

Social Media's influence on travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention in travel planning

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ABSTRACT,

This thesis investigates how social media influences travel decision-making during the information search stage of trip planning. After literature review, a conceptual model was based on four key variables: social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention. Data was collected through an online survey, from which a sample of 87 respondents was formed. The data was examined through the use of Cronbach's Alpha, a Shapiro-Wilk test, a Spearman's correlation test, and regression analyses. The findings from these tests showed that social media was positively related to both travel inspiration and destination image. And in turn, travel inspiration and destination image were positively related to travel intention. All four proposed hypotheses were supported, and therefore the indirect influence of social media on travel intention through travel inspiration and destination image can be confirmed. These findings suggest that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are very valuable tools for destination marketers who want to inspire and influence travellers through engaging user-generated content.

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT in order to refine grammar and spelling, and to support the generation of ideas. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

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Keywords

Social media, travel inspiration, destination image, travel intention, information search stage, online travel planning

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed the way we connect, communicate, and share information in today's world. This means that it has also potentially influenced the way travellers search for travel information. Sigala (2007) defines social media, as “the tools of mass collaboration, that empower Internet users to actively participate and simultaneously collaborate with other Internet users for producing, consuming and diffusing the information and knowledge being distributed through the Internet” (p. 1). These tools ranging from Facebook and YouTube to Instagram and TikTok, have become a crucial part of our daily lives. Today, more than 4.59 billion people are using social media worldwide, a number which is said to be increasing to almost six billion in 2027 (Dixon, 2023).

It is widely acknowledged that travellers are being overloaded with information from various sources, including social media. Yet, it is uncertain how they rely on platforms like Instagram, TikTok or TripAdvisor when making travel decisions in the pre-trip planning phase (Jonca, 2023). The uncertainty of this research question lies in the fact that there have not been many studies that have looked at how travel consumers view and respond to the information they find on Web 2.0 platforms. As noted by Cox, C., Burgess, S., Sellitto, C., & Buultjens, J. (2009) and Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), research on the role of social media in tourism is still quite new and not yet fully developed. Next to that, does the research by Cox et al. (2009) mostly focus on the travel-planning process as a whole, instead of focusing on the information search stage of travel planning.

While the insights provided by Cox et al. (2009) offer valuable knowledge regarding how travellers make use of social media in their decision making process, it should be acknowledged that it may be outdated due to the evolution of social media since their investigation is from 2009. New social media platforms, user behaviours, and trends have come up which can have changed the landscape of travel information consumption. Given this context, there is an opportunity to build upon the research done by Cox et al. (2009), specifically by looking at how the current social media platforms influence travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention.

Though the study by Cox et al. (2009) has laid the groundwork for writing this thesis, social media and travel behaviour have evolved dramatically in the past decade, as stated earlier. That's why more recent work has started to highlight the need for research on the variables social media, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention. Dai, F., Wang, D., & Kirillova, K. (2022) point out that inspiration in travel-decision making, the “dreaming phase” in the beginning of the travel process, is still under researched. Likewise, Wang and Yan (2022) emphasize that there are only a few studies which have examined how social media content quality influences travel intention.

Given the identified gaps in the existing literature and the growing role of social media in travel decision-making, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How does social media influence travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention during the information search stage of trip planning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review examines existing literature on the four variables relevant to this research, being social media in the pre-trip planning information search stage, travel inspiration, travel destination image, and travel intention. Furthermore a conceptual framework will be introduced to make

a clear overview of how these variables are connected and can answer the research question.

