



Social media and its influence on Tourism industry

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This thesis, written in the January, February, March of 2025, explores the impact of social media on travel decision-making, with a focus on how different forms of digital content influence tourists' perceptions and behavior. In an era where travelers increasingly rely on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor for inspiration and recommendations, the role of user-generated content (UGC) and influencer marketing has become central to modern tourism dynamics.</p> <p>The study applies theoretical frameworks including the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) to investigate the psychological and social mechanisms that shape travel-related decisions. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining a quantitative survey of 52 respondents with a qualitative content analysis of real social media posts.</p> <p>Findings suggest that authenticity is a key driver of trust, with regular user content rated more influential than sponsored posts. Respondents also emphasized the value of peer feedback, visual inspiration, and emotionally resonant content. The content analysis supported these findings, revealing how highly engaging posts often aligned with trends in user preferences and travel behavior.</p> <p>The thesis concludes by offering recommendations for tourism marketers to enhance audience engagement, leverage UGC, and maintain transparency in influencer collaborations. The results also highlight the growing importance of social media in shaping destination image, traveler trust, and marketing strategy within the tourism industry.</p>
<p>Key words: social media, tourism, travel decision-making, user-generated content, influencer marketing, eWOM, UGT, TPB</p>

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1 Introduction

In today's digitally connected world, social media has transformed the way people make decisions, communicate, and share experiences. The tourism industry, in particular, has been significantly impacted by the rise of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Travelers no longer rely solely on traditional travel agencies or brochures; instead, they turn primarily to user-generated content and peer reviews, while influencer recommendations also play a role, and peer reviews when planning their trips.

Social media platforms allow users to discover new destinations, find inspiration for travel activities, and evaluate the credibility of different services based on shared experiences. Visual content, such as photos, short videos, and travel vlogs, has become a powerful tool in influencing travelers' preferences and decisions.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role and influence of social media in the travel decision-making process. By understanding how different types of content affect travelers' choices, tourism businesses and marketers can better tailor their strategies to meet the evolving expectations of modern consumers.

1.1 General Introduction

The tourism market experiences a transformation from social media platforms which influence travelers in their discovery activities and their destination selection processes and overall experience dissemination. The online platforms consisting of Instagram and Facebook and TripAdvisor function as central resources for travel consumers looking for motivational material and useful day-to-day insights. The study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2023) demonstrated that social media has substantial impact on how tourists make their destination selection by presenting evidence through nine out of ten variables that demonstrate significance.

Social media enables interactive user content sharing by allowing users to post photographs and create reviews which accumulate into a big user-generated database. This content serves as a valuable resource for potential travelers. The way social media affects tourist decision-making includes inspiring choices and providing information and social validation and travel experience access according to Sujatha (2023).

This thesis focuses primarily on user-generated content (UGC) — photos, reviews, and experiences shared by regular users — as the most trusted and influential form of social media

input in travel planning. While influencer marketing is also considered, the research emphasizes UGC as the dominant factor driving decision-making behavior.

Users of social media platforms can engage with travel content through several activities that include posting images and videos and submitting evaluations and recommendations. The vast collection of User-Generated Content (UGC) expands into a priceless database used by other travelers when making decisions. Social media UGC has become an essential trusted information source for tourists according to Mariani, Borghi, and Cappa (2022). Social media users can learn from real travel experiences provided by their peers because this peer content proves more genuine and dependable than promotional materials. Sujatha (2023) states that social media in tourism gives travelers more than data because it provides both motivators and communal validation together with connections to worldwide travel communities.

Social media influencers now stand as major influential figures within the contemporary digital space. Social media influencers demonstrate their travel experiences to their audience group and these reports potentially influence how potential tourists make travel decisions. Many travelers select their preferred vacation destinations because an influencer provided inspiration according to Dabija et al. (2021).

Social media establishes a broad positive influence on the tourism industry yet various distribution factors make this relationship intricate. According to Mariani et al. (2022) destination selection influenced by social media depends heavily on content consumption type along with platform choice and personal preferences that form key elements in decision-making processes. Visitors who care about their image usually depend on Instagram to guide their travel choices yet older generations lean towards using TripAdvisor for reviews. Tourism toward particular locations faces criticism because social media has reportedly led to problems of overtourism that affects both communities and environmental integrity (Baker & Baker, 2016).

The critical role of social media in tourism requires an enhanced knowledge about how it shapes traveler choices because this pattern will persist into the foreseeable future. Tourism businesses implement social media to strengthen their marketing initiatives by offering promotions and connecting with their audience through digital channels (Sigala, 2018). Social media's expansion introduces new problems to the industry including destination image management and messaging control and sustainability issues related to rising tourist movement. The research investigates social media platform effects on travel decision processes for tourists while studying their industry impacts and delivering suggestions for reaching audience targets effectively.

1.2 Significance of the Research

Modern tourism significantly depends on social media because it shapes the way travelers determine their vacation locations along with hotels and recreational choices. The need to grasp social media effects on travel demand becomes essential since millions of users consult Instagram and Facebook and TripAdvisor and YouTube for tourism direction. The study seeks to obtain essential findings that will deliver advantages to multiple tourism entities including business operators and their travelers alongside marketers and scientific researchers. Who Can Benefit from This Research?

1. Tourism Businesses and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) Tourism enterprises alongside marketing organizations now heavily depend on social media channels to advertise their destinations together with their offerings. Several organizations fail to execute marketing campaigns that engage their target audience effectively when it comes to travel decisions. This study utilizes data investigation to answer critical questions about how social media systems affect decision making patterns of consumers which brings valuable information to business operations. The influence of review content and travel blogs written by users on future tourist decisions requires thorough evaluation. Analyze how social media influencers influence people and decide how to maximize their potential to generate better travel bookings and engagement.

2. Travelers and Consumers Travelers now heavily use social media platforms for organizing their journeys because they depend on shared recommendations between different travelers including platform influencers and online evaluations. The excessive amount of digital content brings dangers including incorrect information and fake reviews together with destination hype. This research can help travelers: People should learn to critically measure travel information that appears on social media platforms. Attain comprehension of how people perceive influencer advertisements and internet review systems psychologically. Your travel choices will become more educated when choosing your locations and hotels and affiliated travel service providers. The research conclusions about digital content present information that strengthens transparency and awareness in customer travel decision making.

3. Academics and Researchers The study increases academic understanding of tourism and digital marketing while giving scholars new research approaches for investigating consumer behavior along with media effects and tourism trends. The study provides fundamental research elements which should guide additional studies in: The evolving role of social media in destination branding. The ethical implications of influencer marketing in tourism. The extended duration of social media patterns produces effects on sustainable tourism growth.

Several practical applications exist for this research study. The research results have various utilization paths which include: This study provides travel businesses with help to optimize their digital marketing through clear identification of powerful social media methods. The research helps public-sector entities alongside tourism boards to direct visitor streams for building visitor distribution across multiple locations while combating tourism congestion threats. The study offers educational content for universities and training centers that support tourism marketing and media teaching. Apprehension about how social media affects tourism continues to increase because of its expanding influence in the sector. The research both showcases present market realities while giving concrete guidelines industry experts and policymakers along with tourists can deploy to handle digital tourism's developing environment.

1.3 Objectives and Research Problem

An escalating dominance of social media oversees how tourists make their travel decisions within the current tourism industry. The decision-making journey of travelers heavily relies on social networks including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter(X), and TripAdvisor because they seek valuable recommendations, real-time information, and inspiration. The tourism industry has undergone substantial change, as Höpken, Fuchs, and Lexhagen (2014) noted, since social media transformed how industry stakeholders provide and acquire information through user-generated content (UGC) rather than traditional advertising.

Social media enables users to share pictures representing their travel destinations, accommodation choices, dining places, and experiences they encounter. Such content affects how travelers perceive travel destinations and drives their travel decisions, covering specific locales, activities, and accommodation choices (Mariani et al., 2022). Visual platforms like Instagram have proven especially successful for destination promotion due to their strong focus on visual media.

Visually appealing content published on Instagram has proven effective at inspiring travel decisions, as highlighted by Gretzel et al. (2006), because it prompts emotional responses to destination imagery and creates new travel trends. Additionally, the ability for users to read peer-based destination reviews from celebrities and influencers on social media platforms directly shapes traveler perceptions and decisions. Sparks and Browning (2011) showed that reviews from TripAdvisor and similar platforms hold strong credibility and significantly influence travelers' evaluations of destinations and hospitality services. Peer-generated content boosts traveler trust by reducing uncertainty about travel choices.

The growth of social media provides tourism operators and destination marketing organizations with powerful methods to communicate directly with potential visitors. Companies can reduce advertising overheads while increasing their global reach through strategic social media marketing (Sigala, 2018). The quick sharing of content between users allows campaigns to spread widely, and businesses can track success through engagement metrics, adjusting strategies accordingly (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2016).

Despite the numerous advantages, challenges remain. Not all destinations benefit equally from social media exposure, and concerns about the authenticity of influencer-promoted content continue to exist (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Influencer marketing success often depends on perceived authenticity and trustworthiness.

At the core of this research is the following main research question:

How do social media platforms influence travelers' decision-making processes, and how can tourism businesses leverage these platforms for effective marketing strategies?

To answer this, the study explores the following sub-questions:

- Which social media platforms have the most influence on travel decision-making?
- What role does user-generated content (UGC) play in shaping travelers' perceptions of destinations?
- How do social media influencers impact tourists' choices, and how much trust do travelers place in them?

1.4 Key Concepts

Social Media

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor serve as essential tools for modern travelers. These platforms allow users to share photographs, post evaluations, and submit recommendations, creating a vast pool of travel-related information. Social media enables real-time content sharing and interaction, shaping how travelers find inspiration, select destinations, and evaluate accommodations and activities.

Social Media's Role in Tourism

The tourism market experiences a transformation through social media, influencing travelers in their destination discovery activities and travel decision-making processes. Platforms such as Instagram and TripAdvisor provide motivational material and practical insights, helping travelers compare destinations, gather peer-based feedback, and access authentic travel experiences shared by others. Social media has become a critical factor in promoting destinations and influencing tourist behavior.

User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-Generated Content (UGC) includes photos, videos, reviews, and testimonials created by regular users instead of professional marketers. UGC forms a trusted database of information, offering real-life insights into travel experiences. It serves as a valuable resource for potential travelers by inspiring travel choices, providing information, and offering social validation.

Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing involves individuals with large online followings who share their travel experiences and inspire their audiences. Travelers often select destinations based on influencer recommendations, perceiving them as relatable and authentic. However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends on the influencer's trustworthiness and the perceived authenticity of the content.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) refers to the sharing of reviews, evaluations, and recommendations through digital platforms. Online reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor or Facebook significantly impact destination perceptions and consumer trust. eWOM plays a crucial

role in reducing uncertainty and shaping traveler decisions based on the experiences and opinions of peers.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) explains that travelers actively seek media content to fulfill specific needs, such as gathering travel inspiration, validating choices, or seeking social connections. Different platforms serve different needs, for example, Instagram offers visual inspiration while TripAdvisor provides detailed user reviews.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposes that individual intentions are influenced by personal attitudes, social norms, and perceived control over behavior. In the tourism context, TPB helps to understand how social media interactions and peer influences shape travel planning, destination selection, and behavioral intentions.

2 Theoretical Framework

The development of social media transformed tourism operations by altering how people locate travel destinations while they determine their worth and choice of accommodation, experiences, and activities. Travelers now rely heavily on digital platforms instead of guidebooks, travel agencies, or traditional advertising to find travel information and evaluate destinations. User-generated content (UGC) has evolved into a fundamental influence on tourist perception, leading to new marketing practices in the tourism sector. This chapter discusses the key themes and theories related to social media's role in tourism.

2.1 The Role of Social Media in Travel Decision-Making

An escalating dominance of social media oversees how tourists make their travel decisions within the current tourism industry. Travelers rely heavily on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TripAdvisor for recommendations, real-time information, and travel inspiration.

