From Scroll to Destination: Introducing the Pre-Trip Social Media Influence Model in Travel Planning

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Abstract

Key words: Social media marketing, influencer marketing, tourism marketing, travel planning, young consumers, Pre-Trip Social Media Influence model, influencers, content creators, User Generated Content, authenticity, FOMO, social anxiety

Thesis aim: The aim of this study is to explore how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions. Particularly, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how social media influences the various stages of travel planning, from initial inspiration to final decision-making.

Theoretical Perspective: The two main theoretical perspectives used are the Uses and Gratifications theory by Katz et al. (1974) and Belk's theory of Possessions and the Extended Self (1988).

Methodology: A qualitative research method was chosen to adopt and 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with young Europeans travellers were conducted. The empirical findings were collected and analysed within previous research from social media marketing, including influencer marketing and tourism marketing.

Main Findings & Contributions: This study supports and extends existing literature by introducing the PSMI model, which offers fresh insights and enriches the current understanding of digital consumer behaviour in the context of travel. This model delineates four key stages: Inspiration & Idea Generation, Information Search and Research, Evaluation of Alternatives, and Decision-Making. Each stage highlights the crucial role of social media in shaping travel aspirations, gathering detailed information, critically evaluating alternatives, and finalising travel plans.

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1. Introduction

In this chapter we will firstly delve into the various impact of social media on travel choices, emphasising the relationship between digital engagement, social anxiety, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) among young consumers. Then, we will transition into a problematization section presenting the existing literature on social media marketing and tourism marketing, and explaining the contribution of this study. Following this, we will present the research aim, question, context and delimitations. To conclude, we will present the research outline to provide a more comprehensible understanding of the research's structure.

1.1 Background

Social media has become a global phenomenon, with 5.04 billion people - roughly 62.3% of the world's population - actively using it (Data Reportal, 2024). This widespread adoption has not only profoundly transformed today's digital landscape, but also redefined individuals' everyday lives (Berthon et al. 2012; Bolton et al. 2013). Given this influence, it is not surprising that marketers have embraced social media as a marketing channel (Appel et al. 2019) leading to a gradual replacement of traditional channels in favour of social media platforms (Bruhn et al. 2012). This transition has not only revolutionised brand-consumer interactions but also fundamentally changed how individuals communicate, exchange and share information, and perceive the world around them (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Bell & Loane, 2010). These platforms have replaced companies as the primary source of brand information (Bruhn et al. 2012) while simultaneously empowering consumers in content creation and fostering consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The pervasive influence of social media on global communication and brand-consumer interactions has extended into the tourism realm, where digital platforms and user-generated content (UGC) have fundamentally reshaped how destinations are marketed and experienced (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Litvin et al. 2008; Lehto et al. 2005), particularly among Western urban middle-class young consumers who increasingly prioritise authentic travel experiences (UNWTO, 2016).

In the tourism context, social media serves as online platforms suitable for UGC (Kang & Schuett, 2013) which represents the collective ways in which users can both interact and create content within these platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This informal exchange of information facilitated by UGC through peer-to-peer sharing (Daugherty et al. 2008; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014) empowers consumers within the tourism realm to freely share travel-related information, experiences, as well as comments or opinions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As previously mentioned, the young demographic increasingly prioritises authentic travel experiences and destinations over traditional tourism services (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018) as they seek experiences that offer relaxation and cultural immersion (Vancia et al. 2023). This preference for authenticity reflects a

desire for genuine connections with places and cultures supporting the importance of digital tools in facilitating meaningful engagement and information exchange among travellers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

In influencer marketing, the demand for authenticity manifests in a need for transparency and credibility, which are essential for fostering trust and building genuine relationships with audiences (Leung et al. 2022; Appel et al. 2019). As argued by De Veirman et al. (2017) social media influencers are individuals who have developed a notable online following, establishing themselves as trusted authorities or tastemakers within one or multiple specialised niches. These figures are now conceived as more effective than traditional advertising methods due to their higher authenticity and credibility, which in turn results in less resistance to the message (De Vries et al. 2012). However, it is important to note the distinction between influencers and content creators, as these terms are too often used interchangeably (Deloitte, 2024). While content creators tend to lead the development and production of content, influencers are like celebrities serving as the face of their own personal brand (Deloitte, 2024). Additionally, creators may be perceived as more relatable, better suited for fostering engagement within niche communities, and often more involved in developing content (Deloitte, 2024). As they typically come across as relatable, they may have a more personal connection with their audience, with followers looking to creators for education or entertainment. Conversely, consumers may be drawn to influencers for more aspirational reasons, based on influencers' more celebrity-like lifestyle and appeal (Deloitte, 2024). Nevertheless, influencers who can transparently disclose their brand partnerships and maintain integrity in their endorsements tend to achieve greater trust and engagement from their audiences (Dwivedi et al. 2021). Given these characteristics, there is a growing focus on utilising influencers to endorse products to reach wider audiences (De Veirman et al. 2017).

Despite the benefits of social media integration within consumers' everyday lives (Berthon et al. 2012; Bolton et al. 2013) concerns surrounding privacy, data security, and the psychological well-being of users (Naslund et al. 2020; Valkenburg et al. 2022) have emerged as striking challenges. Social media literature highlights the dual nature of social media's impact on society, as it offers opportunities for connectivity and engagement (Lazer et al. 2018) while simultaneously presenting risks related to mental health, social isolation, and the spread of misinformation (Naslund et al. 2020). These findings resonate with the insights from the Digital 2024 report by We Are Social, which shed light on the primary motivations behind social media usage in 2023. This report reveals that individuals primarily seek information, maintain connections with friends and family (47,1%), stay updated on current discussions (28,8%), and mitigate the fear of missing out (FOMO) on important events or updates (20.3%).

As also highlighted by the previously mentioned results, FOMO and its negative consequences on social media users has recently started being investigated by social media scholars. (Oberst et al. 2016; Oberst et al. 2017; O'Day & Heimberg 2021).This phenomenon has been defined as a

"pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al, 2013 p.1) and even though it is still not clear whether it is related to social media anxiety (Dhir et al. 2018), it has been shown that individuals with social anxiety are more likely to experience fear and anxiety in social situations (Alden & Taylor, 2004; Hoffman, 2007). As a consequence, these individuals might prefer online interactions rather than face-to-face interactions (Caplan, 2005) and use the Internet as a compensatory coping mechanism (Shepard & Edelmann, 2005). As argued by several studies (Blackwell et al. 2017; Dhir et al. 2018; Good & Huhmann, 2008; Hastings et al. 2004; Oberst et al. 2016; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Zalinska & Agopian, 2022) the pervasive phenomena of social anxiety and FOMO is significantly influencing digital interactions and consumer behaviour on social media platforms. Although FOMO is not necessarily only applicable to social media users, individuals with high levels of FOMO might be more likely to check their social media more often (Oberst et al. 2016).

As social media has become an integral part of individuals' daily life, particularly of the young demographic, and in the tourism sector UGC on such platforms has significantly influenced how destinations are promoted and experienced, understanding their influence on young consumers' travel decisions is crucial for grasping its broader societal impacts. Additionally, as social media has transformed how people communicate, share information, and make decisions, exploring how they shape and influence consumers' behaviour would offer valuable insights for marketers aiming to reach and engage young travellers more effectively. Moving forward, investigating the role of social anxiety and the fear of missing out (FOMO) on social media use and travel decisions is particularly timely, as these psychological elements can influence how young consumers interact with social media and make travel choices. This study also offers valuable insights into the ways influencers and content creators shape travel-related decisions and consumer behaviour, primarily investigating the distinct levels of influence on young consumer trust and engagement. Understanding these dynamics can help businesses, especially in the travel and tourism industry to tailor their marketing strategies to better align with the preferences and behaviours of young travellers. Overall, this study aims to explore how social media influences young consumers' travel decisions, taking into account the pervasive phenomenon of FOMO.

1.2 Problematization and positioning

This study is situated within the fields of social media marketing and tourism marketing. Within the literature stream of social media marketing, previous scholars have extensively examined the profound shifts in interactive communication catalysed by the rise of social media. These studies underscore the transformative impact of social media on society at large, offering insights into the overarching societal shift towards digital platforms (Bolton et al. 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and with specific emphasis on its repercussions for brand management, consumer-brand relationships, and brand image (Bruhn et al. 2012; Dowling, 2000). However, our study will not focus on consumer-brand relationships but rather on the consumer perspective, particularly how

social media content influences their decision-making processes. Despite the acknowledged benefits of social media in fostering enhanced connectivity and engagement, the social media marketing literature also poses several challenges connected with this digital shift (Jozani et al. 2020; Keles et al. 2020; Naslund et al. 2020; Valkenburg et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2019; Zhang & Gupta, 2018). Notably, issues such as social anxiety (Naslund et al. 2020; Valkenburg et al. 2022), social comparison (Bunk et al. 1990; Keles et al. 2020), privacy concerns and data security (Jozani et al. 2020; Zhang & Gupta, 2018), alongside the pervasive spread of misinformation (Diaz Ruiz 2023; Wang et al. 2019), emerge as significant obstacles.

Within the literature of social media marketing, the topic of influencer marketing has not only become a growing trend but has also given rise to a new and distinct literature stream, reflecting its increasing importance (Appel et al. 2020; Brown & Hayes, 2008; Dwivedi et al. 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Freberg et al. 2011; Jin et al. 2019; Kim et al. 2022; Leung et al. 2022). Within the stream of influencer marketing, scholars primarily focus on outlining the concept of influencers (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Freberg et al., 2011; Fowler & Thomas, 2023), illustrating their role within marketing (Appel et al. 2019; Freberg et al. 2011), exploring the authenticity and transparency within influencer-brand relationships (Audrezet et al., 2020; Brown & Hayes, 2008) and emphasising the challenges and future trends shaping influencer marketing practices (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Jin et al. 2019). Yet, a notable gap exists in understanding the complexity of the relationship between influencers and their followers, particularly in terms of trust.

Within the social media marketing literature, scholars have extensively explored mental health, specifically focusing on social anxiety (Good & Huhmann, 2018; Hastings et al. 2004; Roberts & David, 2019; Zalinska & Agopian, 2022). Studies have varied in focus, from the broad implications of social media on perception and anxiety (Valkenburg et al. 2022; Zalinska & Agopian, 2022) to more targeted examinations of consumer behaviour and direct advertising (Good & Huhmann, 2018; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021), to the mental health problems as consequences of social media misuse and addiction (Blackwell et al. 2017; Naslund et al. 2020). Additionally, within the domain of social psychology, the social phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has been investigated by scholars. Hastings et al. (2004) explored how FOMO influences personal narratives, leading to increased anxiety and shifts in social behaviour. Further, Roberts and David (2019) delved into how FOMO links with individuals' engagement with social media and impacts their overall life satisfaction. Similarly, Zalinska and Agopian (2022) delved into the feelings of loneliness and isolation that FOMO intensifies, particularly among younger users, enriching our understanding of its impact on mental well-being. However, despite the previous research in these areas, there remains an understudied aspect concerning how these feelings of social anxiety and FOMO influence the decisions and consumer behaviour within the realm of social media marketing.

Transitioning from the literature of social media marketing, the second literature stream within which this study is positioned is that of tourism marketing, a field that inherently complements the previous one through its focus on the digital engagement and experiential desires of consumers (King, 2002; Leung et al. 2013), reflecting the experiential turn in marketing (Jensen et al. 2015). Prior to this turn, traditional marketing in the tourism sector primarily focused on standardised product offerings and mass advertising strategies (Holloway, 2004; Morrison. 2019), emphasised competitive pricing and widespread distribution channels (Buhalis & Laws, 2001), and relied heavily on promotional campaigns that were often disconnected from the individual consumer's personal experience (Holloway, 2004; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In this context, the work of Pine and Gilmore (2013) marks the pivotal shift from a traditional product economy to an experience-based one, highlighting the complex challenges of marketing within the tourism sector. This shift has been notably underscored by early scholars, such as Leung et al. (2013) and Soteriades (2012), who argue for the fundamentally intangible nature of the tourism offering, highlighting the evolved understanding of what constitutes tourism products. Despite being labelled as a product, the inherent intangibility and heterogeneity of tourism experiences pose significant perception and evaluation challenges prior to consumption, a dilemma articulated by Sirakaya and Woodside (2005). Besides these challenges, social media marketing has emerged as a crucial tool in tourism marketing. Pioneering studies by Choi et al. (2007), King (2002), and Leung et al. (2013) have drawn the growing importance of social media platforms in shaping tourist destinations' images and perceptions. While the exploration of UGC marketing by Cox et al. (2009), Lehto et al. (2005), and Xiang and Gretzel (2010) underscores the role of online consumer-generated content, this study will focus on the influence of social media content, specifically UGC and influencer content, on tourists' decision-making processes.

1.3 Research aim and question

The aim of this research is to explore the influence of social media on young consumers' travel decisions and provide theoretical implications that arise from the interplay between social media marketing and tourism marketing. Driven by these considerations, our research aims to answer the following research question: "How do young consumers use social media to make travel decisions?".

Theoretically, this study seeks to enrich the current academic literature on social media marketing and tourism marketing by extending the understanding of how social media platforms influence travel decisions. For social media marketing literature, our theoretical contribution will involve a deeper exploration of how specific content—user-generated content (UGC) or influencer-generated content—influences young consumers' travel decisions. For tourism marketing literature, we will investigate how social media content shapes young consumers' perceptions of a destination and their ideas about the authenticity of those destinations.

By leveraging qualitative research methods, we aim to delve deeper into the influence of social media on young consumers' choices. By that, we aim to contribute to the literature streams of social media marketing and tourism marketing by expanding the understanding about what influences young consumers' travel decisions, as well as pave the way for future research.

1.4 Research context

This study will focus on the influence of social media on young consumers' travel decisions. This choice of focusing on this demographic is justified by the fact that this segment exhibits distinctive travel behaviours in response to social media influences (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Ketter, 2020; Vancia et al. 2023). Additionally, this group represents a substantial portion of social media users (We are social, 2024) and showcases a preference for unique experiences over possessions, demonstrating propensity for spontaneity and reliance on word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). The global youth travel industry is also experiencing exponential growth (UNWTO, 2024) and it is now estimated to represent almost 190 million international trips a year, growing faster than global travel overall (UNWTO, 2024). In particular, European travellers see travel as an essential part of their everyday lives, rather than just a brief escape from reality (UNWTO, 2024). Additionally, as shown by Eurostat (2017), a significant 66% of European citizens aged between 15 and 34 engage in tourism for personal purposes. These reasons justify our focus on this demographic and underlines the significance of understanding their needs and preferences (UNWTO, 2024), as well as their travel decisions.

1.5 Research delimitations

When undertaking this study, it is essential to acknowledge certain delimitations that may influence its outcomes. Primarily, the sampling focus on young consumers poses a potential limitation as it may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other demographic groups. While young consumers were chosen due to their digital proficiency and extensive use of social media platforms, this may result in findings that are not universally applicable across all age groups. Furthermore, the geographical delimitation, particularly within the context of Europe, may also impact the study's generalizability, even though our results might be adapted to other contexts. By focusing mainly on participants from European countries, the study aims to take advantage of shared travel experiences and behaviours prevalent in this region. However, it is important to recognize that different continents may exhibit varying experiences and behaviours, which could lead to distinct findings if broader geographical representation were considered. Despite these delimitations, the study ensures providing valuable insights within the scope of its chosen demographics and geographic focus.

1.6 Research outline

This section aims to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the study. This research begins with an Introduction chapter aimed at providing initial background information on the research topic to clarify its focus. The chapter continues examining and discussing the literature streams in which the research is positioned, together with the research' aims and the context within which they will be explored. Finally, the research contributions and implications are discussed, while also acknowledging any limitations. Following that, the Literature Review chapter delves into the explorations of the relevant existing literature to identify the gaps that this research aims to address. The third chapter, namely Theoretical Framework, presents an analysis of the theoretical perspectives that will be applied to examine the research findings. This includes the Uses and Gratification theory by Katz et al. (1974) and Belk's theory of the Extended Self (1988). In the Methodology chapter, the methods employed for data collection are described. This chapter illustrates the rationale behind the selected methods and their alignment with the research question, providing insight into the data collection process. Moving on to the Analysis chapter, the collected data are examined to support the thesis' research question and fulfil its purpose. These data are analysed and interpreted in light of the selected literature and theories. By contrast, the Discussion chapter aims at providing the main contributions of the study by emphasising its theoretical advancements and practical applications. Lastly, the Conclusion chapter provides a brief summary of the research together with its findings, its practical implications and potential limitations. This section also includes suggestions for further research, highlighting possible areas for deeper exploration. Finally, a bibliography and appendix is included, containing material such as the interview guide and the interview consent form to ensure transparency.

It is essential to clarify that throughout the entire study, the term "digital tool" will encompass social media platforms. Additionally, the terms "young consumers" and "young travellers" will be used interchangeably. Similarly, "social media" and "digital platforms", as well as "respondents" and "interviewees" will be used interchangeably.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, we will present a literature review on the two main literature streams of this study, namely social media marketing and tourism marketing. We will explore key topics including influencer marketing and its influence on consumer perceptions, the relationship between social media use and social anxiety, digital platforms' role in shaping tourist decisions, and the importance of authenticity in the tourism industry. This review will help the reader understand the current research landscape and underscores the importance of our study's focus.

2.1 Social media marketing

In this section we will explore the literature stream of social media marketing and the main topics discussed within. We will begin by examining how social media has transformed communication, focusing on User Generated Content (UGC), the broader influence of social media on society, the double-edged sword of social media, and the misinformation concerns associated with its use. Furthermore, we will delve into the literature on influencer marketing, detailing its historical development and the perceived authenticity of influencers. Additionally, we will investigate the relationship between social media and social anxiety, particularly the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as a form of social anxiety. Finally, the section will conclude with a summary of the literature on social media marketing.

2.1.1 How social media changed the way of communication

Social media represent a paradigm shift in the way individuals interact, share information, and perceive the world, evolving from simple online forums to complex platforms that facilitate revolutionary levels of user interaction and content creation (Bell & Loane, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This evolution is important to our study as it underscores the impact these platforms have on marketing strategies and consumer engagement, setting the base for a deeper investigation into the influence of digital platforms on young consumers' travel decisions. Defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content", social media distinguishes itself through its participatory nature, empowering users to generate content and foster interaction, which contrasts traditional media, which typically features only a one-way flow of information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The impact of social media on society is profound, influencing various aspects of daily life, from how individuals communicate and consume information to how businesses and marketers reach their audiences (Bolton et al. 2013). The transformative power of social media extends beyond personal communication; it has reshaped the landscape of marketing, advertising, and brand engagement (Bolton et al. 2013; Bruhn et al. 2012). The emergence of new information and communication technologies,

particularly the Internet and social networks, has changed market dynamics, threatening the competitive positions of firms (Porter, 2001) and increasing the power of consumers (Urban, 2003). The Internet and online-based social media have changed consumption habits by providing consumers with new ways of looking for, assessing, choosing, and buying goods and services (Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Given these obvious changes, understanding the role of social media within marketing contexts has become crucial for both researchers and practitioners, underscoring the need for adaptive strategies in an ever-evolving digital marketplace (Kumar et al. 2016; Schultz & Peltier, 2013).