2.1 Social Media Use in the Pre-Trip Planning Information Search Stage

The travel planning process typically begins with a need or desire to travel followed by an information search to explore options and gather ideas for the trip. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), information search is one of the key early stages in the consumer decision-making process. If we take a look at tourism, it can be said that the information search stage in decision making involves searching for details about destinations, accommodations, attractions, and more to help make informed decisions. Earlier on, this kind of information would have been obtained from travel agents, or word-of-mouth, but with the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, travellers increasingly make use of especially social media in order to fulfil their information needs (Sigala, 2007; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

Social media can be seen as digital platforms where users can create, share, and exchange content in a collaborative manner (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Within the travel domain this includes travel review websites, blogs, social networking sites, video sharing platforms, and other user-generated contents being TripAdvisor, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc. These types of social media have become a fundamentality for the information search process, as Xiang and Gretzel (2010) for example found that a significant percentage of online travel results are linked to social media content, highlighting how important social media is when travellers are searching for information for their trip. Travellers learn from these platforms as they use them to read reviews, seek recommendations, and learn from the experiences of others. Further research by Cox et al. (2009) showed that user-generated content can be more of influence to consumers compared to traditional promotional information, highlighting why many rely on social media during the pre-trip planning.

2.2 Travel Inspiration

Travel inspiration refers to the process of becoming motivated or excited to travel, often triggered by exposure to new ideas or visual destination images (Gretzel and Jamal, 2009; Crompton, 1979). It plays a key role in the dreaming phase of travel planning, where individuals shift from imagining future trips to forming real intentions to travel (Dai et al., 2022). In this phase social media platforms are specially important as they can provide visual content that can spark interest in specific destinations. Research has shown that social media influences travel related aspirations (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014), frequently appears in online travel search results (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), and plays a major role in modern trip planning (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Furthermore, Fotis, J., Buhalis, D., & Rossides, N. (2012) state that many travellers get their ideas for their next holiday from their social networks, highlighting how social media can stimulate the inspiration to travel.

Social media is highlighted in several studies as the inspiring factor for potential travellers. The study by Sigala (2007) indicated the emergence of a “new tourism generation” where travellers are both consumers and producers of content. By sharing their own experiences with personal photos and videos, travellers can inspire other people to start travelling as well. More recent research by Dai et al. (2022) indicates that exposure to travel related posts on social media platforms significantly influences travel inspiration, for example short videos on TikTok might introduce viewers to destinations they had never considered before. Through hashtags and shared images on Instagram, travellers are able to discover picturesque locations and experiences. These visual representations help

shape destination perceptions and can serve as a source of travel inspiration during the planning process according to Ilieva (2022).

2.3 Destination Image

A destination image is generally understood as the combination of beliefs, impressions, and perceptions an individual holds about a place (Chi, H. K., Huang, K. C., & Nguyen, H. M., 2020; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). In other words, destination image refers to the mental picture people have of a place, combining both factual knowledge, such as landscapes, attractions, and safety, with emotional impressions, such as atmosphere and friendliness (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). This image in your mind is very important in tourism, as a positive perception of a destination can make travellers more likely to choose a certain destination for a trip (Lam and Hsu, 2006). On the other hand, a negative image of a certain destination can discourage people from choosing a destination. And, as Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) point out, can a destination image change over time because people are exposed to new information through social media about a destination.

In recent years, social media has shown to play a crucial role in destination image formation. Travellers who post their trip experiences online, being photos, videos, reviews, and stories, broadcast their personal image of a destination to others. Such user-generated content influences how other consumers perceive that destination (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Böttger, T., Rudolph, T., Evanschitzky, H., & Pfrang, T., 2017).

2.4 Travel Intention

Travel intention refers to an individual's planned or expected future travel behaviour, such as visiting a specific destination (Ajzen, 1991). In tourism research, it is commonly used as a key predictor of actual travel decisions (Lam & Hsu, 2006). In Woodside and Lysonski (1989) their traveller decision model, it says that a strong intention to visit typically comes before the actual visit. Understanding what influences travel intention is crucial for both scholars and destination marketers.

Academic literature shows that travel intention is influenced by various factors. As stated before can a positive perception of a destination, destination image, significantly boost a person's intention to travel (Lam & Hsu, 2006). While on the other hand a negative destination image, can discourage a person's intention to travel. In this digital age social media has become an indirect but important influence on travel intention by shaping travel inspiration and destination image during the information search planning stage of travelling. When travellers have a good impression of a destination, they are more likely to turn those feelings into an intention to visit a destination (Ma'arif, L. A. A., Ratnawati, K., & Hapsari, R. D. V., 2023). An example for the role of travel inspiration in relation to travel intention can be found in the studies from Dai et al. (2022). They explain that when people feel inspired by a destination, they are actually starting to consider visiting the destination. This inspiration can make the difference between staying solely awareness, or becoming an actual intention to visit.