Research by Höpken, Fuchs, and Lexhagen (2014) shows that UGC has overtaken traditional advertising in influencing travelers' choices. Instagram, in particular, plays a strong role due to its visual nature, with studies like Gretzel et al. (2006) showing that visual content prompts emotional responses and creates new travel trends.

Peer-based destination reviews, influencer posts, and real-time suggestions impact traveler trust, perceptions, and behaviors (Sparks and Browning, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008).

Tourism businesses use social media to reach broader audiences and cut marketing costs, adjusting strategies based on user engagement (Sigala, 2018; Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2016).

2.2 User-Generated Content and Trust

User-generated content (UGC), including reviews, photos, travel stories, and video testimonials posted by everyday users, has become one of the most influential forms of information in travel planning. Unlike commercial advertising, UGC is perceived as more authentic and experience-based, which enhances its persuasive power among digital audiences. Tourists rely on peer-shared content to form impressions of destinations, accommodations, and activities even before making direct contact with a brand. Gretzel et al. (2007) emphasize that tourists place greater trust in peer recommendations than in traditional company promotions due to the perceived lack of commercial bias. This shift reflects a broader move toward experience-driven marketing, where the voices of fellow travelers act as unofficial endorsements.

Recent studies confirm that UGC plays a critical role at every stage of the travel decision-making process — from inspiration and planning to post-trip reflection (Ayeh et al., 2013; Xiang & Gretzel,

2010). Travelers increasingly use platforms like Instagram to discover destinations visually, and TripAdvisor or Google Reviews to validate the quality of services. This aligns with the survey results in this thesis, where a large majority of respondents indicated they trust UGC more than influencer content or branded messages. However, challenges such as fake reviews, paid endorsements, and manipulated ratings have emerged. These issues reduce the perceived reliability of UGC and require users to apply critical thinking when evaluating content (Fileri, Algezau, & McLeay, 2015; Liu & Park, 2015).

Trust is often reinforced when content includes visual evidence (e.g., photos, video walkthroughs) and is shared by users without clear commercial intent. Despite these concerns, UGC remains a powerful force in shaping tourism behavior. As Sigala (2018) notes, UGC not only informs potential travelers but also contributes to digital destination branding — essentially allowing travelers to co-create a destination's online image. Platforms like Facebook travel groups, Instagram travel hashtags, and TripAdvisor forums allow for continuous, community-based sharing of advice and experience. This participatory nature of content creation plays a key role in building credibility and emotional connection, making UGC a cornerstone of digital tourism marketing.

2.3 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has become a dominant strategy in digital tourism, where social media personalities promote destinations, experiences, and services to large audiences. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer content is often perceived as more personal, relatable, and engaging — especially when shared through platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Influencers serve as modern opinion leaders, shaping the behavior of their followers by showcasing aspirational lifestyles and travel experiences in visually compelling ways. According to Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), influencers are perceived as more approachable and trustworthy than traditional celebrities, largely due to their informal tone, frequent posting, and perceived accessibility. This connection fosters a form of digital intimacy that enhances persuasive power.

Micro-influencers — individuals with smaller but highly engaged audiences — are often seen as more credible and relatable than high-profile influencers. Research by Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017) and Campbell & Farrell (2020) indicates that consumers view micro-influencers as more authentic because their content appears less commercialized and more grounded in personal experience.

In the context of tourism, influencers play a critical role in shaping destination image and motivating travel decisions. Their posts often combine emotional storytelling with visual aesthetics, which can significantly impact how users perceive a location's desirability. Many tourism boards and

businesses now partner with influencers to create campaigns that blend entertainment, inspiration, and subtle promotion — a strategy known as native advertising.

However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing is highly dependent on transparency and authenticity. As influencer marketing becomes more commercialized, followers grow more critical of paid promotions. When influencers fail to disclose sponsorships or appear overly promotional, their credibility declines (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). This is particularly important in tourism, where trust and emotional resonance are vital.

Studies suggest that disclosure of partnerships, coupled with honest content, can still result in positive brand perception and consumer engagement (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). When influencers balance promotion with genuine recommendations and behind-the-scenes experiences, their followers are more likely to be persuaded and take action.

In summary, influencer marketing remains a powerful tool in tourism, but its success depends on maintaining a balance between inspiration and integrity. Authenticity, transparency, and emotional connection are the key factors that determine whether influencer campaigns translate into real-world travel behavior.

2.4 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) refers to the process by which consumers share opinions, experiences, and recommendations through digital platforms, influencing the behavior of others. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) describe eWOM as consumer-to-consumer communication that occurs via the internet, often through review platforms, social networks, blogs, or video-sharing sites. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, which is limited by time and geography, eWOM allows opinions to reach wide audiences quickly and persistently.

In the tourism industry, eWOM has become one of the most powerful sources of influence. Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) argue that online reviews on platforms like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Booking.com have essentially replaced traditional interpersonal word-of-mouth. Potential travelers now rely heavily on these digital testimonials to assess the quality of destinations, accommodations, attractions, and services — often before engaging with any official marketing materials.

Peer opinions are especially impactful because they are perceived as unfiltered and experience-based. According to Gretzel and Yoo (2008), eWOM influences all stages of travel — from planning and booking to the post-trip sharing of feedback — creating a cyclical model of influence.

Positive reviews can enhance destination image and increase visitor intent, while negative reviews can lead to reputational harm and reduced trust.

However, the influence of eWOM also brings challenges. The rise of fake reviews, biased opinions, and undisclosed sponsorships can erode the trustworthiness of online platforms. As noted by Filieri et al. (2015), consumers are becoming increasingly cautious and tend to assess review credibility based on factors like detail, language tone, and the reviewer's profile. Platforms like TripAdvisor now implement verification systems to maintain integrity and minimize manipulation.

Despite these challenges, eWOM remains central to modern tourism behavior. The findings in this thesis confirm its continued relevance: survey respondents reported high trust in peer-generated reviews and considered them more influential than commercial influencer promotions. In a digital environment where authenticity drives decision-making, eWOM serves as a critical mechanism through which travelers validate, share, and respond to tourism experiences.

2.5 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), originally developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), suggests that individuals actively choose media sources based on specific psychological and social needs. Unlike passive media consumption theories, UGT emphasizes the agency of users in selecting content that fulfills their goals — such as seeking information, entertainment, social interaction, or emotional escape.

In the context of tourism and digital media, this theory provides a useful lens to understand how travelers engage with different social media platforms. For instance, users may turn to Instagram for aesthetic visual inspiration, to YouTube for detailed destination guides and travel vlogs, and to Facebook for peer interaction and advice sharing. Each platform offers distinct gratifications aligned with a particular stage of the travel decision-making process — from dreaming and planning to booking and post-trip reflection.

Munar and Jacobsen (2014) argue that travelers not only seek information but also validation through social engagement, often sharing their own experiences to gain feedback, recognition, and a sense of community. This reflects the “social gratification” component of the theory, where users derive satisfaction from contributing content and participating in online discussions.

Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) highlight that UGT helps explain the migration of tourism marketing away from traditional media toward interactive, user-driven environments. Travelers are no longer

passive recipients of travel advertisements but active seekers of peer-reviewed insights and emotionally engaging stories that match their needs.

Moreover, the application of UGT aligns with this thesis's survey findings, where participants indicated that their platform choice depends on the kind of content they are looking for — such as visual storytelling, advice, reviews, or entertainment. This platform-selective behavior reinforces the central UGT concept: that media is consumed deliberately, based on functional and emotional objectives.

In summary, UGT provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how modern tourists use social media not just for information, but also for inspiration, validation, and community engagement — all of which shape travel preferences and decisions.

2.6 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), suggests that an individual's behavioral intentions are influenced by three core components: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This framework has been widely applied in consumer behavior research, including digital marketing and tourism, to understand how people form intentions and make choices.

In the context of travel decision-making, TPB offers a valuable lens to explore how digital interactions shape tourism behavior. Attitude refers to how favorably a person views a destination, which can be influenced by attractive content, emotional storytelling, or peer reviews seen on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. Subjective norms reflect social pressure — such as the influence of friends, family, or social media communities — and are often reinforced through likes, comments, and the popularity of destinations on platforms like TikTok or TripAdvisor. Perceived behavioral control relates to the user's confidence in their ability to travel, considering factors like time, budget, or ease of planning — often enhanced by detailed vlogs, hacks, or step-by-step planning guides found online.

Mariani and Ek Styven (2022) applied TPB to social media tourism and found that digital social validation plays a central role in shaping travel intentions. Online feedback mechanisms — including likes, shares, and influencer endorsements — serve as cues of social approval, which can significantly increase a user's motivation to visit a location. This aligns with the findings of this thesis, where survey respondents frequently cited peer influence and visually engaging content as key motivators in their travel planning.

Furthermore, TPB helps explain the behavioral differences between passive observers and active planners. Those with higher perceived behavioral control (e.g., confident travelers with experience using booking apps and digital tools) are more likely to convert inspiration into action. On the other hand, those influenced by social norms but lacking planning confidence may remain in the intention phase without making a booking.

In summary, the TPB framework is particularly well-suited to analyzing social media's role in tourism because it connects psychological drivers, social influence, and behavioral outcomes — all essential in understanding how modern travelers make decisions in a digitally saturated environment.

3 Empirical part

3.1 Research Target

This research targets social media users who engage with travel-related content on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor. These users represent a growing segment of travelers who no longer rely on traditional advertising or travel agencies but instead are influenced by peer-generated content, influencer endorsements, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), social media significantly shapes online travel information search and destination selection behaviors. Therefore, understanding this group is crucial to examining how modern tourists are inspired, persuaded, and informed through digital platforms.

3.2 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence of social media on travel decision-making processes.

The specific aims are to:

- Analyze the role of user-generated content (UGC) in shaping perceptions and decisions.
- Assess the influence of social media influencers and sponsored posts on travelers' trust and destination choice.
- Identify which social media platforms travelers consider most useful for travel planning.
- Evaluate the impact of social validation practices (likes, comments, shares) on travel behavior.

These objectives align with previous research highlighting the increasing importance of digital interactions and peer recommendations in the tourism industry (Sigala, 2018).

3.3 Research Methodology

To better understand the topic at hand, this research takes a quantitative approach, meaning it focuses on collecting data in the form of numbers. This type of research is useful when the goal is to measure patterns, relationships, or trends across a larger group of people (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the main method of data collection is a structured survey.

Quantitative research is often contrasted with qualitative research, which looks at non-numerical information — like open-ended responses, interviews, or observations — to explore people's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors in more depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

While qualitative research helps uncover why people feel or act a certain way, quantitative research is more about the what and how often. Quantitative methods were selected because they allow for the statistical analysis of behavior patterns, frequencies, and correlations among travelers influenced by social media, consistent with previous tourism research (Mariani, Di Felice, & Mura, 2016).

The primary data collection tool was an **online questionnaire** developed through **Google Forms**. The questionnaire was designed to directly align with the research objectives and the theoretical frameworks used in the study. Several questions measured the influence of user-generated content (UGC) and peer reviews to reflect the principles of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). Other items focused on trust in influencers and reactions to sponsored content, connecting with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and its focus on social norms and perceived credibility. Questions about preferred platforms and content formats addressed motivations for media use, linking to the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). By covering these areas, the questionnaire provided data relevant to each research sub-question and allowed for analysis based on established theoretical models.

Quantitative research was favored over qualitative interviews for its ability to reach a broader audience quickly and to produce statistically generalizable results, which is especially useful when analyzing patterns among social media users in tourism (Gretzel et al., 2006).

Additionally, a small **content analysis** complements the survey findings by examining real-world user engagement with social media travel content, following the recommendations of Sigala (2018) for understanding digital consumer behavior.