2.1.1.1 User Generated Content (UGC)

User-generated content (UGC) has emerged as an essential component of social media marketing, reshaping how consumers interact with and perceive brands (Daugherty et al. 2008; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014). Defined as the informal exchange of information over internet platforms, detailing the use or features of various products and services, this form of communication uniquely connects both direct interactions from producers to consumers as well as peer-to-peer sharing, setting it apart from the typical traditional mass media channels (Daugherty et al. 2008; Van Dijck, 2009). UGC differs from traditional marketing forms by originating from the general public, not from paid professionals, marketers or influencers (Daugherty et al. 2008). This form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays an important role in shaping consumers' understanding and perceptions, as it provides timely, informative and trustworthy content that is perceived as highly relevant across various sectors (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014).

2.1.1.2 The broader influence of social media on society

While the role of social media in marketing and consumer behaviour is evident, the influence of social platforms extends far beyond commercial interactions into the daily lives of people (Berthon et al. 2012, Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) stress the paradigm shift catalysed by social media in how information is exchanged and consumed, fostering an environment where UGC is dominant. The transition from traditional marketing strategies to social media marketing has had a profound impact, altering promotional strategies and the very fabric of consumer decision-making processes, particularly in the travel sector (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This shift towards democratised content creation has not only challenged traditional media paradigms but also transformed how people communicate, enabling seamless connections across the world (Berthon et al. 2012). Moreover, the impact of social media in a professional context must also be mentioned, with platforms like LinkedIn redefining networking and career development opportunities (Berthon et al. 2012). Beyond communication, social media has an undeniable influence on modern culture, trends and societal norms (Bolton et al. 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Bruhn et al. (2012) highlight the transformative effect of social media on brand-consumer interaction, suggesting that the interactive nature of these

platforms allows for a more natural and dynamic form of brand engagement, illustrating the extensive reach of social media.

2.1.1.3 The double-edged sword of social media

However, while social media has undoubtedly brought multiple advantages regarding ease of communication and development, it has also introduced complex challenges concerning mental health and societal well-being (Naslund et al. 2020; Valkenburg et al. 2022). The extensive use of social media has been linked to numerous psychological issues, including addiction, decreased self-esteem, and heightened feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Keles et al. 2020). The paradoxical effect of online connectivity can sometimes result in social isolation, as digital interactions may lack the depth of face-to-face relationships (Naslund et al. 2020). The authors further discuss the double-edged sword of social media engagement, noting that while it offers unprecedented opportunities for socialisation and information exchange, it also fosters an environment ripe for overuse and dependency, which can detract from real-life relationships and personal well-being. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "social comparison" on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook further amplifies the concerns related to self-esteem and body image, as users are constantly exposed to idealised representations of others' lives and thus, setting unrealistic standards for personal achievements and happiness (Keles et al. 2020; Valkenburg et al. 2022).

2.1.1.4 Social media use and misinformation concerns

Another challenge presented by the rapid growth of social media usage is in the areas of misinformation and privacy concerns, underscoring the need for ethical considerations and governance in the digital age (Jozani et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2019). Privacy concerns have become paramount, as users often share personal information without fully understanding or controlling who can access their data (Jozani et al. 2020). This vulnerability is then used by the platforms' business models, which rely on data mining and targeted advertising, turning users' personal data into a commodity and raising ethical questions and concerns about consent and ownership (Berthon et al. 2012). Data security appears as another critical issue, with frequent reports of breaches and unauthorised data access incidents undermining users' trust (Zhang & Gupta, 2018). These not only compromise personal information but also expose users to targeted misinformation campaigns, influencing their perceptions and decisions (Lazer et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2019). Wang et al. (2019) argue that the interactive nature of social media intensifies the spread of misinformation, as users often unknowingly contribute to the dissemination of these through likes, shares and comments. This environment challenges consumers, especially the young generation, to critically evaluate the credibility of information they find, a skill that became necessary in the digital landscape (Shin et al. 2018). Addressing these challenges requires a focus on the ethical responsibilities of both social media platforms and users (Jozani et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2019). Platforms should implement sophisticated privacy protections, secure data management practices, and algorithms that prioritise accurate information (Mosteller & Poddar, 2017). Users, in turn, bear

the responsibility of engaging with social media content critically and ethically, recognizing their role in the information ecosystem and the potential consequences of their online behaviours (Ku et al. 2019; Mosteller & Poddar, 2017).

2.1.2 Influencer marketing

Building upon social media marketing's influence, it becomes crucial to delve into one of its most dynamic and influential components: influencer marketing (Appel et al. 2019). In the digital age, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful strategy within the broad spectrum of digital marketing tools (Appel et al. 2019; Freberg et al. 2011; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). While there are multiple definitions of influencers, various sources offer insights that provide a comprehensive understanding of influencers and their impact in the field of social media marketing. According to Dwivedi et al. (2021), influencers are "individuals with the ability to influence others by promoting and recommending brands and market offerings on social media," which highlights the important role influencers play in filling the gap between brands and their target audiences. Building on this, Freberg et al. (2011, p. 90) describe influencers as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media", which perspective focuses more on the shift from traditional marketing strategies to a more modern, interactive approach, where influencers leverage their personal connections and credibility to impact consumer perceptions. Furthermore, Fowler and Thomas (2023, p. 4) offer an additional layer of understanding by viewing influencers as "individuals who use social media platforms to successfully create and foster online connections with others in order to enlarge their sphere of influence (i.e. gaining social capital) with many, although not all, simultaneously pursuing compensation for their work".

2.1.2.1 Historical background of influencer marketing

The history of influencer marketing literature can be traced back to before the trend of social media, rooted in early forms of celebrity endorsements, sponsorships and word-of-mouth marketing (Kay et al. 2020). Recently, influencers began to be categorised by their number of followers, with the most common distinction being between micro- and macro-influencers (Appel et al. 2019; Kay et al. 2020). Although macro-influencers, such as celebrities, are renowned for their impact on audiences, popularity of micro-influencers is rising due to their relatability and the ease with which people can identify with them (Appel et al. 2019). The rise of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Youtube has further revolutionised the field, enabling influencer marketing to become one of the most powerful marketing tools (Appel et al. 2019; Freberg et al. 2011). The effectiveness of influencer marketing is largely connected to the authentic relationships influencers have with their followers, fostering a sense of trust and friendship that traditional marketing methods lack (Audrezet et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2022). This trust is being used as a tool to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours positively towards promoted products or brands (Leung et al. 2022). Multiple authors highlight the great ability of influencer marketing to foster

direct engagement between brands and consumers, which is pivotal in building brand awareness and establishing trust (Appel et al. 2019; Dwivedi et al. 2021; Leung et al. 2022). The authenticity of the connection influencers can have with their followers can translate into higher engagement rates and more impactful brand endorsements, as followers perceive the recommendations from influencers as more authentic and genuine compared to traditional advertising methods (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Leung et al. 2022). Building on the importance of authenticity, Audrezet et al. (2020) uncover two critical authenticity management strategies that could be employed by influencers, namely passionate and transparent authenticity. While passionate authenticity emphasises personal passion over commercial interests, transparent authenticity involves open disclosure about brand partnerships (Audrezet et al. 2020).

2.1.2.2 Authenticity in influencer marketing

While authenticity can be highly beneficial in influencer marketing (Audrezet et al. 2020; Brown & Hayes, 2008), there are also several challenges associated with it (Appel et al. 2019; Brown & Hayes, 2008). Appel et al. (2019) discuss the privacy concerns tightly connected with influencer marketing, as consumers are becoming more concerned about how their personal data is being used. Additionally, even though social media has facilitated the ability to connect people around the globe more easily and seamlessly, it has paradoxically contributed to a growing sense of loneliness among younger generations (Appel et al. 2019). Furthermore, Leung et al. (2022) highlight the possible challenge of discrepancies between brand values and those of the influencers, which can lead to reputational and trust losses. Influencer marketing's landscape is highly influenced by evolving trends, with a notable shift towards fostering long-term partnerships and prioritising authenticity and transparency (Appel et al. 2019; Jin et al. 2019). As Appel et al. (2019) highlight, brands are increasingly seeking to establish enduring relationships with influencers, moving beyond one-off campaigns to foster genuine brand advocacy over time. This trend is driven by the growing consumer demand for authenticity, with audiences gravitating towards influencers who transparently disclose brand partnerships and maintain integrity in their endorsements (Dwivedi et al. 2021; Jin et al. 2019). Additionally, the trend of new social media platforms and content formats, such as TikTok and Instagram Reels, has expanded the creative possibilities for influencer collaborations (Leung et al. 2022). These platforms are adjusted to the preferences of younger demographics, offering fresh avenues for engaging storytelling and immersive brand experiences (Leung et al. 2022).

2.1.2.3 The future of influencer marketing

The future of influencer marketing is dependent on emerging trends and research underscoring the importance of authenticity, long-term partnerships and the development and integration of new technologies (Dwivedi et al. 2021; Sicilia et al. 2020). As highlighted by Dwivedi et al. (2021), the social media marketing landscape continues to develop, necessitating a forward-looking approach that supports consumer needs and leverages the ongoing development of digital

platforms. Appel et al. (2019) further emphasise the dynamic nature of social media in marketing, projecting an environment where brands and influencers collaborate more closely to create content that resonates deeply with audiences. This sentiment is supported by Leung et al. (2022), who explore the effectiveness of influencer marketing, suggesting that genuine engagements between influencers and their followers are crucial for the success of marketing campaigns. Furthermore, the vision of augmented and virtual reality and other immersive technologies offers exciting new avenues for influencer marketing, promising to enhance user experiences and engagement (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). These advancements suggest a shift towards more interactive and engaging content, where influencers play a crucial role in bringing brands closer to their audience through authentic storytelling and innovative presentation methods (Dwivedi et al. 2021; Lueng et al. 2022).

2.1.3 Social media and social anxiety

The interplay between social media and influencer marketing, and social anxiety has gained considerable attention within the academic community, highlighting a complex relationship that impacts individuals' psychological well-being (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Hastings et al. 2004; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Zalinska & Agopian, 2022). Social media platforms, by their nature, encourage constant connectivity and interaction of users, yet nurture the experience of social anxiety, inadequacy and isolation (Oberst et al. 2016; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Zalinska and Agopian (2023) examine how users with different levels of social anxiety perceive and engage with customer service channels on social media, suggesting that increased social anxiety influences preferences for indirect communication methods as coping mechanisms to mitigate direct social interactions that might trigger social anxiety. This is supported by findings of Good and Huhmann (2018), who explore how social anxiety in direct advertising can influence consumer behaviour, suggesting that social anxiety not only impacts personal interactions, but also extends to broader aspects of social media usage. Moreover, the research by Dhir et al. (2018) delved into the habitual aspects of social media, identifying a link between compulsive social media use and increased levels of anxiety and depression among users. This connection underscores the potential of social media to worsen pre-existing mental health conditions, especially among those predisposed to social anxiety (Dhir et al. 2018). Similarly, Blackwell et al. (2017) investigate personality traits as predictors of social media addiction, finding that individuals with higher levels of neuroticism and lower levels of extraversion (traits commonly associated with social anxiety) can be more likely to experience negative outcomes related to social media use. Putting these insights together, it becomes clear that while social media offer great opportunities for connectivity, its impact on individuals in terms of social anxiety cannot be overlooked (Roberts & David, 2019; Tandon et al. 2021). The constant pressure to engage, together with the unrealistic portrayals of others' lives, can create an environment where social comparisons thrive, further spreading feelings of social inadequacy and isolation (Hastings et al. 2004; Roberts & David, 2019). Therefore, understanding the relationship between social media usage and social anxiety among users is not only crucial for

developing strategies aimed to mitigate the adverse effects on mental health (Tandon et al. 2021) but also for exploring young generations' approach towards online content.

2.1.3.1 Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as a form of social anxiety

The phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) has emerged as a pivotal concern in the discourse around the psychological impacts of social media (Blackwell et al. 2017; Dhir et al. 2018; Oberst et al. 2016). This concept describes the anxiety individuals can feel over the possibility of missing out on particular experiences that others are sharing on social media platforms (Oberst et al. 2016; Tandon et al. 2021). Another characteristic by Przybylski et al. (2013) suggests that FOMO is the feeling of being absent in what the others are doing (and sharing online), while strengthening the need to stay connected to ensure being up-to-date with what is going on. The relationship between social anxiety and consumer behaviour on social media platforms reveals a dynamic where users' level of social anxiety influences their attitudes towards customer service channels and interactions as such (Zalinska & Agopian, 2022). This suggests that social anxiety, often connected with FOMO, can drive individuals towards or away from certain digital interactions, and thus shaping their online consumer behaviour (Oberst et al. 2016; Zalinska & Agopian, 2023). Hastings et al. (2004) raise ethical concerns regarding the use of fear appeals in marketing, including those that exploit social anxiety and FOMO. The authors argue that such strategies can strengthen existing anxieties, posing ethical dilemmas in the sphere of digital marketing and consumer engagement. The manipulation of FOMO in marketing practices not only questions the ethical behaviour of advertising, but also highlights the potential psychological consequences on users (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Tandon et al. 2021). Social media users, in particular adolescents, are vulnerable to the negative consequences of heavy social networking, with FOMO being a mediating factor (Oberst et al. 2016; Roberts & David, 2019). Roberts and David (2019) further explore how FOMO, together with intense social media usage, affects individuals' sense of connection and overall well-being of users. Their findings suggest that social media and FOMO can lead to worsened real-life interactions and connections, as well as personal satisfaction with individuals' own lives (Robert & David, 2019). Dhir et al. (2018) examine the relationship between online social media fatigue, FOMO, and overall well-being, identifying a vicious cycle where compulsive social media use amplifies FOMO, leading to increased fatigue, anxiety, and depression. FOMO can both cause and result from social anxiety and heavy social media use. This needs a careful approach to digital well-being that focuses on creating strategies to reduce negative mental health effects and encourage healthy online interactions (Oberst et al., 2016; Roberts & David, 2019). The interplay between social media, influencer marketing, and social anxiety, emphasised by the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), poses a challenge not only for society at large but also for researchers striving to understand its complexities (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Hastings et al. 2004; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Zalinska & Agopian, 2022). As research suggests, the compulsive use of social media driven by FOMO and social anxiety can influence the users' anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Naslund et al. 2020). Ethical concerns regarding

the exploitation of these vulnerabilities in marketing practices highlight the need for a more responsible approach to digital engagement (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Tandon et al. 2021).

2.2 Tourism marketing

In this section, we will discuss the literature streams of tourism marketing. We will begin with an examination of tourism experience and tourism products, and follow with an exploration of tourism and digitalization, encompassing the role of social media and UGC within tourism marketing. Additionally, we will analyse the travel preferences and decision-making processes of young consumers. Furthermore, we will discuss the importance of authenticity within the tourism industry. Finally, the section will conclude with a summary of the literature on tourism marketing, presenting a framework of the current literature on the topic.

2.2.1 Tourism experience

The transition from utilitarian to hedonic consumption observed by Chang (2018) emphasises the underlying connection between consumer spending and the enjoyment derived from experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 2013). Within the tourism domain, the experience economy framework identifies four experiential domains – entertainment, education, escapism, and esthetics – highlighting the all-round nature of tourism experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 2013). In this context, the industry revenue increases according to the extent to which consumers enjoy the experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2013). However, despite the theoretical foundation of the experience economy, empirical investigations within this realm have predominantly focused on psychological aspects, leaving a lack of research within the experiential economy paradigm (Chang, 2018). Nevertheless, the principles of the experience economy, rooted in Kahneman's Theory of Experienced Utility (Kahneman, 2000), highlight the key role of consumer experiences in driving industry revenue and shaping consumer behaviours. This theory suggests that people often perceive losses as more crucial than gains of equal financial value, as the negative impact of potential losses tends to weigh more heavily on individuals psychologically compared to the positive impact of equivalent gains (Kahneman, 2000).

2.2.2 Tourism product

Another core issue in the tourism landscape is the lack of direct experience with a concrete and tangible product (Leung et al. 2013). The notion of "tourism product" has evolved significantly, shifting from a traditional view of tangible commodity to a series of experiences achieved by combining different products and services (Soteriades, 2012). As argued by Sirakayaa and Woodside (2005), the tourism product is characterised by "intangibility", "inseparability", "perishability", and "heterogeneity". Because of the intangible nature of the tourism product, its quality and perceived benefits can hardly be evaluated before its consumption (Leung et al. 2013).

Furthermore, the perishability of the product, together with its inherent heterogeneity across providers, complicates the task of ensuring consistent quality (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Consequently, Dowling (2001) emphasises the central role of reputation in consumer judgments and selection of tourism service providers, underscoring the importance of trust and credibility in this realm. Viewed through a marketing lens, tourism products are categorised as high-involvement goods, signifying that consumers engage in extensive information-seeking behaviour prior to committing to a final decision (Leung et al. 2013). This inherent uncertainty and the associated risks resulting from the intangible nature of tourism products lead to prolonged decision-making processes (Litvin et al. 2008). As today consumers are targeted by a large amount of information, it becomes increasingly difficult to navigate through them and therefore make a rational decision.

2.2.3 Tourism and digitalization

The advent of digitalization has brought a new era for the tourism industry, portraying both challenges and opportunities (Choi et al. 2007). While digital platforms facilitate a more rapid and efficient exchange of information, they might also overwhelm consumers with a multitude of choices (Choi et al. 2007). As Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are primarily responsible for promoting and marketing destinations to both consumers and travel intermediaries, by recognizing the significance of tailored experiences over mass-market appeals, they have started to focus on delivering personalised experiences to satisfy diverse consumer preferences (King, 2002) to strategically align with the high-involvement nature of tourism products (Leung et al. 2013). The tourism industry has taken particular advantage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015) as these technologies have not only enriched the communication exchange between tourism operators and tourists but also considerably improved the experience-offerings provided by individual firms and tourist destinations (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015).

2.2.3.1 Social media and UGC within tourism marketing

Among the most impactful digital tools, social media platforms and User Generated Content (UGC) have been identified as the most influential within the tourism landscape (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Litvin et al. 2008; Lehto et al. 2005). As mentioned in the previous section, social media platforms have emerged as important drivers of consumer behaviour, serving as channels for seeking and sharing information, community engagement, and validation of choices (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). By contrast, User Generated Content (UGC) is heavily used to seek information about the usage of particular goods and/or services or to collect information about their characteristics (Litvin et al. 2008). From the marketing perspective, UGC is conceived as a form of consumer-to-consumer e-marketing (Cox et al. 2009) that specifically serves as a valuable resource for young consumers navigating unfamiliar destinations, shaping their perceptions and knowledge of tourism products (Litvin et al. 2008). Particularly UGC is emerging because of the

rising popularity of travel websites that contain travellers-generated content (e.g TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet) (Cox et al. 2009). Thus, UGC's importance extends beyond information sharing, serving also as a tool for post-purchase satisfaction evaluation and destination image monitoring (Soderlund, 1998; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Despite this, concerns regarding the trustworthiness and validity of UGC persist, highlighting the need for careful consideration when consuming information (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014).