2.5 Hypotheses

In order to answer the following research question: "How does social media influence travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention during the information search stage of trip planning?", four hypotheses have been developed to examine the relationships between these key constructs. To support this research, a conceptual framework has been created to visually represent the proposed relationships and provide a clear structure for answering the research question.

2.5.1 Social Media Use and Travel Inspiration

During the travel planning process using social media can inspire people to consider new destinations. Through exposure to user-generated content like photos, videos, and reviews, travellers often discover places they hadn't thought about before. This shows that social media plays a key role in sparking travel inspiration (Fotis et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between social media use and travel inspiration.

2.5.2 Social Media Use and Destination Image

Social media helps people form opinions about a destination. When users see real experiences shared on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, they start to imagine what it might be like to visit. If the content looks good and feels trustworthy, it creates a more positive image of the place (Ilieva, 2022; Ma'arif et al., 2023).

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between social media use and destination image.

2.5.3 Travel Inspiration and Travel Intention

Inspiration from social media can turn into real travel plans. When someone sees a place that excites them online, they may begin seriously considering a visit by looking up information or adding it to their travel list (Dai et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between travel inspiration and travel intention.

2.5.4 Destination Image and Travel Intention

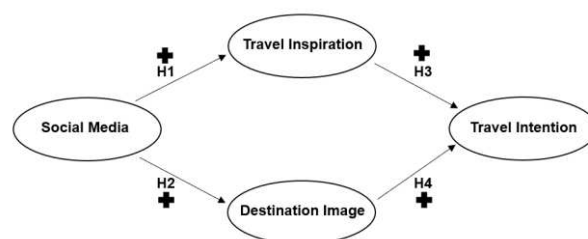
When people have a good impression of a destination, they are more likely to want to visit the place. A positive image makes the place seem more attractive and trustworthy, which increases the chance that someone will make plans to go there (Ma'arif et al., 2023).

Hypothesis 4: There is a positive relationship between destination image and travel intention.

2.6 Conceptual Model

In order to visualise the beforementioned hypotheses, the following conceptual model will be used:

Figure 1 – Conceptual Model



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Sample

In total 97 individuals participated in the online survey. The respondents were recruited through personal social media platforms (such as Instagram and WhatsApp), using a mix of convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Emerson, 2015).

The survey was conducted using Qualtrics. By using an anonymous link, confidentiality and honest responses were encouraged for participants. A soft screening question was used to determine the relevance of participants to the research topic:

“In the past 12 months, how often have you come across travel content on social media?” Respondents who answered “Never” were included for the demographic analysis, but excluded from all other constructs. From the 97 respondents, then three participants answered “Never” on the screening question. Next to the three participants who answered “Never” on the screening question, people who did not fully complete all items for the four key constructs, were also excluded from the final data set. After applying all these criteria, the final sample consisted of 87 valid responses.

3.2 Research Design

The research used an online survey design. Online surveys have been a major approach to collect data according to Zeng & Gerritsen (2014). Furthermore surveys are useful for gathering information about a large group of people, making it possible to detect “trends and relationships and to verify the measurements made” (Watson, 2015)(p. 1).

The survey was designed to gather insights on the key aspects of social media usage for pre-trip planning. This survey included validated items from academic literature. The items were slightly adapted to fit the context of this research. All items were then measured using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7, standing for 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, which is often used in social science research because it gives people a simple and clear way to show how much they agree or disagree (Joshi et al., 2015).

