instagram page. Eight years ago, she became an influencer by accident and not by intention, she posted pictures of her everyday life in the Swiss mountains and people started following her. She even got featured by big profiles like '9gag' and 'voyaged' which resulted in more people following her and creating a broader audience. She focuses on the beauty of nature, landscape, hiking routes and restaurants when at a location.

4.2.1.5 Trent & Sarah - @riotravelers

Trent (28) and Sarah (25) are a storytelling and adventurous couple traveling the world and sharing their trips and experiences on social media. They have 114k followers on Instagram and 650k followers on the video sharing app TikTok, a website and their own line of merch which supports schools globally. Their main content in travel bucket list videos and tips on destinations, especially for young people. They first started their career when TikTok was emerging in 2019 and gained a following both on TikTok and Instagram through their adventurous videos of various destinations on those platforms.

4.2.2 Destinations participating in case study

4.2.2.1 Elisabeth Gefvert - @destinationkalmar

Elisabeth is the press and communication manager at Kalmars official tourism agency, Destination Kalmar and takes care of their social media and influencer collaborations. Destination Kalmar has 10,5k followers on Instagram and is frequently using local influencers from Kalmar municipality and travel influencers to promote the area. Kalmar is a city in the region of Småland in south-east Sweden and a very popular summer city. Destination Kalmar is promoting the area of Kalmar municipality and features sights to visit and explore and events that are happening in and around the city.

4.2.2.2 Eva Lehmann - @goteborgcom

Eva is the head of unit PR, travel trade & campaigns at Göteborg.com, the official visitor guide of the city of Gothenburg. Their Instagram account has around 64k followers and promotes the city for both national and international and tourists. Gothenburg is Sweden's second largest city and a popular tourist destination all year around. Göteborg.com focuses on three special things in their marketing - food, design and the nature of the city.

5 Discussion & conclusion

In the following chapter, the answer to the research question will be presented and discussed in connection to the purpose of the thesis. This is done to provide an in-depth discussion where the research could be implemented and what limitations it may hold, providing a basis for future research.

_____

All participants started their career as travel influencers by accident, through traveling and posting pictures of places they have visited on their social media, resulting in gaining popularity and starting to build up a following. They've all been published on major websites, gaining them greater exposure, and have been approached by travel agencies and hotel chains for partnerships. Andre for example got inspired by other profiles on Instagram and Pinterest to create a more professional profile and really focus on becoming a travel influencer. For all participants it took several years to have a steady income from their travel influencer being. Franziska is still working 80% at her normal job and is therefore more of a local Switzerland influencer.

Levels of power & TDI

The participants all think that their work on social media is authentic and represents the promoted destination in the way it is. All questioned travel influencers think it is very important for their relationship with their followers to be real and authentic and only to engage with things they themselves identify with. The participants feel that they definitely have influence on their followers, and get a lot of positive feedback from people who have traveled to destinations they saw and were influenced by them on the participants' profiles. This confirms the theoretical findings that state that people trust influencers more, if their representation of a destination is credible and honest, which results in followers traveling to a promoted destination themselves. The influencers focus on showing a destination as it is but in their own aesthetic, which confirms the concept of the tourism destination image. All of the participants believe that individuals have begun to go online for travel

information, and that travel influencers, in particular, have this information, making them an interactive element of social media marketing.

All participants focus on the landscape, exciting activities to do, people they meet and the nature of the places they visit when promoting them. Those visually appealing posts are also those who reach the most people. The influencers do a lot of research first before they go on a trip to get the best possible outcome for all parties. It is important for engagement and success to create content that makes the viewer want to know more and to get inspired. People are more inclined to react, share, and comment on a post if they have a strong emotional connection to it. Being genuine and producing authentic content can help an influencer build a stronger bond with their audience and increase loyalty. With the implementation of Reels (a video making tool for short films on Instagram) many influencers see a change in follower engagement. They are seeing greater interest in videos that illustrate the place and things to do than in images posted as before.