2.2.4 Young consumers' travel preferences

The emergence of digital natives has further transformed the tourism landscape (Ketter, 2019). Particularly the demographic of young consumers is increasingly embracing digital tools to navigate this landscape (Litvin et al. 2008). The spread of the Internet has significantly empowered them, assuming simultaneous roles as information consumers, players, and providers (Inversini et al. 2010). Equipped with technological proficiency, young travellers utilise smartphones and laptops throughout their decision-making process (Ketter, 2020). Moreover, given the intangible nature of tourism products it is not surprising that young consumers heavily depend on UGCs (Leung et al. 2013). Being digital natives, young consumers show clear travel behaviours, characterised by spontaneity, preference for unique experiences, and reliance on word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). Additionally, Leung et al. (2013) show that individuals skilled at navigating the Internet are more likely to seek information than non-experts. This tendency might be explained by their extensive knowledge about the vast resources online, or from their ability to formulate specific questions aimed at obtaining what they are looking for (Leung et al. 2013). Furthemore, the research distinguishes between different types of Internet users. Novice users, characterised by deliberative mindsets, are more likely to engage in meticulous information searching aimed at delineating choice sets and facilitate decision-making. By contrast, expert users, also termed as repeat travellers, adopt an implemental mindset, more action-oriented. These users rely on their accumulated knowledge and they approach information searching more practically (Leung et al. 2013). They aim at finding the right information quickly and efficiently (Leung et al. 2013). The young population travel more than any other generation, they prefer experiences over possessions and they show a propensity to travel increasingly as their income rises (Ketter, 2020). When travelling, they are more focused on bucket-list activities, relaxation, and cultural experiences (Vancia et al. 2023), they tend to avoid traditional tourism services and they opt for authentic experiences and destinations (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). Previous research on tourism experiences has shown that young consumers take last-minute decisions, look for opportunities, and tend to use word-of-mouth sources to choose their travel destinations (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). Their affinity for technology and social media platforms presents opportunities for tourism businesses to leverage digital channels for targeted marketing and customer engagement (Vancia et al. 2023). As mentioned above, the rising popularity of social media has changed the way people seek and consume information. However, there is still a gap about how travellers search for, process and use online information (Lehto et al. 2005). This study seeks to fill this gap by delving into the ways in which social media influences

the young consumers' travel decisions. Moreover, the increasing travellers' reliance on digital tools underscores the need for tourism businesses to adapt and tailor their strategies to meet the evolving preferences of this demographic (Ketter, 2020). As young consumers' seamlessly integrate technology into their daily lives, engaging in information-seeking, community-building and validation processes (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), tourism businesses have started paying more attention to their online presence. This strategic choice enables them to monitor customers' preferences and proactively anticipate their needs and desires (Vancia et al. 2023), thereby leveraging young consumers' travel consumption behaviours to their advantage. By recognizing the essential role of digital platforms, UGC, and prior knowledge, tourism businesses as well as DMOs can better satisfy the diverse needs and preferences of travellers (King, 2001).

2.2.5 Travellers' decision-making process

As mentioned in the previous section, consumers have access to numerous sources of information and, as a consequence, they adopt different types of search behaviours (Choi et al. 2007) when making decisions. Within the tourism industry, the process of decision-making, particularly among young consumers, is complex and influenced by various internal and external factors, as extensively discussed in literature (Choi et al. 2007; Crompton, 1992; Cox et al. 2009; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Lehto et al. 2006; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Oppewal et al. 2015). The tourist consumer decision process encompasses various elements: whether to travel, where to travel and what to do, when to travel, with whom to travel, how long to stay and how much to spend (Oppewal et al. 2015). The above-mentioned literature largely examines the complexity of this process and emphasises the relevance of understanding the tourist decision-making process (Cox et al. 2009; Oppewal et al. 2015), which encompasses various stages (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005) and factors (Crompton, 1992). Crompton (1992) illustrates the formation of destination choice sets emphasising the interplay between internal motives and external forces. According to the author, consumers' choice sets – reject, inert, late, inaction and action – all contribute to their confidence in taking a decision (Crompton, 1992). Through their consumer decision-making model, Cox et al. (2009) show that such a process develops sequentially, and it encompasses three stages (pre-trip, during trip and post-trip) which are then subdivided into "need recognition", "information search", "evaluation of alternatives", "purchase decision", and "post-purchase evaluation". Depending on which stage the consumers are at, they will seek information on different types of search engines and online information sources (Cox et al. 2009). A further explanation of this process is that tourism consumers' decision making process can be broken down into: (a) a recognition phase where the consumer becomes aware that there is a decision to be made, (b) formulation of goals and objectives, (c) generation of an alternative set of objectives, (d) information search regarding the properties of selected alternatives, (e) ultimate judgement or choice among various alternatives, (f) acting upon the decision, and (g) provision of feedback for the following decision (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). This model illustrates that the decision-making process proposed is heavily influenced by psychological or internal factors (i.e motives, beliefs, intentions, lifestyle personality traits and information search behaviour) and non-

psychological or external variables (i.e time, marketing mix, constraints, influences of family and reference groups culture and subcultures and social class) (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). The complex feature of this process is additionally explored by Oppewal et al. (2015) that identifies destination choice, activity selection, timing, companions, duration, and expenditure as key elements. When planning a trip, tourists evaluate destinations based on their personal goals and past experiences, shaping their perceptions and preferences (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2004). At each stage, consumers leverage different information sources, including UGC platforms, which exert influence over their decision-making processes (Choi et al. 2007), although their specific impact has not been thoroughly investigated. During the initial stages of travel planning, consumers primarily utilise search engines and airlines sites (Choi et al. 2007). By contrast, DMOs' websites play an important role throughout various pre-trip planning stages, highlighting their importance in offering extensive and additional information and fostering communication between the parties (Choi et al. 2007). Core decisions such as destination selection, budgeting, and transportation choices are made during the pre-trip planning phase, wherein digital platforms play a central role (Choi et al. 2007). In the contemporary digital landscape, websites, particularly those incorporating UGC, serve as indispensable sources of information for travellers (Choi et al. 2007). These platforms not only provide practical details but also facilitate engagement within virtual communities, where tourists share their experiences and seek recommendations (Cox et al. 2009). However, the utilisation of UGC varies across the decision-making process (Cox et al. 2009; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). While some travellers turn to UGC after finalising their destination, others integrate it into their initial research phase to refine their options (Cox et al. 2009). Moreover, the inherent risks associated with tourism products amplify the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations and personal information sources, which exercise considerable influence over consumer decisions (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). The influence of prior knowledge and experience on tourists' information search behaviour is another important aspect to consider (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Lehto et al. 2006). Familiarity, expertise, and past experiences shape consumers' perceptions and their consequent search behaviour (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). As consumers gain knowledge about a specific destination or service, reliance on prior knowledge increases, reducing information search intensity (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). This highlights the dynamic interaction between internal factors, such as prior knowledge, and external stimuli, including digital platforms and UGC.

The process of travel planning is influenced by various internal and external factors, as extensively discussed in the tourism literature (Choi et al. 2007; Crompton, 1992; Cox et al. 2009; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Lehto et al. 2006; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Oppewal et al. 2015). The decision-making process encompasses numerous stages and factors, shaped by psychological and external variables (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Digital platforms, particularly those incorporating UGC, play a central role in providing information and fostering engagement within virtual communities (Choi et al. 2007; Cox et al. 2009). However, the utilisation of UGC varies across the decision-making process, highlighting the dynamic nature of travel planning (Cox et al. 2009). The

emergence of digital natives, particularly young consumers, further underscores the importance of adapting marketing strategies to meet the evolving preferences of this demographic (Ketter, 2020; Leung et al. 2013). By recognizing the essential role of digital platforms, UGC, and prior knowledge, tourism businesses and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) can better satisfy the diverse needs and preferences of travellers (King, 2001). In essence, as the tourism landscape continues to evolve, businesses must remain agile and responsive to the changing dynamics of consumer behaviour and technological advancements (Ketter, 2020).

2.2.6 Authenticity within the tourism industry

The concept of authenticity within the tourism industry has been a subject of considerable academic discussion since its introduction by MacCannell over four decades ago (MacCannell, 1973; MacCannell, 1976). Since then, this notion has received considerable attention and it has undergone extensive examination, resulting in the proposal of alternative conceptualizations such as the existential authenticity by Wang (1999). Rooted in Heidegger's philosophy of being, existential authenticity represents a connection between authenticity and the pursuit of existential meaning (Heidegger, 1962). On the basis of this argument, Wang (1999) argues that in numerous tourism experiences, tourists seek their authentic selves. Thus, the quest for authenticity within tourism is intrinsically linked with the search for meaning inherent in the act of travelling (Beverald & Farrelly, 2009). Additionally, within the tourism domain existential authenticity is closely associated with creativity and engagement (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006) reflecting consumers' active pursuit of authentic experiences to instil their lives with meaning (Beverald & Farrelly, 2009). Criticism directed towards the conventional notion of authenticity highlights its inadequacy in explaining certain tourist behaviours and experiences (Wang, 1999). However, it is worth noting that MacCannell's definition still remains appropriate, particularly in context involving the representation of other cultures, ethnicities, or historical narratives (Wang, 1999).

Wang's idea aligns with Trilling's observation that the concept of "authenticity" was firstly applied to museum contexts before being extended to the tourism field (Trilling, 1972; Wang, 1999). The complexity of this notion is further emphasised by Wang's categorization into objective, constructive, and existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). Objective authenticity concerns the authenticity of originals, while constructive authenticity focuses on the perceptions and expectations projected into tourist sites by visitors or tourism producers (Wang, 1999). Existential authenticity, however, represents a unique source of tourism experiences, rooted in the potential for existential states of being to be activated through tourist activities (Wang, 1999).

Authenticity, however, remains a complex and context-dependent concept within the marketing field (Bruner, 1994). A variety of definitions exists, reflecting varying perspectives and objectives. In the tourism industry, the search for meanings occurs through the act of doing tourism (Wang, 1999). Cohen's definition of authenticity may be considered comprehensive of the various aspects of authenticity: authenticity as "customary practice or long usage"; authenticity as the "genuineness of an unaltered product"; authenticity as "sincerity in relationships"; authenticity as "creativity, particularly relevant in cultural performances like dance and music"; and authenticity

as the "unimpeded flow of life, free from interference by the tourism industry or other managers" (Cohen, 1988). This understanding reflects the complex relationship between authenticity and diverse cultural, social, and economic dynamics. Kolar and Zabkar define authenticity in terms of tourists' enjoyment and perception of the genuineness of their experiences (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Beverald and Farrelly (2009) argue that the process of authenticating an object, or an experience is dependent on consumers' goals, as they seek to create connections between the desired experience and their sense of self (Beverald & Farrelly, 2009). The overall idea is that authenticity encompasses what is real and/or true (Beverald & Farrelly, 2009). This perspective highlights the socially constructed nature of authenticity, which excels inherent attributes to encompass contextual meanings (Bruner, 1994). Arnould and Price (2000) further assert that the association between authenticity and meaning seeking is particularly salient in postmodern markets, where it serves as a means of opposing homogenization and standardisation (Arnould & Price, 2000). The pursuit of authenticity is also justified as a response to the perceived inauthenticity of modernity (MacCannell, 1976). Pine and Gilmore (2008) elaborate further on this concept by emphasising the importance of alignment between a company's internal identity and its external representation to consumers. They argue that authenticity in marketing entails not only staying true to core values but also delivering experiences consistent with brand narratives and engaging with customers in a genuine and transparent way (Pine & Gilmore, 2008). Its significance lies not only in providing genuine experiences but also in serving as a conduit for existential meaning-making in an increasingly commodified world (MacCannell, 1976). As MacCannell (1976) observed, the pursuit of authenticity represents a counterpoint to the perceived inauthenticity of modernity, embodying a quest for connection, identity, and genuine human experience amidst the complexities of contemporary tourism.

To conclude, the concept of authenticity within the tourism industry has evolved significantly since its development by MacCannell (1973; 1976). Wang's (1999) proposition of existential authenticity offers a paradigm shift, highlighting the importance of tourists seeking existential meaning through their experiences. Rooted in Heidegger's philosophy, this perspective emphasises the deep connection between authenticity and the quest for personal identity and significance (Heidegger, 1962). Various definitions and dimensions of authenticity have been proposed, reflecting its all-round and context-dependent nature (Bruner, 1994; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Beverald & Farrelly, 2009). Overall, authenticity serves as a means of resisting the perceived inauthenticity of modernity (MacCannell, 1976), providing a pathway for individuals to connect with genuine human experiences amidst the commodification of tourism.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, we will delve into the theoretical frameworks central to our study, focusing on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by Katz et al. (1974) and Belk's Theory of the Extended Self (1988). We will explore UGT's comprehensive approach to understanding how individuals use media to satisfy various needs and achieve specific gratifications, emphasising its relevance across different media types, including digital platforms. Additionally, we will examine Belk's Theory of the Extended Self, which investigates how individuals integrate possessions, experiences, and social connections into their self-identity, expanding the notion of self beyond physical boundaries. This theoretical examination will help us to delve deeper into the relationship between media consumption and self-concept in the context of social media and tourism.

3.1 Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), introduced by Katz et al. in 1974, provides a profound understanding of individuals' engagement with media to fulfil their needs and goals (Katz et al. 1974). More specifically, such theory deals with understanding why people use certain types of media, what needs they have to use them, and what gratifications they get from using them (Kasirye, 2022). The overall idea is that individuals have different needs and therefore they choose different media to fulfil them (Lin, 1996). Additionally, individuals are not only goal directors in their behaviours but also active media users (Lin, 1996). Even when they are exposed to the same media content, they will respond differently to it (Katz et al. 1974). Given that, UGT research is helpful for explaining the social and psychological motives that influence people to choose a specific media to gratify a set of psychological needs (Katz et al. 1974). The theory encompasses five main components: Needs, Motivations, Activity, Uses, and Gratification (Katz et al. 1974). To begin with, needs, rooted in Maslow's hierarchy, encompass cognitive, affective, integrative, social, and tension release needs (Ruggiero, 2000). Katz et al. (1974) argue that these needs create desires (namely motives) which require fulfilment. Such motives vary among each individual but they generally encompass feelings as entertainment, information, escape, social interaction, identity and companionship. Coming back to the first element's classification, cognitive needs relate to getting knowledge and information as well as having an understanding of people's social environments, exploration, and curiosity (Ruggiero, 2000). It should be noted that individuals have different needs and desires regarding media and they might be differently satisfied from the same content (Lin, 1996; Ruggiero, 2000). Affective needs regard appealing experiences and needs that relate to pleasure (Katz et al. 1974) while integrative needs encompass individuals' desires to use various media platforms to engage in conversations and connect with family and friends (Katz et al. 1974). Such needs are particularly relevant to be studied as they are connected to technology and its evolution. By contrast, social needs relate to individuals' inner feelings and they are connected to self-esteem, personal stability, need for self-respect, self-confidence, integrity and

social status (Stafford et al. 2004). Such needs reflect the idea that people decide to use different types of media platforms to gain social status and raise their credibility among their peers (Ruggiero, 2000). Finally, tension release needs reflect the idea that users might use certain types of media because they want to escape a specific unpleasant situation and take their minds off the issues that could have been bothering them (Katz et al. 1974). Regarding the second element, namely motivations, the authors assert that they correspond to perceived incentives or rewards that can push an individual to take action or engage in media use (Katz et al. 1974). Moving forward to the third element, namely activity, it encompasses three different phases: pre-, during-, and post-exposure activity, reflecting the dynamic nature of audience engagement (Lin, 1996). Pre-exposure activities refer to the preparations individuals undertake before engaging with the media. During-exposure activities denote the level of audience engagement, influenced by concurrent behaviours during media consumption, such as reading, eating, or discussing the program. By contrast, post-exposure activities encompass the immediate and long-term effects of media exposure on individuals. Individuals make deliberate decisions during pre-exposure activities, selecting media channels and content that align with their preferences and goals (Uses) (Katz et al. 1974). Subsequently, they derive gratifications from media exposure, fulfilling their initial needs and setting expectations for future consumption (Katz et al. 1974). As previously mentioned, UGT applicability extends beyond traditional media contexts, encompassing the evolving landscape of digital communication technologies. Notably, the Internet facilitates rapid communication, offering various opportunities of interaction, whether asynchronous or synchronous, enabling the collection and exchange of information among individuals and groups (Kiesler, 1997). In this context, UGT has proved to be helpful for understanding consumer motivations for using the Internet, social media platforms, and other digital media, highlighting its adaptability in capturing changing media consumption behaviours (Ruggiero, 2000). In the tourism industry, UGT serves as a valuable framework for exploring how travellers utilise various media channels to gather information, plan their trips, and share experiences (Silaban et al. 2022; Ho & See-To, 2018; Gamage et al. 2022). Social media platforms, in particular, play a considerable role in influencing tourists' destination decisions by providing them with platforms for information exchange and social interaction (Jamu & Sari, 2022). This aligns with the statement that social media serves as a platform for UGC, enabling users to freely share travel-related information and opinions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Furthemore, UGT emphasises the dynamic nature of audience engagement with media, encompassing pre-, during-, and post-exposure activities (Katz et al. 1974). In the tourism context, travellers engage with social media platforms throughout their journey, from pre-trip planning to post-trip sharing of experiences (Choi et al. 2007). However, the utilisation of UGC varies across the decision-making process (Cox et al. 2009; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). While some travellers turn to UGC after finalising their destination, others integrate it into their initial research phase to refine their options (Cox et al. 2009). Despite its utility, UGT is not without critiques. On a general level, the theory is built upon two main assumptions concerning media consumption (Kasirye, 2022). Firstly, it posits that audiences actively engage with media by selecting content that aligns with their preferences (Lin, 1996). Secondly, it assumes that media users possess

awareness regarding their choices and the reasons behind them (Kasirye, 2022). However, Elliot (1974) has questioned individuals' pre-existing awareness of their needs and gratifications, suggesting that such awareness may only emerge through actual media usage rather than being inherently present.

In conclusion, the Uses and Gratifications Theory UGT can provide a comprehensive analysis of the motivations behind social media use, the gratifications they seek to obtain through social media and its influence on young consumers' travel behaviour. As previously mentioned, according to this theory, individuals seek to satisfy specific needs and desires, which can be categorised into cognitive, affective, integrative, social, and tension-release needs (Ruggiero, 2000). In the context of travel, young consumers turn to social media platforms to fulfil these needs in various ways. For instance, cognitive needs drive them to seek information about potential travel destinations, accommodations, and activities, leveraging UGC for authentic insights. Affective needs are addressed as they find visually appealing and emotionally engaging content that inspires their travel destination choices. Integrative and social needs are met through the interactive nature of social media, which allows users to connect with peers, share their experiences, and gain social approval and self-esteem through likes and comments. Additionally, tension-release needs encourage young travellers to use social media as a means of escaping from daily life, stimulating daydreaming. By addressing these diverse needs, social media significantly influences the travel decisions of young consumers, making UGT an essential theoretical framework for exploring how this demographic uses social media to make travel decisions and therefore to answer our research question.