Items from Chung and Koo (2015) were used to measure social media use, which focuses on how travellers make use of social media during the information search travel planning process. Travel inspiration was measured by items taken from Böttger et al. (2017) their studies. Destination image was then measured using items from Chi et al. (2020), focusing on how social media influences the image that you get from a destination. And at last, the items for travel intention have also been retrieved from Chi et al. (2020) their studies, focusing on whether you want visit a certain destination again in the near future. All the key constructs and the corresponding items can be found in Appendix 8.1, Table 8. An overview of the constructs and the items can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Construct Operationalisation and Sources

Construct	Source	Number of Items
Screening		3
Social Media Use	Chung & Koo (2015)	3
Travel Inspiration	Böttger et al. (2017)	5
Destination Image	Chi et al. (2020)	4
Travel Intention	Chi et al. (2020)	3
Socio-Demographics		3

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected using an online survey which is a method that is being widely used in tourism and social media research, especially in studies focusing on user-generated content (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The research context social media usage during travel planning is exclusively digital, and therefore online surveys were particularly suitable for this study.

The survey was distributed via personal social media channels (such as WhatsApp and Instagram), using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling (Emerson, 2015). These sampling methods are appropriate for exploratory online research and have been widely used in similar tourism studies (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

The target population consisted of individuals aged 18 and older who had used social media for travel purposes in the past 12 months. In total 97 responses were collected over a little more than a week. A reminder was sent halfway through the data collection period to encourage participation, as this strategy had shown to improve response rates (Fan & Yan, 2010).

3.4 Data Analysis

After collecting the survey responses the data was analysed using R-script, which is known for its processing and interpreting survey data in social sciences (Kabacoff, 2015). R-script allowed to both perform descriptive and inferential statistics analyses. To summarise the demographic background of the participants and general patterns of social media usage in travel planning, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Composite scale scores were then calculated for the key constructs: social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention. To assess internal consistency among these scale scores, Cronbach’s alpha was used (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The normality of each scale distribution was assessed by performing the Shapiro-Wilk test and by looking at the corresponding histograms (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012).

Then, to examine the hypothesised relationships in the beforementioned conceptual model, see Figure 1, Spearman’s rank correlation was used because there was no normal distribution in the data (Corder & Foreman, 2014). In addition to Spearman’s rank correlation, multiple linear regression analysis was applied to examine the predicted relationships between the constructs, and test whether the hypotheses can be accepted or have to be rejected (Chi et al., 2020).

Since my sampling method is non-random and targeted, the results should be interpreted with caution to overcome the problem of generalisation.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondents’ Demographics

The survey responses were collected via Qualtrics and then analysed using Rstudio. As mentioned before, several socio-demographic variables were examined, these include age, gender, number of leisure trips, and daily time spent on social media. These variables help to give context to the results, and show that the sample fits the target group. The sample consisted out of slightly more males (54.02%) than females (45.98%). Most of the participants were between 18 and 24 years old (75.86%), which aligns well with the study’s focus on social media users. Additionally, the majority of the respondents took 2 to 3 leisure trips in the past 12 months (44.83%), and is spending 2-4 hours on social media per day (58.62%) A full overview of the socio-demographic distribution can be found in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 – Socio Demographic distribution
N=85**

Variables	Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	47	54.02
	Female	40	45.98

Age (years)	<18	0	0
	18-24	66	75.86
	25-34	12	13.79
	35-44	4	4.60
	45-54	2	2.30
	55-64	3	3.45
	>65	0	0
Leisure Trips per Year	Prefer not to say	0	0
	0	2	2.30
	1	12	13.79
	2-3	39	44.83
	4-5	23	26.44
Time Spent on Social Media (hours)	>5	11	12.64
	<1	6	6.90
	1-2	18	20.69
	2-3	28	32.18
	3-4	23	26.44
	>4	12	13.79

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 - Descriptive Statistics

Constructs & Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Media Use		
SMU1	5.49	1.49
SMU2	5.22	1.44
SMU3	5.61	1.23
Travel Inspiration		
Ins1	5.75	0.98
Ins2	5.45	1.13
Ins3	5.67	1.10
Ins4	5.36	1.28
Ins5	5.16	1.35
Destination Image		
DI1	5.90	0.94
DI2	5.63	0.94
DI3	5.51	1.03
DI4	5.48	1.03
Travel Intention		
Int1	5.40	1.25
Int2	4.84	1.50
Int3	4.74	1.62

