



## **Social Media Influence on Traveler Psychology and Experience**

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## Abstract

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<p>Social media keeps evolving over time and is becoming more and more a trend. Almost all people tend to use them, even from a very young age. Millennials, Generation Z and A are most familiar with social media and technology in general, whereas Generation X and Boomers have started keeping up with them. What role do they play, though, in the hospitality industry? How do they affect a potential traveler's psychology? These, and other relevant questions are about to be examined and answered in the following thesis. Theories such as the Pyramid of Maslow's Needs, Social Comparison Theory, FoMO and Social Cognitive Theory will be explained and related to the thesis topic, in order to help reader figure out the connection between social media and how they affect traveler's motivations, expectations, and experiences, in the 21st century. Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become key sources for travel inspiration and decision-making, needs, preferences, and expectations. Hospitality brands increasingly use targeted social media to engage people, setting aspirational experiences that influence their perceptions before their journey even begins.</p> <p>With a quantitative approach, this research combines recent insight of travelers active on social media, and feedback from hospitality-travel professionals. This is supplemented by content analysis of popular social media posts to identify dominant themes, trends, and engagement strategies. The findings indicate that while social media marketing can heighten traveler anticipation and shape specific expectations, there might be a gap between these expectations and actual guest experiences, influenced by factors such as personal motives, societal trends, and travelers' needs in 2025.</p> <p>By exploring the complicated relationship between social media influence, traveler motivations, and actual guest outcomes, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of digital era role in modern travel culture and offers practical guidance for more expectation-driven guest engagement.</p>
<b>Key words</b> Social media (=SM), Experience (=XP), Psychology, Behavior, SM content, FOMO, Emotions

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# 1 Introduction

“Traveling leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller” by (Ibn Battuta, n.d.), “Investment in travel is an investment in yourself” by (Matthew Karsten, n.d.), or “I haven’t been everywhere, but it’s on my list” from Susan Sontag (1977, 40-45) and other similar inspirational quotes said by explorers, celebrities, writers etc., will be met on social media platforms describing with a cool and gentle way a post or a story. People need to be inspired, and in 2025 social media plays a dominant role in giving people inspiration.

Living in the 21st century, the evolution of technology and consequently of social media, the way that people discover, plan, and experience travel has changed. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook TikTok, and Gaffl are used by travelers or companies as a way of communication, sharing information, and proposals for various destinations and activities (Kumar et al. 2023, 58-60). These digital platforms consist of an important tool in shaping perceptions and decisions, and at the same time replacing traditional forms of travel inspiration such as travel agencies, guidebooks or advertisements. However, this switch brings both opportunities and challenges which affect psychology and overall experience.

The game of social media lies beyond destination choices. They play a crucial part in creating expectations and idealized images of travelling that sometimes may not match reality. Travelers frequently confront social comparisons, fear of missing out, and pressure to define their own travel experiences online, which can carve out their emotions before, during, and after a trip (Shengwei Li, 2024). This psychological fluctuation, when combined with airing to influencer marketing and user-generated content, naturally have an impact on the level of satisfaction people sense and receive from their experiences.

This thesis investigates the interaction between social media and its psychological effects on people, focusing on travelers and on the way that these platforms form travel planning, decision-making and satisfaction, in accordance with needs and motives. Looking into relevant, socially proven and accepted theories in human behavior and psychology, the study points out the connection between the exposure to digital media exposure and the original travel experiences. All sourcing is organized with the assistance of the Reference Manager Mendeley, using the “Cite Them Right 12th edition – Harvard” for the in-text references, and bibliography which come in accordance with the University’s guidelines. The research will be conducted using quantitative method approach, targeting diverse travelers’ profiles active on social platforms, to provide efficient perspectives and opinions on this phenomenon.

By addressing these dimensions, the study will be beneficial for different reasons for both travelers and hospitality - tourism professionals and will be conducted within Greece residents. Research will help travelers understand the game of social media and how the human brain can easily be tricked by the insensible usage of them, and how platforms can elevate or reduce the authenticity of experiences. So as for tourism professionals, they will better understand their audience and meet expectations without preserving unrealistic promises. At the same time, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and experiential impacts of social media in the frame of current travel trends.

### **1.1 Aims and objectives**

The main goal of the thesis is to explain and help readers understand how the human brain develops thoughts and responds, how behavior is projected and what triggers humans to take certain decisions in relation to social media within the concept of tourism and hospitality.

The first objective is the examination of the social media role in travel decision-making, which has to do with motives, status, preferences etc. In this part there will be also a look at the role of User Generated Content (UGC) in users' interaction. The second one is to identify the inner effects, such as fear of missing out, social comparison, sense of inadequacy, social envy etc. These, and other similar phenomena which are related to deeper insecurities that people deal with, will be spelled out. The reason why is because they play a vital role in making choices, and life is all about choices, so they should be taken wisely. The last objective is to rate the real-life experience in terms of satisfaction and compatibility based on research and survey; is the experience always as glamorous as they seem in photos and videos posted, or sometimes it takes more to earn satisfaction and fulfilment from a trip?

### **1.2 Methodology in brief**

In this thesis a quantitative research method will be used to spot and understand the influence of social media on travelers' psychology and experiences. The methodology focuses on gathering and interpreting data in the form of numbers to identify patterns, relationships, and trends in travelers' behavior and psychology in a certain period of the year 2025.

Firstly, an online survey will be designed to take data from a diverse and wide-range sample of people who actively use social media for travel-related purposes.

The survey will include well – structured close-ended questions, and one optional open-ended to measure factors such as usage of socials, human feelings and motives, decision-making, psychological effects, complete travel experience and levels of contentment.

The sample will be taken from a mix of demographic elements, such as age, gender, and travel habits, to ensure reliability. Regarding age, the range will begin from 20 to 60 years old. Then genders will be mixed, so as social, personal, financial status, and travel habits.

After collecting data, they will be analyzed by using tools provided by the institution to identify connections and trends. Descriptive statistics will provide a summary of the key findings, whereas inferential statistics will be applied to investigate potential associations between social media exposure and patterns in travel behavior.

Lastly, the survey questions will be focused on the topic, and some of them will be pre-tested from other surveys or tests, to ensure the nature of their clarity, transparency and reliability. Results will be cross-checked to decrease favoritism and increase validity.

### 1.3 Key definitions

**Social media:** social media are virtual – online platforms where people can share personal moments and come across other peoples' content and interact with. These people are called users, which has a deep meaning why this word has been used to identify people who have accounts on these platforms. Imagine social media like a modern communication set, where people express their opinions and feelings openly. Offering a lot, it has now become a daily-to-use thing. The highest engagement and action are observed to be found among ages 18-34 (Mansoor, 2025).

**Social media Influence:** Discussion about how technology has been inserted into people's lives and daily routine. The impact that they have on choices, preferences, desires and mentality. Explain why certain destinations have gained popularity, while others have not, during different seasons and how social media has changed that. Instagram had 516.9 million users, and Facebook had 492.7 million users (Kemp, 2022).

In the first quarter of 2023, Facebook had 2.989 billion monthly active users, ahead of YouTube with 2.514 billion, Instagram with 2 billion and TikTok with 1,925 billion users globally according to research by Stacy Dixon (Dixon, 2024). So, we can easily assume that the usage of these platforms is becoming more and more popular.

**Traveler Psychology:** The mental and emotional states of travelers, for example attitude, thoughts, mentality, behaviors, and all actions throughout a journey in its three stages. Explaining the way that the human brain works, focusing more on what affects feelings and how they are created. Additionally, what triggers people to behave in certain ways at certain moments (Diskin, 2023; Susanto et al. 2024, 531-539).

**Experience:** Travelers use digital technologies, social media and other platforms for purposes of travel choices and travel experience, because they mainly find information through them (Bilan, Tovmasyan and Dallakyan, 2024, 155-156), and users come across a trigger point, which might be an advertisement, a post, a reel etc. This initial interaction is followed by thoughts and then by actions. Where actions refer to planning, searching destinations, activities, accommodation, restaurants, and other touristic businesses, attractions, monuments etc. Reaching the point where the trip is ongoing and is followed by all the reflections afterwards and an evaluation of the experience.

**User-Generated Content (UGC):** Travelers share images, videos, and reviews, creating authentic content that influences decisions and serves as valuable testimonials for destinations and businesses. Positive experiences shared on social media can motivate others to visit a particular destination, but also the negative ones can prevent travelers from visiting a destination (Dr. Rinzing 107-117, 2024).

It is obvious that users are increasing exponentially over the years, so it is inevitable that they do not have power in peoples' lives, and although they are of a huge importance for this era and have control over most of the world, people have not received any education regarding the way that they should be used, their benefits or dangers. This thesis has acknowledged that, and lights the impact of platforms on people, when it comes to travelling and experiencing.

## 2 Scrolling Through Journeys

This chapter provides a complete definition of social media and talks about their role in forming perceptions and the control that they have obtained in behaviors within the modern travel culture. It looks into psychological theories which shape personality, and how they relate to travel behavior. Furthermore, the concept of experience, comparing virtual experiences to real-time ones, is another topic that it is explored. Lastly, the chapter points out the links between social media, traveler psychology, and the nature of travel experiences, noting down the ways that these elements interact and affect one another.

### 2.1 Social media

This term is a very broad term and hard to be defined with accuracy. A more complete definition was given by Jenny Davis who interpret social media as a set of interactive Internet applications that open the door for creation, business, broaden personal social network and sharing content (Harry T. Dyer, 2020, 15-43), meaning that they basically refer to various online platforms that enable users' interaction and content sharing within online communities, which happens via blogs, groups, posts, live transmitted videos, comments and chats. They play a primer role in destination choices and in collecting information about places, accommodation, hospitality businesses and popular touristic spots both for young and senior generations (Dr. Rinzing 107-117, 2024).

They are used as tools that change the way people communicate. Applications that are easy to install on personal mobile phones have made social media easily accessible and have become a part of people's daily lives and routines, when in earlier time people needed to connect to the existing platforms using a stable computer in their homes.

Looking inside of their content, they host users' uploaded moments, with a tendency to focus on the good and pleasant ones, which are related to present and past experiences; without, on the other hand, meaning that the unpleasant content or negative reviews are missing.

As an extension, social media in their core are free of charge for someone to use, excluding cases that are related to advertising, promotions, and when they are used for business purposes. On the other hand, there have been observations that people were more willing to pay for their usage, as years go by (Babiker *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, hospitality businesses, marketing companies, travel agencies, bloggers, influencers and travelers, are using social media as a compass to direct them through the tourism market, in ways that will be beneficial for them, as for example to promote relevant content, which has proven to be an excellent strategy, particularly in engaging Gen Z travelers, who are extensive users of technology and with a consistent presence in social platforms (Cerna *et al.*, 2024).

### **2.1.1 Social Media Role in Shaping Behaviors in Modern Travel Culture**

It is widely known that online platforms are an inextricable piece in the puzzle of contemporary travel culture. Due to this, for them not to shape peoples' perceptions and behaviors is likely inevitable, because they have inserted on daily life in a strong way with their presence. Firstly, after a survey conducted, it was found that people rely on reviews via social platforms, which most of the time come along with pictures and star ratings (Tanase and Lucia, 2024,1063-1072). Before someone makes a choice to visit a certain place or destination, they will have checked everything about it online. At this point the opinion and comments of influencers and travel bloggers-vloggers, are of the same importance to the audience. However, there are times when hospitality brands with a strong name on the market do not come in accordance with popular peoples' opinions that influence audiences, and there are other cases where brands collaborate with public figures which benefit both sides. In the case where opinions match each other, they have the highest possibility for someone to make a choice over another one (Malik, 2023,37-49).

Moving forward, engagement and commitment to reliable brands matter to travelers. Travelers are setting brands they trust over the cost of their expenses. They prefer to invest money in a brand that they trust than trying an uncertain option. Even young travelers, disposing of lower budgets, tend to choose businesses that have good reviews and experience in the industry, whether that has to do with accommodation, activities etc. So, there has been a noticeable shift in the way travelers perceive and interact with hospitality brands due to the increasing influence of digital platforms and online reviews (Malik, 2023,37-49).

In Greece, so as in other countries in European audiences, public figures and influencers in and out of the domain, do have the ability to navigate peoples' choices, because people trust public opinion and especially when an opinion is expressed by someone who is considered to be a widely-recognized persona, without considering that they might not be a hospitality or tourism expert. However, it is essential to acknowledge that recommendations and opinions of influencers also come with challenges and raise matters of transparency, authenticity, and ethical considerations. Audiences should be clearly informed, updated and selective with the content that they rely on; the way to maintain a direction like this is to be educated, capable of critical thinking and distinguishing information online. As the influencer trend continues to evolve, Greek users need to ensure that this influential space remains fair and transparent (Alexander 2024, 13-23).

Greece used to be famous primarily for its history and priceless monuments, museums, temples, its arts, its pure and unique traditional products, and its balanced cuisine. After social media presence and for the last years, the perception and expectations that younger adult travelers have

over Greece, have been influenced by them and changed; Greece is marked more or less of a destination where travelers can find plenty of sun, wild nightlife, and infinite beach parties. According to research published from the Department of Business Administration in the University of Patras in Greece, 75.6% of travelers chose seaside locations, 28.4% urban areas to live such experiences, and only a few chose rural, mountain or lake locations (Theofanides and Karagiannopoulou, 2012,1-9).

Once the concept of travel culture is changed, a change in behavior follows, and that is the reason why people think and eventually act differently. The difference is not to be found only over the years, but also in the age of travelers. When in other fields people still preserve certain mentalities from older years, on the contrary, regarding technology, digital tools and trends, people seem to adapt easily. Gen Z and Gen X have totally different ways of thinking about travel and tourism, where Gen Y is in the middle limiting the gap, but tending to act and think similarly to Gen Z (Cerna *et al.*, 2024).

## **2.2 Traveler's Psychology**

In this chapter, readers will be familiarized with the meaning of the relation of psychology when making travel choices. Thoughts and emotions can be very easily affected, and masses can be maneuvered for various purposes, with a number one reason to be financial profit, popularity and engagement, either this concerns people or businesses. This chapter dives into psychological phenomena that indicate and explain the human behavior and thoughts generating in brain, through theories, and the effects that they have on them.

