Universidad Europea VALENCIA

Bachelor's in Tourism and Leisure Management

FINAL DEGREE PROJECT

The Influence of Media-sharing Networks and Social Proof on Tourist Decision-making

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Abstract

Social media has a profound impact on the average person's daily life and has changed the way people communicate, connect with others, and consume information (Rajesh Iyer, 2023). This study explores the influence these media-sharing networks have on tourist decision-making, focusing on various aspects of the consumer's point of view. The research methodology includes an extensive review of literature, followed by a quantitative survey distributed by the researcher to her network across the European market.

The key findings of this study include the identification of family and friends as most influential regarding recommendations and identified lack of trust in public figures. This could be caused by the increased utilization of influencers and paid marketing across social media platforms. This raises questions about authenticity and honesty. Photographs and video content have been identified as most influential which strongly relates to Instagram and TikTok being among the most popular social media platforms. Additionally, several groups use social media platforms to collect information and gain inspiration, which has resulted in the increased appreciation of user-generated content and the spread of platforms focusing on sharing experiences and knowledge from previous trips.

Several research gaps have been identified, including the lack of research in the consumer perspective, as opposed to the destination or company, the most effective and influential part of social media platforms, and the use of user-generated content. This research contributes insight by gathering information to create further theoretical contributions from the European market. Limitations are the small sample and unnecessary answer choices.

Keywords: Social media, social proof, influence, tourism, travel

Las redes sociales tienen un profundo impacto en la vida diaria de la persona promedio y han cambiado la forma en que las personas se comunican, conectan con otros y consumen información (Rajesh Iyer, 2023). Este estudio explora la influencia que estas redes de intercambio de medios tienen en la toma de decisiones turísticas, centrándose en varios aspectos del punto de vista del consumidor. La metodología de investigación incluye una extensa revisión de la literatura, seguida de una encuesta cuantitativa distribuida por la investigadora a su red en todo el mercado europeo.

Los hallazgos clave de este estudio incluyen la identificación de familiares y amigos como los más influyentes con respecto a las recomendaciones y la falta de confianza identificada en las figuras públicas. Esto podría deberse a la mayor utilización de personas influyentes y al marketing pago en las plataformas de redes sociales. Esto plantea dudas sobre la autenticidad y la honestidad. Las fotografías y el contenido de vídeo han sido identificados como los más influyentes, lo que se relaciona fuertemente con el hecho de que Instagram y TikTok se encuentran entre las plataformas de redes sociales más populares. Además, varios grupos utilizan plataformas de redes sociales para recopilar información y obtener inspiración, lo que ha dado como resultado una mayor apreciación del contenido generado por los usuarios y la difusión de plataformas que se centran en compartir experiencias y conocimientos de viajes anteriores.

Se han identificado varias lagunas en la investigación, incluida la falta de investigación desde la perspectiva del consumidor, a diferencia del destino o la empresa, la parte más efectiva e influyente de las plataformas de redes sociales, y el uso de contenido generado por el usuario. Esta investigación aporta conocimientos al recopilar información para crear más contribuciones teóricas del mercado europeo. Las limitaciones son la muestra pequeña y las opciones de respuesta innecesarias.

Palabras clave: Redes sociales, prueba social, influencia, turismo, viajes

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1. Introduction

Social media has a profound impact on people's daily lives and has "changed the way we communicate, connect with others, and consume information" (Rajesh Iyer, 2023). The social media networks have grown in popularity over the last years, with Facebook reaching 2 billion users as of 2023, at the same time as Instagram reached over 2,4 billion monthly active users (Adames, 2022; Chaka, 2010; Lutkevich, 2021; Shewale, 2024).

At the same time, the tourism industry is rapidly approaching pre-pandemic levels and will likely continue its growth in the upcoming years. All major tourism-related companies that are selling online, have a social media presence to share pictures from destinations they cover. Simultaneously, travel influencers have gained impressive followings and built communities that share impressions and advice for destinations and establishments like hotels and restaurants. The influence of a person's close circle has also continuously increased.

Extensive research has been done on the impact of social media and social proof on the decision-making of tourists. With the relatively recent rise of social media, these decision-making habits are being utilized by companies and influencers to promote places and businesses. Furthermore, the increased usage of social media and exposure to user-created content, testimonials, and reviews, created by both public figures and people in their inner circles, are impacting people's thoughts and opinions at an increasing speed.

This research aims to further explore the impact and influence these platforms have on tourist decision-making, and how the tourist's opinion can be swayed because of the opinion of others. Additionally, the study aims to investigate which factors are especially important to the audience when it comes to shared content, and which groups have the highest influencing power.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are to gain an understanding of the impact of media-sharing networks and social proof, and the content posted by both private- and professional individuals, on tourist decision-making.

The objectives will be based on the following research questions:
- Investigate to what extent media-sharing networks and social proof affect tourist decision-making when it comes to destination choice, attractions, activities, and more.
- Investigate the role of social proof in regard to reviews, testimonials, and user-generated content, in shaping and influencing the tourist perception of a destination, attraction, activity, and more.
- Investigate whether tourists are more likely to book a tourist activity or service based on recommendations, reviews, or testimonials on media-sharing networks.
- Investigate which aspects of social media networks influence tourist perception and decision-making the most.
- Investigate whether the popularity- and trendiness of a destination, activity, or attraction on media-sharing networks influence tourist decision-making.

2. Methodology

The methods to be used in this study will be based on primary and secondary sources in line with the objectives of the study. Literature revision from secondary sources will provide background information that links to this study's scope and topics. A thorough analysis of relevant literature revision is conducted to subtract important aspects that act as a base for further investigation and analysis. The research is designed based on the quantitative research method to collect primary data.

2.1 Data Collection

The method of primary data collection for this thesis is a quantitative online self-administered questionnaire consisting of 40 questions to measure the relationship between media-sharing networks and tourists' decision-making. The platform Google Forms will be used to create this survey and collect all data. The questionnaire was offered in English to all participants and was distributed in the period from March to mid-April of 2024. Presumed due to the

channels this survey will be distributed, the respondents will be from countries across Europe, including the researcher's origin country, Norway. The English proficiency in Norway is high enough to understand the context and all intricacies of the questions asked, and will therefore not lead to a lower quality of data (EF Education First, 2023; Leiro, 2023). The questionnaire starts with a brief overview of the purpose of the thesis and what the collected data will be used for. The participant is reassured that all data will be handled confidently and anonymously and thanked for investing their time.

A filtering question was used to ensure the relevancy of responses. For the filtering question, respondents are given a definition of being a tourist. The definition used was from UNWTO (2022) and stated the following: "A visitor is a traveler taking a trip to a main destination outside his/her usual environment, for less than a year, for any main purpose (business, leisure or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited. A visitor is classified as a **tourist** if his/her trip includes an overnight stay". Responses of participants who stated that they have not been a tourist before, or are not sure if they have been, are not considered.

For the quantitative survey, non-probability convenience sampling was used. The researcher shared the survey with her network and close contacts through the use of a variety of communicative platforms. This procedure was used because of availability, accessibility, and the time & budget constraints of a student researcher.

2.1.1 Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire will be framed to address research objectives and analyze them appropriately with the following structure:
   A. <u>Introduction to the topic</u>. The participant was assured that the data would be anonymous, and appreciation for participation was expressed. A filtering question is asked to quickly determine eligibility and ensure that ineligible responders are not considered.
   B. <u>General questions</u> about social media and vacationing
   C. <u>Specific questions</u>
       a. Influence of social media
       b. Social Proof
   D. <u>Demographic Questions</u> and repeated appreciation for participation

2.2 Data Quality

To ensure the high quality of data, several methods are used. The following areas are addressed:
- Authenticity
- Bias
- Dishonest

Authenticity

To ensure data authenticity, large parts of the paper and structure will be drafted and completed before the primary research is conducted. This allows for more precise targeting of research (Marco & Larkin, 2000).

Bias

The researcher implemented the following measures to avoid and reduce bias:
- Participant bias was reduced by selecting participants whose profiles aligned with the research objectives (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001)
- The survey questions were carefully phrased with neither positive nor negative connotations toward any side (Cavana et. al, 2001)
- The respondents were ensured that their responses and information would be anonymous and treated confidentially (Cavana et. al, 2001)

Dishonesty

The responses to the quantitative survey will be reviewed and screened for obvious lies or otherwise invalid responses.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Social Media

According to McKinsey & Company (2023), "Social media comprises the applications and websites that allow people to interact with other users, businesses, communities, and content". The concept we know today is assumed to have started catching attention with the introduction of "SixDegrees" in 1997, a social networking platform created- and used to make friends online. The platform focused on connecting people with similar interests, and allowed users to send messages and share bulletins, but failed to gain traction which resulted in it being shut down in 2001 (Rajesh Iyer, 2023). As we entered the early 2000s, several social media platforms such as Linkedin,

MySpace, and Facebook surfaced, allowing individuals to stay in touch with family and friends by sharing life updates and media, similar to what SixDegrees aimed to achieve. The creator of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, initially created the platform for fellow Harvard college students to use, before it quickly expanded and became available to the public. As of the first quarter of 2011, the platform had 372 million active daily users, which continued to increase in the following years and reached over 2 billion by the end of 2023 (Dixon, 2024; Mckinsey & Company, 2023; Rajesh Iyer, 2023).