To get a better understanding of the central tendencies and variation in the data set, descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the four key constructs: social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention. As shown in Table 3 above, item means ranged from 4.74 to 5.90, and item's standard deviation varied between 0.94 and 1.62. These results indicate that the responses were fairly consistent across items, with most items scoring above the middle point of the 7-point Likert scale. The lowest mean score and highest standard deviation was observed within the travel intention items, which gives that this was the construct with the highest variation. Whereas social media use, destination image, and travel inspiration showed more consistent responses with higher mean scores and generally lower standard deviations.

4.3 Reliability Analysis

Before moving on to correlation and regression analysis, the internal consistency of each construct was assessed

using Cronbach's Alpha. The alpha value for each construct is shown below in Table 4. The Cronbach Alpha test is commonly used in online survey research to evaluate how well multiple items measure together the same underlying construct (Hair et al. 2019).

Looking at Table 4, all four constructs show good to excellent internal reliability, as according to Hair et al. (2019) a common accepted threshold for Cronbach's Alpha test is 0.70, and every construct exceeds this threshold. This confirms that the constructs can be considered reliable and are suitable for further analysis.

Table 4 -Internal Consistency of Constructs

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Social Media Use	0.89
Travel Inspiration	0.91
Destination Image	0.76
Travel Intention	0.90

4.4 Normality Testing

To determine whether the assumptions of normality were met a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted on each of the four key constructs: social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention. As shown in Table 5, the p-values for all four constructs were significantly below the threshold of 0.05, which indicates that there are significant deviations from a normal distribution. When the data are not normally distributed, non-parametric statistical methods are more fitting for further analysis.

In addition to the Shapiro-Wilk test, histograms with density curves were created to give a better visual representation of the distributions (see Appendix 8.2). Non-normality was confirmed across all constructs, as each histogram displayed mild to moderate left-skewed distributions. This skewness is especially visible for travel inspiration, while the most normally distributed construct is destination image.

Table 5 – Shapiro Wilk Test

Variables	Statistic (W)	Significance (p-value)
Social Media Use	0.891	2.36e-06
Travel Inspiration	0.921	5.29e-05
Destination Image	0.949	1.858e-03
Travel Intention	0.937	3.868e-04

4.5 Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships between the four key constructs social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention, a Spearman's rank-order correlation was used. This non-parametric test was chosen because the data for all constructs was not normally distributed, as calculated in the Shapiro-Wilk test (see section 4.4). The analysis was based on the composite scores for each construct.

In Table 6 the correlation results are presented showing the Spearman correlation coefficients. All relationships were found to be positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), see

Appendix 8.3, Table 9 for all p-values. These coefficients indicate that higher scores in one construct tend to lead to higher scores in the others. The strongest correlation was found between travel inspiration and travel intention ($\rho = 0.66$), followed by destination image and travel intention ($\rho = 0.62$). These results show that there is a strong relationship between being inspired by travel related content and the intention to travel to a destination as well as between having a positive destination image and travel intention. The correlations that the construct social media showed were moderate, but significant as well as can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6 – Spearman's Rank Correlation Matrix

	SMU	INS	DI	INT
SMU	1.00	0.48	0.46	0.51
INS		1.00	0.63	0.66
DI			1.00	0.62
INT				1.00

4.6 Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the relationships between the key constructs. Travel intention was used as the dependent variable, and social media use, travel inspiration, and destination image as the independent variables. The model explained a significant amount of the variance in travel intention, $F(3,83) = 35.21$, $R\text{-squared} = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$, and an adjusted $R\text{-squared}$ of 0.54. This indicates that a little more than half of the variation in travel intention can be explained by this model. Furthermore, a 5% significance level ($p\text{-value} = 0.05$) was used throughout the regression analysis. A detailed overview from the regression coefficients of the whole model as one can be found in Appendix 8.4, Figure 6.