3.2 Possessions and the Extended self

Belk's (1988) theory of the Extended Self offers valuable insights into how individuals integrate possessions, experiences, and social connections into their self-identity, thereby expanding the boundaries of their sense of self. Initially proposed by William James (1890), the concept of self-extension encompasses physical objects like tools and clothing, as well as digital possessions and social connections facilitated by online platforms (Belk, 1988; Belk, 2016). Belk (1988) further explores how individuals extend the self to include other individuals, such as family members, friends, and ancestors, suggesting that considering others as part of the extended self fosters self-awareness and personal growth. He also discusses how possessions serve as means of communication about oneself to others, shaping perceptions and interactions. Indeed, Belk (1988) describes the functions of the extended self as having, doing, and being, emphasising its role in self-definition, personal development, and preservation of personal history. With the rise of digital media and communication technologies, Belk further explores the initial formulation of the extended self to such platforms by arguing that individuals have started extending their self-concept beyond physical constraints and societal prejudices, finding expression and affirmation in online interactions (Belk, 2016). On digital platforms, individuals engage in various activities, such as sharing photos, videos, messages, and updates, to create narratives that depict engaging

lives and participation in social networks, some of which form part of their aggregate extended self (Belk, 2016). Belk (2016) argues that the disconnection from these digital platforms can evoke feelings of anxiety and discomfort, leading to phenomena like FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) or nomophobia (fear of no mobile access). This phenomenon is critical in explaining why it is important to study how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions. FOMO has been identified as a significant psychological impact of social media, where individuals feel anxious about missing out on experiences that others share online (Blackwell et al. 2017; Dhir et al. 2018). This anxiety drives young consumers to remain constantly connected and updated on social media to avoid feeling left out (Przybylski et al., 2013). Consequently, this need to stay connected and informed can significantly influence their travel decisions, as they seek destinations and experiences that are popular and frequently shared on social media platforms. Understanding the role of FOMO and its influence on young consumers' provides valuable insights into why they might choose certain travel destinations over others. Therefore, the integration of Belk's theory of the Extended Self into our study provides a lens through which we can answer our research question. Additionally, Belk's framework offers a comprehensive perspective on how individuals navigate the digital landscape, construct their identities, and engage with online content in the context of travel decision-making and perceptions of authenticity. Nevertheless, Belk's theory of the Extended Self has undoubtedly been influential yet subject to several critiques. Critics argue that the theory overemphasised material possessions, potentially neglecting the importance of non-material aspects like relationships and experiences in identity formation (Ahuvia, 2005). The advent of digital technology also challenges the theory, as virtual possessions increasingly contribute to identity construction (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Moreover, Belk's ideas are sometimes perceived as static, failing to fully account for the dynamic nature of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, the theory might not adequately address individual differences influenced by personality, socioeconomic status, and personal values (Richins, 1994). Finally, ethical and psychological implications suggest that emphasising possessions could encourage materialism and consumerism, potentially leading to negative outcomes like over-consumption and reduced well-being (Kasser, 2002). These critiques have prompted further research, enhancing the theory's applicability and relevance in understanding consumer behaviour across diverse contexts (Belk, 1988; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In conclusion, Belk's theory of the Extended Self can be effectively utilised to analyse how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions as social media platforms can be seen as extensions of the self, where digital possessions such as travel posts, photos, and videos contribute to the users' identity construction. In this context, influencers and peers play a crucial role in shaping travel desires, as young consumers often aspire to travel to destinations showcased by these figures to align with their aspirational identities. Moreover, social media serves as a rich source of travel information and inspiration, where visually engaging content and personal narratives profoundly impact travel aspirations. Thus, Belk's theory provides a robust framework for understanding the reasons and behaviours behind young consumers' usage of social media in travel decision making context.

4. Methodology

In this chapter, we will outline the methodology of our study, beginning with the foundational research philosophy and moving through to research strategy and design. We will detail our sampling technique, data collection, and analysis processes, ensuring a transparent view into how insights were obtained. Finally, we will discuss the quality and ethical considerations of our research, along with acknowledging its methodological limitations. This overview aims to provide a clear understanding of the approach behind our findings.

4.1 Research philosophy

In the realm of social science research, a thoughtful consideration of ontology and epistemology, the core elements upon which research philosophy is built, is necessary (Saunders et al. 2009). Our research, aimed at exploring how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions, necessitated a philosophical background that could accommodate the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals. Given this perspective, we aligned our ontological position with relativism, which posits that reality is not a fixed entity waiting to be discovered but is instead constructed by individuals based on their experiences and interactions (Bell et al. 2022). This perspective was crucial in framing our research question, providing a lens through which to examine and interpret the ways in which social media shapes travel behaviour. Furthermore, it became essential to us to define our epistemological orientation. Epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge, exploring how we come to know that world whereas ontology concerns itself with the nature of reality, asking what constitutes the social world (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Our ontological orientation on relativism naturally led us to align with social constructionism as our epistemological position. As illustrated by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), social constructionism posits that 'reality' is not an external entity to be measured and quantified but is instead shaped by human interactions and interpretations. This viewpoint aligns with our study into how individuals' decisions are shaped by social media, emphasising the importance of understanding the subjective realities constructed by our respondents (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore, these ontological and epistemological choices led us to adopt a qualitative research approach, as it offers the methodological flexibility required to capture the richness and complexity of individual perceptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Qualitative methods, with their emphasis on depth and context, enabled us to delve deeply into the experiences of our respondents, bringing to light how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions.

In conclusion, our research philosophy is a junction of relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, a framework that we believe is most suited to exploring the ways in which social media influences travel decisions.

4.2 Research strategy

Our choice to adopt a qualitative research method was driven by the aim to deeply explore how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions. This approach is particularly beneficial, as well as suitable, for our topic for several reasons. Primarily, qualitative research allows for an in-depth examination of subjective, interpretive, and contextual data (Thomson, 2011). The depth and richness of data provide insights into how individuals perceive and interact with their world (Saunders et al. 2009), making it an ideal fit for understanding the ways in which social media impacts travel choices. Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to uncover how humans view their world (Saunder et al. 2009), in contrast to quantitative methods that focus on data quantification and analysis (Mayer, 2015). Regarding our methodology, we chose collecting qualitative rather than numerical data, as our study did not require a hypothetical deductive modelling but rather an in depth understanding of an empirical phenomenon (Creswell, 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Our approach recalls the idea that "qualitative research is commonly concerned with the systematic collection, ordering, description, and interpretation of textual data generated from talk, observation or documentation" (Kitto et al. 2008, p. 243). It should be highlighted that due to the nature of this research, the study is influenced by the researchers' subjectivity, deriving from our direct involvement in the process of collecting data (Jonker & Penning, 2010). Moreover, the integration of theory presented in the third chapter is crucial for interpreting our empirical findings. Additionally, we adopted an abductive reasoning approach to guide our research, recognizing its potential to uncover new insights through a dynamic interplay between theoretical frameworks and empirical observations (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Abductive reasoning is particularly suited for qualitative analysis as it allows for a repeated exploration of data, allowing to highlight patterns and insights that may not readily become apparent with other methods (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Furthermore, our decision to apply a qualitative approach is closely connected to our research philosophy. By aligning with a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, we ensured coherence between our philosophical framework and our methodological choices, reinforcing the integrity of our study (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). As Thomson (2011) argues, the essence of the research question ultimately guides the choice of literature streams, underscoring the importance of aligning our methodology with our research goals.

4.3 Research design

There are three primary types of interviews utilised in social research: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Alsaawi, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Structured interviews are characterised by their highly controlled nature, where questions are predetermined and asked verbatim (Alsaawi, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). While this approach ensures a focused interview, it limits the interviewer's and interviewee's ability to delve into topics more freely (Alsaawi, 2014; Bryman, 2016). By contrast, unstructured interviews offer more flexibility, resembling open-ended conversations where the respondent has freedom to shape the direction and

depth of their responses (Bryman, 2016). Finally, semi-structured interviews represent a synthesis of the structured and unstructured formats, incorporating pre-planned, open-ended questions with the opportunity for both interviewers and interviewees to explore topics in greater depth (Alsaawi, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This method is particularly beneficial for researchers who have a deep understanding of their subject matter but seek to uncover new insights through the natural flow of the conversation (Bryman, 2016; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). One of the core strengths of semi-structured interviews is their adaptability, allowing for personalised adjustments such as follow-up questions based on respondents' answers, thus facilitating a more comprehensive exploration of individual perspectives (Bryman, 2016; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This aligns with the purpose of in-depth interviewing, which is centred not on testing hypotheses or evaluating, but on understanding the experiences of individuals and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Seidman, 2006). Ultimately, semi-structured interviews permit personalised adaptations, such as varied follow-up questions, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of data collected. This method aligns seamlessly with our research goals, enabling us to capture the ways in which young consumers use social media to make travel decisions. For all these reasons, semi-structured interviews were selected as our primary method of data collection.

It is also important to note that, as Dornyei (2007) argues, interviewing is a natural and socially acceptable way of collecting data as it can be used in various situations. Furthemore, its presence in everyday interactions underscores its potential for gathering rich, detailed data in research settings (Alsaawi, 2014). The rich and detailed information produced by qualitative interviews, originates directly from the respondents' own experiences and understandings, providing invaluable insights into the subjective realities of those studied (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Conducting interviews on an individual basis further enhances this process, creating a comfortable environment that encourages respondents to share detailed and sincere responses (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). However, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of interviews. Firstly, they can be time-consuming, especially when conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews (Alsaawi, 2014). Secondly, interviews may lack objectivity since the interviewer is also participating in the interaction, potentially influencing the direction of the conversation (Alsaawi, 2014). To address this, we tried to conduct our interviews by reducing to a minimum any interruptions in order to let our respondents freely speak, aiming to facilitate a natural flow of conversation as also advocated by Dornyei (2007). Furthermore, there is the potential for misunderstanding or inaccurately conveying the participants' intended messages during the interview process. To address this concern, we prioritised the use of follow-up questions in order to deeply explore the participants' responses.

4.3.1 Interview guide

In the development of our methodology, particular attention was given to the design of the interview guide (See Appendix 1). The guide begins with ice-breaker questions about the respondents' backgrounds, aiming to create a comfortable environment where they feel free to

engage openly with the main interview questions. This approach was crucial for transitioning smoothly into the main body of the interview, subdivided into three sections: 1) General questions about travel style 2) Role of social media 3) Authenticity and social anxiety and concludes with a question aimed to collect further insights into our respondents' travel-related experiences or feelings. Additionally, as noted by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), we concluded our interview with questions expressing our appreciation for the respondents' time and insights. The first part of the interview guide with general questions about our respondents' travel style aimed at understanding our respondents' travelling styles as well as get to know more about their preferences. The second part had the purpose to collect insights on our respondents' social media usage together with a deeper exploration of the role of such platforms in the context of trip planning. Additionally, this section delved into how social media are used when considering or planning a trip and which kind of content is the most influential on our respondents' travel decisions. We continued investigating how our respondents engage with travel-related content and how they judge their reliability. Finally, the third section aimed at gaining insights into our respondents' idea of authenticity and definition of authentic travel experiences, particularly in the context of social media while investigating the influence of social media on our respondents' travel decision and on the travel destination authenticity as well as exploring if feeling such as social anxiety and fear of missing out (FOMO) related to travel content do have an influence on trip planning and destination choice. To ensure the success of the interviews, the questions were crafted to foster a sense of meaningful conversation, thereby enhancing the respondents' engagement with the process. This strategy is supported by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), emphasising the importance of maintaining the respondent interest and involvement. Furthermore, we made sure to avoid academic vocabulary and theoretical discussions, aiming to make the interviews as understandable as possible for all respondents. Recognizing the value of reflective and open-ended responses, the guide included questions designed to encourage respondents to think deeply and share their perspectives freely. This approach not only enriched the quality of the data collected but also allowed for a deeper understanding of the topic. To delve into the respondents' perspectives, we utilised the laddering-down technique, asking probing questions such as "Can you describe this experience?" to collect specific examples of the respondents' experiences (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Overall, the interview guide was an essential tool in our research design as it enabled us to obtain in-depth answers and gain valuable insights into how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions. Additionally, it enables us to collect unexpected but interesting data due to the adaptable nature of semi-structured interviews.

4.4 Sampling technique

In refining our study's design, the choice of sampling technique was essential. We selected purposive sampling, a method that aligns with our research aim. Purposive sampling is characterised by its deliberate, non-random approach to the selection of participants (Robinson, 2014). This method differs from probability sampling techniques, which aim for random selection

to facilitate generalisation across a population (Seidman, 2006). It is distinct from convenience sampling in that it requires clear, predefined criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of potential units of analysis (Tongco, 2007). Instead, purposive sampling targets specific cases or participants appearing as the most relevant to the research questions (Robinson, 2014; Tongco, 2007). This strategic choice ensured that each selected respondent was suitably aligned with the study's purpose, optimising the collection of meaningful data relevant to our research aim (Seidman, 2006). However, it is crucial to note that due to its non-probability nature, purposive sampling does not support generalising findings to a broader population (Robinson, 2014).

For our study, the definition of a traveller is crucial and follows the UNWTO's description as "someone who moves between different geographic locations, for any purpose and any duration" (UN, 2010, p.9). Given the variations in definitions across different countries, we adopted the UNWTO's classification of a "young traveller" as an individual aged between 15 and 29 years (UNWTO, 2016) for consistency and relevance to our research context. However, it is important to note that we excluded respondents between 15 and 18 years old from our study due to ethical and legal considerations regarding data collection from minors, in accordance with guidelines set forth by the Council of Europe (2021). Potential participants were reached out by posting advertisements on the researchers' social media accounts, aiming to cast a wide and diverse range of respondents. As a result, we received responses mainly from Europe. From those who responded positively to our ads, a pre-screening process was followed and based on three criteria – (1) identify themselves as travellers (2) belong to the 18-29 age group (3) being an European resident – twelve respondents were selected. To document our selection, we prepared a table of participants, assigning each a pseudonym to maintain their anonymity, while still ensuring a human touch in the analysis, along with their ages and genders (See Table 1). As Seidman (2006) argues, an adequate sample size is determined through considerations of sufficiency and information saturation. Robinson (2014) further supports this idea, arguing that a small yet diverse sample can provide a representative perspective within the study. This approach is aimed at achieving a comprehensive and complex understanding of our research topic, within a carefully selected sample.

The following Table 1 gives an overview of the research participants.

Table 1 Overview of participants

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Country of origin**	**Occupation**
Luna	F	24	Italy	Account manager

Federica	F	23	Italy	Student
Will	M	26	Belgium	Student
Margherita	F	24	Italy	Kindergarten teacher
Jacob	M	24	Netherlands	Marketing manager
Luke	M	24	Finland	Unemployed
Harry	M	24	Finland	Finance consultant
Martin	M	22	Slovakia	NGO founder
Kate	F	25	UK	Law intern
Mateo	M	22	Serbia	Relationship manager in a bank
Felipe	M	27	Spain	Student
Chloe	F	27	France	Social media marketing freelancer

4.5 Data collection process

The primary data for this study was gathered through a series of 12 semi-structured interviews. Our participants, representing various European countries, embody diverse nationalities and ethnic backgrounds within the 18 to 29 age group, all identifying themselves as travellers. The recruitment process involved posting on social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook) with a link to a survey containing three questions: (1) Are you aged between 18 and 29? (2) Are you

European? (3) Do you consider yourself a traveller?. Participants who answered positively to all three questions were considered suitable for our research and invited for interviews. The interviews were conducted between April 1st and April 20th 2024, and were either in person or online, depending upon the geographical location of each respondent. For online interviews, an invitation was sent to participants via social media platforms, specifically via WhatsApp, along with a Google Meet link for the virtual meeting on the day of the interview. We prioritised conducting interviews face-to-face whenever possible, as this approach facilitates a more personal connection and allows for the observation of non-verbal cues, enhancing the authenticity and depth of the data collected (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, interviews were carried out by two researchers working simultaneously. This method allowed one researcher to engage directly with the participant by asking questions, while the other documented the conversation, thereby increasing the confidence in the accuracy of the observations made (Seidman, 2006). Each session lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, varying based on the depth of participants' responses. With the participants' prior consent, interviews were recorded using the researchers' mobile phones to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis later on. Transcriptions were promptly executed to maintain the efficiency and quality of the data captured, using either Google's transcription software "Speech-to-Text" or the transcription feature in Microsoft Word, while carefully reviewing the audio recordings to spot any discrepancies. A pre-designed interview guide was used to facilitate the data collection process (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This guide was crucial for maintaining consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to delve deeper into specific areas of interest (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). It consisted of 15 main questions, including additional follow-up questions designed to gain comprehensive insights. The guide was intentionally designed to avoid academic vocabulary, ensuring that questions were accessible and understandable for all participants (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The interview structure was divided into four sections: (1) General questions about travel habits, (2) The influence of social media, (3) Perceptions of authenticity and experiences of social anxiety, and (4) Concluding reflections. Each section aimed to explore different aspects of the participants' experiences and perceptions, with questions adjusted or rephrased based on the responses and behaviours observed during the interview. To foster a welcoming atmosphere and encourage open sharing, researchers actively engaged with participants by nodding and employing affirming phrases like "mmh" and "I know what you mean."

4.6 Data analysis

In qualitative research, the selection of a methodological approach plays a crucial role in shaping the data and influences the findings obtained (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Our journey of data analysis has begun with an organisation of the extensive amounts of data collected from the interviews. This crucial first step involved transcribing the recorded sessions and integrating the researchers' notes, which was crucial in browsing through to identify outstanding parts and quotations. The organised data formed the foundation upon which the analysis was built. Adopting

the framework proposed by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), the analysis was structured in three main phases: sorting, reducing, and arguing; each serving a purpose in the journey to derive meaningful conclusions from the data. Initially, the process of sorting through the interview transcriptions allowed for the identification of passages that stood out due to their insightful or relevant content (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This phase was central in identifying key themes and patterns, setting the stage for a more targeted analysis (Wolcott, 1994). Following the sorting phase, the task of reducing the data became the priority. Here, the focus was on reducing the identified parts down to their most relevant aspects. This reduction was not merely about refining the volume of data but refining it into more coherent and impactful data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Such a narrative served as a foundation for effective presentation and interpretation of the findings, ensuring clarity and direction in the analysis (Wolcott, 1994). The final phase, arguing, involved a deeper level of interpretation, where the categorised data were examined to construct arguments and derive meaningful conclusions (Wolcott, 1994). By labelling and grouping the data, a structured analysis of similar ideas and observations was enabled. This phase highlighted the strength of the abductive approach, allowing for an interplay between theoretical constructs and empirical data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Through this process, the analysis aimed to build an argumentation framework and draw insightful conclusions from the collection (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Organising the material from the beginning was a critical step in making the vast amount of data from the interviews manageable and accessible for analysis. This systematic organisation made the analysis more efficient, and also ensured that critical insights could be captured and explored, setting a foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the study's findings.