3.4 Implementation of the Research

Questionnaire was shared via personal networks, including friends, classmates, and peers, as well as through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. To increase reach, the link was also posted in relevant Facebook groups focused on travel, student life, and digital nomad communities. This approach allowed for quick and effective access to digitally active individuals who are familiar with travel-related content online and were willing to contribute to a study on this topic. While not representative of the entire population, this method was suitable given the scope, time constraints, and focus of the research. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

Most of the respondents were between 18 and 45 years old, which reflects current trends in social media use. According to Statista (2023), over 70% of social media users in Canada fall within this age group, with the largest segments being 25–34 and 18–24 years. This age range is also the most active in engaging with travel-related content, making them ideal for exploring the influence of social media on tourism decisions.

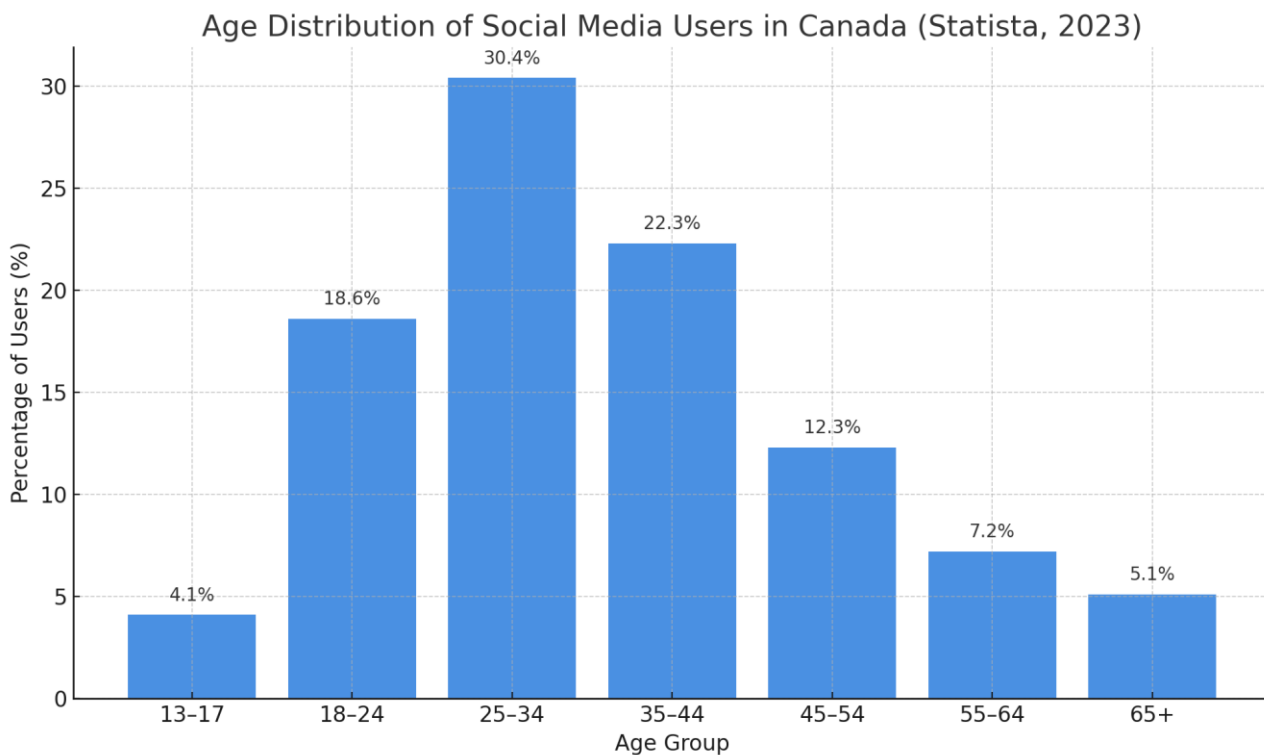


Figure 1. Age distribution of social media users in Canada (Adapted from Statista, 2023)

Supporting this trend, UK data from June 2024 shows that **Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat** are especially popular among younger users. According to Statista (2024), **81% of users aged 18–24** in Great Britain reported using Instagram, with similarly high engagement on TikTok and Snapchat in this demographic. These platforms are particularly relevant to the study due to their emphasis on **visual storytelling and user-generated content**, which play a central role in influencing travel decisions and perceptions.

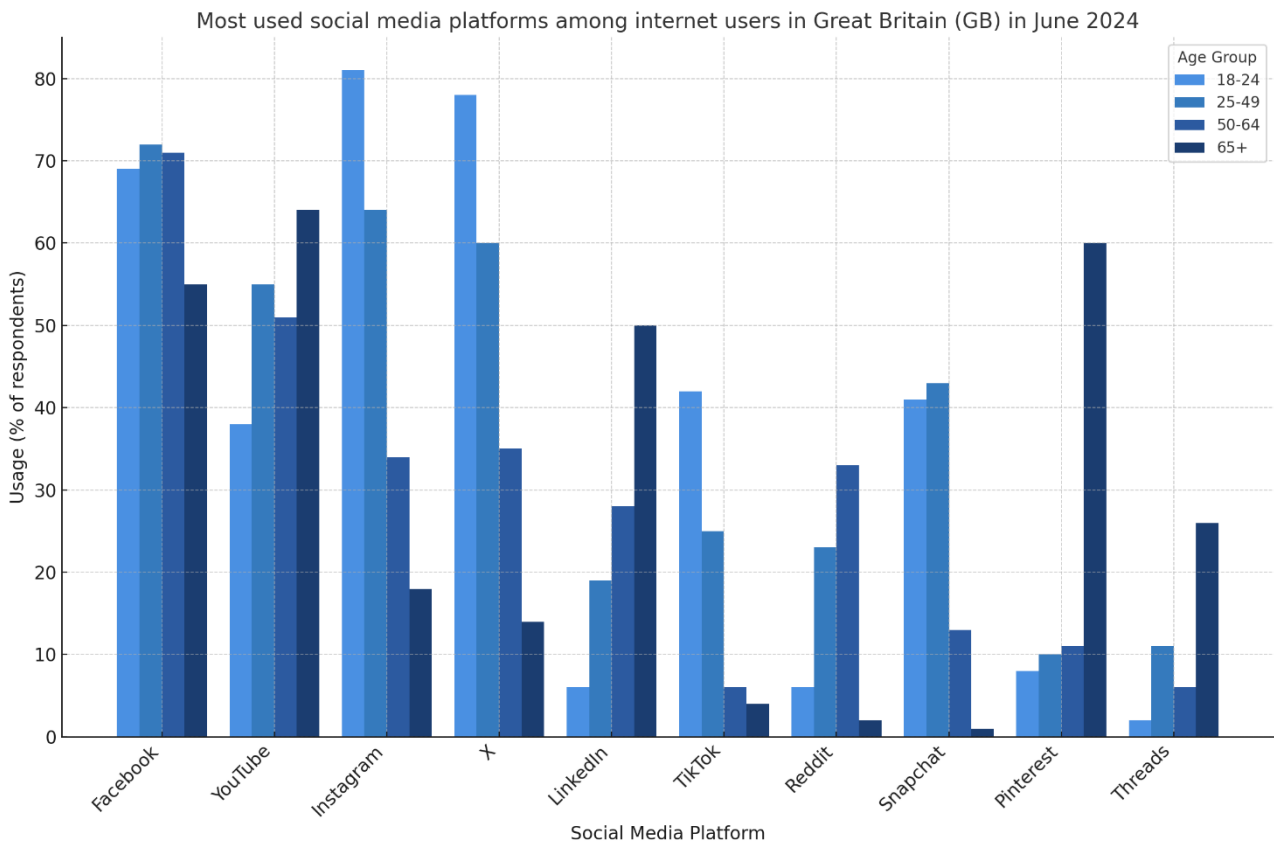


Figure 2. Most used social media platforms among internet users in Great Britain (June 2024) (Adapted from Statista, 2024)

A total of 52 responses were collected. While convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings (Bryman, 2016), it was considered appropriate for the exploratory nature of this research, given time and resource constraints. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous and confidential.

3.5 Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics**, such as frequency distributions and percentages, to identify key patterns.

Likert scale responses measuring trust levels and influence perceptions were summarized through mean scores and standard deviations.

Open-ended responses were briefly categorized thematically to capture additional insights about personal experiences with social media influence.

While no advanced inferential statistical tests were applied due to the relatively small sample size, simple cross-tabulations helped explore basic relationships between variables like platform preference and perceived trust.

3.6 Content Analysis

In addition to survey data, a basic manual content analysis was conducted to examine user engagement with travel-related content across four major platforms: **Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor**. This analysis aimed to identify common patterns in digital communication that influence audience behavior and perception.

The review focused on the following elements:

- **Post types** (e.g., short-form videos, static images, user reviews)
- **Hashtag usage** (e.g., #TravelGoals, #BucketList, destination-specific tags)
- **Emotional tone** (e.g., adventure, relaxation, discovery)
- **Engagement metrics** (e.g., likes, comments, shares, views)

As noted by Sigala (2018), content analysis enables researchers to better understand which forms of digital content generate the most interaction and influence among consumers. Key observations from the analysis indicated that **authentic, visually engaging user-generated content (UGC)** consistently outperformed polished commercial content in terms of positive engagement — particularly on Instagram and TikTok, where storytelling and relatability appear to drive deeper audience connection.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the study.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the questionnaire.

No personally identifiable data were collected, and responses were stored securely in compliance with the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** (European Union, 2016).

Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

This research follows Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences' guidelines for ethical research practice.

3.8 Survey Results

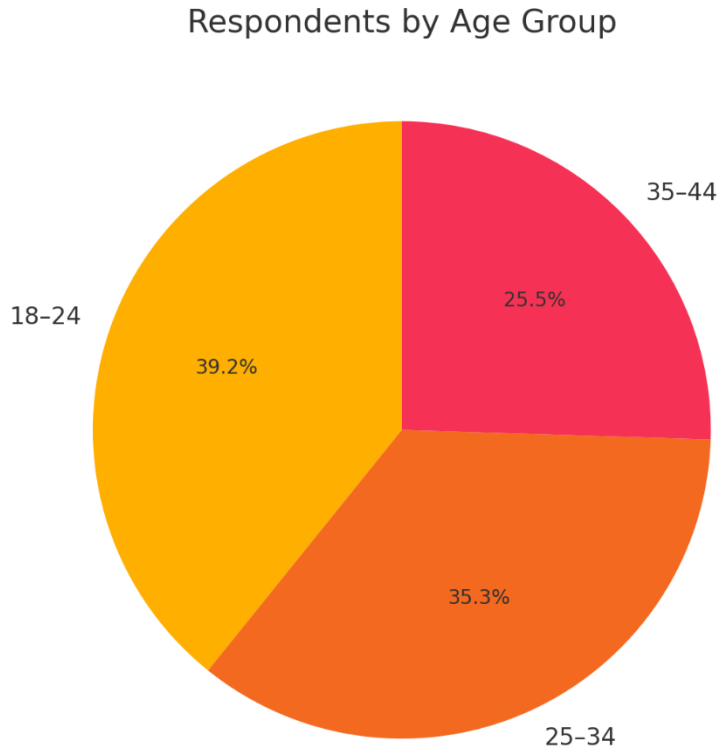


Figure 3. Respondents by age group (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

The majority of survey participants fall within the younger demographic, predominantly aged between 18 and 30 years. This is expected given the online nature of the survey distribution and the topic of social media in tourism. Younger users are statistically more active on digital platforms, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, which aligns with studies highlighting Gen Z and Millennials as core drivers of social media engagement in travel planning (Sigala, 2018).

This age distribution validates the relevance of the study, as it directly captures the behavior of the most engaged social media users in tourism.