Following the increasing popularity of social media platforms, new sites and applications like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok entered the market, focusing on media sharing in the form of photography and videography (Mckinsey & Company, 2023; Rajesh Iyer, 2023). Furthermore, Mckinsey & Company (2023) divides social media into four main categories, being:
- Social networks
- Media-sharing networks
- Discussion forums
- Customer reviews

3.1.1 Media-sharing networks

Media-sharing networks can be defined as networks that are created to enable personal and professional media and content-sharing in the form of digital photographs or video clips. Some of the most popular media-sharing networks as of 2024 are Instagram, Tiktok, and Pinterest, with the first having over 2,4 billion monthly active users in 2022 (Adames, 2022; Chaka, 2010; Lutkevich, 2021; Shewale, 2024). As seen in the figure below, Instagram has steadily grown over the last years gaining 100 million users in the last quarter alone, and is expected to reach 2,5 billion active monthly users by the end of the first quarter of 2024 (Shewale, 2024).
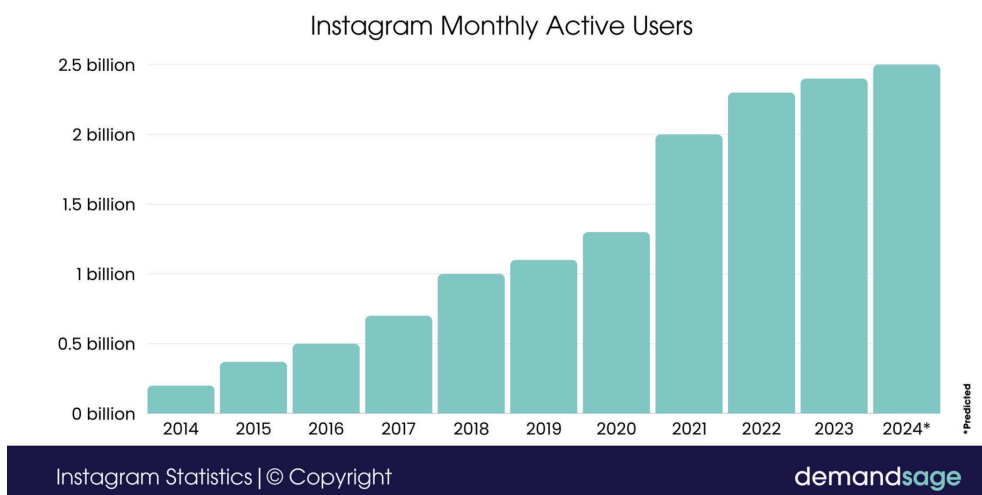

Instagram Monthly Active Users

Instagram Statistics | © Copyright   demandsage

Furthermore, media-sharing networks are used for a variety of reasons, from sharing personalized and professional content to gathering information and purchasing large selections of products. The large interest and motivation for using the platforms enable companies to reach customers and promote their products in numerous new ways, as well as make reaching a larger audience easier and more efficient. The platforms can be used by companies through social media marketing, real-time updates, and responses, as well as allowing and enabling building an audience across borders (Adames, 2022; Lutkevich, 2021). On the other hand, these platforms are also used to share content with family and friends. The ever-growing networks facilitate easy connections between individuals across the planet, making finding- and discovering new people and their content an easy task. As previously mentioned, companies on media-sharing networks hold great power to influence people's choices and thoughts when it comes to a variety of aspects, but on the other hand individuals in their inner circle-, or that they look up to can also have this power.

3.1.2 Social media usage

According to Kemp (2024), "there are 5.04 billion social media users at the start of 2024" which is equivalent to 62.3% of the total world population. When it comes to the total population that is above 18 years old, 84.2% of people use social media. Furthermore, the amount of social media users has steadily grown, with a 5.6% increase over the last year. This number equals 266 million new users in a year, or 8.4 new users per second (Kemp, 2024).

Additionally, according to the same source, the "average daily time spent using social media" in 2024 is 2 hours and 23 minutes (Kemp, 2024). This number equals about 10% of a day, meaning that the average social media user spends 10% of their day on social media platforms.

When it comes to which age groups more frequently use or visit social media platforms, there are some differences. Between December 2023 and January 2024, 96.9% of internet users aged 16 to 24 years old used social media networks, followed by 95.7% of 25 to 34-year-olds. The following groups decreased by the increasing age, with 94.9% of internet users aged 35 to 44, 91.8% aged 45 to 54, and 87.9% aged 55 to 64 (Kemp, 2024).

3.1.3 Social Media in Tourism

Social media has over the years become a large part of the tourism industry and experience. A study conducted after the covid-10 pandemic showed that there was a "sharp increase of 20% in worldwide social media usage compared to before the pandemic" (Cho, 2023). The time forced to be spent inside made individuals dream about their next travel, making it a crucial time for tourism companies and organizations to establish themself on these platforms. The platforms are being utilized by tourists who research the destination they are visiting next, share vacation pictures and videos, and more. On the other hand, tourism companies and organizations are using the platform to promote their services and facilitate easier access to information and knowledge. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2023) "almost 40% of Gen Z travelers (aged mid-20s or below) use social media platforms to plan their holidays", and by sharing content when traveling, destinations, hotels, and restaurants across the globe are put on the user's friend's and family's radars. Additionally, "74% of people who travel use social media while on vacation", and "social media users kept generating a travel-related hashtag search volume of 1 million every week" (Truyols, 2022).

Tourists use social media in travel-related settings in several stages, including pre-travel, during travel, and post-travel. In the pre-travel stage, tourists use social media platforms mostly to gather information, as well as to justify their decisions. In the second stage, during travel, tourists use social media platforms to share their experiences with their audiences. And lastly, in the third stage post-travel, tourists use the platforms as a way to remember and save their experiences, while also sharing tips and tricks for other tourists wanting to visit the same destinations (Tham, Mair, & Croy, 2019).

3.1.3.1 Positive & negative effects of social media on the tourism industry

3.1.3.1.1 Positive effects

There are several positive effects of social media on the tourism industry, including interaction with potential clientele, sharing of information, and marketing opportunities.

As discussed in previous chapters, the fact that social media platforms are free to use results in the number of active users being very large. This also means that companies and organizations can create users and use them to provide relevant information, answer questions, and interact with their customer base (Truyols, 2022).

Furthermore, with the large reach these platforms have, they also offer a variety of paid marketing opportunities. Several social media platforms have "advanced targeting options allowing marketers to target very specific demographics", which allows them to create and launch comprehensive marketing strategies (Truyols, 2022). Studies conducted in 2014 showed that travelers were more likely to choose accommodation alternatives with a higher rating when placed at the same price point, as well as that most visitors were willing to pay more for an alternative with better ratings (Ciccarone, 2014). This showcases the importance and impact reviews and testimonials across platforms already had 10 years ago, which is proven to have increased rapidly in the following years.

Influencer marketing is yet another aspect that has grown in popularity in recent years, utilizing social media platforms and their potential to the fullest. Influencer marketing is a term that involves public profiles on social media platforms marketing a product or a service for their audience, and an aspect that has over the last years been discussed concerning its honesty and authenticity. Several companies pay large sums for influencers with a large audience to promote their product, and many influencers take the easy money without sharing their honest opinion. This creates an atmosphere where today's youth starts to lose trust in reviews made by large figures, believing they were paid to do so. This has resulted in new marketing laws and regulations stating that influencers who are posting sponsored content should mark it clearly (AdamInsights, 2024; News Literacy Project, 2024). Research shows that trust in public figures and influencers on social media is much lower than from consumers and fellow peers. An example is a study conducted by Nosto (2019) explaining how in 2017 10% of the sample found celebrity and influencer content the most influential on social media platforms, compared to the rapid decrease of 8% in the following two years, resulting in only 2% believing so in 2019. On the other hand, 60% in 2019 thought that consumer-created content was the most influential, showcasing a higher level of trust in regular consumers compared to potential paid marketing (Nosto, 2019).

3.1.3.1.2 Negative effects

The increased use and exposure of social media in the tourism industry can also have some negative effects and aspects, including the impact of negative interactions on a company, and how the activity on the platforms is impossible to control.

Studies show that negative interactions under a company's social media posts can be hurtful to the company's brand image (Waramontri, 2020). Not only can the comment or interaction be seen by the company's already existing customer base, but it can also gain the attention of potential clients, which can make the client second guess whether to use this company.

Another example showing how social media campaigns can take a turn for the worse for a destination is the "SunnySideOfLife tourism campaign in the Maldives. The campaign aimed at showcasing the beauty of the Maldives and making the hashtag trend on social media platforms, but was hit with numerous negative comments regarding police brutality, political illegitimacy, and more happening within the country across Twitter. Social media is close to impossible to control, and campaigns and responses can take a life of its own and steer the awareness and focus in a different direction than initially intended. In this case, the campaign backfired and the entire sector in the Maldives suffered the consequences (Siddique, 2012; Truyols, 2022).

3.1.3.2 Social Media in Tourism Marketing

In a time where tourism continues to grow hand-in-hand with the use of social media platforms, social media has become an essential tool to reach- and communicate with potential clients across the world (Molloy, 2023). Some of the most popular platforms include Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, all enabling users to create and publish similar content. These platforms act as an effective tool for social media marketing due to their ability to share content with a large reach, which facilitates easy communication with individuals on all sides of the world. This makes gaining followers and attention way easier compared to the work that had to be put in prior to the increase in this usage.

Social media marketing allows companies to establish and increase their brand awareness, increase engagement, gather insight into their customer's behaviors, and leverage user-generated content created and shared by followers across the platforms (Molloy, 2023). While doing this, they can also post and create content free of charge compared to other advertising- and marketing strategies (Volkman, 2022). Studies by the International Tourist Research Center show that 88% of tourism businesses actively use social media for a variety of reasons, such as promoting destinations and offers.

3.2 Visual Content Psychology

3.2.1 The Importance of Visual Content

Visual content can be defined as "online content that's primarily image-based" and includes common forms of visual content such as "pictures, diagrams, charts, infographics, online videos, screenshots, memes, and slide decks" (Dean, 2019). Research shows that humans "process visuals 60,000 times faster than text", while also enhancing and affecting people's emotions and attitudes (The Media Education Centre, 2010). This also showcases the importance of visual content for professional businesses through online marketing, and how evoking emotions through utilizing visual content can also influence purchasing decisions and create connections (FasterCapital, 2023b). Furthermore, The Media Education Centre (2010) states that these images "engage our imagination and heighten our creative thinking", and describes how emotions take part in influencing decision-making.

3.2.2 The Psychological Aspects

3.2.2.1 Emotions

A person's emotions influence the way they make decisions in their day-to-day lives, and without them, they would be passive. When emotions are experienced at a high intensity, this can affect the ability to make rational decisions, and also "create biases that affect how we perceive information and interpret situations" (Ratson, 2023). On the other hand, emotions can also play a large role in guiding decision-making while taking the individual's values and what matters the most into account.