Sustainability

In terms of sustainability, the travel influencers are well aware of the environmental impact their job has and therefore some rethink the necessity of collaborating with a destination far away. Franziska states that she has witnessed overtoursim and careless disposal of trash in some destinations she has promoted on her social media and therefore does not share all destinations she is traveling to as a private person (unless she is on a trip with sponsored collaboration) simply because she does not want to contribute to the development of mass tourism and pollution of the environment. Destination Kalmar also is very precise with the sustainability marketing and encourages tourists to travel in a sustainable way and therefore highlights many sustainable experiences and actors in the area in their social media marketing.

Collaborations

Sponsored posts can differ from regular posts in the fact that the destination pays them to promote a certain place and not the place the individual influencer personally would like to see and promote. The questioned influencers still give their posts an individual touch even if they are sponsored and are very careful with marking them as sponsored. Andre says that there is no difference between sponsored posts and normal posts as he only promotes hotels or destinations that he personally really likes or the general project they want to do with him while the rest states that there is a slight difference on the way sponsored posts are presented. None of the travel influencers participating in this survey collaborates with partners that do not match their own profile or that they personally cannot support due to for example governmental reasons. This supports the collaboration theory that the best possible outcome is when both parts are both coherent and share the same value as this leads to the best results. As a tourism influencer you have to do a lot of research about the destination but also about the agency offering you a collaboration to prevent bad outcomes. Destination Kalmar and Göteborg.com are very careful and picky with whom they collaborate to make sure the influencers values are the same as the destinations and to make the collaboration as credible as possible. If they do not see a perfect match for the destination they turn down collaboration offers. This could be due to the wrong target audience the influencer has or due to budget reasons.

The disadvantage of Instagram compared to a blog or a website is that you only can publish a certain amount of pictures in one post on instagram and followers tend to not read longer captions as they would do on a blog. Instagram is for the participants a source of inspiration and income but also a lot of work. They find themselves sitting in front of a screen instead of enjoying the actual trip they are on. The Instagram algorithm also filters out uploaded picutres so not all your followers see them in their feed which doesn't happen on a blog or a website.

The interviewed representative from the chosen destinations both agreed that they are dividing the destinations into different categories in their marketing strategy. Those categories are culture & history, nature & activity, shopping & food and events for Destination Kalmar and food, nature and design for Göteborg.com. Both destinations follow marketing strategies and surveys from Sweden's official tourism organization Visit Sweden to better understand the target audience. Destination Kalmar eighter collaborates with people that have a clear connection to Kalmar to make it as authentic as possible or with tourism influencers. When they collaborate with travel influencers, they give them more tips of what to see and do but let them be free to do what feels right and what they really want to see and post. Göteborg.com also gives their niche influencers much freedom but they have to approve the content before it is posted by the influencer.

5.1 Answering the research question

To answer the research question it will be put in relation to the purpose of the thesis. The connection between how social media is able to influence consumer behavior and to what extent these phenomena are interlinked provides an answer to the research question: *In what Ways has Social Media influenced Consumer Behavior - a Travel Influencer Perspective on Tourism Consumer Behavior.*

The theoretical finding implies that social media's influence on consumer behavior is both extensive and widespread. This entails that the influence of social media and its effects can be seen throughout consumer behavior theory. Consumer behavior is influenced through social media by facilitating a platform where emotions, opinions and feelings can be shared that transcends physical limitations instantaneously allowing consumers access to networks. It is estimated that roughly 4.4 billion people are actively a part of these networks (Dean, 2021).

Social media made it possible for consumers to express their opinions and make themselves heard. Consumer trustworthiness for products and services punched by marketires started to diminish as consumers became more aware that other consumers' opinions reflected an unfiltered version of what consuming products actually was like. For businesses, social media became a tool for facilitating two-way-communication, where consumer feedback and engagement made it possible to better predict consumer wants, needs and desires (Tuten, 2020).

Moreover the empirical findings describe social media engagement through personalized content pictures and humor could give big brands an illusion of being more human through means such as Influencers where polls, exclusive discounts and giveaways could provide levels of consumer satisfaction and build the basis for recurring loyal consumers.