4.7 Quality of research

In the pursuit of academic rigour, it is essential to approach empirical data with a critical and reflective mindset (Bell et al. 2022). Establishing the quality of a study is essential for ensuring its usefulness and legitimacy. Maintaining a high standard of academic quality has been a central focus throughout the research process. While Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) argue that there are no universal criteria for determining the quality of a study as it generally depends on how researchers approach their study, Creswell (2011) highlights differences between qualitative and quantitative research in regard to such criterion. Although the dominant research quality criteria are reliability, validity, and generalizability, these stem from positivist viewpoints, which, according to some scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Steinke, 2004), are not adequate for qualitative inquiry. Therefore, as argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985), different evaluation criteria are required, namely (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability. The concept of credibility, comparable to internal validity, refers to the accuracy of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, such a criterion was intentionally ensured by adopting and following certain ethical practices (as shown in section 4.8), thus ensuring the transparency of the research and the seek of our respondents (Bell et al. 2019). Additionally, such a criterion was also ensured with

both researchers being involved in the process of conducting interviews and analysing the empirical data. Concerning the concept of transferability, which can be associated with external validity, it refers to the generalizability of findings and therefore to their application to other contexts (Bell et al. 2019). However, as stated in the sampling section, such a criterion was not the aim of this study as we purposely selected respondents from different European countries belonging to different age groups. Indeed, while the decision of employing purposive sampling can be beneficial for the purpose of our study, it also raises concerns regarding the results' applicability to a broader population. Nevertheless, findings from our study, although specific to our particular context, can still be applicable in varying degrees and ways to other contexts (i.e other countries) providing insights that may inform broader research and practice. The third criterion, dependability, comparable to reliability, refers to the consistency of the study's results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Among the researchers' responsibilities there should be ensuring that the study's process is logical, clearly documented, and traceable (Schwandt, 2001). To ensure that, each interview was recorded and promptly transcribed to maintain the efficiency and quality of the data captured. However, since the interviews were not always conducted by the same researcher, follow-up questions might differ in nature and therefore produce different results. Finally, as argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985) confirmability can only be formulated when all the above-mentioned criteria are achieved. This criterion aims to confirm that the collected data and their interpretation are not dependent on the researchers' subjectivity and imagination but on an objective interpretation of them (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

4.8 Ethical considerations

When conducting research, numerous ethical aspects need to be addressed and considered. Such consideration regards both ensuring the ethical integrity of the research process but also protecting the respondents' rights, including their privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy. In light of this, several measures were implemented throughout our interviews. Firstly, to safeguard the anonymity and privacy of participants, pseudonyms were employed when presenting their responses and quotes. This not only kept the respondents from being identified but also fostered an environment of trust and openness where they could feel free to share their thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, transparency and voluntary agreement were fundamental aspects of respondents' involvement. Indeed, they were comprehensively informed about the study's aim and data collection methods, empowering them to make informed decisions regarding their involvement (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). At every stage of our study, the respondents' welfare and data confidentiality were prioritised. Prior to conducting interviews, respondents were guaranteed that their information would be securely handled and used just for the purpose of this study. Additionally, explicit consent was asked and obtained for the recording of interviews, with participants informed of their right to withdraw consent at any point during the study period. Moreover, ethical interviewing practices were meticulously followed, to ensure the anonymity and privacy of our respondents, acknowledging the inherent power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. First, all participants were requested to sign a consent form (see Appendix 2) prior to

the start of the interviews. Secondly, participant numbers were utilised to replace real names in the paper, thereby preserving the confidentiality of the respondents. Additionally, participants were assured that their data would solely be used for the purpose of this research and would not be employed for any other reason. Moreover, participants were informed of their right to withdraw their consent at any point during the study. Detailed information regarding the aim and purpose of the study was provided to the participants to ensure informed consent and transparency. Lastly, it was clearly specified to the participants who would have access to their data, thereby reinforcing the confidentiality and security of the information gathered. As argued by Robson (2024), we tried to avoid asking long questions to enhance their overall understanding. In light of this, we also minimised interruptions to facilitate the respondents' full expression (Alsaawi, 2014). All the above-mentioned measures were taken into account to ensure both our research's reliability and transparency but also the needs of our respondents.

4.9 Limitations of selected methods

Acknowledging the inherent limitations of any research methodology is crucial, including the one selected for this study. While several limitations of this study have been addressed within this methodology section, it is essential to outline additional limitations, along with the researchers' efforts to mitigate them. Concerning our sampling strategy, a notable costrain regards the narrow age range of the respondents, specifically targeting individuals from 18 to 30 years old. Our study's aim was not to generalise findings to a larger population (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021) but rather to investigate how young consumers use social media to make travel decisions. Additionally, the choice of conducting qualitative interviews poses additional risks, including the possibility of the researcher unintentionally influencing the gathered data (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). To avoid such influence, we tried to minimise interruptions, to give the respondents a few minutes to answer the questions and avoid expressing personal judgments. Additionally, we purposefully employed an interview guide whose questions had been constructed to be non-leading but rather aimed at encouraging the respondent to elaborate and reflect upon it. Nevertheless, according to Bell et al. (2022), one of the main strengths of this method lies in the prioritisation of the respondent's perspective. Moving forward, the use of mediated interviews, namely the ones conducted remotely via computers, present another limitation. Even though researchers tried to prioritise face-to-face interviews, some were conducted via the digital meeting platforms Google Meet to encounter the respondents' availability. However, such types of interviews, while offering greater scheduling flexibility, increase the possibility of potential misunderstandings or misleading interpretations of respondents' answers (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021) as well as reducing the opportunity to build the same relationship with the participant as in a face-to-face interview. To avoid such misunderstanding, the researchers tried, from time to time, to summarise the ideas presented by the respondents in order to seek their confirmation and eventually clarify certain topics.

5. Results

In this chapter, we will present the findings from our study, identifying three major themes that emerged after conducting our interviews. These topics are: (1) Perception of social media's role in tourism, (2) Consumer trust in/during their decision-making process, (3) Authenticity, and (4) Fear of Missing Out as a form of social anxiety. Within the first theme we will have a closer look at how the role of social media in tourism is perceived by young consumers and which factors influence this perception. Additionally, we will focus on the trust young consumers put in during their decision-making process, particularly examining their trust towards influencers versus content creators. We will also explore the concept of conditional trust and the trust involved in the validation process. Furthermore, we will look into different types of authenticity perceived by young consumers, including the authenticity of content, the authenticity of destinations, and the authenticity of experiences. Finally, we will delve into how the phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), as a form of social anxiety, influences young consumers' travel decisions.

5.1 Perception of social media's role in tourism

In this section, we will explore the first theme identified from our empirical findings, namely the perception of young consumers on social media's role in tourism, through multiple subthemes. Firstly, we will address the reluctance to admit social media influence, followed by the use of social media as a source of inspiration. Furthermore, we will discuss the impact of social media on young consumers' decision-making processes, along with the influence of social media algorithms on digital content. Under each subtheme, we will present quotes from the collected interviews, analyse, and interpret with the help of theories and previous literature.

5.1.1 Reluctance of admitting social media influence

During our interviews a prevalent sentiment among our respondents was observed: initially, some of them denied their travel decisions are influenced by social media. However, as we delved deeper into the discussions, a nuanced perspective emerged, revealing a subtle yet undeniable impact of such platforms on their travel choices. This transformation in perspective can be exemplified by Will, who initially asserted:

> *"I don't really think social media influences my travelling actually." (Will)*

But then, later during the interview acknowledged that:

> *"Well, I guess I cannot deny that some of my final choices are influenced by social media, especially Tik Tok." (Will)*

As mentioned above, Will's statements encapsulate a broader pattern observed among our respondents. Despite an initial denial, further exploration revealed a more complex relationship with social media. This phenomenon might be attributed to a potential dissonance between our respondents' conscious perceptions and their subconscious behaviours. In the context of Belk's theory of the extended self, wherein possessions and external entities are intrinsic into the individual's identity (Belk, 1988), it becomes clear that social media platforms have become extensions of individuals' selves. Much like tangible possessions, digital interactions on them contribute to the construction and expression of one's identity. These findings also suggest a deeper integration of social media into the lives of young consumers, potentially shaping their travel's preferences and choices in ways they may not openly recognize. Given the omnipresence of smartphones and digital connectivity in contemporary society, it is likely that social media's influence operates on a subconscious level, embedded in habitual interaction rather than explicit awareness (Bayer et al. 2022).

5.1.2 Social media as source of inspiration

When asked about their primary sources of travel inspiration, the majority of our respondents consistently mentioned Instagram and TikTok as their go-to platforms. Additionally, YouTube emerges as a significant resource for some of them. For example, Luna noted that:

> *"Tik Tok has more impact on my choices because the platform is set up purely on offering content in the form of videos and therefore they are more appealing to me and also more engaging." (Luna)*

Similarly, Kate highlighted the influence of Instagram stating that:

> *"For me it's mostly Instagram and the stories I see there. I mean, sometimes I also check TikTok and Instagram Reels for sure, but it's the stories that make the influence I would say." (Kate)*

Federica expressed the transformative role of YouTube in broadening her travel horizons, arguing that:

> *"Youtube has opened up a big world for me because on the same video you get an explanation of what to visit, where to eat, you get a deeper understanding of the place you'll visit and on a general level, it makes it more interesting as a platform to use for travel. The platform also gives me the opportunity to either grab inspiration or to even organise the trip in the same way as the travel blogger did." (Federica)*

These answers reflect a generation deeply immersed in social media culture, where video content holds paramount importance (Leaver et al. 2020). The preference for videos, whether short clips on TikTok and Instagram or longer narratives on YouTube, underscores a shift towards visual storytelling and more interactive content among young consumers. This inclination also suggests a desire for personalised and tailored experiences, wherein social media platforms offer content organised upon the users' preferences, in contrast to more traditional sources like generic search engines as Google.

In the context of Belk's theory, where possessions and external entities are integrated into the individual's identity, social media have become integral components of their extended selves (Belk, 1988). Through the content they consume and engage with, users not only seek travel inspirations, but they also construct and express facets of their identities. Thus, platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube not only represent sources of travel information but also contribute to the ongoing construction and expression of individual's selves. Furthermore, in the context of the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), according to which individuals actively seek out social media to fulfil specific needs and desires, platforms like YouTube play a crucial role in meeting cognitive needs by providing detailed information about destinations. Federica's use of YouTube to gather comprehensive information and plan her trips exemplifies this aspect, showcasing how these platforms expand users' travel perspectives by providing insights into destinations to explore. Additionally, the visual and interactive nature of platforms such as Tik Tok and Instagram, satisfy users' desires for aesthetically pleasing and emotionally stimulating experiences, thus fulfilling their affective needs.

Moreover, our findings align with recent literature within the social media marketing realm suggesting a shift in young consumers' preferences from established platforms like Facebook to emerging ones like Tik Tok (Appel et al., 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). While previous studies have emphasised the transformative influence of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube on marketing strategies, our data highlight TikTok growing relevance in influencing young consumers' travel decisions. TikTok's surging popularity among young consumers can be attributed to its unique format of short, engaging videos that offer quick, immersive storytelling (Xiao & Zhang, 2023), making it an ideal platform for sharing and discovering travel content.

5.1.3 The influence of social media on young consumers' decision-making process

Multiple respondents indicated a predominant use of social media platforms during the initial stages of travel planning, particularly for gathering inspiration and ideas for potential travel destinations. Once again, TikTok and Instagram emerged as key channels in this regard. This statement is supported by Luna who argued that:

> *"Social media, particularly Tik Tok, are really helpful when I need to decide where I would like to go for my next trip [...] If I have already chosen going to a specific place, social*

media are much faster to collect ideas, information and tips than the Internet. I think that what I find on Tik Tok is much more interesting than what I can find on Google, on the Internet in general." (Luna)

This emphasis on social media usage during the pre-trip phase underscores its utility as a primary source of inspiration for young consumers. Respondents expressed the significance of platforms like TikTok and Instagram in generating ideas and facilitating the brainstorming process. Such platforms strongly influence young consumers' travel choices as they are set up exclusively on offering content in the form of videos which are more appealing and engaging to them (Ana & Istudor, 2019). The tendency to collect as much information as possible by scrolling through social media aligns with a broader trend among this demographic (Ana & Istudor, 2019). Social media platforms serve not only as sources of inspiration but also as archives of diverse travel experiences, enabling users to explore a wide range of destinations and activities from the comfort of their digital devices.

From the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), individuals actively seek out media content that fulfils specific needs or desires (Katz et al. 1974). In this context, social media platforms serve as tools for travel planning, offering gratification through the satisfaction of informational and entertainment needs. Luna's reliance on social media for inspiration aligns with the UGT's assumption that individuals choose media to gratify specific needs, such as the desire for travel-related information and inspiration. Moreover, the interpretation resonates with the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) consumer decision-making model, which posits a multi-stage process involving problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Engel et al. 1968). In the pre-trip planning stage, individuals recognise a need for travel-related information and actively seek out sources to gather inspiration and ideas. Social media platforms, like TikTok and Instagram, facilitate the information search process by providing a wealth of visual content that supports the destination evaluation and selection. Thus, the integration of social media into the travel decision-making process aligns with the information search stage of the EKB model.

5.1.4 The influence of social media algorithms on digital content

Furthermore, our respondents brought attention to the sophisticated algorithms employed by these social media platforms, which seem to adeptly present travel content that aligns with their interests, even when they weren't explicitly seeking it.

"You know, sometimes it feels like my phone knows better what I want to do, than me myself." (Kate)

"I don't try to search for information on social media, but it finds me, you know. I mean, I don't use TikTok, so I can just say for Instagram, but that algorithm somehow always gets me." (Luke)

"On Instagram I have to go looking for things, on Tik Tok it's a bit of an algorithm that works for you and makes you find content." (Will)

Such findings reveal the significant role of algorithms in shaping individuals' interactions with social media platforms. Kate's remark reflects a sense of surprise and perhaps even unease at the seemingly intuitive nature of algorithmic recommendations, suggesting a level of influence that transcends conscious decision-making. Similarly, Luke's experience highlights the passive nature of social media consumption, where content is pushed to users based on algorithmic predictions rather than actively sought out. Will's comparison between Instagram and TikTok further emphasises the algorithm's role in curating content tailored to individual preferences, thus enhancing the overall user experience. The impact of these platforms, strengthened by the capabilities of their algorithms, highlights the critical role social media plays in the modern travel planning landscape. By presenting relevant travel content seamlessly within users' feeds, social media platforms serve as both a source of inspiration and a practical tool in navigating the vast amounts of travel information available online. Additionally, once entangled in the algorithm's web, users find themselves drawn to content they were not explicitly seeking, further underscoring the subconscious influence of algorithm-driven recommendations.

This interpretation aligns with literature supporting the implementation of sophisticated privacy protections, secure data management practices, and algorithms prioritising accurate information (Mosteller & Poddar, 2017). As social media platforms increasingly shape individuals' behaviours and decisions, it becomes imperative for platforms to uphold ethical standards and safeguard user data. Moreover, users themselves are urged to engage with social media content critically and ethically, recognizing their role in the information ecosystem and the potential consequences of their online behaviours (Ku et al., 2019; Mosteller & Poddar, 2017).

5.2 Consumer trust in/during their decision-making process

In this section, we will delve into the second theme identified from our empirical findings: consumer trust during the decision-making process. We will examine this theme through three separate subthemes. First, we will explore the distinction between trust in influencers and trust in creators, followed by an analysis of the conditional trust towards influencers. Additionally, we will discuss the importance of the validation process in establishing consumer trust. Each subtheme will feature quotes from the collected interviews, which we will analyse and interpret with the support of theories and previous literature.

5.2.1 Trust in influencers vs trust in content creators

Our investigation revealed a noticeable difference in perceptions of trustworthiness and credibility between influencer-generated content and that produced by other creators. Our participants explained their understandings towards both influencers and content creators, with the majority expressing greater trust in content creators. This preference was rooted in the perceived authenticity and relatability of their content, which respondents believed to be compromised in influencer-generated content due to financial compensation arrangements with brands. Among our respondents, Margherita expressed this sentiment stating:

> *"I see travel bloggers as more practical, more competent; they do that for a living and so I tend to trust them more than some random influencer who does something else in life. Then with the influencer you never know exactly what their budget is. By contrast, travel bloggers give me the idea of sharing info in a more sincere way while with influencers I always feel there is something missing." (Margherita)*

Similarly, Jacob, drawing from his experience as a marketing manager, expressed scepticism towards influencer credibility arguing as follows:

> *"Influencers are not credible at all. I know that, because I'm a marketing manager now and I can tell from being on this side of the table, that you can have an influencer say whatever you want them to say if you just pay enough." (Jacob)*

Overall, the findings suggest a prevailing preference for content creators over influencers in terms of trust and credibility. This preference stems from the perception that content creators are more genuine and trustworthy due to their perceived independence from brand influence. Conversely, influencers are often met with scepticism due to the potential influence of financial agreements with brands on their content. Our interpretation further elucidates this disparity. Individuals like Jacob, who work within marketing, exhibit a more radical stance towards influencers. His scepticism is grounded in an understanding of how influencer marketing operates, recognizing that influencers may prioritise financial incentives over authenticity. This scepticism towards influencers is echoed among our respondents, who view influencers as influential yet inherently less trustworthy due to the underlying financial incentives driving their content. In contrast, content creators are perceived as more authentic and relatable, retaining greater trust among our participants. This trust is rooted in the belief that content creators are less susceptible to external influence, allowing them to produce content that is more genuine and unbiased.

These findings diverge from the literature on influencer marketing, which typically emphasises the influence and trust placed in influencers by their followers (Lee et al. 2022). Previous research suggests that the effectiveness of influencer marketing lies in the genuine relationships influencers develop with their audience, creating a sense of trust and companionship that is often lacking in

traditional marketing techniques (Audrezet et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022). However, our findings challenge this notion by highlighting the scepticism towards influencers and the preference for content creators among young consumers.

Our findings can be also viewed through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by understanding how individuals actively seek out and consume media content to fulfil specific needs and desires (Katz et al, 1974). In the context of influencer-generated content versus content creator-generated content, individuals may exhibit different patterns of media consumption based on their gratification-seeking behaviours. Content creators are perceived as more genuine and trustworthy due to their perceived independence from brand influence. This authenticity resonates with the UGT principle of "personal identity gratification," where individuals seek media content that aligns with their personal values, interests, and beliefs (Katz et al, 1974). On the other hand, influencers, despite their potential to develop genuine relationships with their audience, are often viewed with scepticism due to the perceived influence of financial agreements with brands on their content. This scepticism may lead individuals to seek alternative sources of gratification, such as content creators who are perceived as less susceptible to external influence.

5.2.2 Conditional trust towards influencers

While a prevailing preference for content creators over influencers was observed among the majority of respondents, a contrasting perspective emerged from some participants who admitted to only a conditional trust in influencers. This trust, they explained, depended not solely on the content itself but on a sense of personal connection with the influencer cultivated over time. Despite recognizing the commercial motivations, these respondents feel a stronger connection with certain influencers they had followed for an extended period, leading to a heightened level of trust. For instance, Chloe argued that:

> *"The content that definitely has more influence on my travel decisions is UGC because it seems to me that it has more affinity with me, it seems less constructed [...] This content seems more truthful to me than a promotion by an influencer, obviously if there is an influencer that I particularly like and respect who is doing a good trip, who speaks well of it I might be interested in looking into the input she/he is giving me." (Chloe)*

Similarly, Kate expressed that:

> *"Well, I'm mostly being inspired by my friends' content on socials, but sometimes also influencers. Although I wouldn't trust all of them, I have some that are particularly reliable for me, those who I have followed for many years now and I kinda feel like I know them, haha. There are maybe 2 or 3 influencers that I really trust. But yeah, I definitely trust content creators more than some random influencers that I don't know. I don't even know why, I just feel like they are more reliable I don't know." (Kate)*

This conditional trust in influencers reflects young consumers' scepticism towards them, particularly in terms of discerning what is paid content and what is genuine. However, what adds credibility to influencers, according to our interpretation, is the trust users develop over time by following them for extended periods. Through this continuous engagement, users begin to identify with influencers and may even perceive them as individuals they know personally, thereby building a sense of trust and reliability. This finding diverges from the literature on influencer marketing, which typically emphasises the influence and ultimate trust placed in influencers by their followers (Audrezet et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022). However, our findings highlight the importance of considering the individualised verification process employed by young consumers, blurring the distinction between influencers and content creators, and underscoring the significance of personal connection in shaping trust and credibility.

By contrast, these findings can also be explained through the lenses of the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), particularly regarding both effective and integrative needs. As effective needs regard appealing experiences and needs that relate to pleasure (Katz et al. 1974), the connection with certain influencers provides users with gratification by offering enjoyable and relatable content that resonates with their personal interests and preferences. However, integrative needs encompass individuals' desires to use various media platforms to engage in conversations and connect with family and friends (Katz et al. 1974). Given that, by following influencers over time, users fulfil integrative needs by engaging in virtual communities, forming connections with like-minded individuals, and fostering a sense of belonging within their social networks.