Furthermore, visuals and the emotions they create help foster connections. From a marketing perspective, catching the audience's attention and fostering connections is of ever-growing importance, as the user's attention spans are continuously getting shorter (Hollingsworth, 2023).

3.2.2.2 The Concept of Social Proof

According to FasterCapital (2023a), "Social proof is a phenomenon that influences our decision-making process by relying on the actions and opinions of others". The concept explains how the impressions, actions, and opinions of other people influence a person's perception of the topic, and that they are more likely to choose something that they have heard- or read good feedback about, compared to the alternative lacking this additional information. When it comes to products, including tourism products, "people are more likely to

choose a product that is popular and widely accepted by others" (FasterCapital, 2023a).

3.2.2.2.1 Social Media Reviews and Testimonials

Social media platforms, including media-sharing platforms, encourage users to leave comments, opinions, and reviews on posts across topics, which provides valuable insight and social proof (FasterCapital, 2023a). Reviews and testimonials from people in a person's inner circle, acquaintances, as well as more well-known social media profiles, all take part in creating the social proof that influences the user's thoughts and decisions regarding tourism products and services.

3.3 Decision-making processes

Decision-making can be defined as "the process of making choices by identifying a decision, gathering information, and assessing alternative resolutions" (University of Massachusetts, 2021). Other sources also define the process as how an individual makes a decision based on one's knowledge, intuition, and judgment (Samir Hossain, 2023). There are a large variety of models and processes that explain what influences- or affects the user's mind and how a person deals with it. According to the University of Massachusets (2021) using a step-by-step decision-making process can be a way to make thoughtful and deliberate decisions.

The step-by-step decision-making process described by the University of Massachusets (2021) is divided into seven stages:
1. Identify a decision
2. Gather relevant information
3. Identify the alternatives
4. Weigh the evidence
5. Choose among alternatives
6. Take action
7. Review your decision and its consequences

The process is carefully created to cover every step of the process in detail and guide the user in the most thought-through way to make successful decisions.

Furthermore, several aspects influence a person's opinion and decision-making process, such as social proof and the increased usage of social media platforms, and exposure to other people's content.

3.3.1 Tourist decision-making processes

According to several studies, understanding the tourist decision-making process is one of the most researched areas in studies of the tourism sector. A model explaining consumer behavior, and later adapted to the tourism market by Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law (2012), showcases the process of tourist decision-making from the initial recognition of a need to travel, to the post-trip behavior.

As stated, the model starts in the pre-trip stage, where the need for travel arises with the consumer. Following this, tourists start searching for information, which in today's society mostly takes place online, across several platforms, including social media. Research has also proven that many value the opinion of friends, family, and other consumers, making consumer-generated content something potentially highly influential during this stage. Thirdly, after collecting the required for information, the tourist evaluates their alternatives. Furthermore, the second stage involves the tourist purchase decisions, and lastly, the third stage is the post-purchase behavior (Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law, 2012).
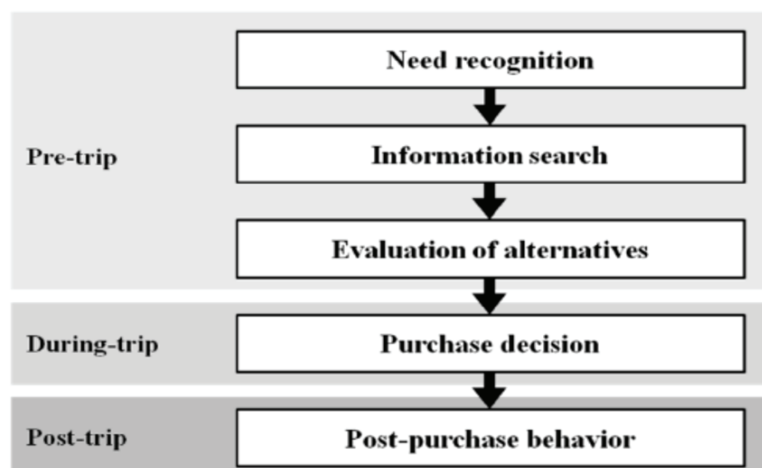
Figure 2: Travel Planning Process (Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law, 2012)

3.3.2 The role of Social Media in Tourist decision-making processes

In a time of increasing usage of social media platforms and exposure, the influence of the previous has become unavoidable. The more they are used, the easier the user is likely to get influenced, and what friends and family or public figures post, shape and guide our opinion of products and services. Media-sharing networks allow for great marketing and promotion of tourism destinations and services, due to their ability to share photos and video content, which as mentioned in chapter 3.2.1 "The Importance of Visual Content", can be more effective than text.

As discussed in previous chapters, a variety of studies show that many individuals use social media platforms as a way to gather information and

inspiration when planning their trips. Among the highest ranked we once again find media-sharing networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok (Papaiacovou, 2023). Studies show that young travelers "trust Instagram travel influencers" and are more likely to get influenced to visit a place featured in their content. These travelers are also more likely to be influenced by the influencer's opinion on a destination's "Instagrammability" in relation to pictures and storytelling (Anuar, Zaid, Zabidi, & Kamal, 2021; Truyols, 2022).

Moreover, studies show that the use of social media to gather information more often happens after the tourist has decided on a destination, especially when it comes to accommodation alternatives and activities, rather than before. User-generated content is often perceived the same way as word-of-mouth, which is often valued as more authentic and credible compared to marketer-controlled content. These platforms are not perceived as credible as government- and tourist organizations, but rather as a supplement to the existing sources (Liu, Mehraliyev, Liu, & Schuckert, 2020).

Furthermore, several companies are creating sections of their websites focused on the aspect of sharing, such as Trip.com's effort to create a "Trip Moments Community", encouraging travelers to share their pictures and experiences for others to use as inspiration for later travels (Papaiacovou, 2023; Trip.com, 2023). As mentioned in chapter "3.1.3.1 Positive & Negative effects of social media on the tourism industry" under the positive part, research shows the importance reviews hold on tourist decision-making. The studies discussed showed that tourists were more likely to choose accommodation alternatives with higher ratings, as well as were more likely to choose an alternative at a higher price point if the reviews were positive.

3.4 Destination choice

The choice of a destination when a need for travel arises, can be a complicated decision to make, usually filled with several criteria to be met. With the increased usage of the internet and social media platforms, gathering information to decide on a destination is easier than before.

When it comes to destination choice, multiple studies point to the notion of choice sets. According to Tham, Mair, & Croy (2019), "scholars focusing on choice sets conclude that destination decision-makers undergo a cognitive and emotional appraisal of the destination in accordance with the purpose or motive for travel". The process includes the cognitive movement throughout several stages, with the end goal of ending up with one destination. The first stage and set is the awareness set, which involves all the destinations that the decision-maker is aware of. In the second stage, destinations in the first set are

eliminated, resulting in the evoked set. The evoked set concludes with the destinations that are perceived to be the most suitable for the purpose of the trip. From the destinations that are included in the evoked set, the decision-maker then decides on one destination that will be the final destination for travel. Throughout this entire process, the decision-maker uses information gathered to make the most suitable decisions for their needs and wants, with the end goal of choosing the best-fit destination for them. Throughout this process, the information used can be gathered from friends and family, travel organizations, social media platforms, and more (Decrop, 2010; Tham, Mair, & Croy, 2019).

4. Research gaps

Extensive research has been conducted on the important factors of destination management and marketing. Mihai et al. (2023), for example, made comprehensive research on this topic with a particular focus on tourist decision-making factors. However, the study does not explore how potential tourists are contacted and how the important factors are communicated to them. In addition, the study focused on Romanian tourists only. In this thesis, the channels through which tourists are approached are the focus of the research to determine whether different sources or modes of communication have a significant impact on the importance of decision-making factors of tourists. Moreover, regional differences are investigated by collecting respondents from across Europe.

Another study closer to this thesis, exploring social media and tourist decision-making, found a direct correlation with social media and an enhanced effect on satisfaction through social media usage. These results are very business and marketing-focused. Furthermore, the authors admit a limited scope of the research and a target group restricted to Chinese students (Agyapong & Yuan, 2022). In order to fill these gaps, this study focuses on the consumer perspective and expands the research scope to the European market.

Additionally, the authors of the abovementioned study mentioned that the rising influence of innovation and technology like social media on tourist decision-making is a recent development. The authors quote a source exploring destination images and visual media (Qu & Chang, 2016). This source specifically explores Korean tourists traveling to China and the visual media are focused on films. However, the impact of visual media on tourist decision-making is an interesting research area to explore. In this study, specific

questions in the survey will be used to try to determine the most impactful visual media for potential tourists in their decision-making process.

This thesis also aims to contribute to filling the research gap identified by Tham, Mair, & Croy (2019) which mentions that the decision-making context is only superficially discussed.

Cheung, Ting, Cheah, & Sharipudin (2020) mention the importance of tourist co-creation and the exchange of information in online communities. Luo et al. (2019) say that tourism marketers should get a better understanding of the co-creation process because it drives engagement. In this thesis, the source of tourist co-creation and their respective impact on the decision-making of tourists will be determined.

5. Findings

The survey questions were framed according to the research objectives and were devised based on the previous literature. The measurement constructs of the survey are composed of four parts: (1) demographic items; (2) travel experience items; (3) social media usage items; and (4) social proof and influence items. Data collection was conducted between March and mid-April 2024. After disregarding responses that did not pass the filtering question (3 responses), 101 responses remain. Given that the researcher shared the survey with her network and close contacts, all the respondents are from European countries. The answers of these respondents will be analyzed and discussed in this chapter.