Psychology is the first and last thing for businesses and marketing domain to use and increase profit. However, it does not concern only businesses nowadays, but also single individuals and public figures who have influence on audiences (Katsikari *et al.*, 2020,2-18).

Most of the times people think that that they have free will, but this is not always a true condition, because thoughts and behaviors are influenced by era, technology, environment, social / financial status, other people etc.; in a few words our opinion is not one hundred per cent ours if we also consider that during these times the human species is under an self-identity crisis (Baumeister, 2008).

### 2.2.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Travel Motivation

Abraham Maslow in 1970 presented a theory known as the theory of motivation or the theory of needs. He included five stages in his hierarchy using the format of a pyramid to categorize and interpret human behavior concerning instincts, desires and basic needs. It should be noted that these needs are crucial to be met at an early age, to provide a healthy emotional development to one's personality (Pimentel et al. 2024, 3-15).

The first stage is about the **physiological needs** such as hunger, thirst, rest and reproduction, which consist of the basic element of survival instinct. Second stage of the pyramid includes **safety needs**, which represent stability, understanding, and control over the environment; need to avoid unexpected threats and unsafe grounds which are not familiar to the human being. As we go in the upper level, the third stage stands for the **belonging and love needs**, which express feelings of affection and intimacy between individuals, and the need of creating bindings and relationships. The fourth step on the pyramid is the **esteem needs**, which demonstrates prestige, sense of accomplishment and the search for recognition and attention. The final step on the theory is the **self-actualization needs**, where the goal for the individual is to become the most complete and authentic version of himself, and be free to act as it wants, if these actions are aligned with personal values and higher purpose (Pimentel et al. 2024, 1-18).

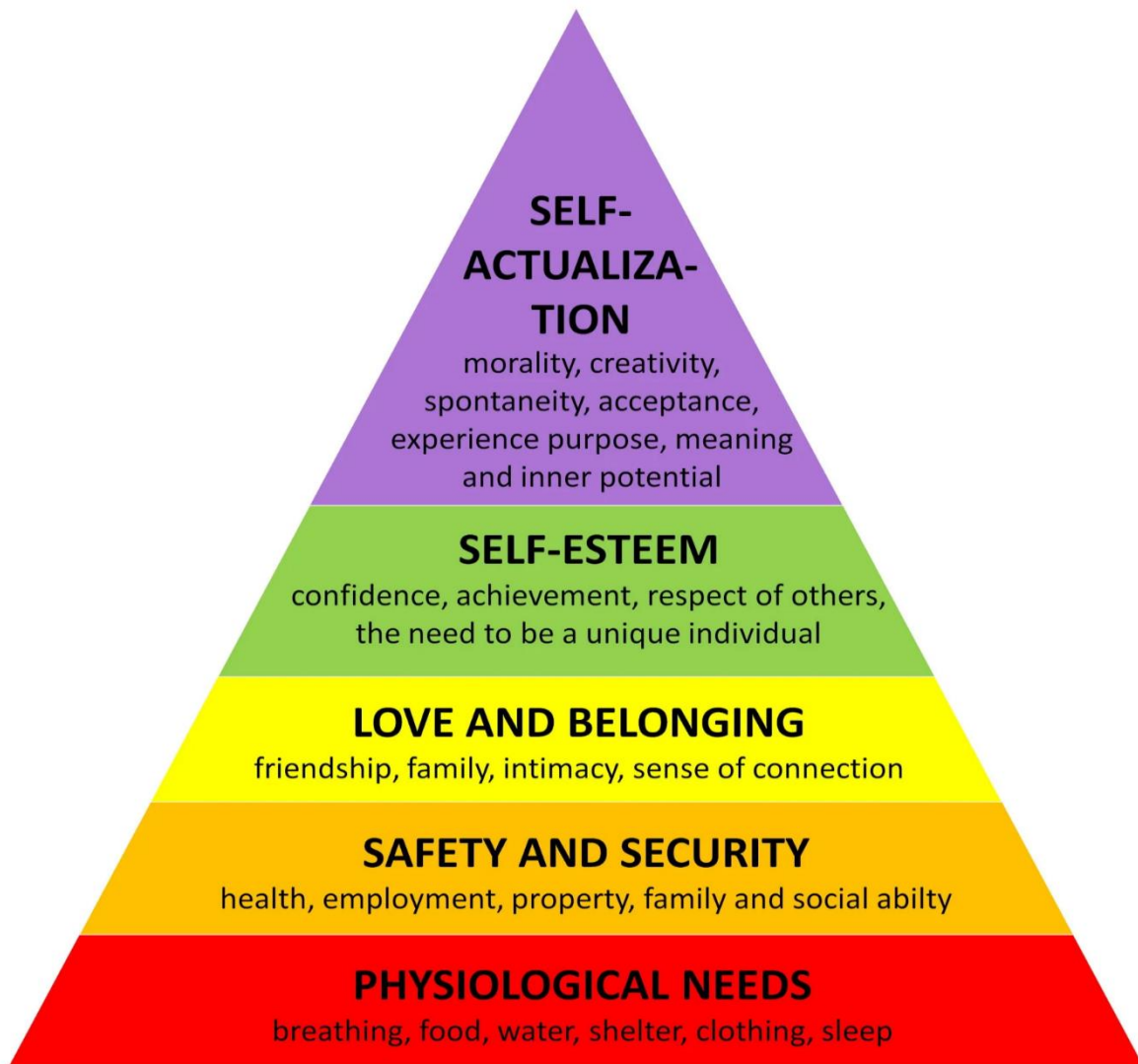


Figure 1. Maslow's Pyramid of Needs (Simply Psychology)

Traveling can belong to different stages of the theory regarding the purpose of the travel and the reason, which is done for. If traveling happens for survival reasons such as immigration, then it belongs to the first level, and if travel is for escaping danger, then it belongs to the second level. Continuing, if the goal is to endure self-esteem and accomplish personal achievements, then sets on the fourth level. Third and fifth level are the most common levels that travel can exist, because the premier is about social connection and communication and the other is about personal growth, exploring new experiences and potentials. On this thesis there is focus on these two levels that relate with social interaction between individuals and note that motivation effects behavior while intention acts on it.

Social media and particularly influencers, travel bloggers and businesses which use online platforms as tools for their benefit, engagement and promotion, upload posts videos and other types of content to increase their popularity and market audience. Simple users also share content on their personal accounts, at times of traveling and experiences. People on social platforms watch content of the attractions and destinations other users have experienced and may wish or intend to visit. When interacting with virtual content there is the idea of visiting a destination or having an experience, virtually, which has slightly the ability to provide traveler with a taste of it (Asri et al., 2024,1-17).

Social media content that users watch and get affected by, comes in abundance. One user can affect another one's feelings and thoughts just by posting online. Users are vulnerable to the exposure of the content and the information receiving is that much that it is difficult to distinguish and understand genuine personal needs. A destination or a certain place can become an attraction or a repulsion for people. When people are affected by others, they tend to lose touch with their actual needs and motives, and lose also genuine interest in a destination, activity or experience because they will just watch a video on TikTok (Ganbold et al. 2024, 914-930).

Motivation is possible to be stimulated or switched by social media platforms because they have the ability to guide viewers along various paths and elicit different feelings depending on the way they comment, promote or advertise a destination. Furthermore, they form and modify public opinion (Asri et al., 2024,1-17). The existing need for humans to socialize either on a physical or on a virtual aspect is continuous, and it is the primer need that digital platforms cover. For young travelers, the invention, for example of a mobile application called 'Gaffl' and similar apps or web pages, awakens the motive for young solo travelers to find partners and travel around the world. These online communities assist and set motivation for young generations to travel worldwide and strengthen multicultural connections. These online social platforms offer a variety of information concerning destinations, maps, accommodation, food service businesses, sights, attractions and reviews (Li Yiling, Cao Wenguan 2024, 156-160).

Ending, traveling is a powerful way to communicate with other people in different cultures and mentalities and a great opportunity to exchange opinions, share feelings, discuss and feel accepted, with an ultimate goal to relate with others and experience fulfillment.

### **2.2.2 Social Comparison**

There has been a theory initially proposed in 1954 regarding social comparison, from the psychologist Leon Festinger, which centers on the belief that individuals compare themselves

because they strive to gain assurance and self-values. The theory explains the way that individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others to reduce uncertainty in these domains and learn how to define the self (Festinger 1954, 117-140). It is rational though that people compare themselves to others who they consider as stronger, wealthier and more successful, and not with the ones that lag (Collins 1996, 51-69).

In the case of comparison, according to the philosopher Aristotle, elements being compared must belong to the same category or share a common basis. However, when comparing humans, who apparently fall into the same category, individual abilities and personal criteria show up and differ. On its base there is just suitable and not suitable for someone, and what matches ideas. The comparison between human beings cannot provide a stable and measurable result (Kapsali, 2012, 6-24). People compare themselves and count their values in relation to other people that have different backgrounds, tendencies and abilities. As a kind, we might belong to the same group, but we come from different backgrounds, mentalities, we speak different languages even in the same country, and we have different beliefs and experiences, and this is what makes the species unique.

Comparison, on the one hand, consists of a motivation for people to evolve, act, exit the comfort zone, try new experiences, and become better versions of themselves. On the other hand, when the background is weak, and individuals experience social anxiety, envy or feeling worthless and deal with strong self-esteem and self-confidence issues, comparison whether it is online or not, could be devastated, because it functions the opposite way, with negative effects on psychology (Collins 1996, 51-69). The relationship between social comparison and social anxiety is well-documented, and evidence found that frequent social comparison on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok is linked to negative self-perception, which increases the possibilities of dealing with social anxiety (Kunhao, Ma'rof and Dahamat Azam, 2024, 1067-1080). Comparison should be used as motivation for greatness and take a more of an admiration role than jealousy.

Social media can at any time shift mental and psychological status and endure forms of competitiveness that affect self-worth and mood, which affect adaptability in society. Instead of comparing themselves to their past behaviors and mentalities, they compare themselves most of the time to unknown people who promote a certain self-image online, without considering whether this image is pure or what the background, values and the goals of this person are (Yuetong, 2024, 1-7). So, basically humans tend to compare themselves to nice, flawless and at the same time utopic concepts, behaviors and lifestyles which do not match reality at all. Users tend to define their values by like counts and compare themselves to posts showing other users visiting impressive destinations, unique beaches, roads, nature landscapes and various cultures (Qiu Yue 2024, 1-4).

Social media has increased levels of mental health and psychology issues and in 2025 users have more insecurities than before (Shagufta, 2024, 12-26). Travelers are influenced by online reviews, Instagram creators and business, TikTokers, travel bloggers and vloggers on websites and on YouTube videos, and then, from other travelers whose profession is to travel, advertise and promote destinations - places on media such as TV, Radio and online Podcasts. While users interact with content, they kind of visualize themselves as the main character who is living the experience or imagines how it would be and how it would feel to live the experience at some time in the future (Stiakakis and Vlachopoulou, 2017, 58-69). On the one hand this state may become inspiring, but on the other hand it may encourage low levels of self-confidence and envy issues.

Summing up, comparison is an idea, and depending on its application it can turn out to be beneficial or harmful. Social media has extended the time and place that it happens and has inserted it more in our daily lives (Missaoui, 2024, 75-85). Travelers who use social platforms for travelling purposes and who rely on online content should be aware of the dangers and traps that are hiding behind the fancy front, and understand their needs and traveling reasons; avoid traveling because someone else visited a destination-place and users congratulated, applauded or liked this pick, and also avoid traveling or living an experience because another user did, assuming that this is going to provide with worth and validation, which ends up to be temporary. Traveling and experience should be under the veil of sincerity and not to be used for show-off purposes, if the traveler wants them to have a profound meaning (Stiakakis and Vlachopoulou, 2017, 58-69; Yuetong, 2024,1-7)

### **2.2.3 Social Cognitive Theory**

According to psychology theories, learning is a link between stimulus, and comporment. To begin with, social cognitive theory (SCT) refers to the ability for a person to learn through observing others and, dynamically interacting with personal, social, and environmental factors. A key element of SCT is self-efficacy, which significantly influences an individual's capacity to adopt and succeed in new behaviors (Zdravkova, 2024, 53-55). The Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura was the first one to propose this theory which is an extension of social learning that includes the effects of cognitive processes, such as conceptions, judgment, and motivation, on an individual's behavior and on the environment that influences them (Schunk, 2012, 101-123).

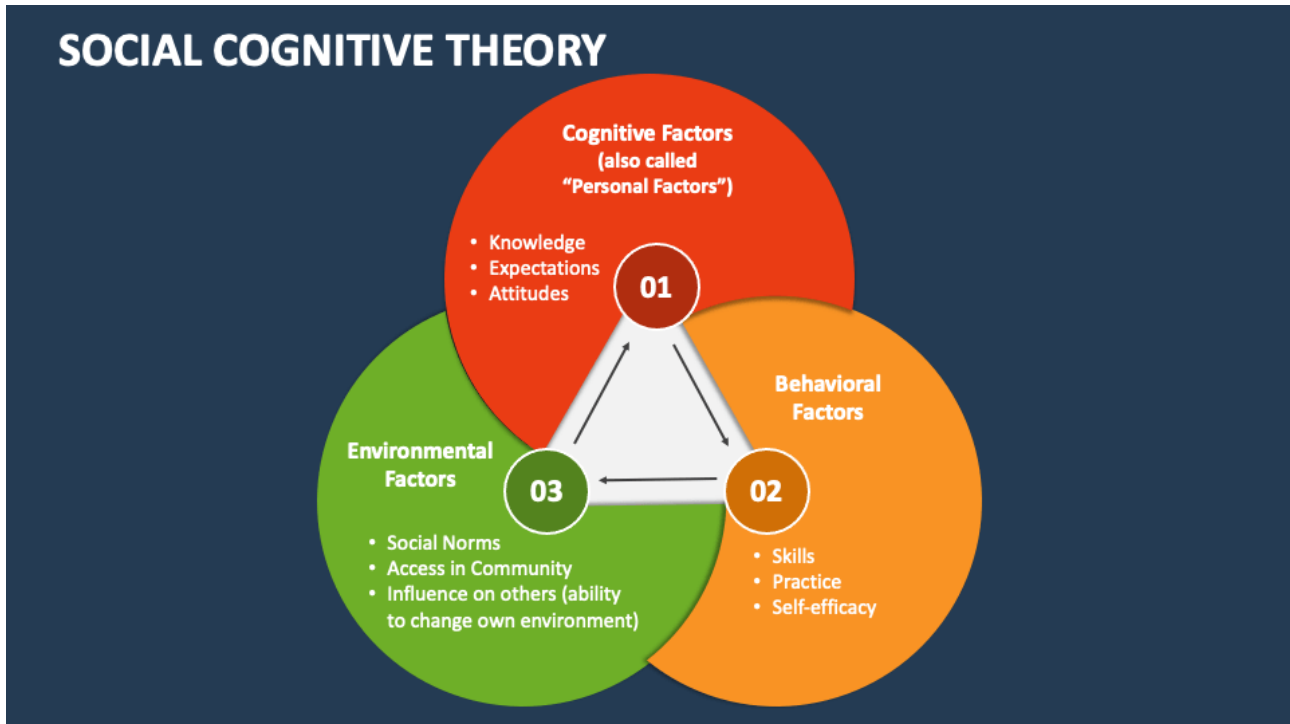


Figure 2. Social Cognitive Theory (Simply Psychology)

To continue, SCT can also, with the evolution of technology, apply for both physical and digital environments, having small differences. Users interact with both physical and digital environments daily, often trying to turn virtuality into reality. People form and alter behaviors by observation, and this process starts from an early age. People, as children, are observing the environment that they live in, receive vibes, and through this, they learn compartments, experience feelings, and act, because this process is a part of a person's development. Coming into adult life, people still use SCT consciously or unconsciously and shape opinions and mentality (Elzon and Timokhovich, 2024).