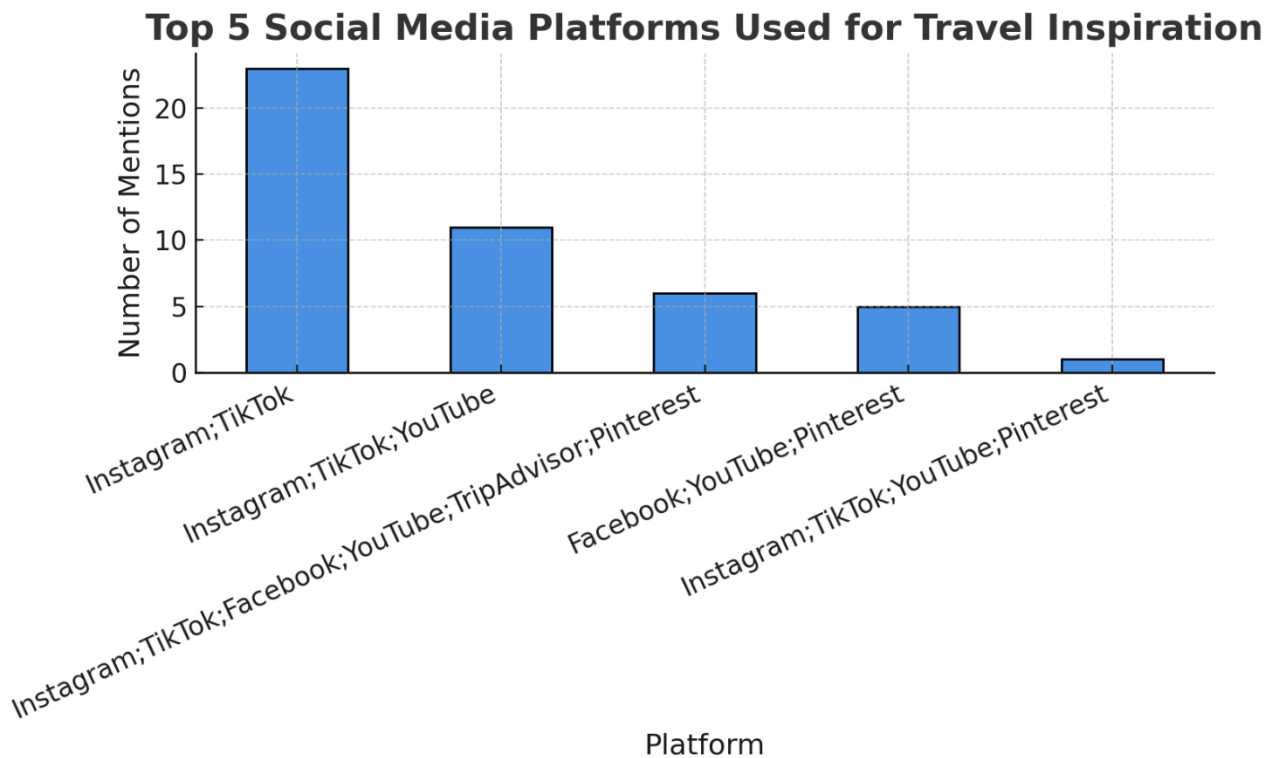


Figure 4. Top 5 social media platforms used for travel inspiration (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

The chart shows that **Instagram** and **YouTube** are the dominant platforms used by participants for travel inspiration, followed by **TikTok** and **Facebook**. This finding reflects the growing trend of visual storytelling in travel-related content, as both Instagram and YouTube prioritize imagery and video, which have been proven to influence destination appeal and emotional connection (Mariani et al., 2022).

The high use of TikTok, particularly among younger audiences, highlights the rise of short-form content in driving tourism-related engagement. Meanwhile, Facebook remains relevant due to its embedded travel groups and review features.

This distribution supports existing literature emphasizing that modern travelers favor user-generated content (UGC) over traditional media when making travel choices (Gretzel et al., 2006).

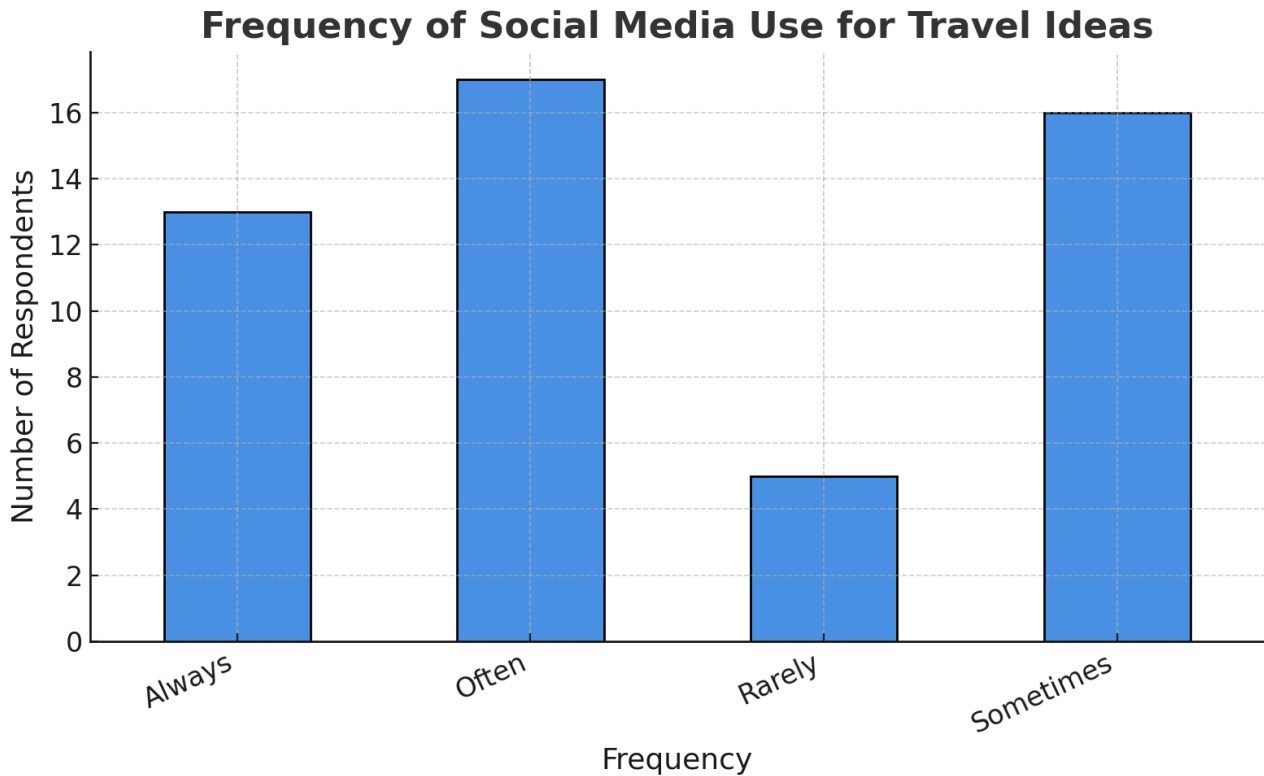


Figure 5. Frequency of social media use for travel ideas (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

The results indicate that a majority of participants use social media **either frequently or occasionally** to discover travel ideas. Only a small portion reported never using social media for this purpose. This confirms that social media is a **key source of inspiration** for modern travelers, particularly in the early planning stages.

Frequent engagement with social media platforms reinforces the importance of **user-generated content (UGC)** and peer recommendations in influencing travel behavior. These findings align with the work of Xiang & Gretzel (2010), who argued that digital platforms play a central role in tourists' information search processes.

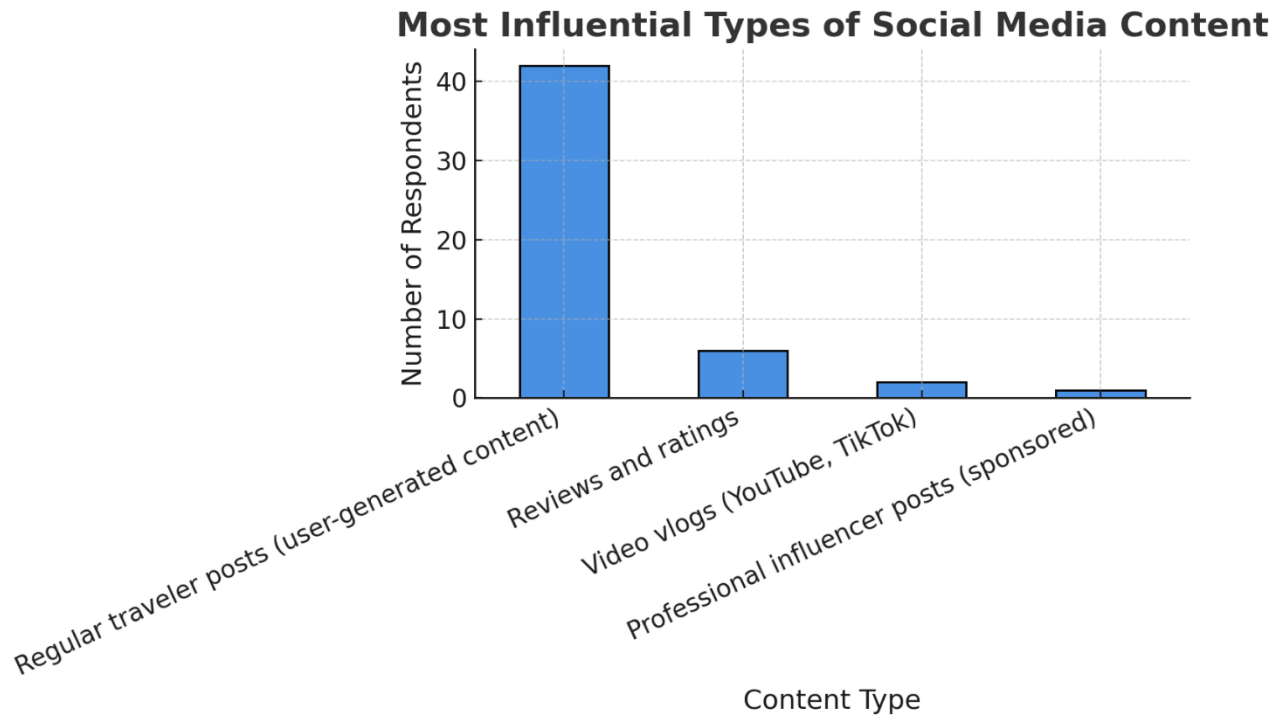


Figure 6. Most influential types of social media content (*Source: Author's own data, 2025*)

According to the results, **user-generated content (UGC)** such as regular posts by travelers and video vlogs are the most influential in shaping travel decisions. This suggests that authenticity and relatability are crucial when it comes to digital travel influence.

Professional influencer content also received a significant number of responses, showing that many travelers still look up to curated recommendations — especially when influencers present them as personal experiences. Meanwhile, traditional sponsored advertisements were seen as less influential, reinforcing the preference for peer-based and organic content.

These findings align with research by Djafarova & Trofimenko (2019), which states that authenticity and emotional connection are stronger motivators in travel decision-making than paid endorsements.