According to the definition below, have you ever been a tourist?   "A visitor is a traveler taking a trip to a main destination outside his/her usual environ...er trip includes an overnight stay" (UNWTO, 2022)
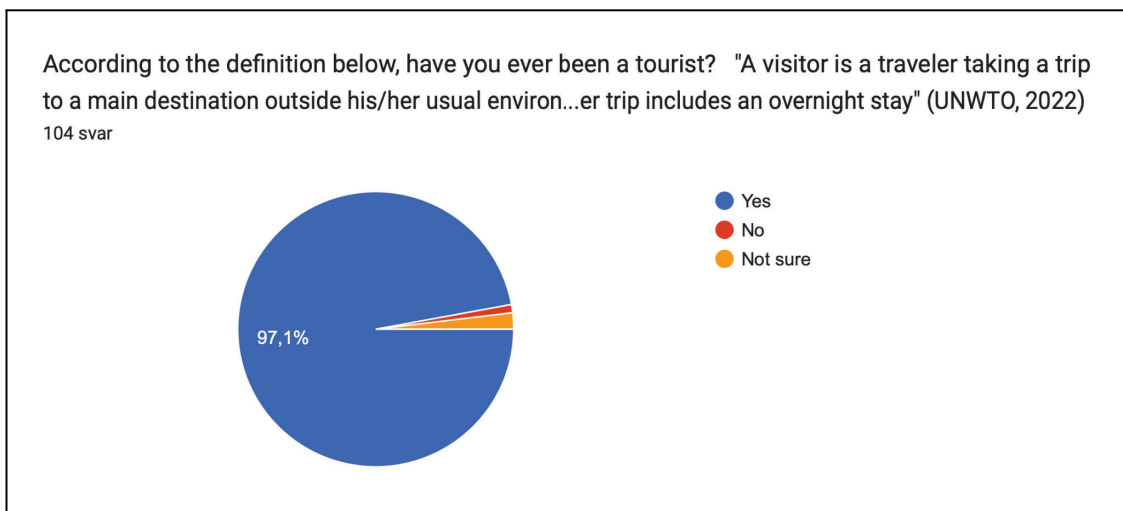
104 svar

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

97,1%

Figure 3: Google form results filtering question (Source: Own elaboration)

5.1 Data Analysis and Results

5.1.1 Demographic Analysis

Considering the respondents' demographic variables, there were three questions asked to identify and classify their current status. These questions included aspects relating to gender, age, and status.

As seen below, 73.3% of the sample were female, while 26.7% were male.

Figure 4: Gender (Source: Own elaboration)
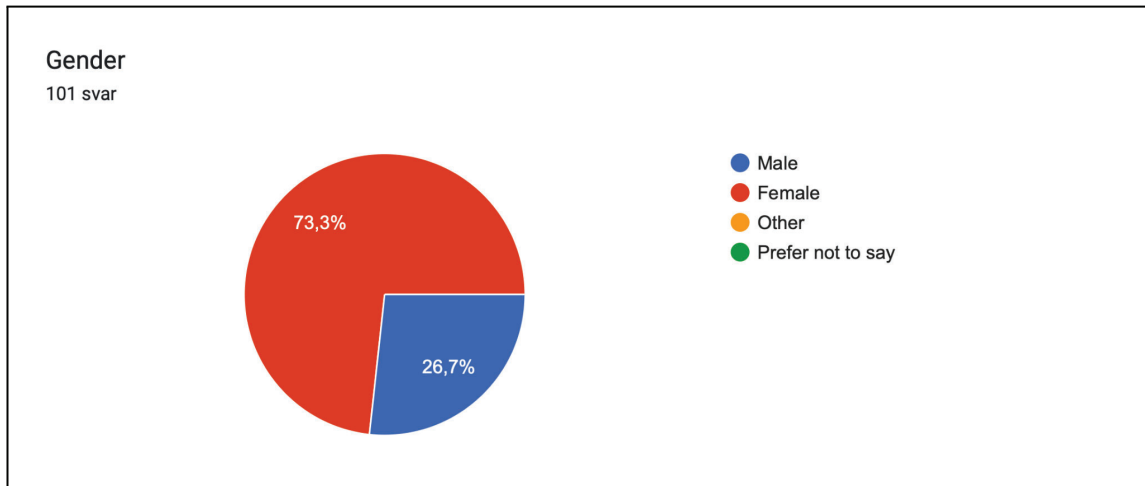
Furthermore, the sample varied in age groups from 18- to over 57 years old. The largest groups of respondents belonged to either 18 to 23 years old (30.7%) or 24 to 29 years old (41.6%).
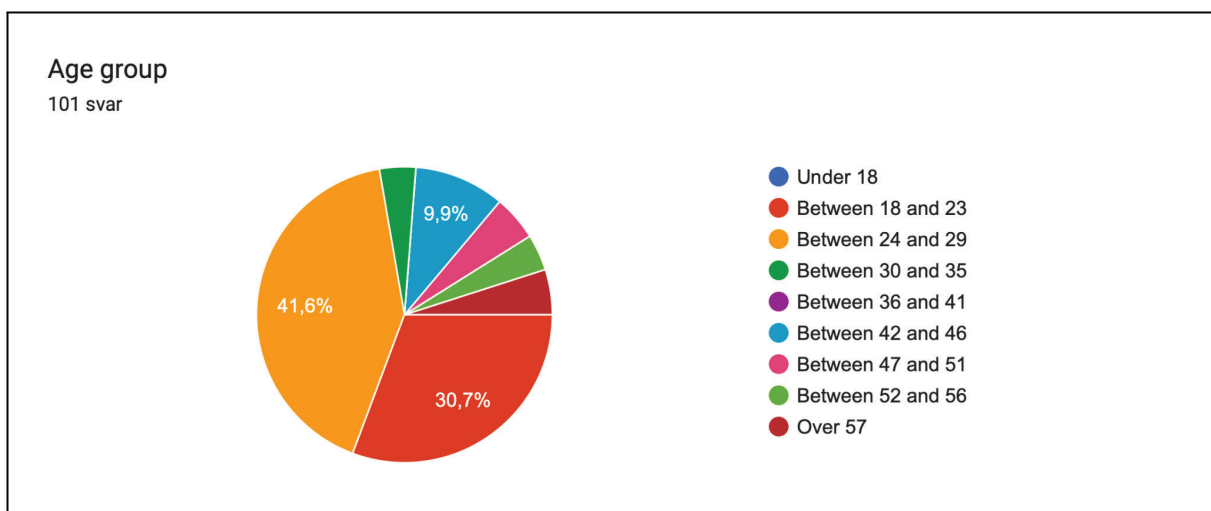

Figure 5: Age group (Source: Own elaboration)

Lastly, 56.4% of the sample were students, followed by 36.6% being employed. The remaining 7% were either retired, unemployed, or in another category.
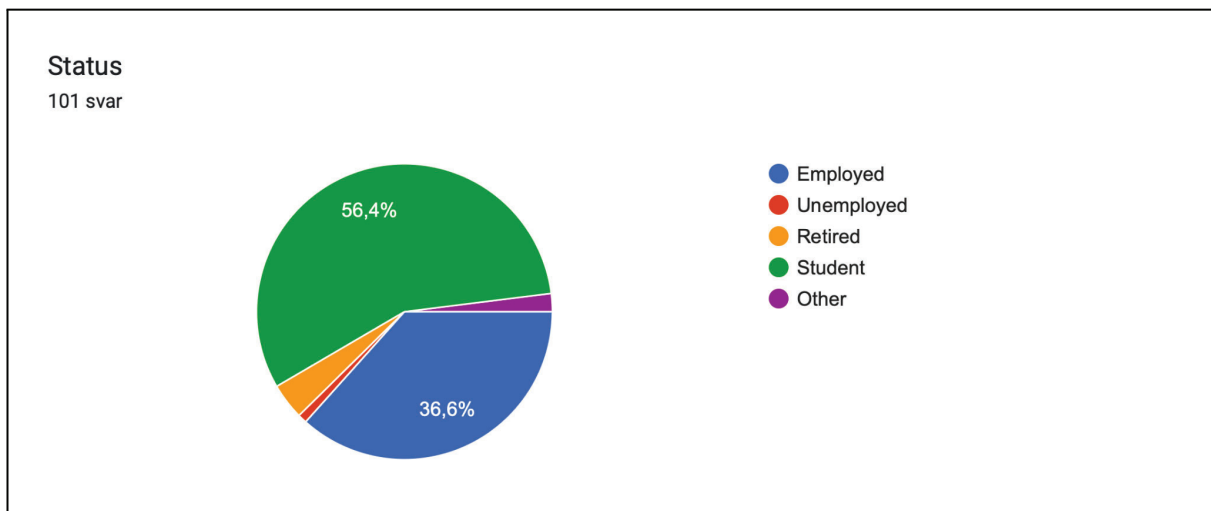
Figure 6: Status (Source: Own elaboration)

5.1.2 Travel Experience

The chapter regarding travel experience aimed to gain insight into the respondents' preference for new or familiar destinations, frequency of visiting attractions, as well as travel habits regarding who they travel with and whether this correlates to their preference. There are important aspects to once again determine to which degree the respondents are open to new experiences influenced by factors such as media-sharing networks and more.

Out of the 101 responses, 38 (37.6%) frequently visit new destinations, followed by 61 (60.4%) who sometimes do so, and 2 (2%) who prefer visiting familiar destinations- or are not sure. The sample, as seen below, also consists of 28 respondents (27.7%) who always visit attractions or take part in activities when traveling 54 (53.5%) who often do so, and 14 (13.9%) who sometimes take part in these activities. On the other hand, 4 respondents (4%) rarely do so, followed by 1 (1%) who never partake in these activities.