Traveler can be affected by the content he is watching and the accounts he follows. SCT works the same way; traveler watches, interacts, thinks, generates feelings, shapes the behavior and acts, by making decisions.

Instagram, same as other media, (Facebook, Gaffl, YouTube, TikTok etc.) provide a frame for understanding the foundational principles of social cognitive theory, including reciprocal determinism, symbolic consumption, self-efficacy, and learning, all of which can assist interpret human behavior. With the social media bang people have multiple stimuli, by watching other people's lives in several phases, which shapes their own decision-making process; users simultaneously influence and are influenced by their interactions on the platform (Atasoy and Türkay, 2024, 947-962). Content creators often inspire users through travel-related posts and

these visual materials have symbolic meaning, which users interpret and internalize, thereby influencing their behavior.

Interactions on platforms, such as likes and comments, further play a role in encouraging or challenging travel-related habits. Users assess their self-efficacy by comparing their own experiences to those shared on the platforms, evaluating their ability to achieve similar outcomes (Atasoy and Türkay, 2024, 947-962).

Additionally, SM strengthens social learning by urging users to share and engage in travel experiences. Options when uploading a post have now become more and more detailed; there is room to add music, change the colors, make a collage etc. This shared content helps in making positive perceptions of destinations, demonstrating experiential learning. Moreover, the platform's digital environment facilitates both direct and indirect learning, where the positive emotions and immersive experiences generated by social media boost tourist behavior (Atasoy and Türkay, 2024, 947-962) (Y. Soeharso, Moningka and Selviana, 2023). Considering also that people count on the recommendations of others, the visual and audio e-servicescape of social networks is a vital matter of information.

#### **2.2.4 FOMO**

Fear of missing out, or in short way FOMO, is a contemporary psychological phenomenon that has drawn attention in relation to the usage of social media platforms, focusing on younger generations who are most vulnerable in online exposure. This phenomenon refers to the anxiety that individuals feel when they perceive that others are having worthwhile experiences from which they are absent, and they have a strong sense that they are missing out on important parts of life. Continuous and constant updates and uploads on social media keep the phenomenon alive and extend it (Kunhao, Ma'rof and Azam, 2024).

It sets fertile ground for people to feel anxious about relationships and acceptance. It tends to be addictive, and at the same time blocking peoples' actions and making them passive and overthinkers in a harmful way. FOMO is a vicious circle that feeds from current insecurities without limits. It does not work as an inspiring factor to enable people not to miss out, but as a whirlpool in which people are diving in (Kunhao, Ma'rof and Azam, 2024) (Montag and Markett, 2023). Imagine of a persona profile who views every day on social media posts of people that are traveling with their families or friends and partners, or they are visiting unique places, accompanied with experiences and activities; it is more likely for the viewer to feel unloved, unworthy, lonely or deficient because he is not experiencing any of that, than to admire of what the other user is doing.

Fear of missing out does not make discrimination and is possible to impact on any person, with a tendency to affect young adults (Y. Soeharso, Moningka & Selviana 2023, 2-9). To add, if the individual is dealing with psychological issues and insecurities, or his circle is not healthy and supportive the situation could get even more difficult to manage (Luth and Maryam, 2024).

The perspective and the interpretation that someone gives to facts or the attitude, is subjunctive and it is closely connected with background, mentality, expectations, and personal goals. In other words, a post from someone's trip to Thailand and its exotic islands, for someone who watches content of it online may mean nothing, but for somebody else it could be a dream of life. These two personalities will percept differently this post, feel dissimilar emotions and make divergent thoughts about it (Harahap *et al.*, 2024) (Putri and Sa'id, 2024).

Advancing, an idea of some examples of FOMO follows to better understand its application on social media and traveling life. Supposing the following:

- A popular brand posts:

"Only 2 Sea villas are left for the summer season! Don't miss your chance to wake up to crystal blue waters in Maldives. Book now!"

This example creates a sense of urgency, making travelers feel they'll miss out on an exclusive experience and the use of limited availability aims to urge travelers to act quickly.

- A travel influencer posts a reel featuring a hot air balloon ride over Cappadocia at sunrise:

"This was truly magical! The sky filled with colors, and the view was out of this world. Don't wait, this needs to be on your bucket list!"

This description of the content triggers FOMO by shouting out an extraordinary experience that others might not yet have had.

- A travel influencer collaborating an African brand who organizes luxurious activities, posts a TikTok video form a complete safari adventure, with footage of lions, elephants, and giraffes, accompanied with a suitable emotional soundtrack:

"I can't believe I'm finally here. This has been my dream for years! Have you been waiting too long to take that dream trip? Life is short, don't wait until it's too late to create memories like these. #YouOnlyLiveOnce #WildLife #SafariNature"

This example triggers FOMO by making viewers feel as though they are wasting time and missing out on transformative, once-in-a-lifetime experience others are already enjoying. It is accomplished by using phrases like “life is short” and “don’t wait until it’s too late,” which rises anxiety.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that usage of outstanding colors, or several color combinations, imperative form, emojis and music when posting, is a very smart and powerful movement to elicit emotions and increase engagement through online social platforms. Fear of missing out leaves a notable footprint on people, especially younger audiences, and it is used for marketing purposes (Journal Cogent Business and Management, Bok, Shum and Lee, 2025, 2-11).

To end with, here are some suggestions for travelers to confront FOMO, that follow; Firstly, the most important thing for the traveler is to focus on his personal travel goals and make a list of destinations - experiences that truly matter, rather than comparing oneself to others. This helps to set priorities that are correspondent with interests, while at the same time lessening the consequences of external factors. Secondly, setting boundaries on how much time is spent scrolling through travel content on SM is useful, as well as avoiding engagement with posts that provoke feelings of inadequacy or anxiety. Following accounts that inspire the individual without pressure is more beneficial. Lastly, reflecting on the trips and memories are already gained should not be underestimated, and keeping in mind that everyone’s journey is unique, without “right” way to experience travel (Mohanana & Shekhar 2021, 57-63).

### **2.3 Guest Experience**

In this subchapter there is a focus on understanding of the term experience, comparing virtuality with reality, and uncovering the foundations of creating memorable positive experience, which can provide traveler with long-life lessons.

Experience is often explained as a conscious state, where individuals observe or participate in events and gain knowledge through this process. Although it is commonly linked to perception and sensation, it can also refer to other forms of consciousness that help humans understand the world. In a broader sense, experience is not limited to just what people sense or feel but includes any conscious state that contributes to practical knowledge and adapting in life situations (Borchert, 2006).

Experience may become memorable if it is strong enough to provoke emotions and awaken the senses (Ela Laela 2024, 1197-1204). Experience can be both positive and negative, which is

subjunctive when it refers to tourism sector, because every person's preference and requests differ from each other, and that is why each of them perceives and defines differently the positive and the negative experience.

When an experience becomes memorable it can change someone's life, transform behavior and play a key role in influencing a traveler's desire to return. It is a personal and lasting impression formed during a trip, which remains in the traveler's memory even afterwards and for a long time. This impact is mainly driven by the emotional bond created through experience with a destination. When travelers encounter something new and intriguing, their minds retrieve relevant knowledge to help interpret and make sense of the experience. The stronger this connection is, the more likely they are to recall and want to re-live their visit, increasing chances of returning in the future (Ela Laela 2024, 1197-1204).

Moving on, in this modern era, experience has also become a business for companies and marketers. In current times, people have the option to offer an experience as a gift to someone, totally replacing and repositioning the idea of a gift that was in mind some years ago. Companies, businesses and single public figures by collaborating with each other or not, through marketing techniques and with the usage of social media, promote and offer experience to audiences whether they are engaged or not. Goal is to offer alternatives and initiative ideas that they individual will find desirable and meaningful (Miao *et al.*, 2025).

Besides, immense and luxury hospitality brands have made the experience a separated and complete department, primarily to better understand guests, satisfy needs and meet high-standard expectations. The Guest Experience department ensures that each guest receives tailor-made experiences, from customized room preferences to special requests, enhancing overall contentment and loyalty. By creating memorable moments and exceeding expectations, guests develop a deeper emotional attachment to the brand, which increases repeaters and positive word-of-mouth. In the highly competitive luxury hospitality industry, offering exceptional experiences to guests that also afford this kind of treatment, sets a business apart, enduring its premium status and justifying its high price (Pinho *et al.* 2025, 88-100).

There are differences though in the virtual and real experience, which will be analyzed and show readers when to use each experience depending on the wishing outcome. A real time experience offers sensory engagement, emotional elicitation and connection, interaction with real environment and authenticity. While on the contrary, virtuality in experiences is more cost-effective, providing safety and sustainability, it is easily accessible and convenient (Nazare *et al.*, 2024) (Hadianfar & Darzian A., 2021). Social media may provide virtual content and experience and make it to be as close as possible to reality; but what happens when the virtual image does not match reality?

### 2.3.1 Balancing Virtual Hype with Real Travel Bliss

Within the time of this new digital era, evidently, the tourism and hospitality industry has inserted technology into its operations and is updating continuously. Systems have changed and operations are becoming more and more convenient, easy, and fast to use, minimizing possibilities of errors. Hotels and hospitality companies use technology in several ways, like for example is the online booking and reservation systems via websites and mobile apps. Additionally, they use Artificial Intelligence (AI) and offer virtual assistance, such as chatbots, that provide real-time support for travelers (Singh, Sharma and Bangad, 2024). There are also mobile hotel and travel apps designed that allow planning, easy check-ins, real-time notifications and secure and transparent transactions for bookings such as with Blockchain tech, or cryptocurrency and digital payments for alternative payment methods (Radic, 2024, 79-98) (Dianawati et al. 2024, 213-220).

Moreover, many hotels have gained the title 'Smart', which is justified because they make much more use of technology. They use robots to assist with concierge and housekeeping services, and they provide keyless entries using smartphones or facial recognition. Except from smart hotels there are smart rooms that dispose automated room controls for lighting, temperature, and entertainment (Dr. Naidu 2019, 76-79). In industry professionals use AR apps that provide interactive city tours and historical site overlays, and VR for guests to preview hotel rooms or travel destinations before booking (Petrevska and Cingoski 2016, 203-204; Singh, Sharma and Bangad, 2024).

Continuing, technology assists in big data management and personalized recommendations and advertisements for guests that match preferences and offer ameliorated experiences. Last, but most important apply of technology are social media – digital marketing that businesses use for branding, guest engagement, and influencer marketing (Tanvir, 2022).

Social media acts as an interface between virtual and real-world tourism experiences, that helps travelers explore, plan, and connect with destinations in all three phases of the travel procedure. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok where quality images, videos, and influencer content, shared and destinations and tourism experiences present, before actual visits.

Travel influencers and bloggers – vloggers, create immersive storytelling through their social media content, inspiring travel picks and enhancing virtual connections with destinations. Travelers share experiences through posts, videos, and reviews on platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social media, providing authentic virtual insights for destinations, businesses and services (Islam Md. Tariqul 2021, 59-68; Aksoy, 2024; Dr. Rinzing, 2024). To add, AI-driven algorithms on

social media suggest destinations, accommodations, and activities based on user preferences, proposing a customized virtual travel planning experience.

On top of it, the power of live streaming has become great. Hospitality brands and travel agencies use Facebook Live, Instagram Live, and YouTube to offer real-time experiences, allowing potential tourists to wander into a variety of accommodations and attractions virtually. Social media combine AR filters and VR travel experiences, enabling users to visualize and desire what they have partially – virtually- experienced. SM is used as a tool to promote real-time experiences and give a taste to travelers through virtual content. So, to better understand, virtual experience is pretty much used as a short taste to travelers, for the brands to promote the actual experiences.

Real travel, in contrast with the virtual one which lacks multisensory stimulation (e.g., smell, taste, touch), and emotional elicitation, provides higher psychological well-being, happiness, and familiarity with cultures (Gilovich, Kumar and Jampol, 2014). Social media content at times can be beautified by its promoters and genuine experience may differ. Also, virtual travel does not support local economies, while real travel drives spending on hotels, transport, food, and attractions.(Vinnakota *et al.*, 2023). Real travel provides physical activity, stress reduction, and social interaction, which virtual experiences lack, walking through a destination, engaging in outdoor activities, and experiencing nature have proven physical and mental health benefits (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2009).

Virtual experience in tourism may be used as a substitute but not replace real experience. There are benefits of the usage of it, and social media work as a promoting tool and thought-emotion generator, to enable, urge or assist the traveler with the decision-making process. Human element and interaction are a piece of the memorable experience puzzle and add vitality.