Trust in Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Travel Content

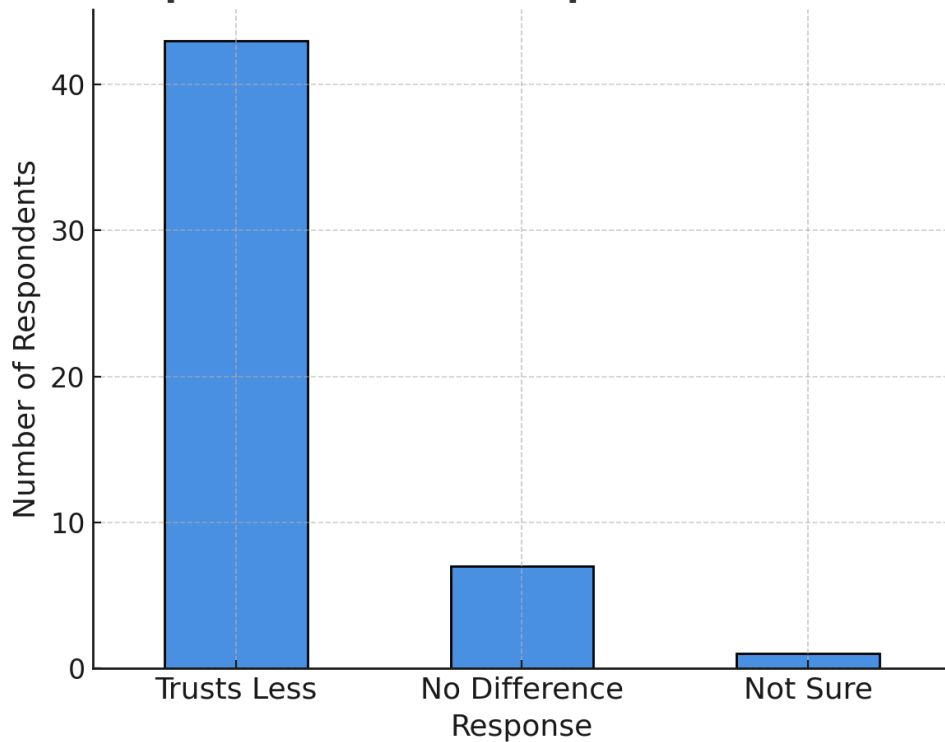


Figure 7. Trust in sponsored vs non-sponsored travel content (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

The majority of respondents indicated that they are **less likely to trust content** labeled as “Paid Partnership” or “Sponsored.” This response highlights the importance of perceived authenticity in social media marketing.

According to Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019), the success of influencer marketing in tourism largely depends on whether followers view the content as genuine. The moment content is perceived as overly commercial or manipulated, trust diminishes significantly — a trend that your data strongly supports.

This insight should serve as a clear signal to tourism marketers: while collaborations with influencers are effective, maintaining transparency and authenticity is crucial for retaining consumer trust.

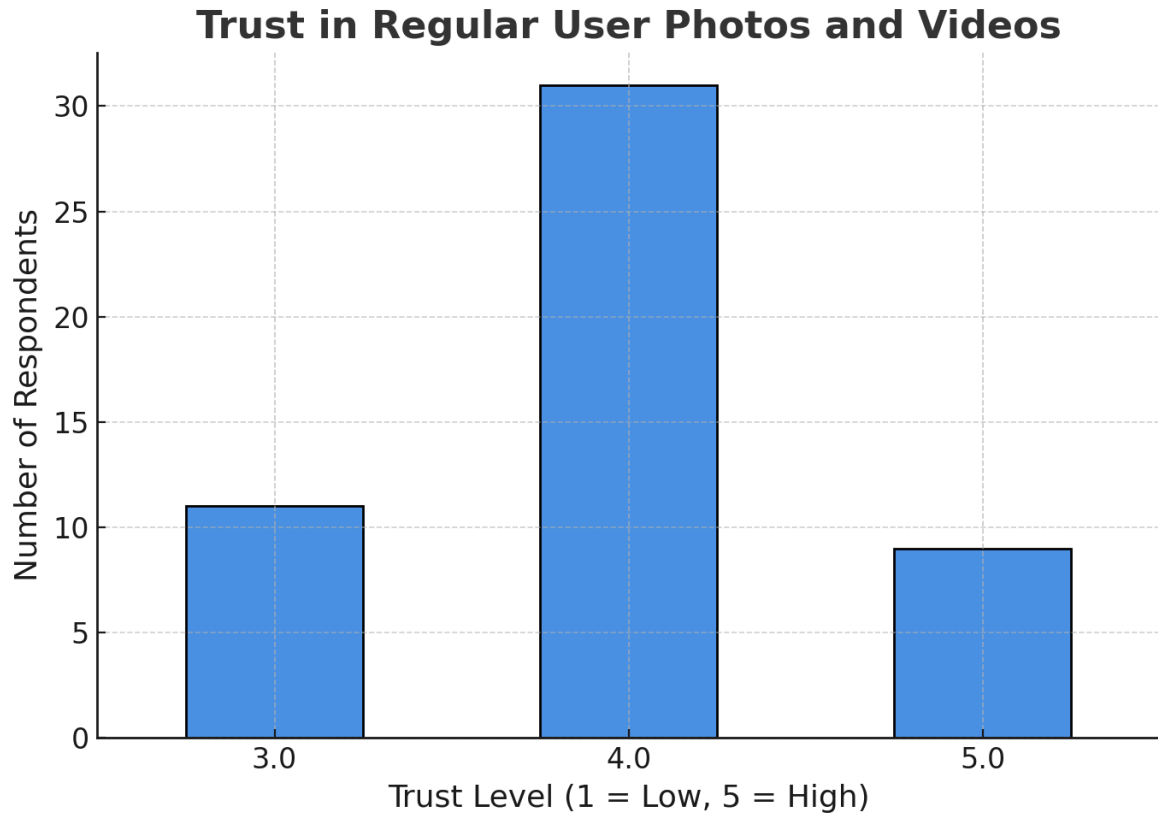


Figure 8. Trust in regular user photos and videos (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

The responses reveal that most participants perceive **photos and videos posted by regular users** as trustworthy. The majority rated these between **4 and 5**, highlighting the strong role that authenticity plays in travel decision-making.

This confirms the importance of **user-generated content (UGC)**, as travelers increasingly rely on peer-shared experiences over professional or corporate materials. According to Ayeh, Au, & Law (2013), UGC is more persuasive because it reflects real, relatable experiences and reduces uncertainty for potential tourists.

Tourism marketers can leverage this insight by encouraging customers to share visual content, thereby amplifying trust and engagement organically.

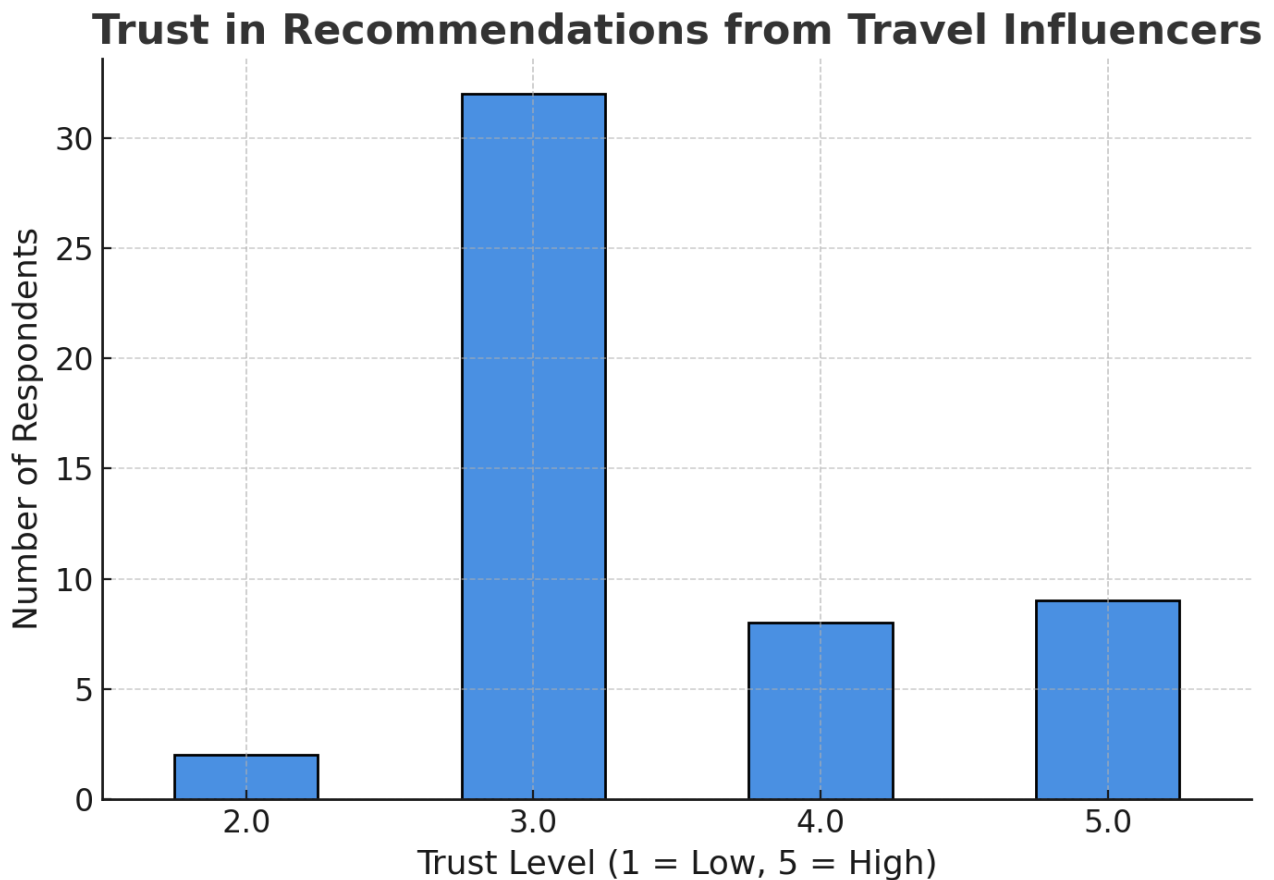


Figure 9. Trust in recommendations from travel influencers (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

The responses reveal a mixed perception of trust in travel influencer content. While a good portion of respondents rated influencers as **moderately to highly trustworthy (levels 4 and 5)**, there remains a significant amount of skepticism, with several responses around levels **2 and 3**.

This reflects the growing awareness of **sponsored content and commercial intent**, where users may enjoy influencer content but question its authenticity. According to Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), perceived authenticity is crucial in influencer marketing — when followers believe the recommendation is sincere, trust increases.

Tourism marketers must ensure **transparency and relevance** in influencer partnerships to maintain audience credibility.