5.2.3 Trust in validation process

Some of our respondents exhibited a high degree of scepticism towards online information, regardless of its source, and engagement in a thorough process of double-checking through additional research on the Internet. Luke, for instance, expressed his ideas stating that:

> *"I mean, I guess I don't so much think of the source being truthful when it comes to travel content. Anyways, normally I see some good places in Instagram Reels and then I put it on Google Maps as a place I want to visit, so I don't lose it. And that way I actually do kind of check it, at the same time you know." (Luke)*

This statement illustrates a meticulous process where Luke cross-references information he obtained from social media platforms with other sources, such as Google Maps, to validate its accuracy. Similarly, Chloe highlighted her verification process, stating that:

> *"Once I have the input about what to see in the place I'm going to visit, I usually do a deeper research on the Internet to see if it's worth it. I tend to take as much information as possible and then Google to check if it is really worth it' 'I prefer to do my research on Google*

because it is more practical, quicker when I want to do a fact check of things seen on YT."
(Chloe)

This statement shows that Chloe's approach consists of leveraging various online resources to validate the credibility of the travel information. We identify these consumers as "double-checkers," characterised by their rigorous verification process and scepticism towards online content. For these young consumers, the distinction between influencers and content creators fades out, as trust is not placed in the source but rather in their own verification process. Their approach reflects a desire to gather sufficient information to avoid being misled, emphasising a reliance on their own judgement and critical thinking skills over blind trust in online sources. This behaviour aligns with a broader trend of internet users seeking to validate information independently, highlighting the importance of digital literacy and critical evaluation skills in navigating the vast landscape of online content (Ku et al. 2019).

5.3 Authenticity

Another theme identified from our interviews revolves around authenticity, which manifests in two distinctive perspectives. Firstly, we will analyse the authenticity of content, by examining our respondents' perceptions of the genuineness of the content they encounter on social media and their interpretations of it. Secondly, we will delve into the authenticity of destinations, exploring our participants' conceptualization of authenticity and its influence on destinations' appeal. This will include the concept of overfamiliarity and how the online representation of destinations, as well as online content saturation, influence consumers' perception of a destination's authenticity. Furthermore, we will examine the authenticity of experiences, by delving into our respondents' idea of genuineness, and applying these definitions to frequently mentioned destinations (i.e Santorini and Thailand) to determine if these ideas remain consistent. Lastly, we will explore the influence of tourist saturation on the destinations' authenticity.

5.3.1 Authenticity of content

Our respondents expressed an awareness regarding the authenticity of content encountered on social media platforms, acknowledging the potential for alteration and inauthenticity. Some of them also suggested that the inherent nature of social media platforms and the authenticity of content is inevitably compromised when it becomes entangled with commercial motives. Luke particularly reflected on this aspect by stating that:

> *"Actually this is quite funny because it also relates to why I created my travel Instagram you know. Because it's also a bit fake you know haha, well I also only show the good moments and pictures you know, I wouldn't call it fake maybe, but I'm just basically posting just one side of it. And that's also what all the influencers are doing, so we can't blame*

them right, we just need to count with the fact that this is not the ultimate authentic picture or video we see. This is just what they want us to see. I mean, some people are for sure more real than others, they talk more about the bad stuff, but in general I think it's just the nature of social media, everyone makes it more beautiful than it really is." (Luke)

This sentiment was also supported by Martin who argued that:

"Since I am filming videos and similar things like that myself, I can imagine how the edited and colour-graded videos with the dramatic music looked like originally. My brain just works like that somehow, it nicely uncovers it for me." (Martin)

Furthemore, Jacob emphasised the influence of commercial motives on content authenticity:

"I think you should always first check if the content you see was created for any commercial purpose, if that's true, that's when you already know it's not authentic." (Jacob)

What previously mentioned suggests that the heightened awareness of video editing and social media practices among young consumers contributes to increased scepticism towards content authenticity. The more consumers comprehend the intricacies of video editing and social media mechanisms, the more likely they are to view content on social media with scepticism, perceiving it as inauthentic. This finding aligns with previous research within the social media marketing field where consumers, particularly young generations, are consistently demanding for authenticity (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2019). Additionally, we observed that this is particularly pronounced among those consumers with backgrounds in marketing or video production, who do not only possess a deeper understanding of the techniques used to manipulate content but also assert their ability to envision the original state of edited videos or images. This dual awareness induces consumers to examine online content for authenticity more rigorously.

5.3.2 Authenticity of destinations

Notably, our findings revealed that our respondents each held a slightly different understanding of what authenticity represents when travelling. A prevalent interpretation emphasised the importance of "local people and culture" in defining authenticity. Indeed, Luna stated:

"An authentic trip is trying to live as a local, not as a tourist. Authenticity is not always connected to the positive sides of a place, but also to the negative aspects of it." (Luna)

Similarly, Mateo illustrated the importance of interacting with locals and embracing local customs to foster an authentic connection with a destination:

"For me, authenticity means people, you know, interacting with the locals. We, as a family, never go to like nice restaurants, we always do the local stuff, like restaurants and so, so you get to know the local people." (Mateo)

These findings assert that the concept of authenticity is subjective and contingent upon the consumers' personal experiences and backgrounds. Specifically among this demographic, authenticity often requires immersing oneself in the local culture and lifestyle, reflecting a departure from the preferences of older generations (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). This inclination towards experiencing destinations as locals underscores the evolving nature of authenticity in contemporary travel practices.

Our findings also resonate with the scholarly discourse highlighting the complex nature of authenticity within tourism. Vancia et al. (2023) observe a noticeable shift among tourists towards prioritising bucket-list activities, relaxation, and cultural experiences over conventional tourism offerings, signifying a growing preference for more authentic encounters. This convergence between our interpretation and Vancia et al.'s (2023) observations underscores the evolving dynamics of authenticity within contemporary tourism practices, wherein travellers increasingly prioritise authentic engagements with destinations over mainstream tourist experiences.

Additionally, in the context of Belk's Extended Self Theory, our study illustrates how social media platforms serve as extensions of individuals' selves, influencing identity through digital interactions. As this theory suggests that individuals may use possessions and experiences to communicate aspects of their identity to others, in the context of travel, engaging in authentic experiences may serve as a means of self-expression and communication of one's values and preferences (Belk, 1988). This can be connected to our findings, arguing that by seeking out authentic encounters and interactions while travelling, individuals reinforce their identities and express their unique selves to others.

5.3.2.1 Authenticity vs destinations' appeal

The sentiments expressed by our respondents also illustrate a prevailing concern regarding the influence of social media, including both influencers and the platforms themselves, on perception and authenticity of destination. Some of them highlighted that saturation of destinations on social media platforms reduce their appeal, leading to a loss of the perceived "magic" associated with discovering them in person. This notion can be exemplified by Luke who stated that:

"If some places are really basic, that everyone goes there, it definitely takes some magic away from that. Even though it's a cool place you know, it's a pity actually." (Luke)

Similarly, Luna acknowledged the influence of social media on her predisposition towards specific places:

"Undoubtedly, how a place is presented to me on social media influences my bias towards a particular place." (Luna)

Chloe further elaborates on social media's influence on destination authenticity, noting how the proliferation of content can misrepresent hidden gems into tourist attractions:

"Social media definitely has an impact on the authenticity of destinations, you try to make a place out to be what it is not... they create expectations in you that then maybe don't match the reality. Unfortunately, social media has also taken the authenticity out of places that were actually wonderful. Places that were once less unknown are now, as they have gone viral, very touristy.. .sometimes it is as if the soul of these places is being ripped out a bit." (Chloe)

These perspectives suggest that the abundance of social media content influences young consumers' perceptions, potentially leading to prejudiced understandings towards destinations. Thus, the pervasive online visibility of highly promoted destinations has reduced their allure for young consumers, who now prioritise authenticity and exclusivity, seeking out unique and unspoiled travel experiences over mainstream ones (Russo & Richards, 2016).

5.3.2.2 Overfamiliarity as a deterrent?

The overrepresentation of certain places on platforms like Instagram and TikTok has also been associated as an appeal-reducing element. Moreover, the overcrowding and over-hyped associated with these destinations has been mentioned as a deterrent for their final selection. Kate expressed that, stating:

"Yeah for me it's like, when I see a place 100x on Instagram, I don't even want to go there anymore you know, I kind of feel like I've already seen all of it, like there is not much more to explore and be surprised by." (Kate)

Similarly, Harry stated that:

"It is important to me that the place is not too crowded and I don't like to go to these over-hyped places that we talked about. So when I'm choosing a destination it might be a little bit less-known place, so less tourists also." (Harry)

This hesitation to visit destinations that are extensively showcased on social media platforms can be attributed to the phenomenon of "overfamiliarity," wherein the abundance of online content diminishes the excitement and uniqueness associated with visiting these places in person (Meethan et al. 2006). The saturation of content leads to a loss of the "surprise effect" that typically accompanies travel experiences, thereby reducing the attractiveness of such destinations for young

consumers who prioritise authenticity and seek out unique experiences. From a UGT point of view, young consumers may initially engage with destination content on social media to satisfy their need for entertainment, information or social interaction (Katz et al. 1974). However, since the information overload diminishes their perception of the "surprise effect" and reduces the destination's perceived authenticity, they might be less likely to visit extensively showcased places.

5.3.2.3 Real or idealised?

In our study, respondents also indicated the ease with which experiences can be faked on social media platforms, contributing to a prevailing perception of idealised representations of travel. In addition, there is a prevailing idea among respondents that on social media, people tend to showcase only the positive aspects of their trips, portraying everything as perfect and fun. This sentiment is captured by Will who argued that:

> *"On social media we can pretend being somewhere even if we are not there at the moment we are posting, we can fake having been to a place we've never been." (Will)*

Federica further elaborated on this perception, noting the prevalence of positive content and expressing a desire for greater authenticity:

> *"90% of travel content is positive and this somehow has to do with the authenticity of the destination, everyone tends to speak well of a place even though it may not be entirely true. But I think it is a human trait that someone may not like a place. That is why I would like to find more truth on social media, especially because I feel there is this obsession of them as just a place where to show only the good things." (Federica)*

Furthermore, Chloe's experience exemplifies the potential disparity between online representations and reality, highlighting the misinformative aspect of social media which might increase the perception of destinations' inauthenticity:

> *"It once happened that when I went to Madeira, which is probably the only trip I decided to do just because of what I saw on Instagram reels, I experienced this misinformative aspect of social media. Madeira is definitely a wonderful island but from how it was depicted on reels it seemed like there was no one there, that it was just nature, with incredible beaches and that there was always crazy sunshine, but in reality there were few beaches and often few of them were suitable for swimming. Of course, I had collected information on my own but some places simply did not correspond to what I had seen through those reels...I really had the impression that I was visiting a different island than the one represented on the video." (Chloe)*

Our findings, in line with Wang et at. (2019) who assert that the interactive nature of social media amplifies the dissemination of misinformation, show that the prevalence of misinformation on social media platforms contributes to an increased sense of scepticism among young consumers. This generation is increasingly aware of the potential for digital content to be manipulated or distorted, leading them to approach online representations of destinations with caution (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). The proliferation of idealised portrayals on social media can contribute to a perceived inauthenticity of destinations among this demographic, who recognize that such portraits often diverge from reality.

Additionally, these findings also align with Johnson and Kaye's (2004) study where the authors explore the concept of media scepticism among young adults, highlighting their tendency to question the credibility of media sources and information presented to them. This scepticism stems from a variety of factors, including increased exposure to diverse viewpoints, greater access to information, and a desire for authenticity in media content. As Johnson and Kaye (2004) suggest, this scepticism is driven by a desire for authenticity and a recognition of the potential for manipulation in media content.

5.3.2.4 Touristy is authentic?

Furthermore, some of our respondents emphasised that the abundance of content on social media about a destination is aligned with their perception of it as a tourist place, specifically making it appear inauthentic in their eyes. For instance, Harry elaborated on the influence of social media saturation on destination perception, citing Santorini as an example where hyper promotion has led to overcrowding and diminished appeal:

> *"If I see too much content being posted by influencers and people from one place, I probably don't even want to go there anymore, because it will probably be too hyped and crowded, I don't like that. Then also the prices are higher and you wait for 2 hours to get there you know. One example would be Santorini, where everyone wants to take a perfect sunset picture, and then when you actually go there you wait like one or two hours to take the picture from the stairs. It's full of tourists and I really hate these kind of places. It's not relaxing at all being around that much people and just waiting to get a basic picture, so yeah." (Harry)*

The findings suggest that young consumers express concerns about hyper sponsored destinations appearing inauthentic and overly touristy due to the saturation of social media content. As a consequence, lesser-known destinations may hold greater appeal for this demographic group seeking authentic and novel travel experiences as also stated by Haddouche and Salomone (2018) who argue that young consumers increasingly prioritise authentic travel experiences and destinations over traditional tourism services.

Additionally, Belk's theory of the Extended Self provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how young consumers integrate their online experiences into their self-identity, particularly in how they perceive travel destinations shared on social media. This integration helps explain the growing scepticism towards hyper-promoted destinations, as consumers strive to maintain a sense of self that is authentic and distinct from the mass-marketed tourist experiences.

5.3.3 Authenticity of experiences

Authenticity is also perceived by our respondents as something embodying genuineness and richness of experience. They expressed a desire to optimise their time while travelling, emphasising the importance of presenting destinations authentically on social media by showcasing both its positive and negative facets. This perspective can be synthesised by Chloe and Federica's following statements:

> *"Authenticity is something genuine. It is living something fully. I imagine it as a sphere, as something pure and distinct [...] Authenticity is living a 100% experience". (Chloe)*

> *"Authenticity is something real, both negatively and positively. Something authentic cannot be without defects." (Federica)*

These findings resonate with the scholarly discourse on authenticity within the tourism marketing field where the demand for authenticity reflects the desire for genuine connections with places and cultures (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

5.3.3.1 Popularity vs authenticity

A notable point shared by multiple respondents was the assumption that authenticity exists everywhere, it is just dependent on an individual's perspective stance. It was mentioned that even in destinations frequently criticised for their overwhelming tourist presence, such as Thailand or Santorini in Greece, genuine experiences remain accessible. This view is expressed by the following statements:

> *"In every country you can find something authentic [...] Santorini is also authentic, there's just more tourists. With a lot of tourists there come businesses that are just made for tourists and they make the place a bit less authentic." (Jacob)*

> *"In some places authenticity is more evident, in others you have to look for it." (Luna)*

> *"You know I think that even the places that seem as the least authentic, like I don't know, for example Thailand, they can have a lot of authenticity, you just have to search for it. The people, they are so pure, but you need to go outside of the tourist traps, and often also your*

comfort zone to find it. A lot of people are afraid to do that and then they think there's nothing authentic in there." (Kate)

This perspective shared by our respondents explains young consumers' inclination to seek authenticity across various destinations. The respondents' belief in the accessibility of genuine experiences, even in destinations characterised by overwhelming tourist presence, aligns with their travel style, which emphasises the pursuit of authenticity irrespective of location. This perspective suggests a parallel with the trend observed among young consumers towards seeking bucket-list activities, relaxation, and cultural experiences that diverge from conventional tourism offerings in favour of more authentic encounters (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018).

The perspective also resonates with scholarly literature challenging earlier assertions about the undermining of authenticity by popularity (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). Additionally, this viewpoint suggests a shift from traditional notions that popularity necessarily diminishes authenticity, instead highlighting the ways in which authenticity can manifest across different contexts. Moreover, the idea that social media can create stereotypes and influence perceptions of destination authenticity aligns with existing literature emphasising the influence of social media on shaping such perceptions (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Wang, 1999).

One notable exception mentioned by our respondents is Dubai, perceived as lacking genuine cultural and historical experience and being predominantly built and tailored for tourists. This statement is clearly expressed by Luke, who stated:

> *"Authenticity is for me connected a lot with culture and history, so places like Dubai, that in my opinion have basically no history and culture, are not very authentic." (Luke)*

These findings align with the discussion above, regarding young consumers' tendency to seek cultural and historical experiences (Vancia et al. 2023). In light of this, destinations perceived as primarily tailored to satisfy tourist preferences are seen as lacking culture or history and therefore categorised as inauthentic.

5.3.3.2 Tourist saturation influencing destinations' authenticity

Furthermore, some of our respondents emphasised that they tend to perceive destinations as more genuine during periods of low tourist activity, allowing for a more enriching experience of the place. Luna's statement clearly illustrates this:

> *"Even the period of time you decide to travel to a specific destination can influence your perception of its authenticity. For example, if you travel to Sardinia during the busiest months during summer you will get for sure a less authentic experience and or idea of it than visiting the same exact place in spring or, I don't know, late september." (Luna)*

These findings underline that the young consumers' perception of a destination's authenticity is often related to the destination's level of tourist saturation. The more these destinations are crowded, the less they are perceived as authentic. Indeed, this demographic tends to avoid heavily touristed areas, prioritising relaxation and seeking out lesser-known destinations that offer them a more genuine experience of the local culture (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Vancia et al. 2023). Such findings also align with Belk's theory of the extended self as in the context of travel, young consumers often seek experiences that are in harmony with their self-concept and values (Belk, 1988).

5.4 Fear of missing out (FOMO) as a form of social anxiety

In this section we will delve into the theme of FOMO as a form of social anxiety. Firstly, we will analyse the role of travel passion as an intensifier of FOMO, exploring how a deep-seated love for travel heightens sensitivity to missed opportunities and affects respondents' enjoyment of current experiences. Secondly, we will investigate FOMO towards acquaintances, focusing on how personal connections and perceived similarities with friends and peers amplify feelings of FOMO compared to travel bloggers or influencers. Thirdly, we will consider FOMO towards the self, where the pressure to fulfil one's own travel goals and expectations leads to anxiety about missed experiences during trips. Lastly, we will discuss the variability of FOMO's influence, highlighting how individual characteristics and coping mechanisms shape respondents' reactions to FOMO, and exploring the concept of no FOMO as a form of self-persuasion, where some individuals mitigate these feelings by accepting their life constraints and travel opportunities.

5.4.1 Travel passion as an intensifier of FOMO

From our interviews, another important theme emerged, revealing the influence of social anxiety and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on our respondents' travel experiences, particularly in response to the multitude of travel-related content on social media platforms. Several respondents reported experiencing feelings of social anxiety or FOMO and explained how these emotions influence their travel decisions. The intensity of these feelings varied among participants, each providing unique insights based on their personal experiences.

To begin with, some mentioned experiencing FOMO related to travel quite frequently, driven by a deep passion for travelling. This sentiment is evident in Luke's statement who argued:

> "I literally experience FOMO every day haha. No, you know it's because I really love to travel, so especially if I'm stuck in rainy, or even worse snowy, cold Finland, you know, and I see my friends going some place cool, like you know, even if I'm travelling myself, I

still definitely have FOMO. Like I'm enjoying myself, it's not that I let it take me, but I do have these feelings." (Luke)

These empirical findings highlight that young consumers' passion for travel amplifies their sensitivity to experiencing FOMO, as they perceive missed travel opportunities as a loss or deprivation. Additionally, such feelings might influence their enjoyment of present experiences and contribute to feelings of unhappiness. As also stated by Oberst et al. (2016) and Roberts and David (2019), social media work in intensifying feelings of FOMO by constantly exposing young consumers to online representations of others' travel experiences. As a result, young consumers may feel constrained to prioritise travel and seek validation through their own travel experiences, carrying on a cycle of FOMO-driven behaviour (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Hastings et al., 2004; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021; Zalinska & Agopian, 2022).