### **2.3.2 Creating Memorable and Transformative Experiences**

Last years the form of the economy has changed, and there is more focus on experiences than services. Brakus and Schmitt developed a four-dimensional scale that uses sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions of brand experiences and observed that people through experiences invoke thoughts and emotions about a brand and engage with it (J. RR. Brent Jong Hyeong and McCormick, 2012, 15-25).

Memorable experience is the subjective mental and emotional state of an individual who perceives an experience in a certain, powerful way that has an influence on him. A memorable experience can be both positive and negative. The status of the experience depends on the thoughts and

feelings that the experience will elicit. Feelings are the dominant factor for an experience to be marked as positive or negative in human beings. If feelings are way too strong the experience may become transformative as well for the person (Ela Laela, 2024).

The marketing field which is closely connected to hospitality and social media fields, has changed from net marketing to experiential marketing to enhance engagement and increase profit (Tarssanen and Kylänen, 2006, 134-149). The hospitality industry can provide audiences both services and experiences or turn services into experiences. It aims to create positive memorable and transformative experiences for travelers (Hemmington, 2007, 747-755).

For an experience to be memorable it should have the element of being tailor-made, so that it is easier for the guest to enjoy and engage (Joseph and Gilmore, 1998, 97-105). Moving forward, the four realms of experience (4E's) according to Joseph and Gilmore (1998) implemented as Entertainment, Escapist, Educational and Esthetic, indicate the four pylons of a complete memorable experience and combine both the passive and active participation of the individuals into experiences.

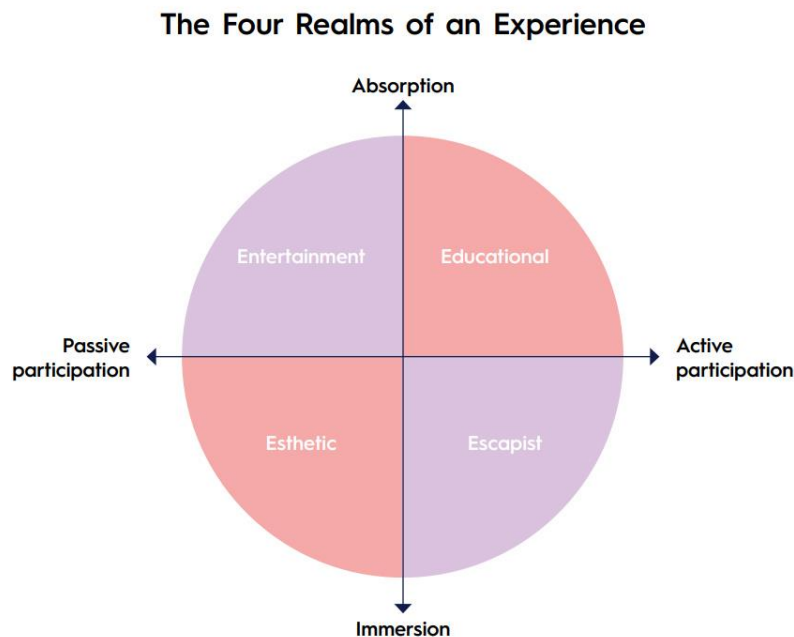


Figure 3. Four Realms of Experience (Pine & Gilmore 1998).

Guests and travelers vary in personalities and preferences, so a tailor-made experience wins out from one that can apply to multiple individuals (Dwivedi, Mahanty & Khashouf, 2024). This kind of experience captures the attention of the person who is living it and aligns with likings. Designed to

be multisensory is a pros and crucial element; a multisensory experience should use more than two senses, and it enhances perception, emotions and memory.

Giving an example of a complete multisensory experience would be experiencing a hot air balloon safari and enjoying breakfast on it; breath taking view, whoosh of the balloon air burner, calls of animals listening from far away, aroma of freshly baked pastries, the touch of the woven rattan basket, and the taste of the products included. On the other hand, for an experience to be transformative it is vital to manage to profoundly change the individual's perspective and behavior by altering beliefs, expanding awareness, or giving fundamental personal growth, including rising strong emotions and reflection. For instance, a survival retreat for individuals or groups matches these ideas.

Ultimately, a business may create and obtain a competitive advantage over another one by launching memorable and transformative experiences. In that case, guests' expectations and desires are fully met; meaning that repeaters are created, and new guests are engaging. When guests have these kinds of options are willing to pay for their experiences and they build a positive word-of-mouth, which benefits the business in terms of positive image making and distinguish it from others (Pine II and Gilmore 1998, 176).

## **2.4 Converging Dynamics of Social Media, Psychology and Experiences**

Social media has entirely changed the psychology and experience of travelers, and act like a reflection of modern travel behavior. If we look from a psychological angle, using social media during travel is a way for people to express themselves in harmful ways, because the black mirror is in the middle of this expression, and gain validation. Sharing travel experiences on social platforms allows people to build up a story and 'sell' it to others, that is based on how they wish to be or look to their audience, and not how they sincerely are in their personal lives outside this e-world. The instant satisfaction picked up from likes, comments, and shares props up positive emotional replies and holds up a community of engagement that improves the travel experience itself, just because the people feel better. However, this desire for social approval can sometimes lead to psychological anguish, particularly when travelers feel the need and pressure to follow some imaginary online standards or measure their personal worth or success of their trips by the level of engagement received. Ambivalent opinions among personal experience and social comparison are able to modify the way humans behave within their environments, and this makes them sometimes sacrifice authentic moments of contentment. (Xiaodong, Meng and Donggen, 2023).

Digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have an impact on travel planning, viewpoints of destinations and rise expectations. Travelers increasingly rely on UGC, to gather information that will help them plan a travel; however, this might lead to a phenomenon called destination envy, which is basically the tendency for travelers to compare their experiences with those presented online, resulting in an elevated, but not normal willing to visit specific locations based on flawless or dreamlike images (Liu Dege et al. 2024, 1-14). Hence, this constant exposure to content advocates for a mindset, where destinations are not chosen that much for their heritage or the things that they have to offer to travelers, but for their ability to create moments worthy of social media recognition (Bilan, Tovmasyan & Dallakyan 2024, 153-175).

In conclusion, social media impacts on both the psychology and experiences of modern travelers, shapes the decision-making on travel planning and the way they interact with destinations. It creates a frame where a sense of competition and comparison bloom, which changes expectations and behavior. While social media can ameliorate travel experience, it introduces a layer of psychological complexity as well that can influence travelers' perceptions of their own experiences. As the presence of social media continues to grow, understanding its impact on the travel industry and its psychological implications for individuals is essential for developing a more authentic approach to travel in the digital age.

#### 2.4.1 Author's Framework

The survey focuses more on the theories mentioned and its purpose is to uncover the range of the influence of social media on people. Data will be extracted from questions relevant to behaviors, routines and emotions. Questions are more focused on the relation that people have with social media in the travel-life framework and in the table board below the way that every theory is used in the survey with the form of a question, is presented. Basically, the usage column refers to the way that question was created to be inserted into the survey.

Author	Theory	Element	Usage
Maslow, 1943	Pyramid of Needs	Hierarchy of human motivation and needs.	How social media fulfills psychology, esteem needs + create motivation.

Festinger, 1954	Social Comparison	Self-evaluation through comparison with others.	How exposure to travel content on social media constructs travelers' decisions + social acceptance or engagement.
Bandura, 1989	S.C.T.	Learning through observation and modeling.	Check the impact of influencers + peer-shared experiences on travel behavior.
Dr. Herman, 1996. Patrick J. McGinnis, 2004	FOMO	Anxiety of missing out on rewarding experiences. / Decision-making influenced by fear of exclusion.	Spontaneous and last minutes offers or bookings, + how it drives travelers to seek exclusive / trendy experiences.
Pine, Joseph & Gilmore, 1998, 2002, 2013	Experience Realms	Education, Entertainment Escapist, Esthetic	Evaluating promotion of travel experiences. Creating memorable moments with the four realms.

### **3 Research Methodology**

The research uses a quantitative method approach to edit data and spot the influence of social media on traveler psychology and experience. It is conducted through an online survey using a public link, targeting people who actively use social media in general and more specifically in the context of travel. The survey will consist of 21 questions designed to give answers and help us measure the psychological effects of social media on travel-related decision-making, expectations, and overall experiences, mainly in Greek audience. The questionnaire includes 20 close-ended mandatory questions and 1 optional open-ended question.

The data collected will be edited using statistical methods to recognize patterns, links, and potential pay-off of social media on travelers. This will be done by using the assistance of Webropol platform, which is recommended by the university, and it is a valid and simple-to-use tool. Inferential statistical techniques will be applied to interpret the data and extract information to make conclusions. This approach delegates systematic analysis, ensuring that research produces reliable results. Using a quantitative approach on this research is much more purposeful, since the topic belongs to social context, and is related to human beings. Gathering data from people who are experiencing and expressing their sincere feelings and thoughts for the topic, is the best way to collect real and up-to-date information (Westerman, 2006). Through this methodology, the study will make some light into the role of social media in modern travel culture.

#### **3.1 Ethics in Research**

To guarantee honesty, we need to take into consideration that there is an ethical part regarding research, among other things. The research is conducted by following Haaga-Helia's research guidelines and all ethical principles, and complies with strict standards to protect participants' rights, secure confidentiality, and maintain clearness. Given that this study uses a quantitative approach to investigate the influence of social media on traveler psychology and experience, separated attention is paid to informed for the consent, data protection, and compliance with ethical regulations.

To begin with, before starting to complete the survey, participants will be wholly informed about the research goals, procedures, and their rights through a detailed consent form. Regarding the format of the survey, participation will be entirely voluntary, and participants will have the right to withdraw at any point without providing justification. Since the study relies on online surveys, participants will acknowledge a consent form before proceeding with the questionnaire. The survey questions are

carefully designed for them not to be in any case inappropriate, invading or intrusive and do not cause psychological discomfort.

Following Haaga-Helia's guidelines for data management, all collected data will be handled wisely. To secure privacy, responses will be anonymized, and no personally identifiable information will be collected; there are questions regarding age or sex, but since the survey work with anonymity and is online, demographic data cannot be separated. The research will also acquiesce with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) indications to prevent unauthorized access, misuse, or revealing of data.

Continuing, to preserve a good character in research is essential, so as to have a base built upon validity and reliability. To do that and avoid bias, the study will follow consistent and standardized methods for collecting and analyzing the data. The research process will remain transparent by clearly presenting the methodology, acknowledging any limitations, and reporting the survey outcome in a descent way. If any unexpected outcome or ethical concerns occurred during the study will be disclosed in the final research report.

By following these ethical guidelines, the research will contribute genuinely to understanding more about the thesis topic and meet the highest standards of ethical conduct.

### **3.2 Data Collection Method**

The survey will gather demographic information data, and almost all questions are closed-ended. To calculate the psychological stigma, multiple answers that are related to emotions regarding travel-related social media content are included, as also questions regarding the travel expectations vs. reality, pressure to create or share travel content online, social media comparisons on travel satisfaction. The estimated time for the participants to complete the questionnaire is approximately 7 minutes and will not last more than 10 minutes. The number of questions is 20, and a consent form will be included, before starting with the questions.

Considering the travel experience, participants will be asked with relevant questions to the influence of social media on suggestions on choice of destinations, accommodations, activities, travel behaviors and authenticity or not, of travel experiences. Research will also reveal frequency and motivation behind it of sharing travel experiences online and engagement (comments, likes, shares).

Research utilizes Webropol, a reliable online survey tool, for data collection, which allows an e-questionnaire distribution. The questionnaire, as mentioned above, consists of mainly closed-

ended questions to keep up with consistency and facilitate quantitative analysis, and only one optional open-ended question. Close-ended questions are preferred because they allow participants to answer faster and do not demand the disposal of plenty of time or a lot of thinking. Questions are designed based on existing literature and a framework related to the thesis topic. The survey includes Likert scale, multiple-choice, and ranking questions and is distributed via social media platforms and email to be presented to relevant correspondents. Also, word of mouth has proved to be very helpful along with the e-survey. Moreover, it is happening in action time online, and it is accessible for a diverse and sample, with an open link, so that the users can also share with more people, and remain open for a predetermined period, allowing sufficient data collection. Survey is conducting in Greece, but it has been sent also to people that have all the qualifications to be part of it, that mentioned above but are not Greeks. To move on, on the first page of the survey there is a consent statement, where at the bottom of it, participants can select the option 'I agree' and proceed with the questions. Lastly, Webropol secures data and GDPR, protecting personal information, and data is exported in different formats (e.g., Excel, SPSS) for statistical analysis.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The survey data collected through Webropol will be checked and then feedback will be exported in an Excel and Word format for the process to be adequate. The exact period that the survey is open is March of 2025. Summary statistics, including frequency of distributions, will provide an overview of participants' demographics and results. Additionally, to reconnoiter relationships and connections, the inquiry will focus on computing levels of social media intervention on travelers' thoughts, choices, expectations, and experiences. Before processing, the dataset will be evaluated to address any inconsistencies or left out entries to confirm exactness. To conclude, the results will be organized logically and presented through colored chart bars to be easy for the reader to spot differences, offering an inclusive and impartial interpretation of the data. The online platform for the survey was running for 3 weeks and the results were gathered during that period of time, having 75 responding in the first 2 weeks, and 7 the last week; whereas 202 people opened the survey in total but did not complete it until the end to submit the answers.

### **3.4 Validity of the Study**

Given that this research follows a quantitative approach, careful attention is paid to the consistency of data collection, the accuracy of tools, and the overall credibility of the outcome. Haaga-Helia's

academic guidelines, which are followed is the reason that validity can be confirmed and allowing for objective conclusions. To achieve reliability, meaning the consistency and stability of the research elements in total during its process, the survey questionnaire will be designed with questions showing the reality in social media influences on travelers' psychology and experience. A simulation of the survey will be delivered to some volunteers before the actual data collection starts, to provide feedback and make room for changes so that the final questionnaire is complete satisfying for the purpose.

Questions on the survey are mainly generated by collecting ideas from the theories mentioned throughout the thesis, and existing literature. They were designed to help spot the real impact that social media has on people's lives regarding traveling, but also to understand the mindset behind that, the mindset of businesses and mentality of people. Samples will be taken from people who travel and are actively using social media. Furthermore, a wide age range will be also included so that the survey is more objective, but it should be well-noted that the Greek X generation, and some of the Y's are more likely not to be that familiar with the combination of traveling and social media. To minimize biases and errors, the data collection process has the same conditions for all respondents (Sukamolson, 2007).