4.6.1 Hypothesis 1

The relationship between Social Media Use and Travel Inspiration is examined in the first hypothesis. A simple linear regression analysis showed that Social Media Use significantly predicts Travel Inspiration, with $\beta = 0.2741$ and a p-value of 0.0012. These results indicate that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between these two variables, supporting Hypothesis 1.

4.6.2 Hypothesis 2

Again a simple linear regression analysis was performed to test the second hypothesis between the variables Social Media Use and Destination Image. The analysis revealed a significant positive effect, a p-value of 0.0004 and $\beta = 0.2218$. These findings support Hypothesis 2 and indicate that Social Media Use is positively related to Destination Image.

4.6.3 Hypothesis 3

A multiple linear regression analysis was used with Travel Intention as the dependent variable and Travel Inspiration and Destination Image together as the independent variables, for testing hypothesis 3. Table 7 below shows that Travel Inspiration has a p-value of 0.0007 and $\beta = 0.4972$ in predicting Travel Intention. These results provide strong support for Hypothesis 3, suggesting that there is a positive relationship between Travel Inspiration and Travel Intention.

4.6.4 Hypothesis 4

Lastly to test hypothesis 4, the same multiple linear regression analysis was performed as for Hypothesis 3. A p-value of 0.0003 and $\beta = 0.7086$ can be found in Table 7, regarding the relationship between Destination Image and Travel Intention.

These results confirm the Hypothesis 4, and for that reason Destination Image is positively related to Travel Intention.

A detailed overview of each regression model can be found in Appendix 8.4, Figure 6 to 9.

Table 7 – Regression Summary

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Coefficient (β)	Significance (p-value)
Travel Inspiration	Social Media Use	0.2741	0.0012
Destination Image	Social Media Use	0.2218	0.0004
Travel Intention	Travel Inspiration	0.4972	0.0007
Travel Intention	Destination Image	0.7086	0.0003

4.7 Summary of the Results

For the proposed relationships between social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention there was strong support provided by this study. The socio-demographic profile of the study confirmed the target group, young, active social media users. The descriptive statistics then showed that the constructs were fairly consistent over all items, showing a positive attitude towards all constructs. Which goes hand in hand with the reliability analysis that was performed afterwards, as this showed all four constructs having good to excellent internal reliabilities.

After executing a Shapiro-Wilk test it could be concluded that the data was not normally distributed, and therefore non-parametric methods had to be applied for correlation analysis. The correlation analysis then revealed significant positive relationships between all constructs. Finally, regression analysis further confirmed these findings, as all four hypotheses were supported by statistically significant relationships between the variables.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion

The results of this study show that there is support for the relationships between the variables social media use, travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention during the information search stage in trip planning. The four hypotheses were all confirmed by the results: social media use was positively linked to both travel inspiration and destination image, and both travel inspiration and destination image were positively related with travel intention. Just like all the correlations between the constructs were positive and statistically significant. Social media use together with travel inspiration and destination image explained more than half of the variation in travel intention (adjusted $R\text{-squared} = 0.54$). These results show how big of a role social media plays in how travellers think about destinations during the information search stage in trip planning.

If we take closer look at each relationship individually, there is a lot of alignment with existing academic literature. For instance the first hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between social media use and travel inspiration, which was supported by a statistical significant effect in the regression analysis between the two variables. Participants who more actively use social media for travel related content feel more inspired to travel. This is in line with studies highlighting social media as a key part of creating travel ideas, as for example Fotis et al. (2012) observed that many travellers get new ideas for

travelling from their social network. To be exposed to user-generated photos and videos about destinations that they might not have considered yet, inspires people to travel. These findings confirm that social media is indeed inspirational, as it drives the “dreaming phase” of travel planning according to Dai et al. (2022).

As social media use was found to have a positive influence on destination image, the results also supported Hypothesis 2. Zeng & Gerritsen (2014) their work aligns with this by emphasising that travellers often share their personal experiences online, shaping how others perceive destinations. Ilieva (2022) similarly showed that real and trustworthy content on social media helps to create more favourable impressions. The findings in this study also showcase the findings of Xiang & Gretzel (2010), who found that social media acts as electronic-word-of-mouth. All combined, this confirms that social media use is positively related to destination image (Ma’arif et al., 2023).