Figure 7: Frequency of visiting attractions and taking part in activities (Source: Own elaboration)

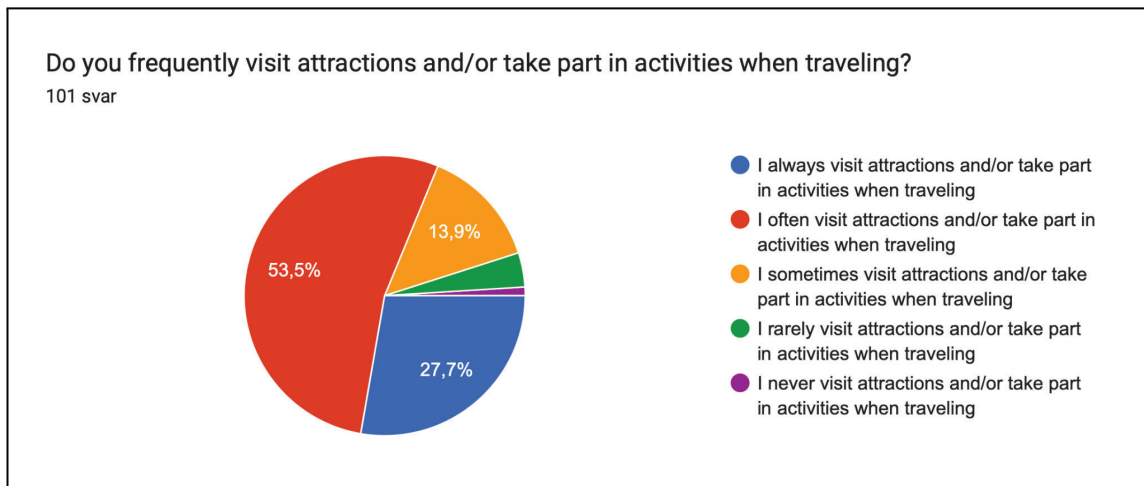When asking the respondents whether they usually travel alone or with someone else, 0% stated that they always travel alone, 40 (39.6%) stated that they sometimes travel alone and sometimes with someone else, and 61 (60.4%) stated that they always travel with someone else. Following this, the respondents were asked what they prefer to do, to compare these responses with what they actually do. 87 (86.1%) stated that they prefer to travel with someone else, compared to the previous saying that only 60.4% actually always do so. Furthermore, 13 (12.9%) states that it does not matter to them, and 1 (1%) is not sure.

5.1.3 Social Media Usage

The sample stated that 100% of the respondents use social media platforms, where the most popular platforms mentioned included Instagram (99% of respondents use this platform), Snapchat (71.3%), TikTok (68.3%), and Facebook (60.4%). Furthermore, other platforms mentioned among the ones used by the sample included Pinterest (25.8%), X (17.8%), Reddit (3%), WhatsApp (2%), and YouTube (1%).

Regarding utilizing the publishing aspects of social media platforms, 100 respondents (99%) responded that they had posted content on social media platforms before. Out of these, 62 (61.4%) post content regularly, 32 respondents (31.7%) sometimes post, and 7 (6.9%) do not regularly post content. However, one respondent answered that they had never shared content on social media platforms before, although they afterward answered to share content regularly. Because all other answers from that participant seemed to be truthful and related to using social media, it is assumed that the answer to question 8 was a mistake.

Furthermore, when asked what the participants enjoy the most on social media platforms, some answers seemed to be more frequent than others. The most popular answer was pictures (90.1%), followed by videos (78.2%). Following this came interacting with people & companies (31.7%) and reading posts (29.7%). Lastly, one respondent stated that they enjoy birthdays the most, and its meaning is unclear.
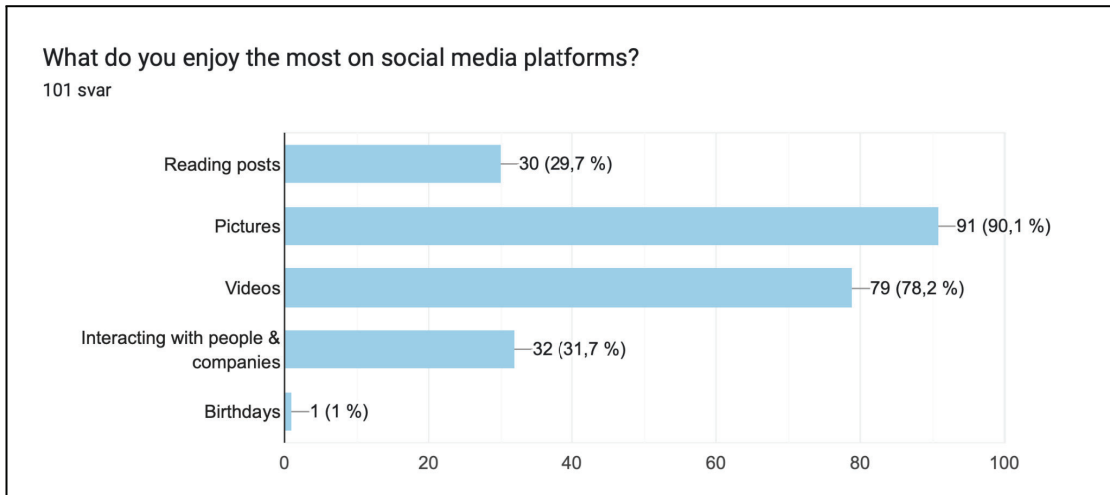
Figure 8: What do you enjoy the most on social media platforms? (Source: Own elaboration)

The sample showed that who they follow on social media platforms varies, starting with their friends on top (100%), followed by public figures (80.2%), companies (48.5%), and people with the same interests (1%). The majority follow these accounts because they like their content, they are their friends, they want to stay updated on new releases and information, and they want to show their support.

Considering the use of social media regarding vacationing and holiday planning, the participants were asked a variety of questions. When asked if they have been a user of a social media platform while, or immediately before, going on a vacation, 96% responded yes. Furthermore, 92.1% stated that they have wanted to visit a destination or do an activity because they saw it on social media, while only 64.4% have actually done so. 77.2% of the sample have also used social media platforms specifically to get inspiration or plan their next trip, and 71.3% have actually booked a trip, visited an attraction, or participated in an activity at a destination because they saw someone on social media do so.
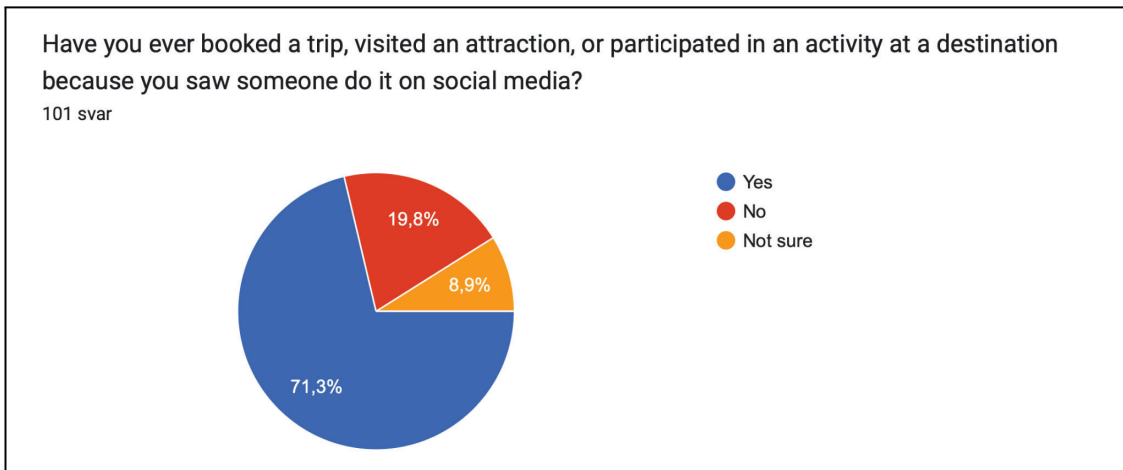
Figure 9: Number of respondents influenced by social media (Source: Own elaboration)

5.1.4 Social Proof & Influence

Regarding who influences a person's decision-making the most, 81.2% of the sample stated friends & family, followed by 9.9% being public figures. Additionally, 66.3% states that they feel influenced by what they see on social media, and 27.7% sometimes get influenced. One example that showcases the influence social media has on today's society is how 84.8% of the sample stated that they have purchased something because they saw it on social media.

Furthermore, 68.3% read reviews and/or watch testimonials on social media platforms before they book a holiday destination or activity. 25.7% sometimes do so. As seen below, 65.3% think that images, reviews, or testimonials that they see on social media influence their opinion of destinations and/or activities, followed by 26.7% of the sample felt that they sometimes get influenced by it.
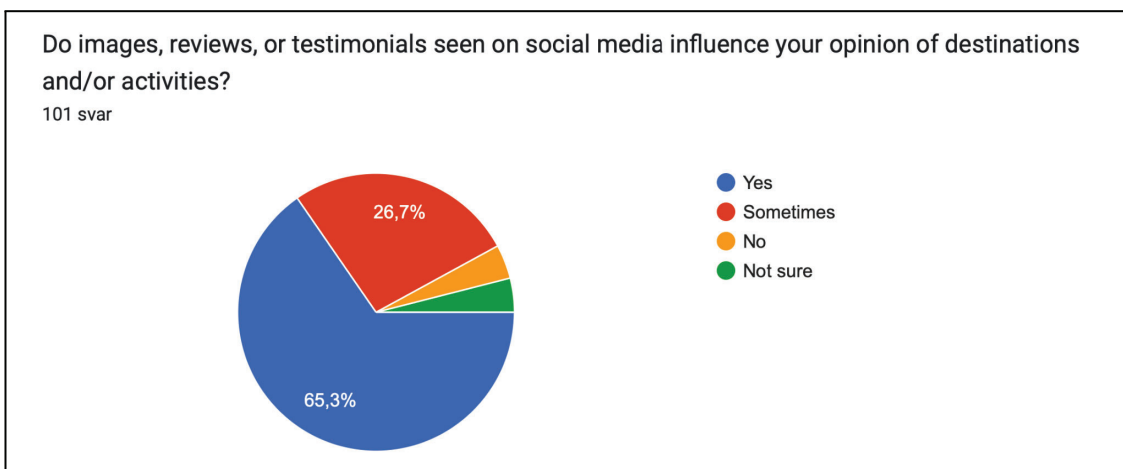
Figure 10: Influence of images, reviews, or testimonials (Source: Own elaboration)

The respondent was then asked several questions regarding the influence of social media on their travel and decision-making. 65.3% stated that they had visited a destination or participated in an activity because a person they follow on social media enjoyed it. 87.1% stated that their interest in visiting a destination increased because they saw someone on social media post beautiful pictures of it, as well as how 72.3% stated that their interest decreased when seeing unpleasant pictures. The respondents were also asked whether they had ever stayed away from or not participated in an activity because someone on social media disliked it, where 51.5% answered yes, 26.7% answered no, and 21.8% were not sure.