By implementing these measures, this study holds a high degree of reliability and validity, allowing trustworthy conclusions. This approach strengthens the academic value of the research and provides a deep dive into the main topic which should be investigated.

## 4 Results

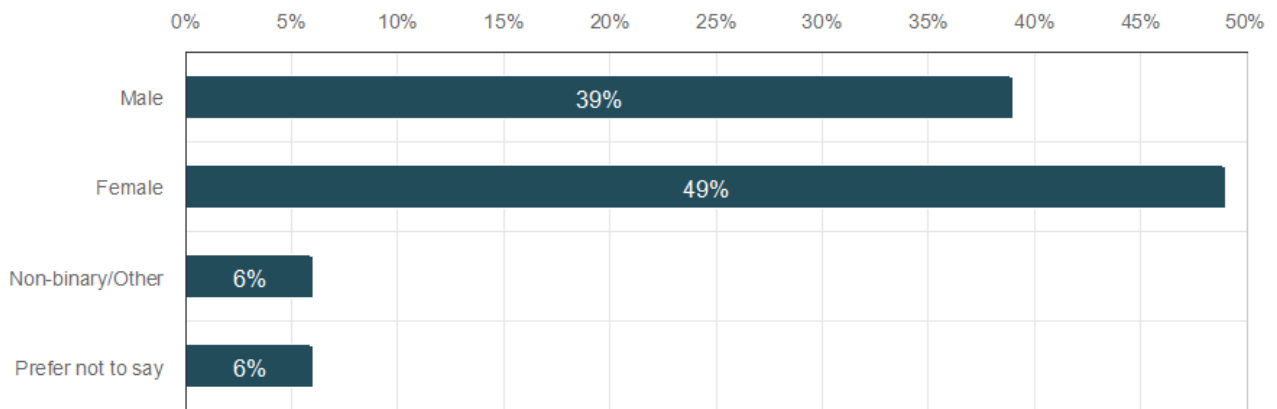
In this chapter, all results brought to the table will be separated, presented and discussed. The goal which needs to be achieved is to provide answers to the one big initial question of the thesis, and on what scale. Below, to set apart the pieces and then unite them, we will start with an overview of traveler profiles, giving light into the demographic information and behavior. Next, the psychological phenomena that master travel decisions will be discussed, and a comparison between virtual and real experiences will follow, assessing their consequences on expectations and contentment. Finally, the chapter will acknowledge study's limitations, providing a whole and clear explanation and simplification of the results.

### 4.1 Travelers Profiles

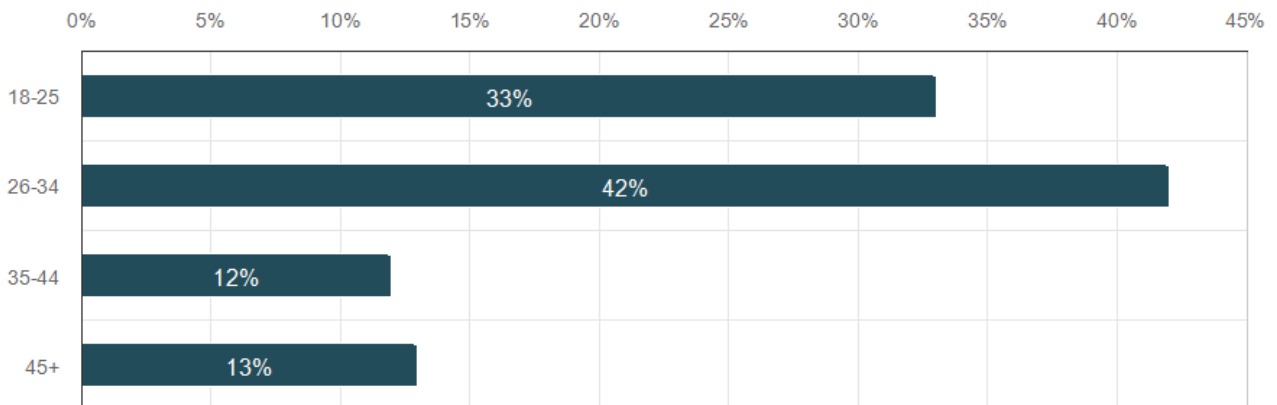
At this point we will have a look at all travelers' profiles participated in the survey. The first and most important information to commence with is that participants come from different financial backgrounds. This is mentioned because everyone wholesale financial or social status is using social media. Social media applies to diversity but also encourages it. There is also diversity on the sex, age, nationality, educational level, preferences etc. Participants are active users of social media even for those who are over the age of 45, which makes the survey much more interesting in terms of hearing the voice and the opinions of people that belong to a different generation; but yet they are also users and adapting into this digital era of current times. There is also diversity in the occupation of the participants, who have, as mentioned before, different backgrounds, but most of the participants are regular travelers and people that have experience or are working in the hospitality industry; mainly in hotel businesses, but also in businesses that are related to the food and beverage domain.

Specifically, the percentage of the female participants was a bit higher than the male one, having 49% female participants and 39% male participants, while the 6% was non-binary and "prefer not to say. Regarding the age, the highest percentage was between 26-34, and 33% was between 18-25, while around 12% of participants were above the age of 35, and the 45+ category is following all. Since the survey corresponds more to Greek audience, the 80% was Greek, and rest is followed by the European audience and other nationalities. Moving on, data remainders from the survey will be revealed below analytically as they concern the main object of the research, and it is easier to reach a conclusion. The number of respondents reached 82, and results are presented below:

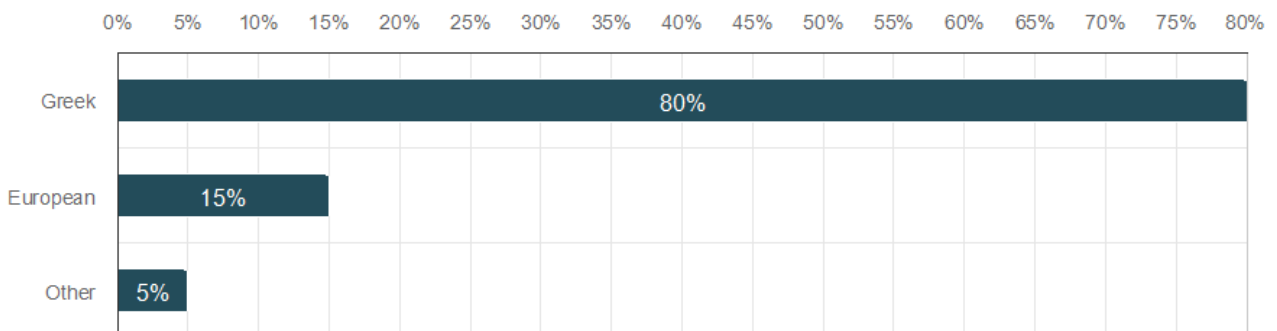
## Gender



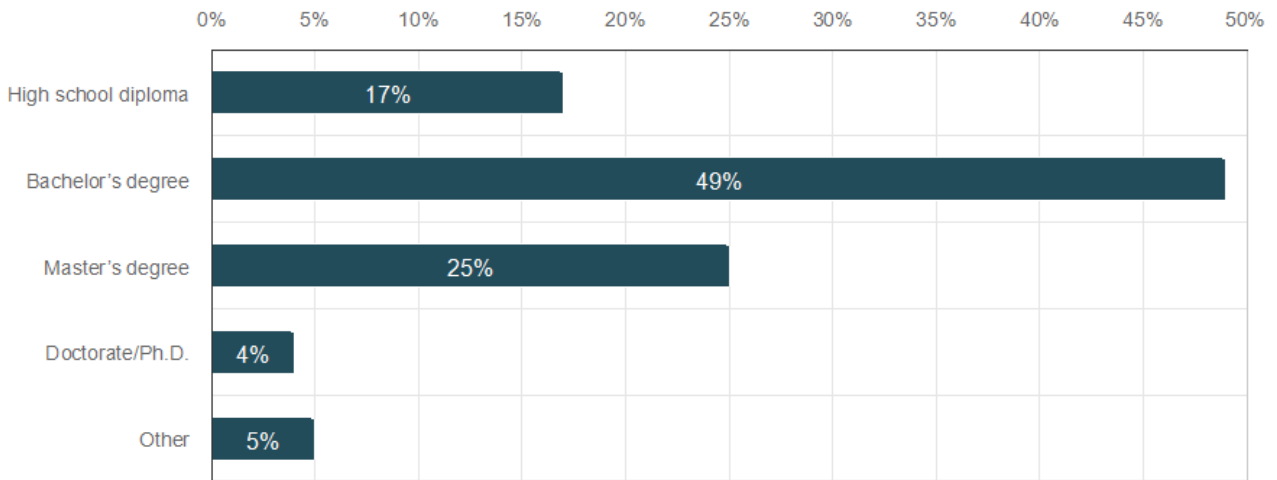
## Age



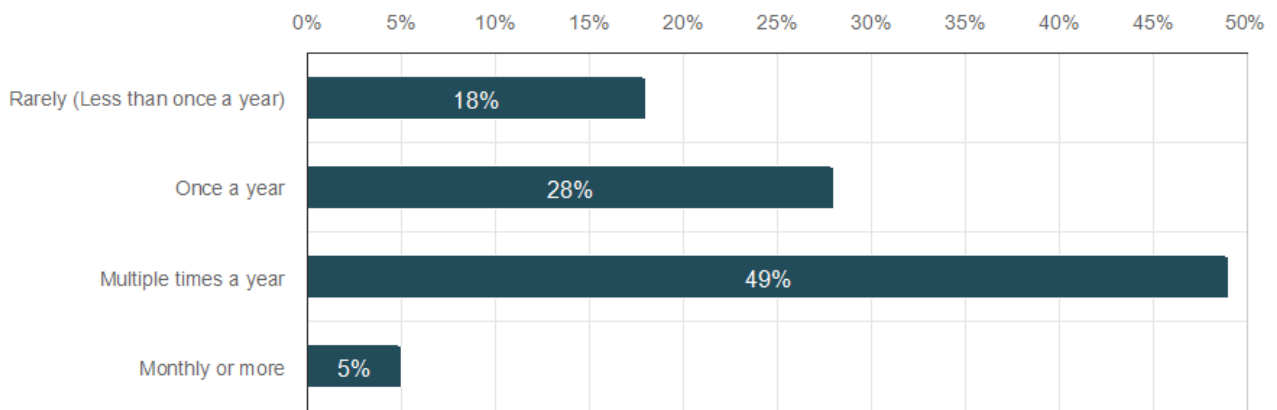
## Nationality



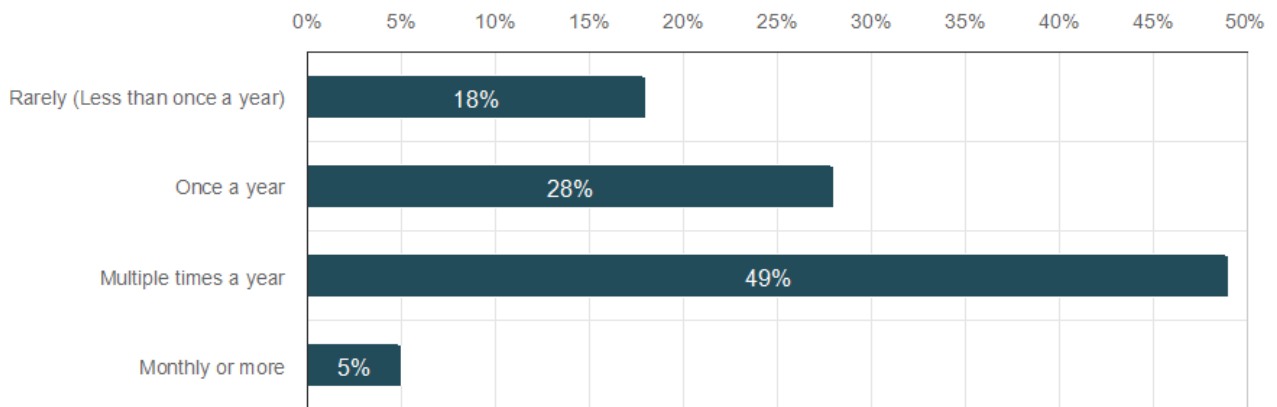
### What is your highest level of education?



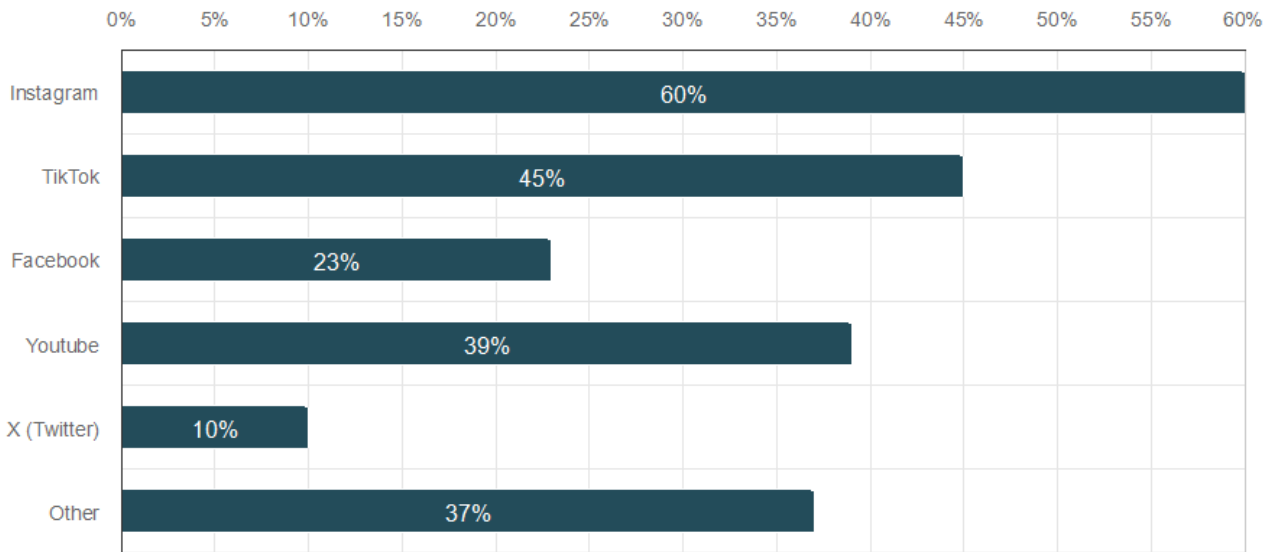
### How often do you travel for leisure?