5.4.2 FOMO towards acquaintances

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that social anxiety and FOMO were more prevalent towards people the respondents knew, rather than towards travel bloggers or influencers. This distinction was attributed to differences in lifestyles and budgets between the respondents and influencers. Felipe elucidated this distinction, stating:

> *"At least for me, I'm more influenced by people that are close to me, so when I see they are travelling, rather than some influencers you know. Because with influencers you know, they are always travelling, that's their normal, so I don't feel envious when I see them travelling. But when I see that my friends are travelling, then I feel inspired and FOMO sometimes." (Felipe)*

Similarly, Margherita emphasised the influence of social media on intensifying feelings of FOMO, by noting that:

> *"Travel content generated from a travel blogger doesn't trigger any kind of anxiety for me, at the end of the day that's their job, I do experience it more with people who are maybe among my followers. If I see a person who every weekend picks up and goes then I start to think 'maybe it's me who's not making good use of my time, maybe I should be doing more like them. Of course Instagram amplifies this sentiment a lot and it's a feeling that is more pronounced at certain times of the year such as in summer." (Margherita)*

These findings highlight how personal connections and perceived similarities with individuals known personally can evoke strong feelings of FOMO compared to travel bloggers or influencers, whose lifestyle is perceived as distinct. This distinction suggests that young consumers may perceive their friend's experiences as a reflection of their own choices and lifestyle, leading them to experiencing feelings of inadequacy or unfulfillment. While this aligns with the idea of social

needs in the context of the UGT theory, as young consumers may experience higher levels of FOMO towards friends due to their social need for belongingness and affiliation (Katz et al. 1974), it also diverges from previous literature, which predominantly emphasised the influence of influencers on feelings of FOMO (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Hastings et al., 2004; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Additionally, the affective needs for emotional gratification and validation mentioned in the UGT theory may also play a role. Witnessing friends' travel experiences could evoke emotions such as envy or regret, as individuals compare their own experiences and achievements to those of their peers (Katz et al. 1974). This emotional response may stem from young consumers' desire for validation and recognition within their social network.

5.4.3 FOMO towards the Self

Federica's experience shed light on a unique facet of FOMO, where the focus is directed towards herself rather than others. She mentioned feeling anxious about not being able to visit or see everything she had planned during her travel, explaining that this feeling could be particularly strong during once-in-a-lifetime trips, where there might be added pressure to ensure nothing was missed.

> *"When I am at home and I see others travelling I am fine, I have no feeling of FOMO but when I know I'll go on a trip and so I start to stockpile the things I want to do, then when I go and cannot do what I have planned then I feel FOMO, as if I have not experienced what others have had the possibility to … I definitely feel I missed out something." (Federica)*

Federica's experience reflects that individuals may not experience Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) when observing others' travels from a distance, but instead, experience it intensely when confronted with their own travel plans and expectations. Additionally, this sentiment might be strong during the trip when young consumers feel more pressure to fulfil their own travel goals. This suggests that FOMO may be more closely tied to personal aspirations, rather than simply comparing oneself to others. This accumulation of expectations can contribute to feelings of FOMO when individuals are unable to fulfil all of their planned activities during their trips. Federica's statement reflects this dynamic, as she describes feeling as though she has "missed out" on experiences that others have had the opportunity to enjoy. This suggests that the pressure to live up to external standards and expectations (Asch, 1955), fueled by information overload, can exacerbate feelings of FOMO and detract from the enjoyment of travel experiences.

5.4.4 Variability of FOMO influence

For some respondents, while the feeling of FOMO may have influenced them, it was not as notable. While Kate admitted she is often influenced by what she sees on social media, and that FOMO makes her act impulsively when planning her travels, Felipe claimed that although he experiences FOMO and he could imagine it can influence his decisions, he doesn't think it happened yet.

"FOMO for sure influences my travel habits. I often go to places I didn't plan to, but when I saw my friends were there, I felt like I really have to be there as well. I would say it has rather negative impact on me cause I tend to make impulsive decisions you know - like oh, I see this video from Iceland, I check the flight, and if the price is ok I book it. And only then, I would search for other information about the place and accommodation for instance, but that's not how it should be right, I mean, what if there was no accommodation left. So yeah, I'd definitely say there is this negative impact of social media and FOMO on me." (Kate)

"I for sure sometimes experience FOMO, when I see someone is at some super nice place and it could influence my destination choice, I could for sure imagine that. But I think until now I don't think it happened. Social media yes, FOMO probably no." (Felipe)

These findings show the variability in how young consumers respond to FOMO and the influence of social media on their travel behaviour. While some, like Kate, may take impulsive decisions driven by FOMO, others, like Felipe, may maintain a more cautious approach. This suggests that the influence of FOMO on travel decisions can vary based on individual characteristics and coping mechanisms. This subjective facet of FOMO might also be linked to young consumers' social media usage. Indeed, as stated by Roberts and David (2019), FOMO together with intense social media usage can influence individuals' sense of connection and their overall well-being as users.

5.4.5 No FOMO as a form of self-persuasion

In contrast to what has been discussed above, some of our respondents affirmed that travel-related content or FOMO does not influence their travel decisions at all. Most notably, these participants stated they feel they have sufficient time to travel and consequently they experience no sense of urgency or pressure.

"I don't really have this feeling when it comes to regular travel content from places, maybe only when I see some very cool parties around the world, then I might have this feeling because that particular party cannot be repeated you know. But just from regular travel content not so much because I know that at some point I can visit this place myself, so there's no rush, no FOMO." (Jacob)

"No, I don't think I have ever experienced this kind of feeling. First because I think I have seen many more places than people of my age. But also because I think I have my whole life ahead of me, I still have a lot of places to see and that I want to see but I'm not even in a hurry to say, "I want to see them now." (Luna)

"I would say I don't have FOMO that much since I accept the fact that I am working, so I don't have that much time to travel now. It's fine, I don't feel bad about it." (Harry)

What can be deduced from these findings is that young consumers are not all experiencing FOMO or social anxiety related to travel-content. Some of them, as also clearly shown by these quotes, are aware of having adequate time to live their life fully without experiencing travel as a pressing concern. This might also be connected to the fact that all these three respondents are reportedly no longer students. This aspect suggests a potential link between young consumers' life stage and their susceptibility to FOMO. As they are employed, they likely possess greater financial stability but this potentially limits their freedom to schedule their own leisure time, consequently mitigating the urgency typically associated with travel decisions (Garikapati et al. 2016). However, it is also important to consider that statements like Harry's, where he accepts his limited travel time and says "it's fine," might indicate a form of self-persuasion. It remains uncertain whether this acceptance is genuine or a coping mechanism to reconcile with his current life constraints.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, we will highlight the contributions of our study, emphasising its theoretical implications. We will detail how our findings extend the existing literature, offering new perspectives and deeper understanding within the literature streams of social media marketing, influencer marketing, and tourism marketing. By exploring these areas, we aim to provide a comprehensive analysis that addresses current gaps in the literature, as well as introduces a new model to advance academic discussions.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

In this section, we will detail the theoretical contributions to the key literature streams. First, we will explain the contributions to the social media marketing literature, as well as influencer marketing literature. Next, we will delve into the concept of authenticity within tourism marketing, as well as the critical role of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) in this domain. Finally, we will introduce a model that outlines the stages of pre-trip planning, highlighting how young consumers' make use of social media to make travel decisions. Each of these contributions will be detailed and explained in the subsequent sections.

6.1.1 Social media marketing literature

Our study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in social media marketing, by emphasising the consumption of digital content in the context of tourism. By exploring the pronounced shift toward visual storytelling and interactive content, on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, we highlight a significant trend towards more personalised and tailored travel experiences. This trend not only supports but also extends the findings of Appel et al. (2020) who discussed the future evolutions of social media in marketing, and of Kumar et al. (2016) who examined the impact of firm-generated content on consumer behaviours. Furthermore, our study underscores Tik Tok's emerging role as a critical player in shaping travel decisions, enriching the discussions presented by Dwivedi et al. (2021) on platform preferences among young consumers. Indeed, our research also refines the discussion initiated by Appel et al. showcasing TikTok's emerging relevance not just as a social platform but as a critical player in shaping travel decisions. In this context, video-based platforms are emerging as primary sources of travel information among young consumers due to their interactive and more engaging content.

Moreover, our findings illustrate the critical role of social media during the pre-trip planning phase, serving as a primary source of inspiration. This aligns with and builds upon the work of Xiang and Gretzel (2010), deepening the understanding of how social media influences the early stages of travel decision-making processes. We observe that young consumers are increasingly relying on

social media content for initial travel inspiration and information gathering. This behaviour includes a critical evaluation of content credibility that allowed us to identify a group we termed "double-checkers," who exhibit profound scepticism towards online information, thus engaging in thorough verification processes. This observation extends the discussions on fake news and social media trustworthiness by Lazer et al. (2018) and Zhang and Gupta (2018), highlighting the growing sophistication of consumers in navigating the digital information environment. Due to young consumers' extended digital literacy, this demographic is more likely to detect and recognize misleading information as well as critically judge the accuracy of information.

An intriguing psychological effect we identified is "overfamiliarity", where young consumers' apparent knowledge about a specific destination might interfere with the excitement associated with visiting those places in person and consequently diminish the "surprise effect" which generally accompanies travel experiences. This paradox, where excessive familiarity leads to a decreased desire for firsthand experience, contrasts with Söderlund's (1998) work on customer satisfaction. While this author emphasises positive outcomes, our study introduces the concept that satisfaction with seeing a place through social media can lead to diminished interest in experiencing it directly.

In summary, by highlighting these aspects, our research not only underscores the significant influence of social media on contemporary consumer behaviours but also enhances our understanding of the interplay between social media platforms and young consumers. Our study contributes to the existing social media marketing literature by emphasising the consumption of digital content in tourism and illustrating how visual and interactive content shapes travel decisions. Additionally, it sheds light on the sophisticated behaviours of young consumers in verifying information and the paradoxical effects of overfamiliarity on travel interest.

6.1.1.1 Influencer marketing literature

Our study contributes to the influencer marketing literature, by extending the understanding of authenticity and trust, particularly distinguishing between influencers and content creators. Our findings indicate a strong preference for content creators over influencers among young consumers, driven by the perceived authenticity and independence from brand influence that content creators display. This preference reflects a broader scepticism towards influencers, whose authenticity is often questioned due to potential impact of financial incentives. These findings challenge the traditional views in influencer marketing literature, which highlight the trust and influence employed by influencers over their followers, as discussed in studies by Leung et al. (2022) and Audrezet et al. (2020).

Furthermore, our study reveals that young consumers experience conditional trust towards influencers. According to our findings, this trust not solely depends on the content but also on the personal connection that young consumers develop with influencers over time. This aspect of trust

evolving through ongoing interaction suggests a more complex relationship between followers and influencers than what was previously understood, providing a deeper insight of the underlying relationship between them. According to our findings, time strongly contributes to the trust-building process between influencers and their followers. Continuous engagement allows young consumers to gradually perceive influencers as acquaintances. This concept of conditional trust developed over time offers an intriguing counterpoint to Jin et al. (2019) and Kim et al. (2022), which examine the impact of influencers based on their social status and perceived similarity to the audience.

Additionally, our study delved into the psychological influence of influencer interactions, revealing that young consumers experience social anxiety and FOMO more intensively towards individuals that they know personally, rather than towards influencers or content creators. This shows a significant shift in how social comparison and FOMO are experienced, diverging from previous findings by Good and Huhmann (2008) and Hastings et al. (2004), which predominantly emphasised the role of influencers in encouraging such feelings. Young consumers tend to perceive influences as distant life-style figures, whereas their friends are seen as a reflection of their own choices, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy.

In conclusion, our research fills gaps in the existing literature by linking authenticity, trust, and the evolving nature of influencer-follower relationships. Our findings underscore the critical role of content creators and reveal the scepticism towards influencers as well as revealing the complex time-dependent nature of trust. Additionally, our study sheds light on the psychological influence of influencer interactions, showing that young consumers experience social anxiety and FOMO more intensely towards individuals they know personally, compared to influencers or content creators. By highlighting that, we provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of social influence in the digital age. Overall, our findings contribute significantly to the influencer marketing literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour, trust dynamics, and the psychological influences at play.

6.1.2 Authenticity within tourism marketing literature

Our research illustrates the subtle perceptions of young consumers regarding the authenticity of tourism destinations, particularly influenced by the pervasive visibility of these destinations on social media. Before delving into this aspect, it is important to note that our findings revealed young consumers' concept of authenticity is subjective and contingent upon their personal experiences and backgrounds. This reflects that the definition of authenticity is anything but static. Indeed, our findings show the evolving nature of authenticity in contemporary travel practices. Moreover, we observed that the extensive promotion of certain destinations often diminish a destinations' appeal among young travellers, who perceive such places as lacking uniqueness and overly touristy. This finding resonates with Wang's (1999) exploration of authenticity in tourism,

suggesting that authenticity tends to diminish as destinations become more commercialised and widely consumed. Furthemore, our findings show how the information overload surrounding a destination can strongly influence young consumers' perception of its authenticity. Thus, these findings suggest that lesser-known destinations may hold greater appeal for young consumers as they seek authentic and novel travel experiences. This perspective complements Rickly-Boyd's (2013) discussion on existential authenticity, where the uniqueness of a place significantly contributes to its perceived authenticity.

Additionally, our study underscores the role of UGC in shaping and influencing young consumers' travel decisions. Content creators are often perceived as reliable and trustworthy, leading their content to be seen as more credible and representative of a destination's reality. This perspective contributed to the discourse on authenticity in tourism experiences and therefore in the tourism marketing field.

In conclusion, exploring young consumers' perceptions, we have uncovered the influence of social media visibility on destination appeal as well as highlighting the influence of information overload on authenticity perception, suggesting that lesser-known destinations may offer greater appeal to young consumers as they tend to seek authentic travel experiences. Moreover, our study underscores the influential role of UGC in influencing young consumers' travel decisions which contributes to the field of tourism marketing by highlighting the importance of UGC in shaping perceptions of destination authenticity and influencing their travel behaviour.

6.1.2.1 The influence of FOMO on young consumers' travel decisions

Our findings also illustrate a critical aspect of young consumers' travel behaviour: the influence of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) on their decision-making processes. Contrary to previous assumptions within the social media literature that portrayed FOMO as omnipresent, our study reveals that, among young consumers, this sentiment actually shows with varying degrees of intensity. Furthermore, FOMO is not only experienced towards the others but it can also be experienced towards the self. This idea of FOMO as a self-directed sentiment reflects that young consumers might experience the pressure to live up to personal aspirations and external standards which then contribute to feelings of inadequacy or unfulfillment during travel experiences In some instances, young consumers can also engage in self-persuasion mechanisms, finding it challenging to acknowledge the extent to which FOMO influences their decisions. Moreover, our study reveals the role of travel passion as an intensifier of FOMO among young consumers. For those with a strong affinity for travel, the fear of missing out on travel opportunities becomes greater, leading to a heightened sensitivity towards perceived losses or missed experiences. This highlights the importance of considering personal characteristics in understanding the influence of FOMO on travel decisions. Furthermore, our study distinguishes between the FOMO experienced towards acquaintances versus influencers or travel bloggers. Contrary to prior literature, predominantly attributing FOMO to influencers' portrayal of idealised lifestyles influence (Good & Huhmann,

2008; Hastings et al., 2004; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021), we find that social anxiety and FOMO are more prevalent towards individuals known personally, such as friends or followers. This distinction suggests that personal relationships and perceived similarities with acquaintances evoke strong feelings of FOMO. By highlighting the differential impact of social relationships on FOMO, our study adds depth to our understanding of how social dynamics shape individuals' emotional responses to travel-related content on social media.

In conclusion, our study stresses out the idea of FOMO as a multidimensional phenomenon, not only directed towards the others but occasionally also towards the self. Additionally, contrary to previous assumptions that portrayed FOMO as universally pervasive, our findings reveal that FOMO manifests with varying degrees of intensity among young young consumers. Additionally, our study distinguishes between the targets of FOMO, highlighting the influence social relationships have on young consumers' emotional responses. Contrary to prior literature attributing FOMO predominantly to influencers, we find this sentiment is more pronounced towards individuals known personally, such as friends or peers. This distinction underscores the influential role of personal connections and perceived similarities in evoking strong feelings of FOMO.

6.1.3 Pre-Trip Social Media Influence model (PSMI model)

As part of our contribution to the existing body of literature, we have developed a new model to better understand the travel planning process among young consumers. This model encapsulates the various stages from initial inspiration to the final decision-making, influenced predominantly by social media platforms. By integrating our empirical findings with previous literature within social media marketing and tourism marketing, we believe that this model offers fresh insights and enriches the current understanding of digital consumer behaviour in the context of travel.

This model advances previous literature on young consumers' travel planning by elucidating the nuanced roles social media platforms play throughout different stages of the process. By highlighting the transition from passive to active information search, our model underscores the significance of visually engaging content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok in the initial inspiration phase, aligning with findings by Leaver et al. (2020) and Ana & Istudor (2019). Furthermore, it challenges the predominant emphasis on influencers, suggesting that young consumers prioritise authenticity and scepticism, which is supported by the scepticism towards influencer-generated content noted by Diepeveen & Pinet (2022) and Dwivedi et al. (2021).

Our findings reveal a conditional trust in content creators, diverging from traditional perspectives on influencer trust (Audrezet et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2022). The model also introduces the critical role of digital literacy in evaluating UGC, highlighting the methodological cross-referencing young consumers employ to ensure information accuracy (Ku et al. 2019).

By integrating these insights, the PSMI model not only enhances our understanding of young consumers' travel planning but also provides valuable guidance for marketers and researchers. It

emphasises the need for effective strategies that appeal to the digital-savvy, authenticity-seeking young traveller, and highlights areas for future research, particularly concerning the impact of emerging social media platforms on young consumer behaviour.
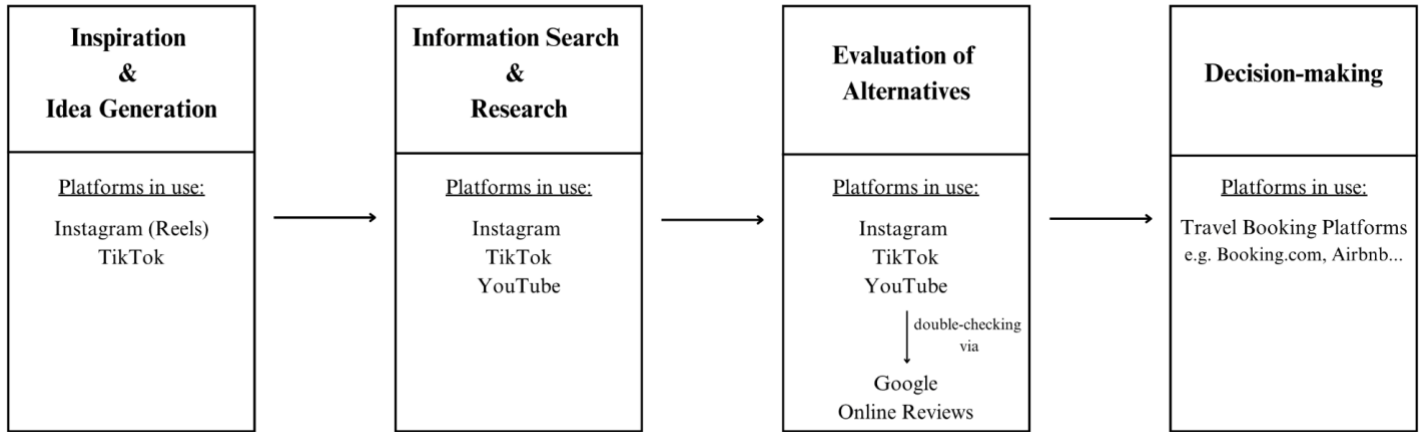
Inspiration & Idea Generation	Information Search & Research	Evaluation of Alternatives	Decision-making
Platforms in use: Instagram (Reels) TikTok	Platforms in use: Instagram TikTok YouTube	Platforms in use: Instagram TikTok YouTube double-checking via Google Online Reviews	Platforms in use: Travel Booking Platforms e.g. Booking.com, Airbnb...