Furthermore, the participant was asked several imaginary questions where they had to rate several situations from being very unlikely (1) to be very likely (5). Firstly, as seen below, 67.3% stated that they were either likely or very likely to choose a destination for a later holiday if they saw a family member or their favorite public figure having a great experience at that destination.
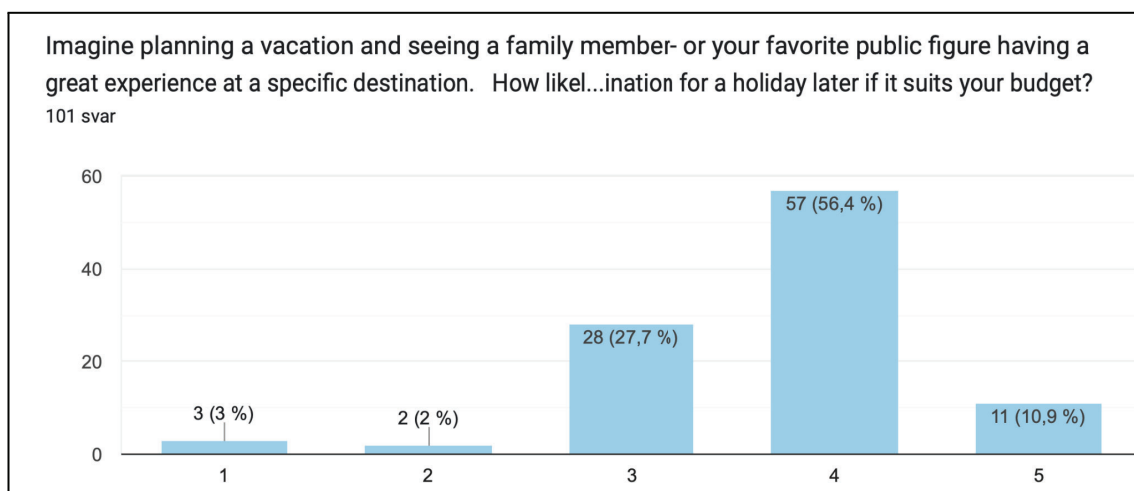
Figure 11: Influence of social proof on holiday destination choice (Source: Own elaboration)

With the same scale and circumstances, 77.3% stated that they were either likely or very likely to add this destination to their "bucket list" of places they would want to visit in the future. Additionally, 65.4% stated that they were likely to incorporate an activity into their vacation plans that the previously mentioned had had a great experience with. On the other hand, when asked how likely they were to avoid a destination if a family member or their favorite public figure had a horrible experience there, 54.5% were likely to avoid it, and 18.8% very likely. Here 20.8% stood neutral, 4% were unlikely to avoid it, and 2% very unlikely.

On the other hand, the respondents were asked questions regarding how they feel when a destination or activity is trending on social media. 48.5% stated that they were likely to want to visit a destination or an activity they see trending on

social media, but only 3% are very likely to. On the other hand, 32.7% stood as neutral, and 15.9% were on the lower half of the scale. The reasoning for not wanting to visit a trending or popular destination varied from it being too commercial, too crowded and touristic, or being overpriced.

Lastly, the respondents were asked a series of questions to see the difference in trust between friends & family and public figures. Firstly, as seen below, the majority of the sample stated that they were either likely or very likely to trust reviews, testimonials, and/or recommendations posted by friends & family on social media platforms (87.2%).
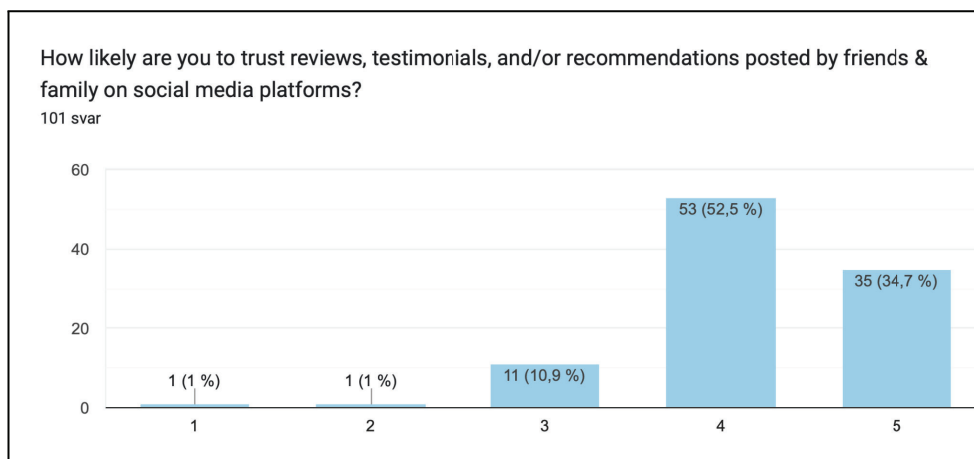
Figure 12: Trust in testimonials and recommendations by friends & family (Source: Own elaboration)

On the other hand, the scale was almost turned upside down when asked how likely the respondents were to trust reviews, testimonials, and/or recommendations posted by public figures on social media platforms. In this case, 37.6% stated that they were very unlikely to trust these posts, and 13.9% stated that they were unlikely to. 38.6% stood as neutral, and only 9.9% showed to be placed on the upper half of the scale.

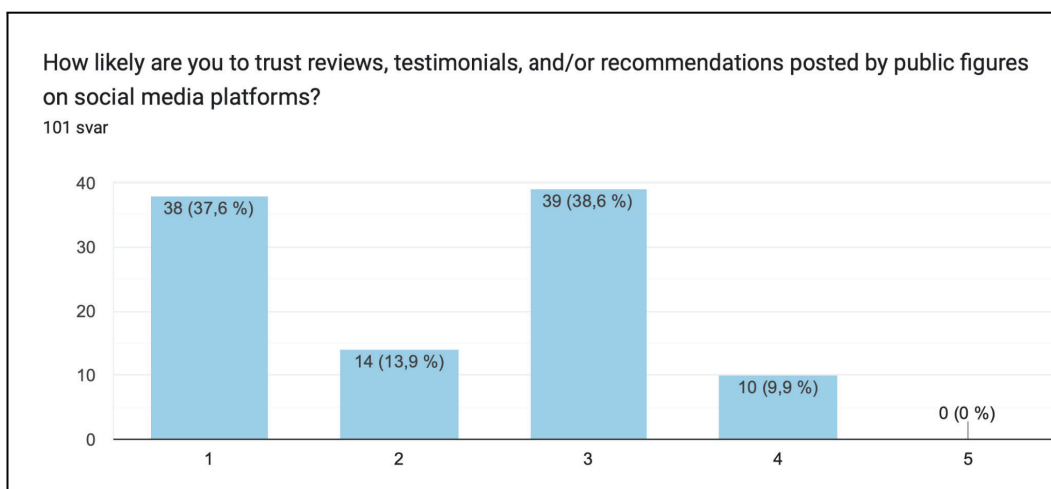*Figure 13: Trust in testimonials and recommendations by public figures (Source: Own elaboration)*

Furthermore, 64.4% were placed on the upper half of the scale when asked how likely they were to book a vacation or an activity solely based on recommendations by someone they knew. When asked the same regarding recommendations by a public figure on social media, the scale was once again turned around. 50.5% stated that they were very likely to trust recommendations by public figures on social media platforms, and 17.8% were unlikely to. 25.7% were neutral, and only 5.9% stated that they were likely to trust these recommendations and book a vacation or an activity.

5.2 Discussion

This section addresses research objectives based on the results of the survey findings. Prior to the detailed explanation of these aspects, research findings show that the majority of Gen Z and millennials use social media platforms as described in chapter "3.1.2 Social media usage". This was reflected in the respondent's answers where 100% use social media, 99% have posted on social media, and almost 62% post content regularly. Research shows that the most popular social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which is yet again reflected in the respondents' answers, with the addition of Snapchat and Pinterest being placed among the most popular ones. Our study findings are in line with the previous literature by highlighting the growing impact and popularity of social media (Kemp, 2024; McKinsey & Company, 2023; Rajesh Iyer, 2023). The mentioned platforms are based on sharing and viewing visual content, which shows a strong indication that, as described in the chapter on visual content psychology, visual content leaves a larger impression than written text. Moreover, the respondents indicate a preference for platforms that are based on visual content. These findings support the visual content psychology impact which enhances people's emotions and engagement (Dean, 2019; The Media Education Centre, 2010).

Research objective 1: **Investigate the role of social proof in regard to reviews, testimonials, and user-generated content, in shaping and influencing the tourist perception of a destination, attraction, activity, and more.**
Respondents were asked if images, reviews, or testimonials on social media influence their opinion of destinations and/or activities, whereas 65.3% answered yes, and 26.7% answered sometimes. These findings are in line with the concept of social proof, which was described by FasterCapital (2023a) as "a phenomenon that influences our decision-making process by relying on the actions and opinions of others". Additionally, the respondents were asked whether they had ever wanted to visit a destination because they saw it on social media, whereas 92.1% responded yes. This shows that the visual

content seen on platforms such as Instagram has a large impact which influences the opinion and wishes of the user. The research findings closely relate to the findings by FasterCapital (2023b) which explored how evoking emotions through utilizing visual content can also influence purchasing decisions and create connections. However, when asked if the respondents had actually visited a place because they saw it on social media, 64.4% responded yes. This number is lower than the number of respondents wanting to visit, as expected. These numbers indicate great markets for companies to use social media marketing as a way to increase this number by directly targeting potential audience groups, as described in chapter "3.1.3.2 Social Media in Tourism Marketing". Additionally, the study showed that the respondent's opinions and thoughts of destinations swayed depending on the visual content they saw. 87% of the respondents answered that their interest in visiting a destination increased when seeing beautiful pictures of it. On the other hand, 72.3% of the sample also stated that their interest decreased when seeing unpleasant photos on social media platforms. This indicates that the findings are in line with the study created by Ratson (2023) which explains that emotions "create biases that affect how we perceive information and interpret situations" (Ratson, 2023).