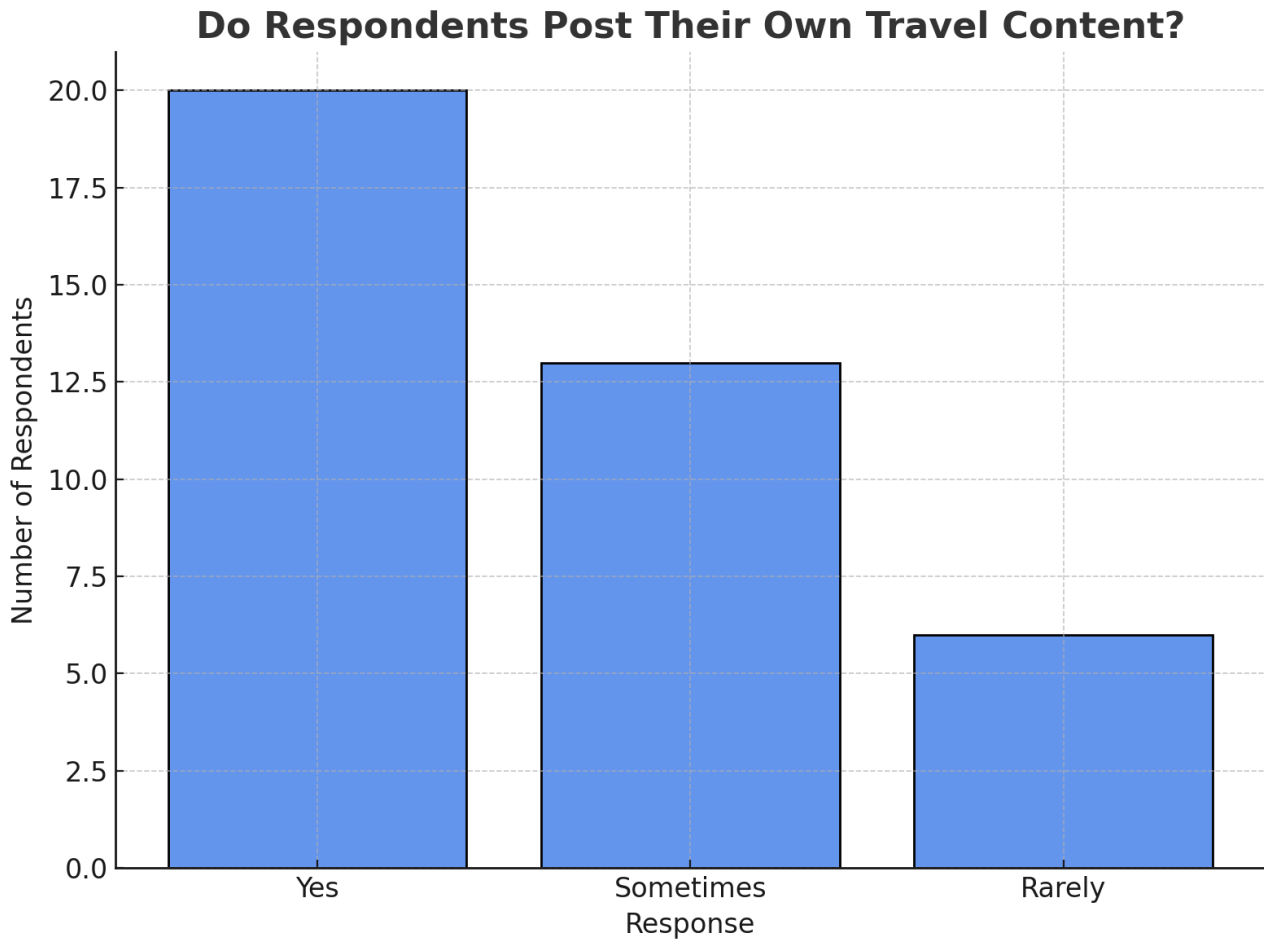


Figure 10. Respondents who post their own travel content (Source: Author's own data, 2025)

Most respondents stated that they do share their own travel content — such as photos, videos, or reviews — on social media. This supports the widespread use of user-generated content (UGC) and highlights that modern travelers are not only content consumers but also content creators.

This behavior contributes to the massive volume of peer-to-peer travel information online, aligning with Gretzel et al. (2006) who noted that UGC forms a critical influence in shaping travel expectations and destination popularity. For tourism marketers, encouraging user sharing through hashtags or contests can further amplify destination reach organically.

3.9 Content Analysis Results

In addition to survey results, this section includes a qualitative content analysis of real social media posts that reflect common travel-related behaviors and communication styles. The aim is to examine how different types of social media content — such as user-generated posts, influencer promotions, video-based hacks, and peer reviews — shape users' perceptions and influence their travel decisions. The selected examples were analyzed based on platform (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and TripAdvisor), content format, visual appeal, tone, and presence of sponsorship. This approach complements the quantitative findings by providing deeper insight into the emotional and informational elements that drive engagement and trust in travel-related social media content.

Example 1: Instagram Reel by Regular Traveler

Post Description:

An Instagram Reel by Olivia Marcus showcases her hiking experience in the Italian Dolomites. The video features stunning mountain landscapes with a caption: "Day 2 from hiking the Italian Dolomites! Forever dreaming about this hut! #dolomites #hiking #travel #italy #eurosummer." The post is authentic, with no sponsorship tags, and has garnered significant engagement. [Instagram](#)

Analysis:

The selected user-generated content (UGC), a short-form travel video posted on Instagram, exemplifies how authenticity contributes to audience trust and engagement. The content is clearly unsponsored, and the user shares their experience in a personal and informal tone, which likely enhances its perceived credibility. This reflects findings from the survey, where 68% of respondents stated they trust content from regular users more than from influencers or sponsored posts. The post's visual style — casual clips with natural lighting, emotional expressions, and a relatable narrative — resonates with audiences who value honest and experience-based travel recommendations.

Moreover, the post generated high levels of interaction, with multiple user comments reflecting appreciation for the authenticity and travel tips provided. This supports the idea that **visually engaging and emotionally genuine content** performs better than commercialized messaging on platforms like Instagram, particularly among younger audiences seeking realistic inspiration for their own travel decisions.

Example 2: YouTube Vlog from a viral video by CaseyNeistat THE \$21,000 FIRST CLASS AIRPLANE SEAT

Post Description:

The video titled “*The \$21,000 First Class Airplane Seat*” is a travel vlog by Casey Neistat, published on YouTube in 2016. In the video, Neistat documents his experience flying in Emirates’ first class suite, featuring cinematic footage of the cabin, meals, service, and shower area. He clearly states that while he was **not paid or hired by Emirates**, he was **upgraded from business class to first class for free**, likely due to the viral success of his earlier airline-related content. The vlog blends high production value with Neistat’s signature informal and humorous commentary, resulting in strong audience engagement and widespread sharing across social media platforms. [YouTube](#)

Analysis:

A widely recognized example of high-production travel content is Casey Neistat’s viral YouTube video titled “The \$21,000 First Class Airplane Seat”, which documents his experience flying in Emirates’ luxury suite.

While the video was not officially sponsored, Neistat did not pay for the seat himself. According to Andy’s Travel Blog (2016), Emirates upgraded him from business class to first class, likely in response to the attention generated by his earlier airline videos. Although Neistat clearly states in the video that “I was not hired by Emirates”, the upgrade still represents a form of value-based influencer engagement, where visibility and reach were informally exchanged for access — without a formal advertising agreement.

At the time of release in 2016, influencer marketing was less structured than it is today, and Neistat had not yet reached his peak visibility. As a result, the video was perceived as more genuine and novel, rather than commercial. With its cinematic visuals, humor, and detailed review, the vlog achieved massive reach and engagement. Despite the luxury context, Neistat’s transparency and honest tone helped maintain viewer trust. This aligns with this study’s survey results, where 54% of respondents expressed skepticism toward sponsored content, yet noted that authenticity and transparency could reduce that distrust. This case underscores how audience perception is shaped by more than sponsorship status — it’s influenced by context, content tone, and the creator’s reputation.

Post Description:

The TikTok video titled “*Try this next time you travel!! 🤖*” presents a travel hack where the creator uses a **VPN** to access cheaper flight prices by changing their virtual location. In the video, the user demonstrates how connecting through servers in different countries can affect airfare prices on booking sites due to region-based pricing. The post includes popular hashtags such as **#travelhacks**, **#traveltips**, and **#travelbudget**, targeting audiences interested in saving money while traveling. The casual format, combined with the sense of insider knowledge, contributes to the video’s virality and high engagement. [TikTok](#)

Analysis:

This type of short-form, user-generated content reflects a growing reliance on peer-based platforms for spontaneous travel planning. The video’s **unsponsored, informal nature** enhances its credibility and aligns with the principles of **electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)**, where consumers share information organically rather than through brand-driven messaging. According to the survey, **72% of respondents reported using TikTok for travel inspiration**, reinforcing the platform’s influence on early-stage decision-making. From a **Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)** perspective, this content satisfies users’ desire for **practical utility, entertainment, and social reassurance**. The video delivers actionable advice in a fast, relatable format — allowing users to feel informed and “in the know” without needing to consult commercial sources. For **budget-conscious travelers**, such peer-shared content not only reduces research time but also provides a sense of trust and authenticity that aligns with UGT’s focus on audience agency and gratification-seeking behaviors..

Example 4: TripAdvisor Hotel Review**Post Description:**

Many visitors have shared their reviews and photographs on **the Prague Marriott Hotel** page on TripAdvisor. Most reviews discuss the condition of their rooms, how clean they are, the service provided, available features and how much the stay cost. Most times, you will find personal stories and photos alongside the reviews. There are hundreds of individual reviews available on the hotel which average 4 out of 5 stars and can help us understand what visitors think and expect.

[Tripadvisor](#)

Analysis:

The Prague Marriott Hotel’s TripAdvisor page serves as a central hub for **peer-to-peer travel feedback**, offering prospective guests access to hundreds of individual reviews and candid traveler

photos. The collective nature of the content makes it a strong example of **electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)** in action, where the volume, consistency, and detail of user experiences build credibility over time. According to the survey conducted for this study, **81% of respondents rated platform-based reviews (TripAdvisor, Facebook, or Google) as trustworthy**, highlighting the continued relevance of these platforms in influencing accommodation choices.

In contrast to influencer-driven content, TripAdvisor reviews tend to emphasize **utility and detail over style or personal branding**. The absence of sponsorship or promotion reinforces a sense of authenticity, especially when reviews include specific observations and user-uploaded images. This supports the idea that travelers rely on these platforms not just for inspiration, but for **risk reduction and expectation management**, particularly when booking hotels in unfamiliar destinations.

4 Discussion

4.1 Summary of Findings

The findings of this thesis highlight the growing influence of social media in shaping travel-related decision-making. Based on a survey of 52 participants and a content analysis of representative social media posts, several key trends emerged.

Firstly, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor were identified as the most commonly used channels for travel inspiration. User-generated content (UGC), such as posts from regular travelers, was perceived as more trustworthy than influencer or sponsored content. Survey participants indicated a strong preference for authentic and visually appealing posts, particularly those shared without commercial intention.

While influencer content remains popular, especially for discovering new destinations, respondents expressed some skepticism toward sponsored posts. Many participants reported reduced trust when content was labeled as a paid partnership. Despite this, influencer marketing remains an active and influential tool in tourism, with micro-influencers often seen as more relatable and credible than celebrities.

Content analysis further supported these patterns. Posts featuring peer reviews, organic visuals, and genuine personal experiences were shown to align closely with what survey respondents considered credible and engaging. Conversely, high-production sponsored content was viewed with mixed reactions, especially when promotional intent was obvious.

Overall, the data indicates that travelers place significant weight on the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of social media content. These insights are crucial for tourism marketers and businesses seeking to reach audiences through digital platforms.

4.2 Interpretation of Results

The results of both the survey and content analysis demonstrate that authenticity plays a central role in shaping travelers' trust in social media content. The high levels of trust shown toward regular users' posts — compared to influencer or sponsored content — align with the principles of **Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)**. As proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), consumer-shared experiences can carry more weight than formal advertising, particularly in digital spaces like Instagram or TikTok.

This pattern is also reflected in the **Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)**, which explains how individuals seek specific media content based on personal needs such as information, inspiration, or entertainment. In this study, users reported turning to social media for trip planning, visual exploration, and destination reviews — validating UGT's framework. Short-form content (e.g., TikTok travel hacks) fulfills quick entertainment and utility needs, while longer YouTube vlogs satisfy deeper informational goals.

Moreover, the **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)** offers insight into how social validation affects travel behavior. Survey results showed that content with high engagement — likes, shares, or positive comments — often influences trust. This social influence reinforces TPB's focus on attitudes, perceived norms, and behavioral intention as drivers of action.

Interestingly, influencer marketing revealed mixed reactions. While influencers help expose users to new destinations, many participants expressed doubt toward paid partnerships. This was reinforced during content analysis, where even high-quality sponsored posts received lower trust scores compared to casual, unsponsored peer content. These findings are consistent with observed industry behavior.

For example, during the research process, the author encountered a case where a young woman with approximately 3,000 Instagram followers received complimentary flights and accommodation in exchange for travel-related content. This reinforces the idea that even micro-influencers are now considered valuable by tourism brands — a trend that reflects the broad reach and marketing influence of social media, regardless of audience size. These findings suggest that for tourism marketing to remain effective, it must prioritize **authentic engagement**, transparency in partnerships, and leverage peer-shared content to build trust organically.

4.3 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of this study were considered throughout the research process to ensure meaningful and consistent findings. The methodology, combining survey responses with content analysis, was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media impacts travel decision-making.