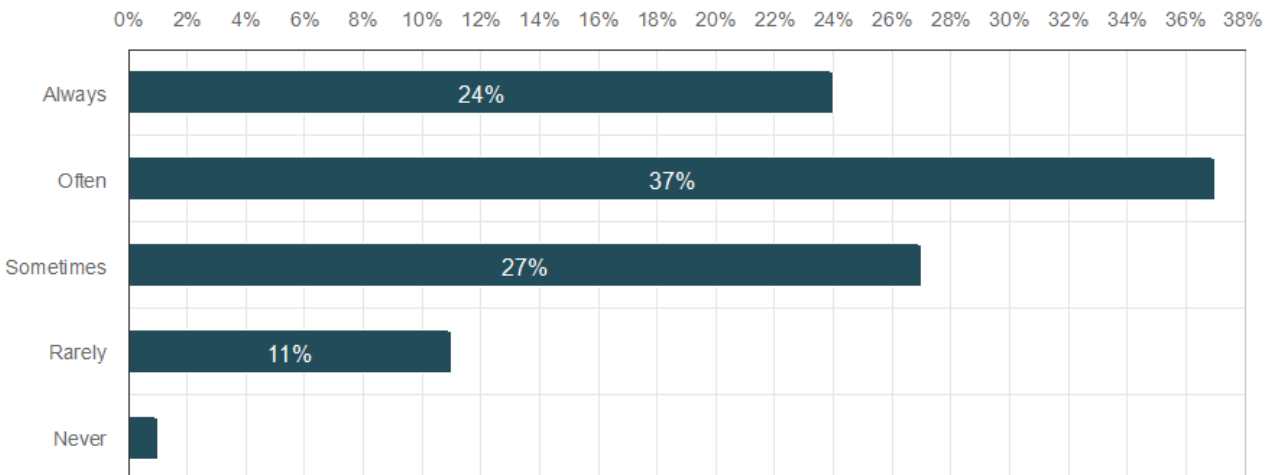
### How often do you travel for leisure?



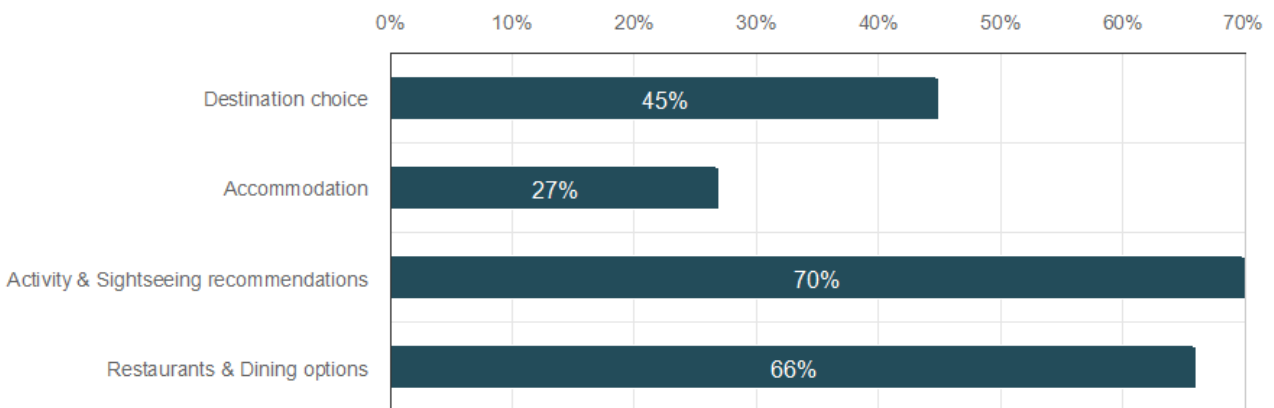
**Which social media platforms do you use for travel-related content?**

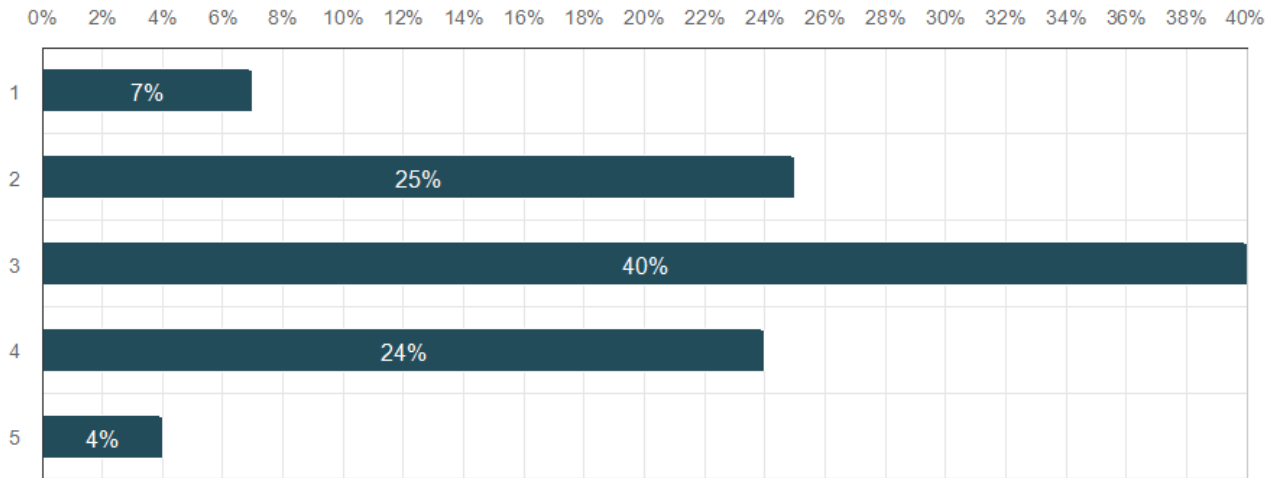
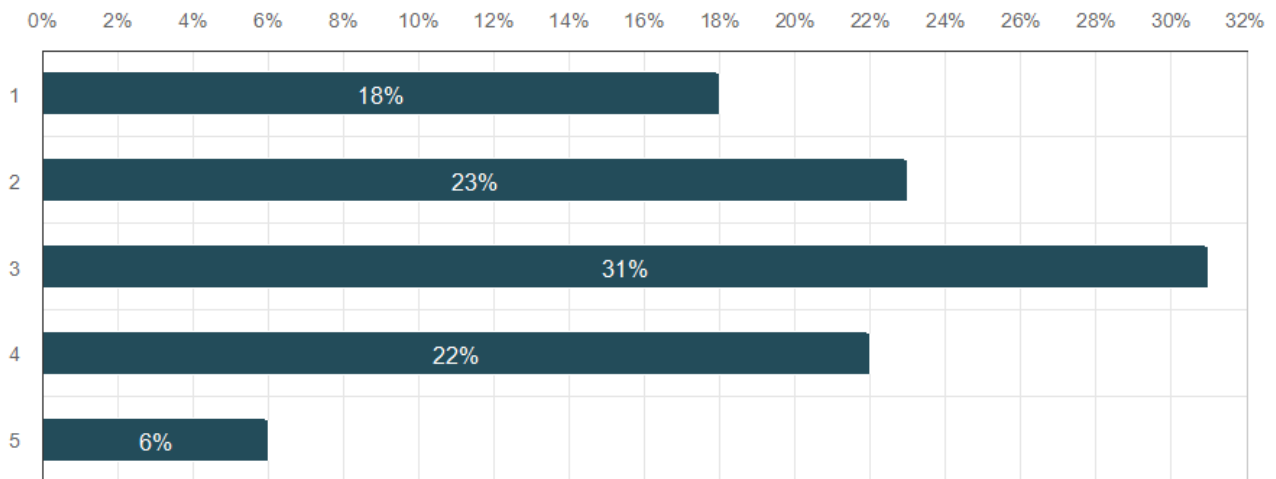


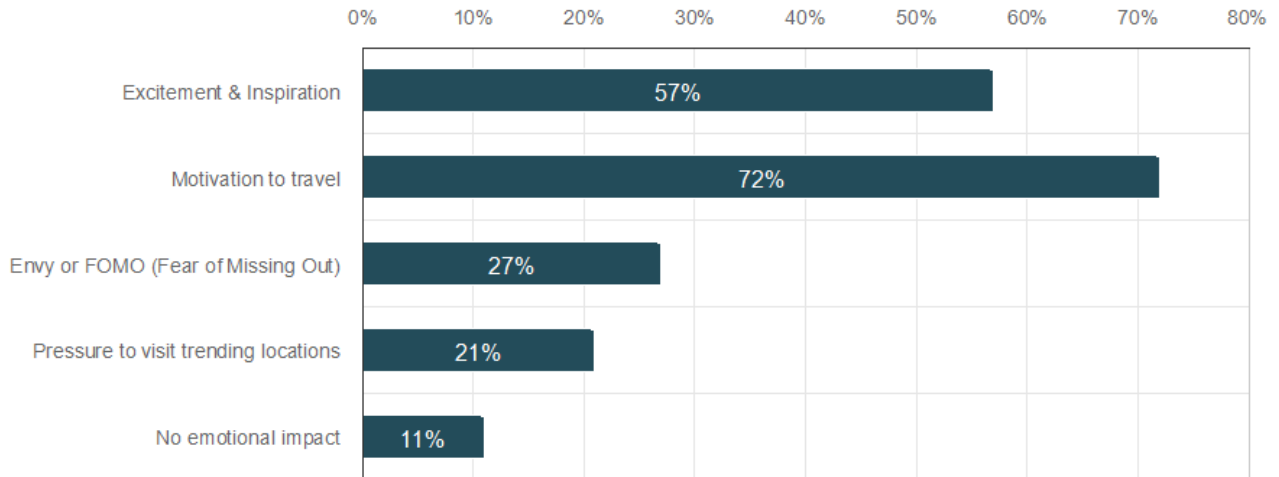
**How often do you use social media to gather information for trip planning?**



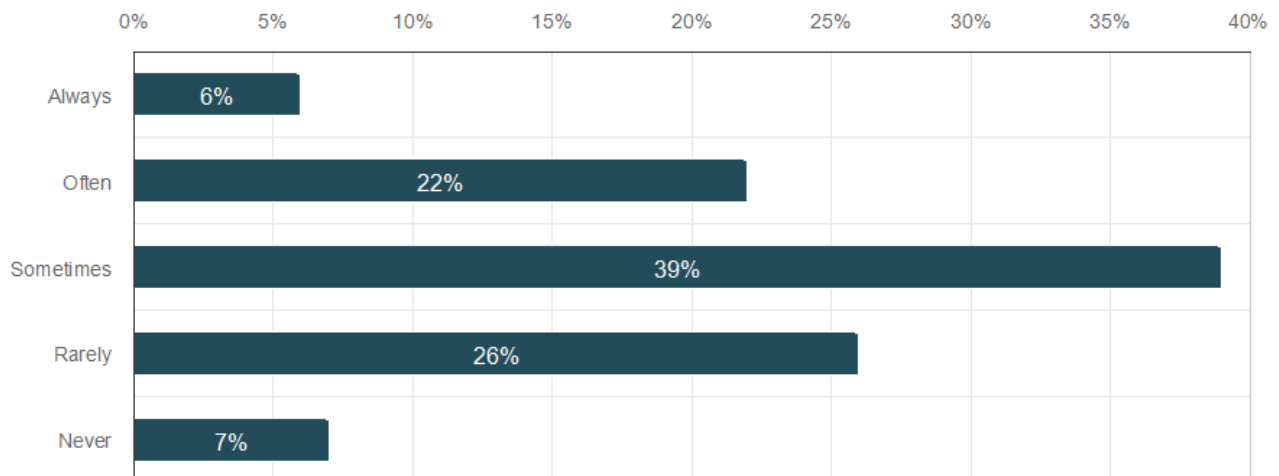
**Which aspects of your travel planning are most influenced by social media?**



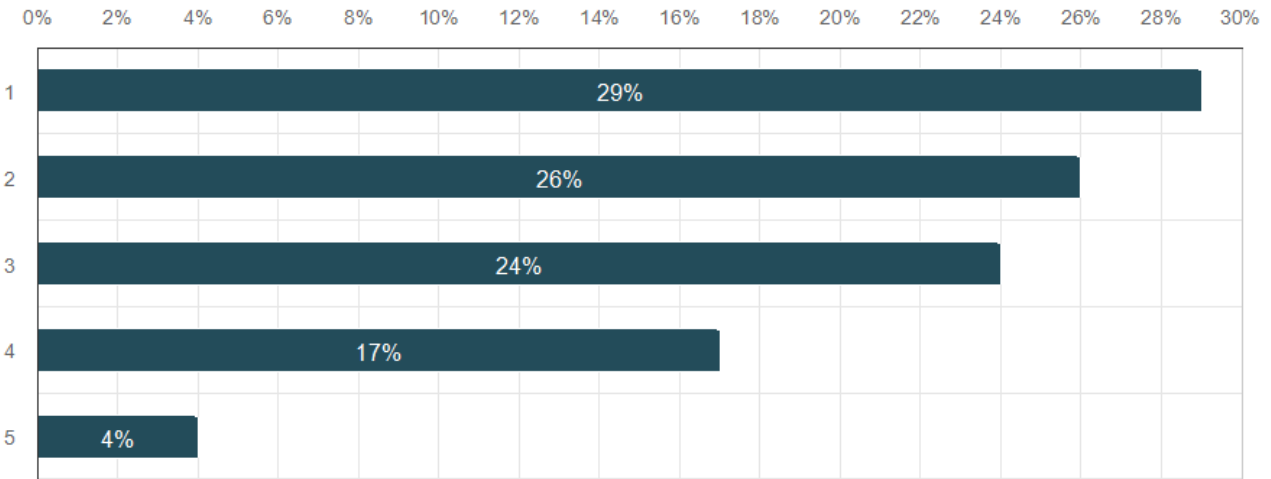
**To what extent does social media influence your travel destination choice?****Do you ever choose a travel destination just because it 'looks good' on social media?****Which emotions do you most frequently experience when viewing travel-related content on social media?**