A positive link was predicted between travel inspiration and travel intention in Hypothesis 3, and was confirmed through both the regression analysis and the correlation analysis. People who felt inspired by travel related content were more likely to intent to visit those destinations. This supports Dai et al. (2022) their study, explaining that inspiration can shift people from solely awareness to active consideration. Next to that, this study also responds to their claim that the “dreaming phase” is still under researched, by giving new insights into the role of social media in relation to travel inspiration and then its role towards travel intention.

A statistically significant positive relationship between destination image and travel intention can be retrieved from the results to also confirm Hypothesis 4. This means that respondents with a more positive destination image, are significantly more likely to visit a destination. The more favourable the image of a destination is, the more likely someone is to choose that destination is a claim from Lam & Hsu (2006) that perfectly supports the findings of this study. It aligns perfectly with this study because the effect of destination image on travel intention was the strongest out of all constructs in this study, showing its important role during the information search stage in trip planning. This extends the findings by Ma’arif et al. (2023), who showed that destination image had an influence on revisiting. Now this study adds that this also applies to initial travel plans.

Next to the fact that the results show that all the hypotheses can be confirmed, the results also show that social media’s influence on travel intention is mostly indirect just like in the conceptual model of this study. Although social media use had a moderate positive correlation with intention, and $p < 0.01$, its role became a lot clearer when considering its effect on travel inspiration and destination image. Xiang & Gretzel (2010) and Ma’arif et al. (2023) are supporting these ideas because they are saying that social media shapes both desires and perceptions, which then shapes travel intentions. Additionally, our findings update the findings by Cox et al. (2009). Confirming that user-generated content still plays a major role in travel planning, but now with more modern platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

5.2 Conclusion

This research was set up to answer the question: *How does social media influence travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention during the information search stage of trip planning?* Based on the results, we can conclude that social media has a significant influence on travel inspiration and destination image, which then have a strong effect on travel intention. Therefore, social media indirectly shapes travel intention through these two key constructs. The study found that

an increase in use of social media in the pre-trip planning phase leads to higher travel inspiration and a more positive destination image among potential travellers. Also, when people feel inspired to travel and have a favourable image of a destination, it was shown to increase someone’s intention to visit that destination. To summarise, social media functions as a catalyst in the information search stage of trip planning, as individuals are exposed to user-generated content, which inspires them to travel and shapes a certain image of a destination, which then boosts their intention to actually make the trip.

Not only showed this study the confirmation of all the hypotheses, but also how these influences unfolded. Social media’s influence is not directly impacting travel intention, it is rather indirect by firstly giving travellers inspiration to travel and shaping their perception of a destination. This is for example done by seeing beautiful pictures or positive reviews on social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which ignites the inspiration to travel and at the same time creates a certain image of a destination, which then translates into a strong intent to want to travel to that destination. On the basis of this, the research question is answered. The findings clearly show that the information search stage in modern travel planning involves social media. In conclusion, this study provides a clear answer: social media has a powerful effect on travel inspiration, destination image, and ultimately travel intention.

5.3 Practical Implications

This study provides several practical implications for tourism stakeholders, especially destination marketers and travel organisations. The practical implications are based on the confirmed hypotheses.

As a first practical implication we take a look at hypothesis 1 and 3, involving the positive relationship between social media use and travel inspiration and later on the positive relationship between travel inspiration and travel intention. As this relation is positive, destinations should have a strong and engaging outlook on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. To trigger inspiration among potential travellers, they should post scenic pictures, make videos from special events, or post hidden gems that nobody knows about. By having an active, engaging, and attractive feed, travellers will stay inspired by the destination as they are constantly in the back of their mind. Consequently, when a person’s inspiration is sparked, the chances of the person actually visiting the place becomes larger.

A second practical implication can be linked to the positive relationship between social media usage and destination image. By letting previous customers of destinations or experiences leave behind a review, it will become easier for travellers to create a positive image of a certain destination. In this way electronic word-of-mouth creates the destination image.