Social media became a means of influencing consumer behavior through analyzing consumer opinions to better predict consumer desires and wants. Furthermore, influencers on social media could market products directly to consumers connected to the same network where consumers feel aspects of trust, connection, belonging and community. The difference between companies launching an ad campaign compared to influencers promoting the same product is based on emotional connection where social aspects and belonging are a part of human nature (Tuten, 2020). Naturally, more empirical findings are needed to state this as an absolute truth within consumer behavior theory.

The empirical findings indicated that the tourism destination image closely cohers with the expression of it on social media through influencers (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Sponsored posts therefore might not be the influencers personal favorite spot to visit but still remain authentic and real in its representation according to the empirical findings.

Collaborations are a vital part of social media marketing and creates credibility and authenticity for the influencer and the destination (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2014). The questioned influencers and destination both state that they are picky with who they choose to cooperate with and always look for the best and most authentic fit. If a destination collaborates with an unauthentic influencer or an influencer works together with a destination which they personally cannot support it might wreck both their image and reputation.

Trustworthiness is created through honesty and travelers will eventually find out if an influencer was lying about a destination (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). The questioned influencers also indicate that their goal is to be as honest and trustworthy as possible since they do not want people to spend money on something they will regret since it is not as pictured by influencers.

To conclude, it can be said that social media has changed consumer behavior within the tourism industry in the way people purchase, search for information, interact with a destination and expect it to be as well as how consumers portray themselves on their trips. As a result business had to adapt in order to meet the demands of consumers.

5.2 Implication

The research may have future implications for research within the subject matter. However, since the authors conducted a small scale case study the result of the thesis aims to answer questions in the specific and not in the generic. Therefore the empirical findings could lack credibility and validity for grand theory within the research field. The participants in the case studied were all from the social media platform Instagram, and no other platforms such as Youtube and Facebook were considered during the thesis.

When it comes to the theoretical implications, the possibility for future research, both within the specific and the generic is possible since the theories used can be regarded as well-established theories within the fields of research, examining mainy how social media and consumer behavior relate to one another in regard to tourism (Davies, 2003). It's important to note that these aspects are constantly evolving and changing as time passes and as a fault continues, future research is key to understanding the subject matter.

5.3. Limitation & future research

As this research is limited to the phenomenon of social media travel influencer within the tourism industry, and social media, consumer behavior and travel demands are constantly changing, future marketing might look serverily different from what it is now. The authors also only examined the influencer and destinations point of view coming to a conclusion. Taking the consumer's perspective into account might have led the research into a different direction and provided an in-depth look at individuals' habits and practices. This viewpoint may have provided an opportunity for the authors to compare the influencer perspectives with the consumer perspectives. Due to the limited time available to collect data, the authors were unable to achieve this wish. Future research could be undertaken over a longer period of time and take both the consumers and the destinations/ influencers perspectives into account.

Another limitation would be that only travel influencers active on Instagram were interviewed but it would be interesting to see how, for example lifestyle or fashion influencers affect their target audiences' travel behavior in a non-touristic context. Future research could also focus on other social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook for a broader audience and take them into relation to each other to get a more fuller and comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

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Appendix

Interview questions for travel influencers

1. Do you want to be anonymous?
2. What is your age and your gender?
3. How did you become a travel influencer?
4. Can you see a clear distinction between your male and female followers when interacting with your content? If yes, in what ways?
5. Do you think that you have an influence over your followers and can influence their purchase decisions/ visiting a certain place or destination?
6. If you promote a place or a destination, what things do you focus on?
7. What kind of posts reach most of your followers?
8. In what ways has being a social media influencer changed your life?
9. Do you feel that your posts are authentic and to what level do you think your followers trust you?
10. Does it differ from regular posts and sponsored posts, in what ways can you tell the difference?
11. Do you say no to collaborations with certain brands and if yes, why?
12. Do you consider yourself a brand?
13. Have you ever experienced something that made you rethink being an influencer?

Interview questions for destinations

1. How did you as a company start working with travel influencers?
2. When you are promoting the destination, what things do you focus on?
3. Do you feel that your posts with influencer engagement are authentic and to what level do you think your followers trust you?
4. Do you say no to collaborations with certain brands/ influencers? If you, why?