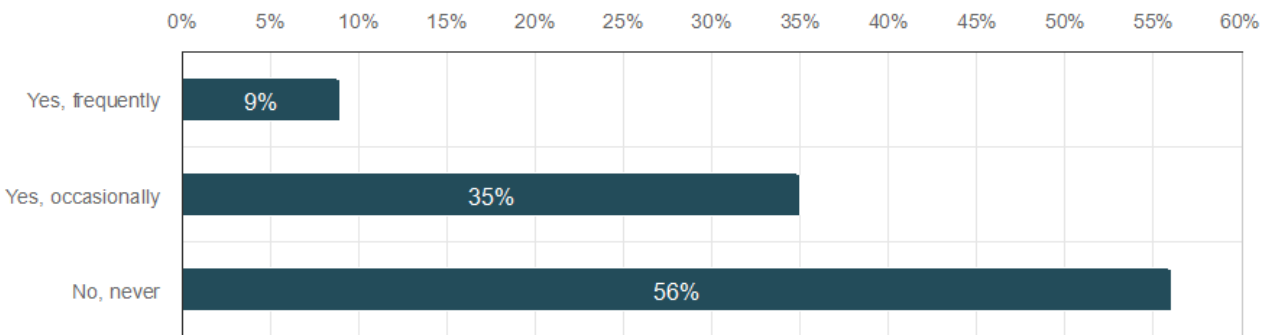
**How often do you compare your own travel experiences to what you see on social media?**



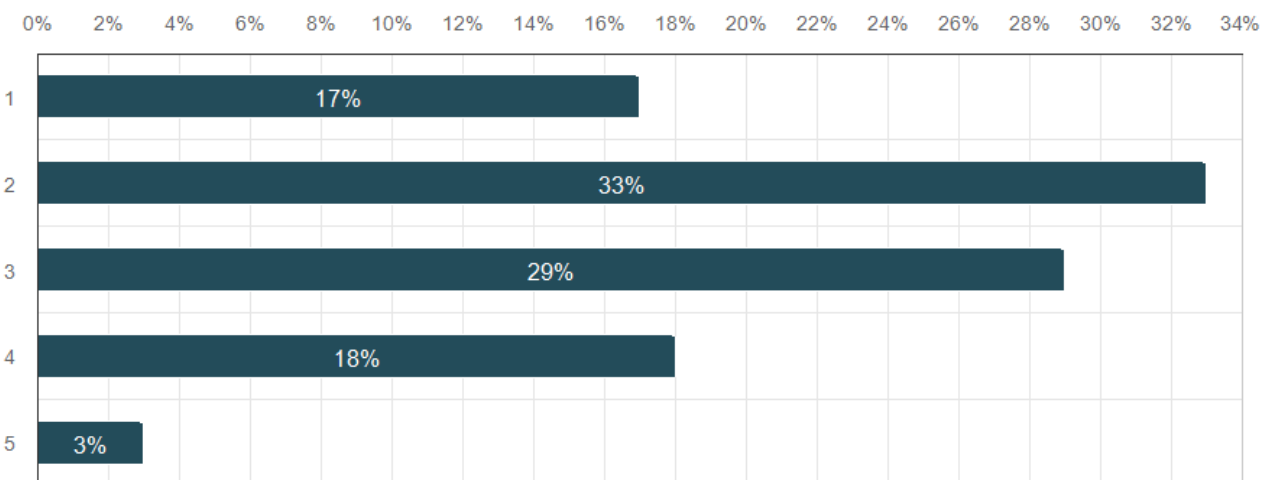
**To what extent do you feel pressure to document and share your travel experiences on social media? (Likert scale: 1 = No pressure at all, 5 = Extreme pressure)**



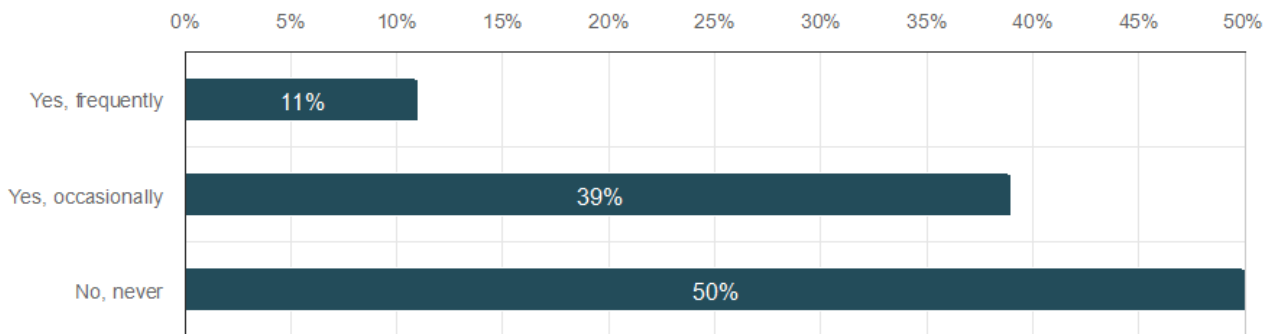
**Have you ever felt disappointed by a travel experience because it did not match how it was presented on social media?**



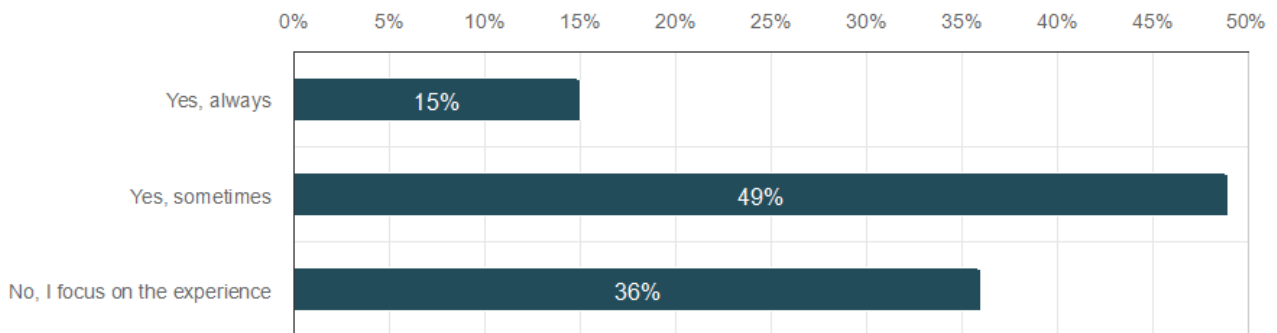
**To what extent do you plan your trips based on social media recommendations? (Likert scale: 1 = Not at all, 5 = Completely based on social media)**



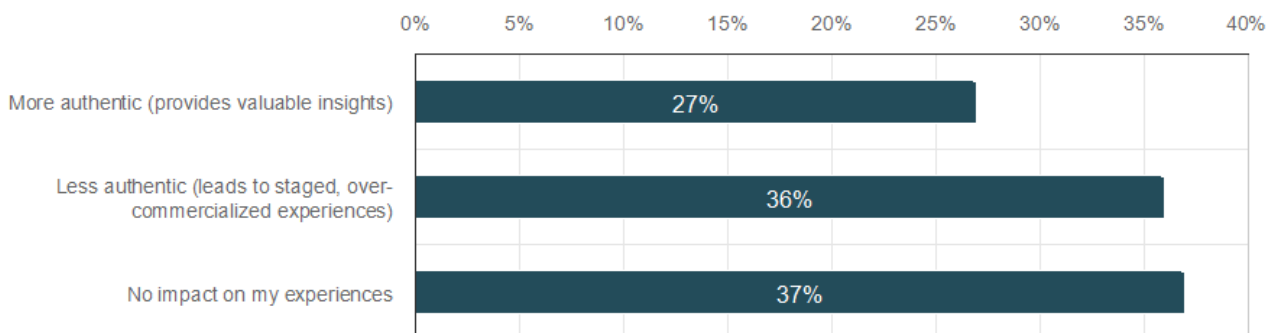
### Have you ever modified your travel plans to visit a location trending on social media?



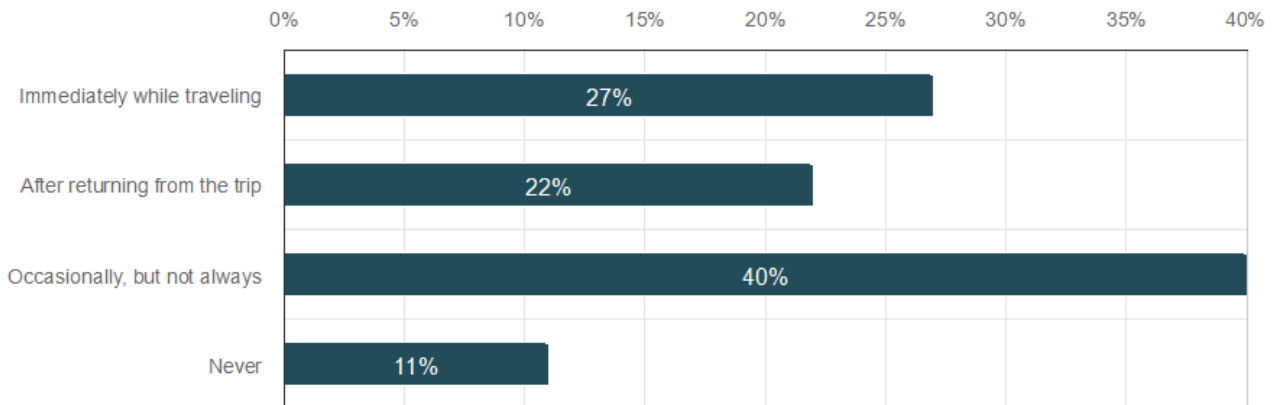
### When traveling, do you prioritize taking photos/videos for social media over experiencing the moment?



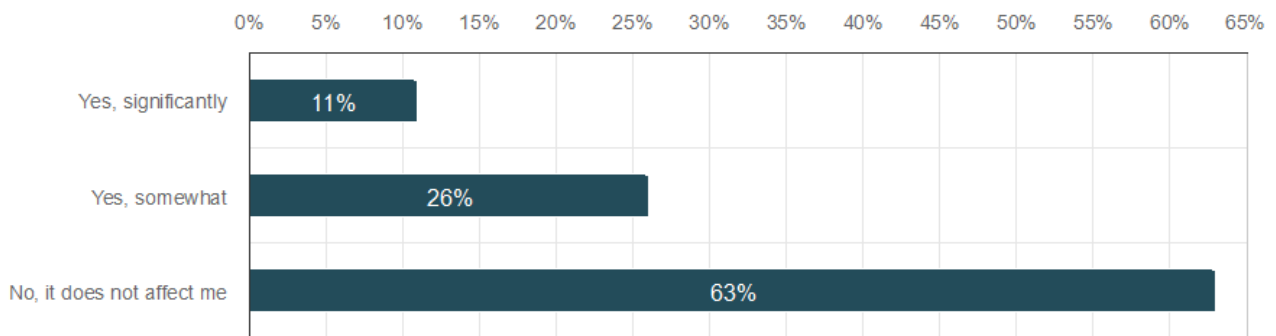
### Do you feel that social media has made your travel experiences more or less authentic?



**How often do you share travel experiences on social media?**



**Does the engagement (likes, comments, shares) on your travel posts influence your satisfaction with your trip?**



**Can you describe a time when social media significantly influenced your travel decisions, expectations or experience? (Optional)**

*Number of respondents: 15*

Responses
When I was in Abu Dhabi, I wanted to visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque also because I wished to take a picture as everyone else was doing and then post it in my social media.
I saw an ad of a destination which was in Greece and seemed magical. I did not believe that this destination was in Greece, and I hadn't found out about it. Literally social media can recommend places and destinations that you didn't know that even exist, and they are so close to your region

<p>It was an FnB business that looked so good on social media and when we visited, everything was different. No parking, a huge waiting line, no good service, too expensive etc.</p>
<p>There was one time that we saw an ad on Instagram which included an interesting activity, so we altered plans to experience this activity to another destination, that we did not want so much, because we saw this ad, advertising the activity and the destination</p>
<p>Social media often recommend places to visit, eat at or experience. My most recent example is my visit to Japan. There are various videos made for food, places, and experiences. They provided a significant insight to my travels. Places I did not know about beforehand, food I had not tried before. Events that were occurring and otherwise I would not have known about them.</p>
<p>When I was around 20s, social media had just started to make a bang in Europe.</p>
<p>To travel to Koufonissia islands was a great experience</p>
<p>I am a huge fan of Christmas markets, and they always look super cool on social media, but sometimes the recommendations people gave about them on social media and the fact that they made them look so awesome, turned out to not be true according to my opinion. They were a bit repetitive and with lack of inspiration (I am talking for some specific Christmas markets shown on social media that are completely overrated, whereas other Christmas markets in smaller towns turned out to be way more awesome!)</p>
<p>When I travelled in Thailand</p>
<p>Never, have I only been influenced once for a destination. If I hadn't seen it on social media, I might never think of going there. Still haven't but I would like it to be my next trip during December.</p>
<p>TikTok always helps me find good restaurants</p>
<p>Yes, when I traveled to Rome! Being a fan of history and I felt like I was leaving in the past. Entire city is a museum</p>
<p>I altered my destination choice and instead of Peloponnese I went to Crete because I saw on Instagram the beautiful city of Chania</p>

<b>Social media influenced my travel decision concerning the destination during the Christmas period.</b>
<b>It hasn't.</b>

## 4.2 Effects from Psychological Phenomena according to Research

Under this sub-chapter, survey results demonstrate that social media indeed influence traveler behavior and psychology, albeit most commonly on a moderate scale. While only a minority of respondents reported being extremely influenced by social media (4–7% across various measures), a big number fell within the middle range, designating partial or situational effect. For instance, on the one hand, 40% ranked social media as reasonably influential in choosing travel destinations, and on the other hand, 31% of them admitted that they sometimes choose destinations based on how they appeal online. Emotional responses to social media content were uncommonly strong, with 72% choosing motivation to travel option and 57% reporting feelings of excitement and inspiration. Paradoxically, only 27% revealed that they experience FoMO. This emotional engagement reflects the persuasive power of selected online content, which is possible to shape desires and expectations. Meanwhile, 39% of participants sometimes compare their own experiences to what they see on social platforms, allowing us to know that social media fosters aspiration, but also social comparison, which is kind of a double-edged sword.