Furthermore, when asked about the trust in recommendations, testimonials, and reviews, several key points stood out. The sample showed a large difference in trust between two main groups, friends & family and public profiles. First and foremost, when asked who influences the respondent's decision-making the most, 81.2% responded friends & family, while only 9.9% responded public profiles. Several key scenarios showcasing the feelings and influence felt by the above-mentioned groups were provided to the respondent, to further test this statement. When asked how likely the respondents were to trust reviews and testimonials by friends and family, 87.2% of the sample were either likely or very likely to. On the other hand, when asked the same regarding public figures, only 9.9% responded that they were likely to, and 0% very likely. The majority of responses were very unlikely (37.6%) or unlikely (13.9%), as well as neutral (38.6%). One respondent mentioned, "In the days of social media, I always assume that all good reviews coming from an influencer are paid advertisement. Social media is the new advertisement, and most of it is paid". This is further discussed in the chapter "3.1.3.3.1 Positive Effects" which reflects upon the use of social media influencers and the large sums spent to make someone promote the product. This indicates a slight mistrust in public figures and influencers as the general respondent prefers the opinion of people they know. It can be difficult to divide and differentiate between authentic and paid reviews, whereas some influencers may promote a product solely for payment. These findings are strongly in line with the findings by Nosto (2019) that showcase the lack of trust in public figures and paid-marketing content compared to regular user-generated content.

To further develop this, respondents were also asked how likely they were to book a vacation or an activity based on recommendations from these groups. 64.4% responded that they were likely to do so by recommendations from friends and family, while only 5.9% were likely to do so from public profiles. However, 68.3% responded that they were very unlikely or unlikely to do so based on public profile recommendations.

As stated in Chapter 3.1.3 Social Media in Tourism "almost 40% of Gen Z travelers (aged mid-20s or below) use social media platforms to plan their holidays" (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). This is confirmed by the survey where 77.2% stated that they have used social media specifically to get inspiration or plan their next trip. The sample shows a higher percentage than the study previously conducted by the World Travel & Tourism Council. This may be due to the small sample conducted for this research, which is focused on a group that uses these services more frequently than others who did not participate and would have lowered the average score.

Research objective 2: **Investigate whether tourists are more likely to book a tourist activity or service based on recommendations, reviews, or testimonials on media-sharing networks.**
This objective includes a lot of aspects previously mentioned in the objective above but focuses on a few more details related to purchasing influence and behaviors. When asked whether the respondents read reviews and/or watch testimonials on social media platforms before booking a holiday destination or activity, 68.3% answered yes, and 25.7% answered sometimes. This indicates that 94% of the sample search for and use user-generated content to gather information when making a decision. Furthermore, 81.2% of the respondents answered that friends and family are who influence their opinion the most. The previous two points closely correlate and prove the statements within the tourism decision-making model adapted by Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law. The model states that during the information-gathering stage of the tourist decision-making process, "many value the opinion of friends, family, and other consumers, making consumer-generated content something potentially highly influential during this stage" (Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law, 2012). This statement could also be backed up by the findings by Nosto (2019) that showcase the lack of trust in public figures and paid-marketing content, which makes user-generated content from fellow peers more attractive, reliable, and trustworthy.

Furthermore, when it comes to the influence on purchasing behavior and attitudes, visual content can enhance emotions which creates a feeling of need to do or acquire something (Dean, 2019; The Media Education Centre, 2010). 84.8% of the respondents in the sample stated that they had bought something because they saw it on social media, and 71.3% stated that they had booked a trip, visited a destination, or participated in an activity because they saw

someone on social media do so. On the other hand, 51.5% of the sample also said that they have stayed away from an activity because they saw someone on social media dislike it. Additionally, 73.3% of the sample also stated that they were likely or very likely to stay away from a destination if they saw a family member or their favorite public person have a bad experience there. These findings are in line with the study conducted by Ciccarone (2014) stating that travelers were more likely to choose accommodation alternatives with a higher rating, which are factors created and based on other people's opinions.

Research objective 3: **Investigate which aspects of social media networks influence tourist perception and decision-making the most.**
According to the respondents, the most influential aspects of social media networks and platforms are pictures and videos. These aspects capture the user's attention and leave a more memorable impact compared to text and interactions. These findings indicate that there is a strong correlation explaining this behavior as humans "process visuals 60,000 times faster than text", while also enhancing emotions and attitudes (The Media Education Centre, 2010). This is explained more in detail in the chapter "3.2 Visual Content Psychology". Moreover, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which are among the most popular platforms, are based on creating-, sharing-, and viewing visual content. Research findings by Ratson (2023) stated that visual content affects our emotions which can alter one's decision-making and affect one's ability to make rational decisions. The survey responses are strongly in line with the research findings in this study.

Furthermore, as reflected upon in the first objective, the survey shows that the majority of respondents are the most influenced by their closest circle, including their family and friends, compared to public figures. The responses to the survey show that 81.2% of the sample define friends and family as the most influential to them, indicating that the respondents find the opinions and thoughts of people they know as the most trustworthy source of information. This could be related to the growth of paid advertisements and reduced trust in other outside sources, which is in line with the findings by Nosto (2019) that explore the lack of trust in public figures and paid-marketing content compared to regular user-generated content.

Research objective 4: **Investigate whether the popularity- and trendiness of a destination, activity, or attraction on media-sharing networks influence tourist decision-making.**
The survey consisted of several questions regarding the trendiness of a destination, activity, or attraction on social media networks and whether this influences the respondent's decision-making. Examples of questions asked included whether the trendiness of a destination increased their interest in visiting it and how likely they were to visit it. The majority of the responses were

on the upper half of the scale, signaling that the trendiness of a destination, and the fact that it is going viral on social media platforms, are increasing their interest and making them want to visit it. This may indicate that the increased use of- and exposure to social media platforms based on visual content direct the user's attention towards a visually pleasing location or attraction. The reason for this may be the increased emotional connection which as explained by Ratson (2023) can affect how we perceive information and interpret situations. Additionally, the findings may be explained as an influence of social proof, which as defined by FasterCapital (2023a) "is a phenomenon that influences our decision-making process by relying on the actions and opinion of others". Moreover, FasterCapital (2023a) also states that "people are more likely to choose a product that is popular and widely accepted by others", which may be the reason for why trending destinations and attractions may increase users' interest. On the other hand, many visitors are places neutral and in the lower half, as seen in the figure below.

To what extent do you feel that the increased popularity and/or trendiness of a destination or activity on social media increases your interest in visiting it?
101 svar
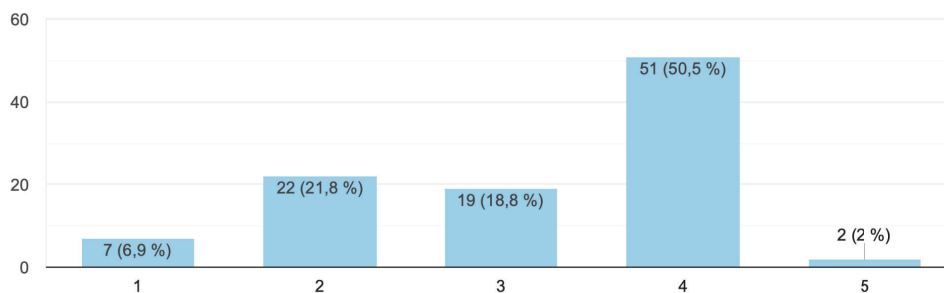
Figure 14: Influence of a trending destination on interest (Source: Own elaboration)

A destination trending on social media can bring both positive and negative sides. Positive aspects may include increased awareness or knowledge about a destination, a company, or an activity, among more. However, the negative aspects may include overtourism, commercialization of cities, and more. These reasons were mentioned in the responses for not wanting to visit a trending destination. On the other hand, respondents stating that a trending destination does not increase their want to visit the destination indicates that although many people are intrigued by trending locations, a trend where individuals tend to want to visit less popular or unexplored destinations is also rising.

Research objective 5: **Investigate to what extent media-sharing networks and social proof affect tourist decision-making when it comes to destination choice, attractions, activities, and more.**
This objective aims to answer and explore the main question of the study, which is a complex question. The sample used in this study shows strong signs of being influenced by media-sharing networks and social proof when it comes to

their decision-making regarding destination choice, attractions, activities, and more. Throughout the responses, every question regarding the influence of these platforms always reflects and indicates that there is a strong influence on tourist decision-making. The respondents are especially influenced by visual content such as videos and pictures, which are the core content of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and more. This is in line with recent numbers regarding the most popular social media platforms, which highlight Instagram and TikTok in particular (Adames, 2022; Chaka, 2010; Lutkevich, 2021; Shewale, 2024). Moreover, the reason for these platforms being among the most popular can be related to the appeal of visual content which as previously mentioned has a strong effect on our emotions, feelings, and rational decision-making (Ratson, 2023). Additionally, visual content "engages our imagination and heightens our creative thinking", and describes how emotions take part in influencing decision-making (Media Education Centre, 2010).

Furthermore, responses point towards friends and family being the group that influences the user the most, and they showcase the highest level of trust towards this group. On the other hand, the group that the sample shows the lowest level of trust in public profiles, as many suspect reviews and recommendations by this group to be paid. This research finding strongly relates to the research findings by Nosto (2019) where the study proved that "in 2019 2% of the sample found celebrity and influencer content the most influential on social media platforms, compared to 60% thinking that consumer-created content was the most influential". These findings demonstrate the higher level of trust in regular consumers compared to potential paid marketing, which engages the discussion regarding reliability, trustworthiness, and authenticity, as it can be difficult to identify whether one is sharing their honest opinion or is swayed as they are being paid to post it.