Figure 1 Pre-Trip Social Media Influence (PSMI) model

6.1.3.1 Inspiration & Idea Generation stage

In the initial stage of the travel planning process, young consumers do not actively seek out travel content. Instead, algorithms on platforms such as Instagram Reels and TikTok present this content to them, sparking inspiration and ideas for potential trips. These social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping young consumers' travel aspirations by providing a continuous stream of visually engaging and dynamic travel-related posts. This reflects a demographic deeply immersed in social media culture, where video content holds paramount importance (Leaver et al. 2020). Social media serves as a dual-purpose tool in this phase. Not only do platforms like Instagram and TikTok offer inspiration, but they also function as archives of travel experiences young consumers might be likely to do in the future, allowing users to efficiently gather information about various destinations and activities from the comfort of their digital devices. The preference for videos, whether short clips on TikTok and Instagram or longer narratives on YouTube, underscores a shift towards visual storytelling and more interactive content among young consumers (Ana & Istudor, 2019). TikTok's emerging popularity among young consumers can be attributed to its unique format of short, engaging videos that offer quick, immersive storytelling (Xiao & Zhang, 2023), making it an ideal platform for sharing and discovering travel content. This preference also suggests a desire for personalised and tailored experiences, wherein social media platforms offer content organised upon the users' preferences, in contrast to more traditional sources like generic search engines as Google. As part of their brainstorming process, young consumers evaluate destinations based on the perceived authenticity. This assessment often leads them to unconsciously disregard locations they deem inauthentic due to an overabundance of information. Preconceived ideas and prior prejudices influence these judgments, as destinations that are heavily

represented on social media might deter some young consumers from visiting them or just even consider them as potential travel destinations. As also supported by Russo & Richards (2016), the pervasive online visibility of highly promoted destinations has reduced their allure for young consumers, who now prioritise authenticity and exclusivity, seeking out unique and unspoiled travel experiences over mainstream ones. Indeed, they may perceive the former destinations as lacking in surprise or uniqueness, feeling as though they already know what the experience entails without having visited. Additionally, the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) can significantly influence their willingness to explore new destinations. When their acquaintances frequently post about their travels, it can either inspire young consumers or cause anxiety if they feel overwhelmed by the volume of shared experiences. While this aligns with the idea of social needs in the context of the UGT theory, as young consumers may experience higher levels of FOMO towards friends due to their social need for belongingness and affiliation (Katz et al. 1974), it also diverges from previous literature, which predominantly emphasised the influence of influencers on feelings of FOMO (Good & Huhmann, 2008; Hastings et al., 2004; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

6.1.3.2 Information Search and Research stage

In the second stage, young consumers actively seek out information to plan their trips. Having already decided to travel, they turn to platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where they rely on trusted content creators and influencers for insights. These platforms provide a wealth of information through short, engaging videos that help consumers gather knowledge about potential destinations. This underscores young consumers' reliance on digital platforms and UGC, which serve as critical resources for young consumers seeking information about unfamiliar destinations (Litvin et al. 2008). In this phase, young consumers also start considering YouTube as a valid and reliable source of information to obtain a more detailed view of their intended destinations. Indeed, YouTube's platform allows for longer videos compared to other social media, enabling young consumers to find and gather more comprehensive and practical information about a destination. These extended videos can cover a destination's unique aspects in greater detail, offering insights and tips that shorter content on platforms like Instagram or TikTok cannot provide. Furthermore, YouTube videos provide a more immersive experience for young consumers by offering them a more realistic sense of what the destination has to offer. This aligns with previous literature according to which young consumers prefer practical and detailed content from trusted sources, often using YouTube for its in-depth and immersive content capabilities (Leung et al., 2013). During this stage, the information collected and gathered by young consumers is highly influenced by their prior (unconscious) categorization of both destination and content. Online content is categorised into content to keep and content to avoid, with a keen awareness of the potential for faked experiences and misleading information (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). It is important to note that the interactive nature of social media exacerbates the spread of misinformation (Wang et al. 2019). As a result, young consumers are highly sceptical of the information presented on social media, carefully selecting content they deem authentic. This scepticism leads them to favour content posted by trusted travel bloggers/content creators or user-generated content (UGC) that

aligns with their interests as they increasingly tend to seek for authenticity (Dwivedi et al. 2021; Jin et al. 2019). Nevertheless, it is important to note that in this phase young consumers tend to prefer information from content creators, specifically travel bloggers, who are perceived as competent and providers of practical information. This preference is mainly due to content creators' perceived independence from any brand influence. Indeed, influencer-generated content is often perceived as lacking credibility and authenticity due to the nature of influencers' relationships with brands, as they frequently engage in financial agreements that can bias their content. This diverges from existing literature on influencer marketing, which generally emphasises the significant influence and trust followers place in influencers (Lee et al. 2022). Furthermore, young consumers look for content that presents a realistic view of a trip, thus including both positive and negative aspects. They seek out honest reviews and experiences, avoiding content that portrays an overly perfect or unrealistic view of the destination. This critical approach helps them form a realistic and comprehensive understanding of what to expect, ultimately aiding in more informed and satisfying travel planning.

6.1.3.3 Evaluation of Alternatives stage

In the third stage, young consumers engage in a careful and meticulous process of validating and double-checking the information they have gathered from social media platforms. This approach is also well-supported by the literature on the critical evaluation of UGC and the need for authenticity in content (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014). Recognizing the potential for manipulation and misleading content online, young consumers employ various methods to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information. This validation process often involves using search engines like Google and tools like Google Maps to cross-reference the information they have found on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This double-checking process helps them reduce the scepticism connected to online information as well as their uncertainty. As also argued by Appel et al (2019) and Dwivedi et al. (2021) perceived authenticity and credibility of influencer-generated content is crucial for young consumers' decision-making processes. Indeed, during this stage young consumers look for reviews and additional sources of information that can provide a sense of security and confirmation (Choi et al. 2007). Here, they exhibit what can be termed as conditional trust in content creators and influencers, meaning that while they may rely on these figures for initial inspiration, they do not accept the provided information without inquiring. This interestingly questions previous literature which generally emphasises the significant influence and ultimate trust followers place in influencers (Audrezet et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2022). Instead, they systematically verify the content against other sources to confirm its authenticity and accuracy. Digital literacy therefore plays a significant role in this stage, as young consumers are aware of the ease with which online information can be manipulated. Their understanding of digital media's potential biases leads them to place greater trust in their own validation process. This approach ensures that they make well-informed decisions based on a comprehensive and verified set of data, rather than relying solely on the potentially biassed or incomplete information presented on social media (Ku et al. 2019)

6.1.3.4 Decision-making stage

In this final stage of the travel planning process, young consumers shift away from social media and rely primarily on booking platforms to finalise their plans. At this point, the focus is on securing accommodations, transportation, and other logistical aspects of their trip. Booking platforms provide the necessary tools and information to complete these tasks efficiently and, ensuring that all essential preparations are made in advance. However, social media still plays a minor role in this stage, particularly in finding specific attractions, restaurants, and activities that do not require prior booking. In this particular case, young consumers might consider checking social media to get tips from those who have already been, without really discerning between influencers, content creators or general users. Young consumers may continue to use platforms like Instagram and TikTok to discover popular spots and hidden gems at their destination. This information helps them plan their daily itineraries and enhances their overall travel experience.

This stage also marks a transition to the "during-trip stage," where the focus shifts to the actual experience of the trip. This aligns with the literature that emphasises the sequential nature of the travel decision-making process, which involves stages of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Cox et al. 2009; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). The continued, yet reduced, use of social media in this stage for finding attractions and activities underscores the ongoing influence of UGC and digital platforms in enhancing the travel experience (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Cox et al. 2009).

7. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, we will summarise the key findings of our study and their relevance to our initial research question. Additionally, we will introduce practical implications that arise from our study, present its limitations, and suggest potential opportunities for future research.

7.1 Summary of findings

Our research has been focusing on investigating the influence of social media on young consumers' travel decisions. Through the lenses of the Uses and Gratifications Theory by Katz et al (1974) and Belk's theory of the Extended Self (1988) coupled with the relevant literature on social media marketing and tourism marketing, we have revisited our initial research question: How do young consumers use social media to make travel decisions?

The empirical findings of this research revealed that social media profoundly influences young consumers' travel decisions through several mechanisms. Firstly, young consumers rely heavily on these platforms for travel inspiration, using platforms such as Instagram and Tik Tok as primary sources of information. In other words, social media influences young consumers' travel planning and destination choices. This reflects a deepening preference of this demographic for user-generated, particularly visual content and that resonates more than traditional marketing. Additionally, the authenticity of content plays a crucial role in this influence leading young consumers to value genuine, relatable narratives over traditional marketing communication approaches. Nevertheless, young consumers' level of scepticism towards digital content often leads them to double-check the information found online.

Young consumers' preference and seek for authentic content also extends to influencer marketing, where young consumers show a growing preference for content creators, and specifically travel bloggers, over traditional influencers. This shift is driven by the perception that this content is more trustworthy, though this trust can be conditional and influenced by the consumers' familiarity with the content creator. Additionally, young consumers' travel decisions are also influenced by their perception of the authenticity of particular destinations. Indeed, they often avoid destinations perceived as overrepresented online to maintain a sense of discovery and surprise. However, through this study we also found out that the definition of authenticity is subjective, with some consumers identifying it anywhere and others firmly classifying destinations as authentic or inauthentic. Finally, the exploration of the phenomenon of social anxiety, more specifically of FOMO, revealed that young consumers' travel decisions are also influenced by these sentiments. In the context of our study, FOMO has been identified as more pronounced when online travel content is shared by friends, rather than influencers. However, such influence varies among

individuals, with some, those who self-persuade themselves, that do not feel any pressure coming from social media content, and those who surprisingly experience FOMO towards themselves.

Additionally, we created the Pre-Trip Social Media Influence (PSMI) model that offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the travel planning process among young consumers, driven predominantly by social media platforms. This model delineates four key stages: Inspiration & Idea Generation, Information Search and Research, Evaluation of Alternatives, and Decision-Making. Each stage highlights the crucial role of social media in shaping travel aspirations, gathering detailed information, critically evaluating alternatives, and finalising travel plans. By integrating empirical findings with previous literature within social media marketing and tourism marketing, the PSMI model sheds light on the evolving consumer behaviour in the digital age, emphasising the increasing demand for authenticity and reliable information. This model not only enhances our understanding of young consumers' travel planning and how their use of social media influence their travel decisions, but also provides valuable insights for marketers and researchers aiming to navigate the dynamic landscape of social media marketing and tourism marketing.

7.2 Practical contributions

Our study does not only enhance our understanding of the relationship between social media and travel decisions among young consumers but also offers practical insights for tourism providers aiming to effectively engage this key demographic. To begin with, we have identified a shift towards visually engaging and interactive content on popular platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. As a result, tourism marketers should be encouraged to adapt their content strategies by incorporating more UGC and visual storytelling. This approach not only appeals to young travellers but also enhances the perceived authenticity of destinations. Furthermore, considering the scepticism young consumers have towards influencer content influenced by financial incentives, it is crucial for tourism marketers to implement transparent and ethical influencer marketing strategies. This involves clear labelling of sponsored content and ensuring that influencers share genuine experiences, which can help maintain trust and credibility among young consumers. Additionally, as we found that the influence of FOMO varies along life stages and employment status, promotional efforts should be tailored to address the specific needs and concerns of different demographic segments. For example, marketing campaigns could emphasise relaxation and unplanned experiences to mitigate FOMO among more specific demographics, such as employed young adults who may have less flexibility in their schedules. Additionally, tourism providers should leverage digital platforms not only for promotional purposes but also as tools for real-time engagement and feedback gathering. This active engagement can lead to improved service offerings and enhanced customer satisfaction by allowing tourism providers to adapt their offerings based on direct consumer feedback. Lastly, to address scepticism towards highly promoted destinations, tourism providers can play a role in enhancing digital literacy. By helping consumers understand how to recognize and evaluate the authenticity of online content,

educational initiatives can empower them to make informed decisions. This effort fosters a more trusting relationship between consumers and the brand, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of tourism marketing strategies. By embracing these strategies, tourism marketers can not only attract but also retain a demographic that values authenticity, personalization, and ethical transparency in their travel experiences. These practical contributions underscore the necessity for tourism marketers to continually adapt and innovate in response to the dynamic preferences of today's digitally savvy young travellers.In light of these findings, it is evident that tourism marketers need to reconsider how they promote destinations, focusing more on fostering authentic experiences and narratives that resonate with young travellers' desire for uniqueness and personal connection. Furthemore, the insights from this study also carry societal implications. As social media plays a crucial role in influencing young consumers' travel decisions, there is a need to promote digital literacy among users. Additionally, policymakers can also draw valuable insights from this study. The findings highlight the importance of regulating influencer marketing to ensure transparency and authenticity of content. Policies that mandate clear disclosure of sponsored content and set standards for ethical marketing practices can help protect consumers from misleading information and maintain trust in digital platforms.

7.3 Limitations and further research

As with any study, this research comes with its own set of limitations that need to be addressed, as these could affect the generalizability and trustworthiness of the findings. To mitigate these issues and further explore the topics, we provide several suggestions for future research. Firstly, the limited time frame and resources led to a small sample size, which may influence the generalizability of the findings. Future research could allocate more time and resources to include a larger and more diverse sample, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the findings. Secondly, the study's reliance on the sampled individuals' viewpoints and the researchers' interpretations introduces subjectivity, a common issue in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This subjectivity can impact the trustworthiness of the study. To mitigate this, future studies could employ a multi-method approach, such as combining interviews with focus groups. This would allow for the collection of more exact and complex views and experiences, enriching the data and providing a more balanced perspective. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this study means the results are derived from interviewees' expressions and the researchers' interpretations. This reliance on qualitative data may affect the reliability and validity of the study. Incorporating a quantitative approach in future research could help validate the findings through statistical analysis, increasing the study's credibility and generalisability. Another suggestion for future research would be to extend the presented model, which only focuses on the pre-trip stage of young consumers' travel planning process, to also include other phases, such as during- and post-trip. Here, it could be studied how social media influences their travel decisions also in these other stages, potentially comparing them to understand the continuity and changes in social media's impact throughout the entire travel experience

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Guide

A. Introduction:

Welcome and thank you for agreeing to participate in our research. Our thesis is dedicated to exploring the role of social media within the realm of tourism and travel. We seek to understand how social media platforms impact travellers' decisions or experiences.

Before we start, we need to confirm your consent for this interview to be recorded, as well as for collecting your data (consent form). Recording the session will allow us to accurately capture your insights and ensure that we can refer back to them during our analysis, and while making the transcript. Please be assured that all material gathered will strictly be used for the purposes of this thesis. To protect your privacy, all interviews will be anonymized, and only the two authors of this thesis will have access to any personal details shared.

Your comfort and openness are very important for us during this conversation. If at any point there are questions or topics you prefer not to answer or discuss, please let us know.

Do you agree to participate in the interview subject to these terms? Do you have any questions before we start?

B. Personal background information:

Age, gender

C. Ice-breaking questions

Section 1: General questions about travel style
- Aiming to understand the participants' travelling style and preferences

1. *Do you identify yourself as a traveller? (if NO, we do not proceed with the interview)*
2. *Why do you travel? Why do you like travelling? What are you looking for when travelling?*
3. *What are some places you have been to so far? Why did you decide to go there?*
4. *Can you describe the last trip you planned/took part in?*
- Starting the conversation, aiming to get the participant think about his/her recent trip

Section 2: Role of social media
5. *How do you usually search for information when you are about to travel?*
6. *Which social media do you usually use? Why?*
7. *How do you use social media? Are you more of an observer, active content creator ...?*

8. *In what ways, if any, do you typically use social media platforms when considering or planning a trip or vacation?*
9. *Do you follow any particular profiles/influencers for travelling tips? If yes, why those?*
10. *What types of content on social media platforms have the biggest impact on your travel decisions? (e.g., user-generated content, influencer posts, reviews, etc.)*
- Aiming to understand which platforms/type of content are preferred/most trusted
- If needed - explain what UGC/influencer posts are
- Show some example of UGC content (travel forums) and influencer post (to be added to this appendix - which specifically we showed)
11. *Do you personally engage with travel-related content on social media platforms, are you also sharing your own experiences?*
12. *How do you decide which travel-related content to trust on social media? Can you tell me about an influencer/page/post that you trust? Why do you trust them?*
- Credibility and influence of different sources - UGC vs influencer content
13. *How has your perception of social media (in the context of travelling) changed over years?*

Section 3: Authenticity and social anxiety
14. *How would you describe "authentic travel experience"? What does this mean to you?*
- Follow-up: explore the difference between authenticity of hyped destinations (Dubai/Santorini/Mykonos) and less-known destinations (Albania/Georgia)
15. *What does authenticity mean to you (in terms of travelling)? How do you perceive the authenticity of travel-related content on social media? Do you notice any difference in authenticity of influencer vs UGC content?*
16. *Have you ever experienced any kind of social anxiety/fear of missing out (FoMO) related to travel-related content on social media? Can you tell me more about this experience?*
- Explain social anxiety/FOMO if needed. Use an example of a friend posting nice pictures/videos from vacation - have you ever felt sad/that you are missing out? Can you describe your feelings at that moment?
17. *How does this anxiety/FOMO influence your trip planning/destination decision?*
18. *Have you ever noticed differences between how a destination was portrayed on social media and what you actually experienced when you visited it? How did that make you feel?*

Section 4: Final thoughts
19. *Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or feelings related to choosing travel destinations?*

Thank you very much for your time. Your insights have been really helpful and are a great asset for our research.

_____

End of the interview

Appendix 2

Interview Consent Form

From Scroll to Destination: Introducing the Pre-Trip Social Media Influence Model in Travel Planning

Giorgia Gaetaniello, Sophia Petrovská

Interview Consent Form.

I have been given information about the thesis named "From Scroll to Destination: Introducing the Pre-Trip Social Media Influence Model in Travel Planning" and discussed the research project with Giorgia Gaetaniello and Sophia Petrovská who are conducting this research as a part of a Master's programme in International Marketing and Brand Management supervised by Hossain Shahriar, Ph.D..

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project, I will be asked to give the researcher a duration of approximately 45-60 minutes of my time to participate in the process.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for my thesis only and will be deleted after completion, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Name: ………………………………………………………………………….

Email: ………………………………………………………………….

Telephone: ………………………………………………………….

Signed: ………………………………………………………………………….