Despite these influences, the data reveals an exquisite picture, since 44% of respondents admitted to occasional or frequent disappointment due to equivocal online promises, and 56% did not share this sentiment, showing a level of critical engagement with content. Similarly, although only a minority felt strong pressure to document their experiences which was just on 4% at the highest level, nearly half of users sometimes prioritize creating content or posting online over living the moment, and being present, suggesting a behavioral shift driven by constant online presence. Regarding authenticity, responses were variegated: 36% felt social media made their experiences less authentic, while 37% saw no impact, and 27% believed it added value as we can see thought the least percentage agreed that social media added value to experience. This divide shows that while social media endures and promotes inspiration plus access to ideas, it also introduces performance pressure and potential disillusionment.

To sum up, social media does influence travel-related behavior and psychology, mainly through emotional stimulation, aspirational imagery, and social comparison. The scale of this influence is generally moderate rather than extreme, with users often aware of its impacts, yet still partially

guided by it. Users are aware of dangers, and traps of the online and virtual community, but this does not consist of a break for them not to use, or even not to use sensibly. Social media acts as a double-edged sword; on the one hand by fueling curiosity or motivation, while at the same time gently shaping mentalities, behaviors and expectations. The findings point out that travelers are not entirely passive consumers of social content but are psychologically responsive to the way travel is being represented online, which in turn affects how they plan, perceive, and reflect on their own experiences.

### **4.3 Virtual vs Real Experience**

Whereas according to the theories analyzed in previous sub-chapters, and their sourcing, it was mentioned that virtual experience does not always match the real one, and the ways this is happening differs. There are times that the virtual does not match the real one at all, and other times that there is a small deviation. From the information gathered from the survey, it was noticed that slightly above half of the participants did not feel disappointed or dissatisfied by a travel experience because it did not match on how it was presented on social media, where the rest of the participants it was found that they have felt disappointed sometimes, and only 9% has felt disappointed frequently. However, 47% of users are based on social media recommendations for trip planning, and the rest of the percentage are not so keen on, while both are using social media to gather information regarding activities, sightseeing and restaurant options.

Destination is also a dominant factor, except activities and dining options, since it was proven that most of the participants asked mentioned that they will choose a destination because it looks good on social media, or because it has become a trend, and half of them prioritize taking photos or posting on social media first, before living the authentic experience. Yet the outcome is the same because the number of participants that were satisfied with the real experience, which matched the virtual one, outweighs the ones that were dissatisfied.

That means that brands in 2025 are investing a lot in social media marketing strategies, and collaborations with public figures, have understood how engagement works in digital era, and that repeaters are the best guests and candidates for expanding a positive word of mouth. It is very important that brands tell the truth to their audience about their services or their products because in this way along with others, they build trust.

It is evident that if a business sells a 'product' which is not valid and does not meet expectations, customers will not buy it again and probably will create a negative word of mouth. Expectations are becoming more and more demanding and audience want them to be value for money also during

this difficult financial state that has taken over, especially for Greek people, that are people who invest money on having a good time, even during this hard financial state that they experience.

#### **4.4 Limitations**

To begin with, the first thing that should be taken into consideration is that this research-based thesis is a bachelor thesis on where there is time and sourcing restrictions regarding the depth of research. In a master or a higher level of degree, research is used to be more extensive and is conducted in a bigger time frame. Next thing is that the research is conducted within a restricted nationality frame, where the center of it is Greece, and a small number of participants are Europeans or from other nations. Although there is a small number of European or other nations participants, it still remains small, and that makes the research more specific in what is happening at current times in Greek and does not cover a global insight. There is some information regarding how the rest of European or other nations use and percept social media, on which similarities or differences can be spotted, but this consists of a small piece of the cake.

Another thing that follows this is that the survey gathers information during 2025 and in a specific period of this year, which at other times may differ, due to several factors, such as economic conditions, global events like pandemics, which affect traveler psychology, making it difficult to isolate the effect of social media alone.

On this survey, the social platforms that are examined are platforms that are used mostly from people, and are most-known of their content that audiences are engaged in. For instance, the survey focuses mainly on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and similar platforms, and in relation to travel content. Following this, social media algorithms and features change frequently, which may impact on how travelers engage with content over time.

Another limitation that is spotted is the psychological depth of the survey's questions, meaning that almost all questions are close-ended, and participants are given 4 to 5 maximum options to select which one matches more their perception and way of thinking. Questions on the survey were selected carefully and also pre-tested with participants who volunteered and gave feedback on their credibility and validity, but there are also a lot of questions that can be answered with different formats and also provide insights and help to reach conclusions.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

It is the final chapter, a recap will be presented and discussed including the learning outcomes, suggestions for future research and contribution to hospitality of this thesis will be discussed. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section considers the Learning outcomes; the most important results gained from the study which have been noted and there is a focus on adaptation and behavior to social media, decision-making, and overall experiences, according to a combination from the survey results and the theories mentioned in the literature review. The second section concerns some suggestions for future research that would be beneficial to be done. On this part areas that are still unexplored will be pointed out, since this study has limitations and proposes new directions for research to deepen the understanding of this topic. Finally, the sub-chapter named 'Contribution to Hospitality' discusses the practical appliances of the rulings for industry professionals and offers awareness to businesses concerning how they can adapt to changing traveler behaviors and leverage social media effectively.

### 5.1 Learning Outcomes

The purpose of this section is to present and interpret the information derived from the survey conducted on the topic of social media and travel psychology and behavioral patterns. The survey, involving 82 participants, provides research-based findings into the emotional, cognitive, and decision-making processes shaped by affecting and spending time on travel content on social media platforms. The majority of participants belonged to the age group of 18–34 and were highly educated, with 74% of them holding a bachelor's or master's degree. Educational level as financial and social background plays an important role in the survey's results because it is evident that if this survey, for example, had been conducted to a non-European environment the answers would be totally different. At this point it is good to mention that not all countries and areas allow access to the same social media or allow access to social media at all. To add, not all humans have also access in travelling to their preferred destinations without restrictions, so traveling could be considered as a luxury benefit for some. The findings offer a strong perspective on how social media impacts both the planning and experiential phases of travel (ante – per - post).

The results indicate that social media plays a strong role in 2025, but on the other side this role is possible to be controlled and limited when it comes to travel planning and behavior. A generous number of respondents use platforms such as Instagram (60%), TikTok (45%), and YouTube (39%) for travel-related content. Remarkably, 61% of participants reported using social media "always" or "often" to gather information during trip planning. The most influenced aspects of travel were actually related to activity and sightseeing content and recommendations (70%) and restaurant/dining options (66%), followed by destination choice (45%) and accommodation (27%).

These results confirm that UGC on social media has become an influential planning resource for modern traveler culture.

Psychologically, the influence of social media was more evident in the answers that had to do with emotions and behavioral tendencies of the participants. A wide percentage reported feeling “motivated to travel” (72%) and “excited or inspired” (57%) by viewing travel-related content. However, these positive emotions are accompanied by more complex effects such as social comparison, and this will be explained. Approximately 39% of respondents stated that they sometimes compare their experiences to those they see online, and 44% admitted to occasional or frequent disappointment when the reality of a destination did not match its presentation or advertisement on social media. While 63% indicated that engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) did not affect their satisfaction, 37% acknowledged some kind of influence. Furthermore, 49% reported that most of the time they prioritize content creation, meaning, taking photos, creating reels, posting stories etc., over fully experiencing the moment, showing a direction towards performative behavior. Despite a number of 4% that reported high pressure to share travel experiences, a larger portion of the 89% said that they do share their travels, most commonly during or shortly after the trip but without pressure, which shows that it is a natural task that people will do almost every day. In this vein, it is good to mention that after completing the questions, the survey content and goal was discussed with some participants, off the record, and quite a lot of them admitted that sometimes, they share travel content including themselves on stories or post, on purpose, to draw the attention of their familiars.

To sum up, the data confirm that social media does influence behavior, experience, and psychology, but on a fair and decent scale, in Greece, and this influence manifests across multiple dimensions as for example planning decisions, emotional elicitation, and behavioral characteristics. Social media platforms serve not only as sources of inspiration and information but affect people’s expectations and the way travelers perceive or evaluate their personal experiences. While users seem aware and critical of the background of the ideal and spotless content that is uploaded, the pressure to compare to one another remains present. These findings call attention to the dual role of social media as both a motivational factor and modifier of travel experiences and point at the importance of addressing its psychological implications in both tourism research and industry practices.

## **5.2 Suggestions for Future Research**

Due to the evolution of technology and the constant changes in trends, there are a lot of topics for deeper research, which would be useful to hospitality and tourism industry. AI is a powerful tool used by new generations more and more, so as from companies and businesses for various reasons. AI is worth further research on how it can assist businesses provide the best possible outcomes for both companies and customers, but also its limitations, and dangers should be explored within the industry. Influencers and personalized algorithms for people can affect public opinion, and personal preferences, which is also a big chapter to investigate. Whatever information is shared by people on social platforms and on websites, it consists of great feedback for web specials and for AI tools. Another topic for further research would be the observation of human behavior and its effects in the long term. Some claim that people have become more distant and aggressive with the expansion and misuse of social media platforms and there has been a commercialization of the valuable things in life.

Crisis management in hospitality is also another domain to be explored. Some things with the evolution of technology that were not to worry the society at earlier times, are the viral negative reviews, misinformation, and cancel culture on social media, that affect brand reputation and guest trust. Additionally, marketing domain has a lot to learn by further exploring social media's nature, and businesses have the opportunity to dive into finding ways to balance virtual promotions with realistic representations to reduce expectation gaps, as for example experience marketing does. Sustainability, eco-friendly, and ethical travel marketing have been gaining more and more supporters, and there are a lot of guests that are paying attention to the businesses which use these practices. Concluding, in this thesis, as limitations have been explained it would be beneficial for others to further explore some phenomena and in a wider time frame.

## **5.3 Contribution to Hospitality**

This research-based thesis aims to contribute to the hospitality industry in multiple ways. The first thing that will be beneficial to be mentioned is to understand the behavior. Hospitality businesses could gain some knowledge regarding traveler's preferences, booking and destination decisions choices in the digital era of 2025. Continuing, the amelioration of marketing strategies via social media and altering the way that they commercialize destinations, accommodation etc. could be changed and adapt into current times by making more and fresh attempts to create engagement by using authentic content, making influencer collaborations, with an upper goal attract and retain guests. Moving on, the management of guests' expectations is an important angle that should not be overseen.

Guests need to be satisfied and happy in order to return to a company or in a destination, so businesses ought to be transparent with them and matching the service or product advertising – selling online, with reality. Credibility is the number one factor to build trust and long-term relationships between business and consumers. Besides credibility, exceeding expectations is also a matter that businesses need to take into account, due to the fact that when someone exceeds our expectations, we tend as humans to remember it for a longer time and elicit emotions that last longer; and there is when businesses have opportunities to create memorable experiences. The hospitality industry should always be up-to-date and adapt to new trends, the needs and desires of its customers, and on this part familiarization with technology and new ideas is vital. This is also something that strengthens brand reputation and helps in maintaining a competitive advantage. By better understanding behavior and needs, or even better, knowing how to create needs, a brand will always have an advantage. Everything is a matter of psychology and marketing when it comes to humans, and that is also the reason that social media has become so much attractive, wanted and has inserted into people's lives, with very few exceptions.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Survey Questions

#### 1. Age

- 18–24
- 25–34
- 35–44
- 45+

#### 2. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/Other
- Prefer not to say

#### 3. Nationality

#### 4. How often do you travel for leisure?

- Rarely (Less than once a year)
- Once a year
- Multiple times a year
- Monthly or more

#### 5. Which social media platforms do you use for travel-related content? (Select all that apply.)

- Instagram
- TikTok
- YouTube
- Facebook

- X (formerly Twitter)
- Other

**6. How often do you use social media to gather information for trip planning?**

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**7. Which aspects of your travel planning are most influenced by social media? (Select up to two.)**

- Destination choice
- Accommodation selection
- Activity & sightseeing recommendations
- Restaurants & dining options

**8. To what extent does social media influence your travel destination choice? (Likert scale: 1 = Not at all, 5 = Extremely influential)**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

**9. How important is visiting 'Instagrammic' or highly photographed locations in your travels? (Likert scale: 1 = Not important, 5 = Very important)**

- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

10. **Which emotions do you most frequently experience when viewing travel-related content on social media?** (Select up to two.)

- Excitement & inspiration
- Motivation to travel
- Envy or FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)
- Pressure to visit trending locations
- No emotional impact

11. **How often do you compare your own travel experiences to what you see on social media?**

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

12. **To what extent do you feel pressure to document and share your travel experiences on social media?** (Likert scale: 1 = No pressure at all, 5 = Extreme pressure)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

- 5

**13. Have you ever felt disappointed by a travel experience because it did not match how it was presented on social media?**

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- No, never

**14. To what extent do you plan your trips based on social media recommendations?**

(Likert scale: 1 = Not at all, 5 = Completely based on social media)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

**15. Have you ever modified your travel plans to visit a location trending on social media?**

- Yes, frequently
- Yes, occasionally
- No, never

**16. When traveling, do you prioritize taking photos/videos for social media over experiencing the moment?**

- Yes, always
- Yes, sometimes
- No, I focus on the experience

**17. Do you feel that social media has made travel experiences more or less authentic?**

- More authentic (provides valuable insights & recommendations)

- Less authentic (leads to staged, over-commercialized experiences)
- No impact on my experiences

**18. How often do you share travel experiences on social media?**

- Immediately while traveling
- After returning from the trip
- Occasionally, but not always
- Never

**19. Does the engagement (likes, comments, shares) on your travel posts influence your satisfaction with your trip?**

- Yes, significantly
- Yes, somewhat
- No, it does not affect me

**20. Can you describe a time when social media significantly influenced your travel decisions, expectations or experience? O**