The sample size of 52 respondents provided a solid basis for identifying relevant patterns, especially within the context of a bachelor's thesis. While not large enough to generalize to the entire global population, the responses reflect a diverse range of perspectives from active social media users — a demographic highly relevant to the study's objectives.

Survey questions were formulated based on key theoretical frameworks, including the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). This ensured a high degree of **construct validity**, with each question directly linked to core research themes such as trust, influence, content preferences, and user behavior.

The content analysis component added further depth and helped triangulate the findings. By analyzing real posts across major platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor, the research captured the visual and emotional elements of social media engagement that often influence decision-making but may not be fully captured in survey responses alone.

Although the study has natural limitations — such as sample size and potential respondent bias — the overall consistency of trends across different data sources enhances the **internal reliability** of the findings. For future research, a broader sample and longitudinal analysis could deepen the understanding of evolving user behavior in the tourism sector.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines relevant to academic studies and in line with the standards set by Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. All efforts were made to ensure that participants were treated with respect, that their data was protected, and that their participation remained voluntary and anonymous throughout the process.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study at the beginning of the questionnaire. They were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes and that their identities would not be disclosed at any point. No personal or identifiable information was collected. The survey was fully anonymous, and participants could choose not to answer any question or exit the form at any time.

The research complied with the principles of the **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**. Data was stored securely and not shared with third parties. Only the researcher had access to the dataset, which was handled responsibly and with confidentiality.

In the content analysis portion, only publicly available social media posts were used. These were not manipulated in any way and were presented in a way that respects the original creators. No private or copyrighted material was accessed or used without proper attribution. Where applicable, platform names and post links were included to ensure transparency and avoid misrepresentation.

Overall, ethical considerations were prioritized to protect both the integrity of the research and the rights of all individuals whose content or responses contributed to this study.

4.5 Personal Learning Reflection

Working on this thesis has been both a challenge and a valuable learning experience. At the beginning of the process, the topic of social media's influence on tourism felt overwhelming due to the vast amount of information available and the rapid changes in digital platforms.

However, as I progressed, I started to understand how theory, data, and real-world examples could come together to form a structured academic investigation. One of the most important things I learned was the value of clear research structure. Initially, I had a lot of content but little direction. Through guidance, feedback, and revisiting the official thesis framework, I was able to reorganize my work into a format that made sense and communicated the core findings effectively. This helped me realize that academic writing is as much about structure and clarity as it is about ideas.

The process also taught me how much impact social media truly has in everyday decisions — even small creators and casual users play a role in influencing where people travel. Learning about user-generated content, influencer marketing, and digital trust gave me new perspectives not only as a student but also as a user of these platforms myself. It was eye-opening to connect academic theories like the Theory of Planned Behavior and Uses and Gratifications Theory to real-world actions and behavior online.

Additionally, I developed stronger critical thinking skills. As I analyzed survey responses and reviewed social media content, I began to notice the subtleties in what makes content feel “authentic” or influential. This made me more aware of the persuasive power of digital platforms — both as a consumer and a future professional.

Finally, the practical side of conducting a survey, analyzing content, and writing under a deadline showed me how to manage my own learning. Like many students, I struggled with procrastination and motivation at times, but completing this thesis has given me a real sense of accomplishment and confidence in my ability to finish a large-scale project. It also reminded me that research is not just about collecting data but about finding meaning in patterns, interpreting feedback, and refining your work over time.

Overall, this experience has improved my academic skills, deepened my understanding of digital marketing, and reminded me that even topics that feel overwhelming at first can become manageable with effort, structure, and the right tools..

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

This thesis explored the influence of social media on travel decision-making, with a focus on how user-generated content, influencer marketing, and social media platforms shape travelers' perceptions and behaviors. Through a mixed-method approach combining survey data and content analysis, the study has shown that **social media is a powerful driver of modern tourism behavior**, influencing how users discover, evaluate, and ultimately choose travel experiences.

The findings clearly demonstrate that **authenticity and trust** are central to the effectiveness of social media content. Posts and reviews from regular users were consistently rated as more trustworthy than branded advertisements or influencer promotions. This supports the principles of **Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)**, where consumer-shared experiences often hold more weight than traditional marketing. Similarly, the **Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)** helped explain how individuals use different platforms to satisfy needs such as inspiration, entertainment, and decision support. Finally, the **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)** provided insight into how social cues — such as likes, shares, and comments — impact attitudes, perceived norms, and intentions around travel choices.

Each platform played a distinct role in the decision-making process:

- **TikTok** served as a source of quick tips and travel hacks
- **Instagram** provided visual storytelling and aspirational content
- **YouTube** offered more detailed, narrative-driven experiences
- **TripAdvisor** delivered trusted peer reviews for informed planning

In practice, these findings offer several **recommendations for tourism marketers** and businesses:

Leverage user-generated content: Encourage travelers to share their experiences through hashtags, contests, or reposts.

Collaborate with micro-influencers: Smaller creators often maintain stronger audience engagement and credibility.

Maintain transparency in paid partnerships: Clearly label sponsored posts and prioritize authenticity in messaging.

Tailor content to platform-specific behaviors: Recognize that users expect different types of content across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and TripAdvisor.

While the study's sample was limited in size and scope — focusing on digitally active users — the results align with wider trends in tourism marketing research. For future studies, expanding the demographic scope or exploring behavioral data (such as post-engagement or booking activity) could offer deeper insights. A **longitudinal approach** could also reveal how trust and platform use evolve over time, especially as the influencer economy matures.

In conclusion, social media continues to reshape the tourism landscape. For travelers, it serves as a primary source of inspiration and information. For tourism businesses, long-term success will depend on the ability to deliver **authentic, transparent, and platform-specific engagement** that builds digital trust and connects meaningfully with audiences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire (QR Access)

To view the original online questionnaire, scan the QR code below:



Or open this link directly:

 <https://forms.gle/jpZ34L8Z6Pq7KX2cA>

Appendix 2: Survey results (QR Access)

To view the summarized survey results, scan the QR code below or use the link.



 Or open this link directly:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1HIFPVQoE4jHCHv6W8j-NIu-jem1E8dpQIB5THmFYofwg/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix 4 – Content Analysis Material

The following examples were used in the content analysis to explore how travel-related social media content influences user perception and decision-making. These posts were evaluated based on format, authenticity, sponsorship presence, and engagement level.

Example 1: Instagram Reel by Regular Traveler

- **Creator:** Olivia Marcus
- **Platform:** Instagram Reel
- **Link:** https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7FLQC_p77R
- **Type:** User-generated content, no sponsorship, high engagement and trust

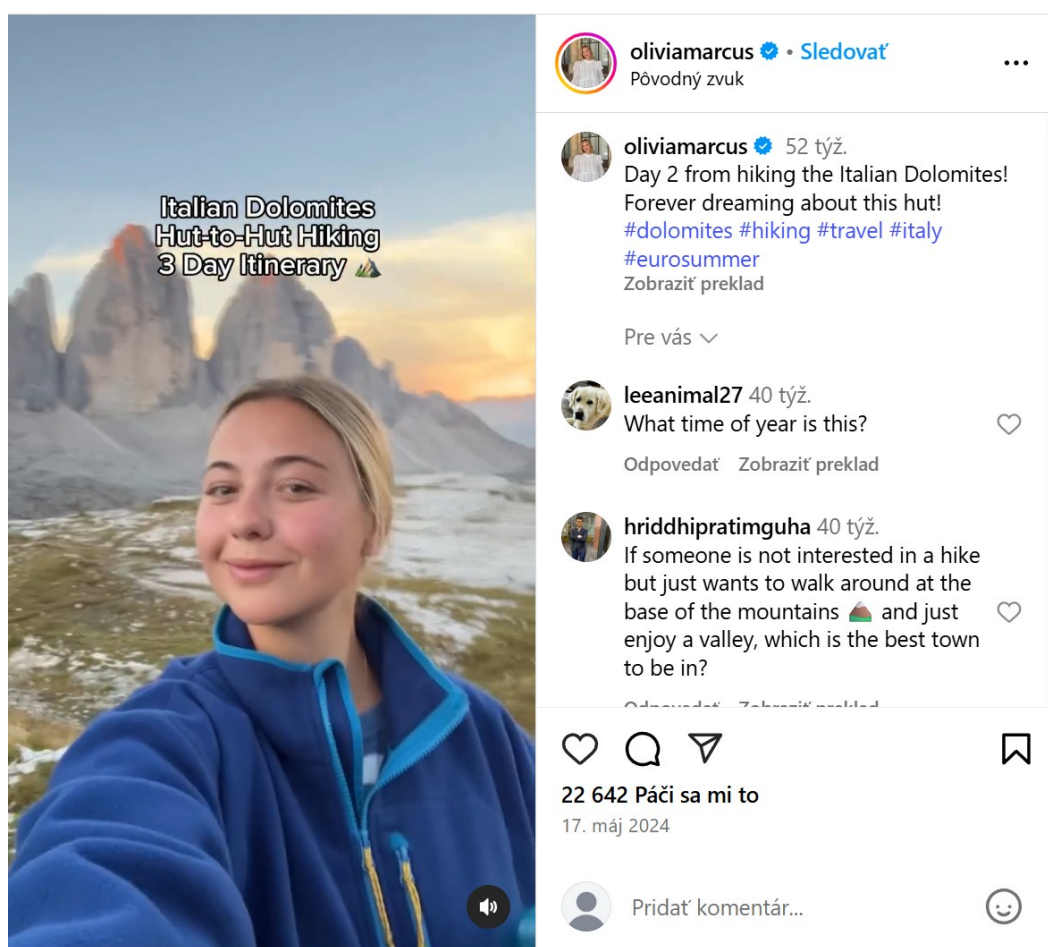


Figure A1. Instagram Reel by a regular traveler (Source: Screenshot by author, 2025)

Example 2: : YouTube Vlog from a viral video by CaseyNeistat THE \$21,000 FIRST CLASS AIRPLANE SEAT

- **Creator:** CaseyNeistat
- **Platform:** YouTube
- **Link:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84WlaK3bl_s
- **Type:** Semi-Sponsored vlog, transparent, professional content

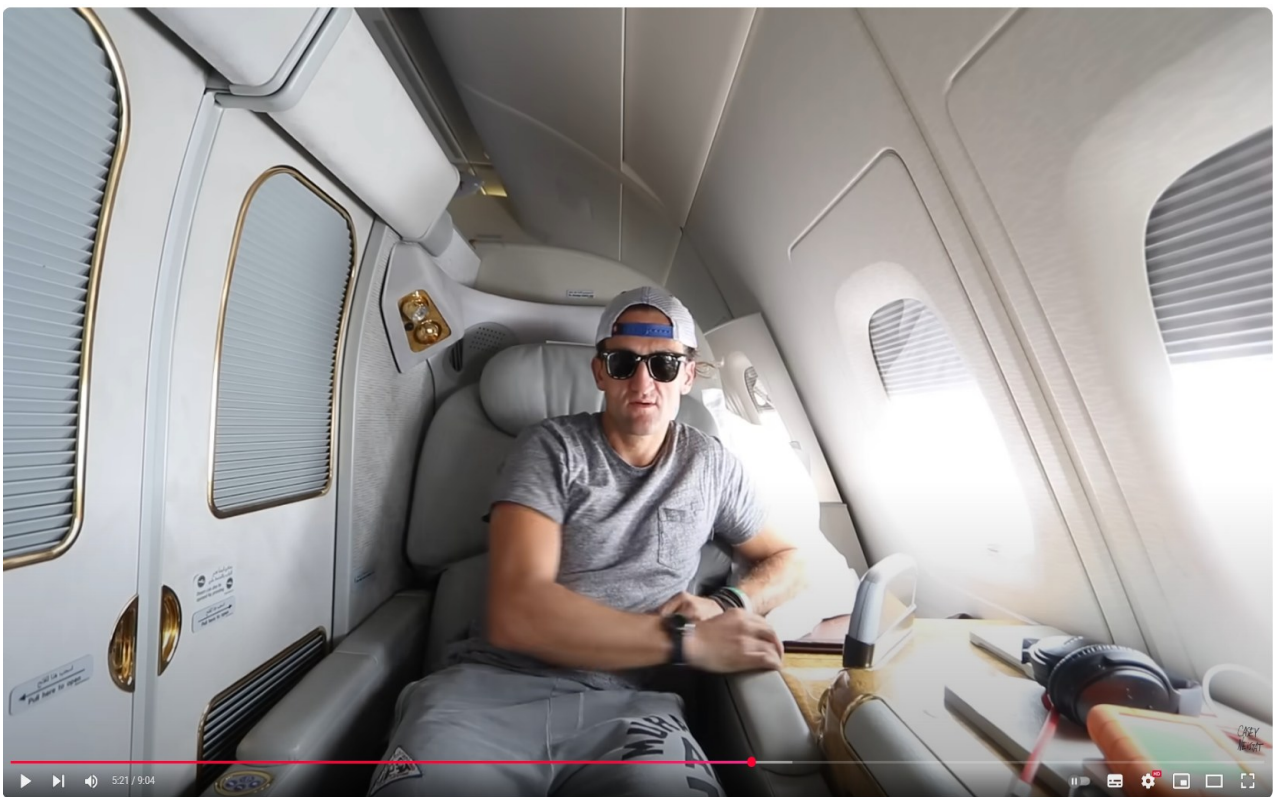


Figure A2. YouTube vlog by Casey Neistat on first class air travel (Source: Screenshot by author, 2025)