One part of the findings explains how respondents use social media platforms as a source of inspiration and information search. Two studies discussed this stage in decision-making, the model on tourism decision-making and behavior adapted by Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law (2012), and the step-by-step model by the University of Massachusets (2021). The two above-mentioned models both state that in the second stage the user searches for information to make educated decisions, often using social media and user-generated content. This is a central aspect of this study that was well reflected in the responses made by the respondents in the survey.

6. Conclusions

In this final chapter, a brief conclusion with an overview of the research contributions is provided, followed by the limitations and areas for future research.

6.1 Conclusion and Research Contribution

This study shed light on understanding the influence of media-sharing networks and social proof on tourist decision-making. The study findings provide important theoretical and practical implications. For theoretical implications, this study provides significant contributions to examine tourist decision-making on a deeper level focusing on the tourist point of view as opposed to the destination. Furthermore, the study provides research contributions in the fields of which social media platforms are the most influential, which user group is the most influential on these platforms, and the difference in trust between familiar people and public figures. Lastly, the study also adapts existing research to European culture and explores this environment. The extent of the research gaps is rather large and not all shortcomings can be extensively resolved in this study. The contribution is more focused on creating a general overview of the relevant areas of research in the European environment. Limitations and specific recommendations for further research will be given in the chapter below.

Moreover, several key findings were identified. The study provides valuable insight into the consumer perspective on the influence of media-sharing networks and social proof on decision-making. This enables the reader to get a more in-depth and detailed understanding of the aspects that influence consumers the most, as well as which aspects they are the most skeptical about. Research shows that visual content is the most effective in gaining a user's attention, as the brain captures and understands this faster than text, as well as is more likely to enhance emotions. The research findings also supported this theory, highlighting photos and videos as the main reason and interest found across these platforms. Furthermore, this specific information can be used efficiently by companies searching for ways to get closer to their potential customers and creating effective marketing campaigns, which was clearly identified and discussed in the chapter Social Media in Tourism Marketing.

Furthermore, friends and family are indicated to be the most influential when it comes to recommendations, while there has also been identified as a lack of trust in promotion and reviews made by public figures. This can be caused by the increase in paid promotions across social media platforms, which opens the discussion about authenticity and honesty as some may only create a review

because of the money earned. Additionally, the study and prior research show evidence that tourism decision-making is mostly influenced by post-destination choice. This means that the consumer uses social media platforms to research the destination they have chosen, and the options of attractions and activities available there, instead of mainly as a source to find a destination in itself. These research findings can be used as a valuable source for companies searching for ways to promote their products and/or services for future clients.

The findings mentioned in this study contribute to existing theory and literature by incorporating and focusing on details from the consumer's point of view. Additionally, the study provides insight into the European market in a sector of users highly involved in social media usage and can contribute to further development within several areas of business within the tourism sector. Also, the study contributes to more in-depth knowledge about tourism behavior and decision-making, as well as insight into what influences their decisions the most, on a variety of levels ranging from content and following, to reviews and levels of trust.

6.2 Limitations and future research

The sample consists of respondents located in Europe and consists of questions referring to their habits and influences, which may differ depending on origin. The relatively small sample, of only 101 responses, stands as a small example but is not sufficient to provide a complete overview of the general impact these factors have on tourist decision-making.

Furthermore, at the time of survey creation, nationality was not considered to be an important aspect as the survey was only created- and distributed to a European audience. Western and/or European culture can be considered somewhat similar and with around 100 responses there would not have been identifiable trends between countries. Future investigation and research could look deeper into specific countries or regions within the continent to get more defined answers. Additionally, it has been recognized that several questions in the quantitative study could have reflected a better outcome if the option "not sure" was not included. This option can act as an easy choice for respondents who can not think of a response right away and therefore click this to move on rather than reflecting upon their thoughts and opinions on the topic.

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8.Annex

8.1 Survey Questions

Survey Questions			
Question	Answer Choices	Response Type	Dimension
Q1. According to the definition below, have you ever been a tourist?	Yes	Multiple choice	Travel Experience
	No		
	Not sure		
Q2. Do you frequently travel to new destinations or do you prefer to visit the ones you are familiar with?	I frequently visit new destinations	Multiple choice	Travel Experience
	I sometimes visit new destination		
	I prefer to visit destinations I am familiar with		
	Not sure		
Q3. Do you frequently visit attractions and/or take part in activities when traveling?	I always visit attractions and/or take part in activities when traveling	Multiple choice	Travel Experience
	I often visit attractions and/or take part in activities when traveling		
	I sometimes attractions and/or take part in activities when traveling		
	I rarely attractions and/or take part in activities when traveling		
	I never attractions and/or take part in activities when traveling		
Q4. Do you usually travel alone or with other people?	I always travel with someone else	Multiple choice	Travel Experience
	I sometimes travel with someone else and sometimes alone		
	I always travel alone		

Question	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q5. Do you prefer to travel alone or with someone else?	I prefer to travel alone	Multiple choice	Travel Experience
	I prefer to travel with someone else		
	It does not matter to me		
	Not sure		
Q6. Do you use Social Media?	Yes	Multiple choice	Use of Social Media Plafroms
	No		
	Not sure		
Q7. Which Social Media Platforms do you use?	Facebook	Multiple-select question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	Instagram		
	Pinterest		
	Tiktok		
	Snapchat		
	X (Previously known as Twitter)		
Q8. Have you ever shared content on social media platforms?	Yes	Multiple choice	Use of Social Media Platforms
	No		
	Not sure		
Q9. Do you regularly share content on social media platforms?	Yes	Multiple choice	Use of Social Media Platforms
	Sometimes		
	No		
	Not sure		
Q10. What do you enjoy the most on social media platforms?	Reading posts	Multiple-select question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	Pictures		
	Videos		
	Interacting with people & companies		
	Other:		

Question	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q11. Who do you follow on social media platforms?	Friends	Multiple-select question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	Companies		
	Public figures		
	Other		
Q12. Why do you follow people or companies on social media platforms?	Because I like their content	Multiple-select question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	Because I want to stay updated on new releases and information		
	Because they are my friends		
	Because I want to show my support		
	Other		
Q13. Have you been a user of a social media platform while, or immediately before, going on a vacation?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	No		
	Not sure		
Q14. Have you ever wanted to visit a destination or do an activity because you saw it on social media?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	No		
	Not sure		
Q15. Have you ever actually visited a destination or done an activity because you saw it on social media?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	No		
	Not sure		
Q16. Did you ever use social media platforms specifically to get inspiration- or plan your next travel?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	No		
	Not sure		
Q17. Have you ever booked a trip, visited an attraction, or participated in an activity at a destination because you saw someone do it on social media?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Use of Social Media Platforms
	No		
	Not sure		

Question	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q18. From the options below, who influences your decision-making the most?	Friends & Family	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	Companies		
	Public Figures		
	Discussion Forums		
	Other		
Q19. Have other people's opinions ever influenced a decision you had to make?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	No		
	Not sure		
Q20. Do you feel, or did you ever get, influenced by what you saw on social media platforms?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	Sometimes		
	No		
	Not sure		
Q21. Did you ever purchase something because you saw it on social media?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	No		
	Not sure		
Q22. Do you read reviews and/or watch testimonials on social media platforms before you book a holiday destination or activity?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	Sometimes		
	No		
Q23. Do images, reviews, or testimonials seen on social media influence your opinion of destinations and/or activities?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	Sometimes		
	No		
	Not sure		
Q24. Have you ever visited a destination/place or participated in an activity because a person you follow on social media enjoyed it?	Yes	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
	No		
	Not sure		

Questions	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q25. Imagine planning a vacation and seeing a family member- or your favorite public figure having a great experience at a specific destination. **How likely are you to choose this destination for a holiday later if it suits your budget?**	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q26. Imagine planning a vacation and seeing a family member- or your favorite public figure having a great experience at a specific destination. **How likely are you to add this destination to your "bucket list" of places you want to visit?**	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q27. Imagine planning a vacation and seeing a family member- or your favorite public figure having a great experience at a specific activity. How likely are you to incorporate this activity into your vacation plans?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q28. Imagine that a destination or activity is trending on social media. How likely are you to want to visit it?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence

Question	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q29. If you do not want to visit trending or popular destinations, why?	Write here:	Open-ended question	Social Proof & Influence
Q30. To what extent do you feel that the increased popularity and/or trendiness of a destination or activity on social media increases your interest in visiting it?	It does not increase it It rarely increases it It neither does nor does not increase it It somewhat increases it It does increase it	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q31. Did your interest in visiting a destination ever increase because you saw someone post beautiful pictures of it on social media?	Yes No Not sure	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
Q32. Did your interest in visiting a destination ever decrease because you saw someone post unpleasant pictures of it on social media?	Yes No Not sure	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
Q33. How likely are you to trust reviews, testimonials, and/or recommendations posted by friends & family on social media platforms?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence

Questions	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q34. How likely are you to trust reviews, testimonials, and/or recommendations posted by public figures on social media platforms?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q35. How likely are you to book a vacation or activity solely based on recommendations by someone you know?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q36. How likely are you to book a vacation or activity solely based on recommendations by a public figure you like on a social media platform?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very Likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence
Q37. Have you ever stayed away from or not participated in an activity because you saw someone on social media disliked it?	Yes No Not sure	Multiple choice question	Social Proof & Influence
Q38. Imagine planning a vacation and seeing a family member- or your favorite public figure having a horrible experience at a specific destination. How likely are you to avoid this destination?	Very Unlikely Unlikely Neutral Likely Very likely	Five-point Likert Scale	Social Proof & Influence

Question	Answer Choice	Response Type	Dimension
Q39. Gender	Male	Multiple choice question	Socio-demographic
	Female		
	Other		
	Prefer not to say		
Q40. Age group	Under 18	Multiple choice question	Socio-demographic
	18-23 years old		
	24-29 years old		
	30-35 years old		
	36-41 years old		
	42-46 years old		
	47-51 years old		
	52-56 years old		
	Over 57		
Q41. Status	Employed	Multiple choice question	Socio-demographic
	Unemployed		
	Retired		
	Student		
	Other		