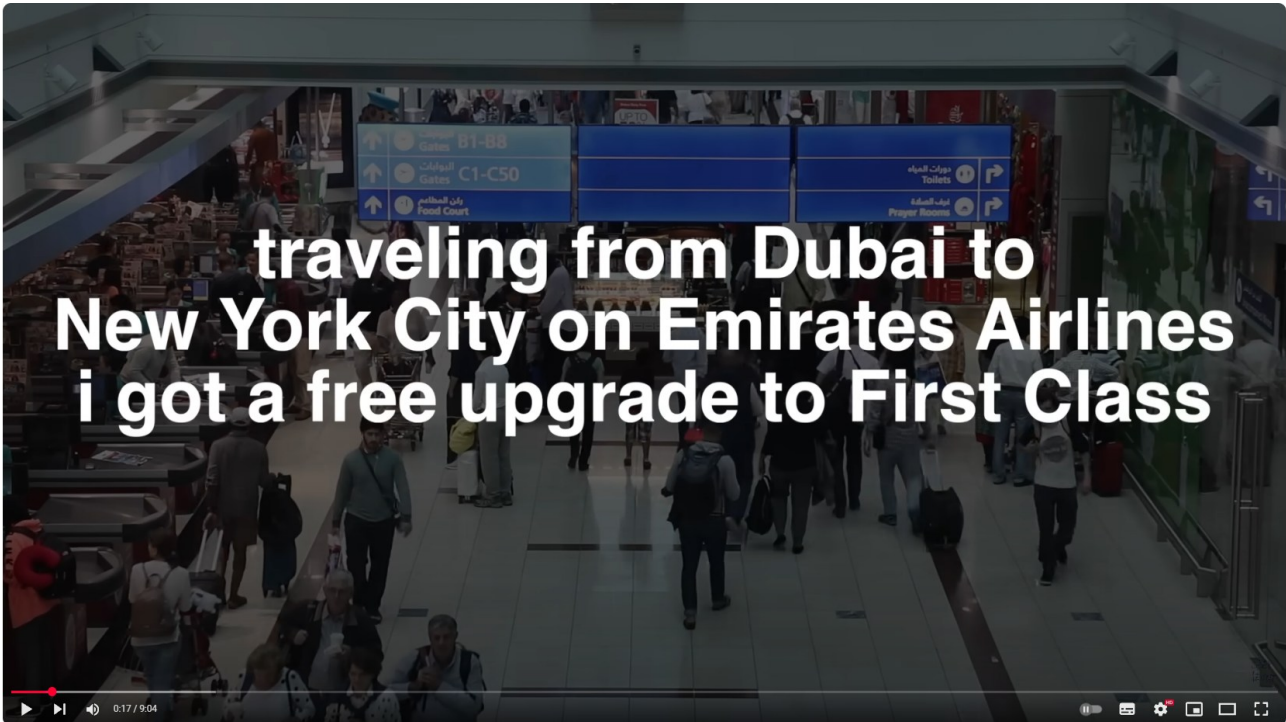


Figure A3. YouTube vlog by Casey Neistat on first class air travel(Source: Screenshot by author, 2025)

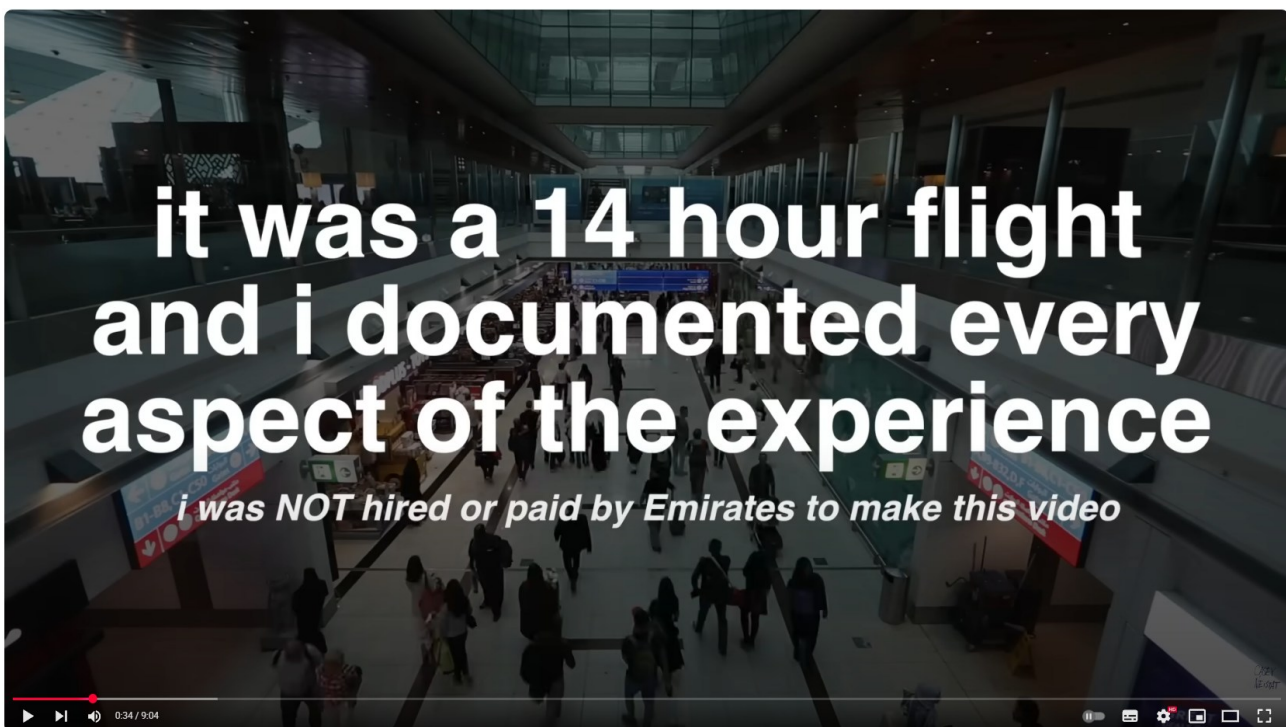


Figure A4. YouTube vlog by Casey Neistat on first class air travel(Source: Screenshot by author, 2025)

Example 3: TikTok – Flight Hack Using VPN

- **Creator:** @kiptok
- **Platform:** TikTok
- **Link:** <https://www.tiktok.com/@kiptok/video/7451916799404412206>
- **Type:** Quick tip, unsponsored, high-value content

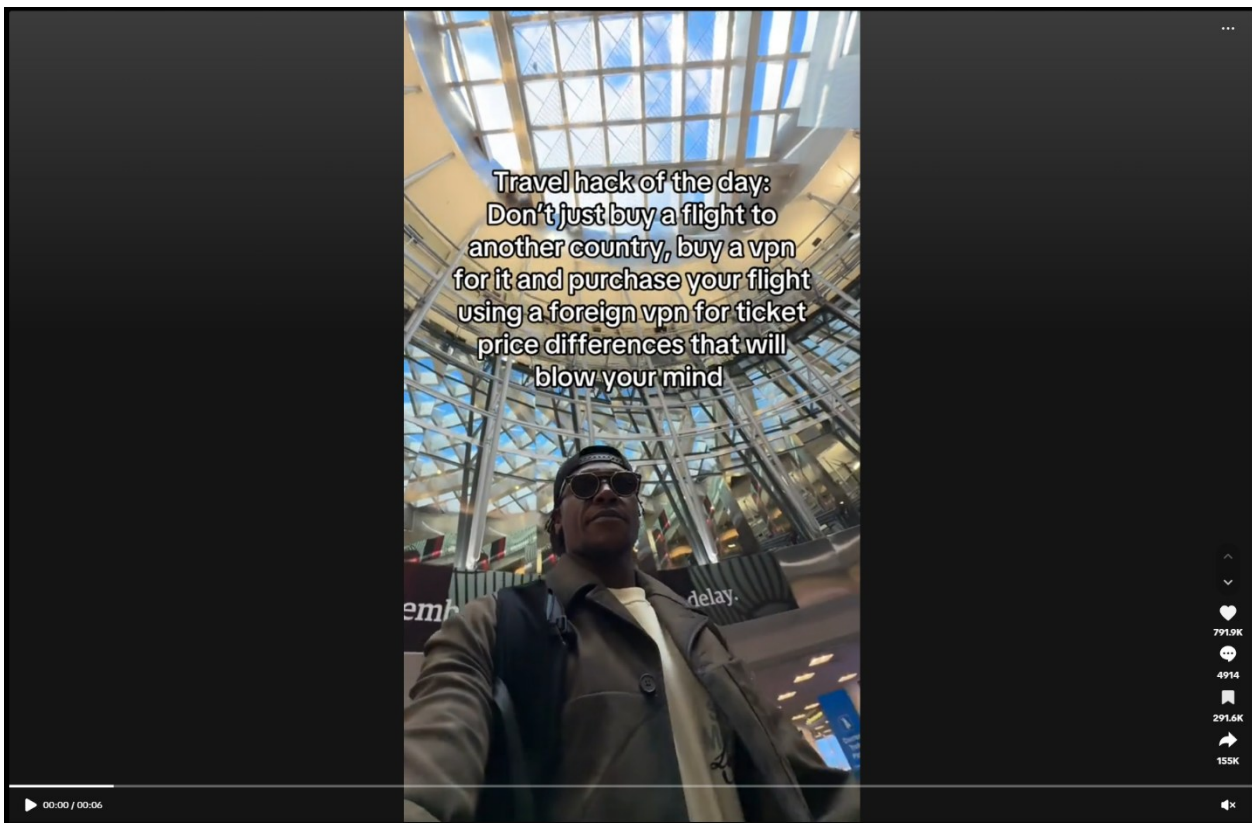


Figure A5. TikTok post showing a flight hack using VPN (Source: Screenshot by author, 2025)

Example 4: TripAdvisor – Prague Marriott Hotel Review

- **Platform:** TripAdvisor
- **Link:** https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g274707-d275252-Reviews-Prague_Marriott_Hotel-Prague_Bohemia.html
- **Type:** Peer review, detailed and visual, considered highly credible

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Tell us so we can help you plan.

Yes No

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Prices are currently average for your trip

Figure A6. TripAdvisor page for Prague Marriott Hotel (Source: Screenshot by author, 2025)