This brings us to the next practical implication, which is closely related to the second practical implication. When a destination is portrayed on social media as a beautiful, entertaining, and safe place, travellers will create a positive destination image. And since the strongest predictor of travel intention was destination image, travel stakeholders should definitely ensure that their visuals are portrayed in the best way possible.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

Not only does this study confirm existing theories, it also extends knowledge on existing theories about the role of social media during the information search stage in trip planning. This study shows that during the early stages of travel planning social media plays a big role. Many online travel searches lead to

social media content (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), which shows the relevance in the information search stage. This is in line with this study's findings, showing that social media affects both travel inspiration and destination image, which then both influence travel intention.

The same applies to the theories of Cox et al. (2009), who emphasised the role of user-generated content in trip planning. This study builds on the theories of Cox et al. (2009), by confirming that user-generated content is still very relevant during trip planning, but that it has modernised over time with the inclusion of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Next to that, also the theory by Lam & Hsu (2006) about that travellers are more likely to choose destinations with a favourable image, can be found in the results of this study. This will in the end also lead a larger likelihood of travel intention, following our hypotheses.

An additional theoretical implication is the confirmation of travel inspiration as a relevant construct. Dai et al. (2022) showed that social media content can trigger the motivational state from solely awareness (inspiration) to actual intention to travel. This is exactly what this study also showed by proving that there is a positive relationship between travel inspiration and travel intention.

5.5 Limitations

All research has its limitations, just like this one. Firstly, the final research sample consisted out of 87 valid responses from which the majority, more than 75%, was between 18 and 24 years old. This non-probability sample may not fully represent the travellers population, as there is also an older population travellers. Next to that, the research sample is relatively small, and because of the young respondents also skewed to the left considering the use of social media, which both limits the generalisability of the findings.

Secondly did this research solely focus on the influence of social media on travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intention, while other factors could also affect travel related decisions. These factors could include real world situations like travel cost, travel distance, safety concerns, or prior experiences. This model did not include such variables, and as a results this might lead to variable bias. This means that such variables could act as moderators or have overlap with the current model.

5.6 Future Research

Based upon the limitation this study could expand its future research in two ways. Improving its generalisability can be done by conducting similar research only then with a larger and more diverse sample, including older age groups in both the travellers population and the social media use population. This would allow for broader comparisons among different socio-demographic groups, and offer a broader view of how social media influences travel decisions.

And as a second improvement for future research, more variables should be included in the model to test real world travel problems, such as budget, travel distance, or safety concerns. Including these variables into the model could create different situations towards travel inspiration and destination image as you might be influenced by practical problems. This would give a more realistic view of how travel decisions are made in real life.

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8. APPENDIX

8.1 Construct Items

Table 8 – Construct Items

Construct	Source	Items
Social media use	Chung & Koo (2015)	
SMU1		I use social media to search for travel information when planning a trip.
SMU2		Once I have chosen a destination, I use social media to plan the details of my trip.
SMU3		Before traveling, I use social media to find additional information about my destination.
Travel inspiration	Böttger et al. (2017)	
Ins1		Seeing travel destinations on social media inspires me to visit those places.
Ins2		When I see a destination on social media, I feel a strong desire to experience it in person.
Ins3		Social media content about travel destinations increases my interest in visiting those places.
Ins4		I feel motivated to visit destinations that I find on social media.
Ins5		I often feel an urge to travel to destinations I discover through social media.
Destination image	Chi, H. K., Huang, K. C., & Nguyen, H. M. (2020)	
DI1		The travel destinations I see on social media generally have a positive image.
DI2		I find the destinations shown on social media to be attractive places to visit.
DI3		Overall, I have a favorable impression of travel destinations that I discover on social media.
DI4		I think that visiting the destinations I see on social media would be worthwhile.
Travel intention	Chi et al. (2020)	
Int1		I would like to visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.
Int2		I intend to visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.
Int3		It is likely that I will visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.

8.2 Normal Distribution Test Results

Figure 2 – Normal Distribution Histogram SMU_score

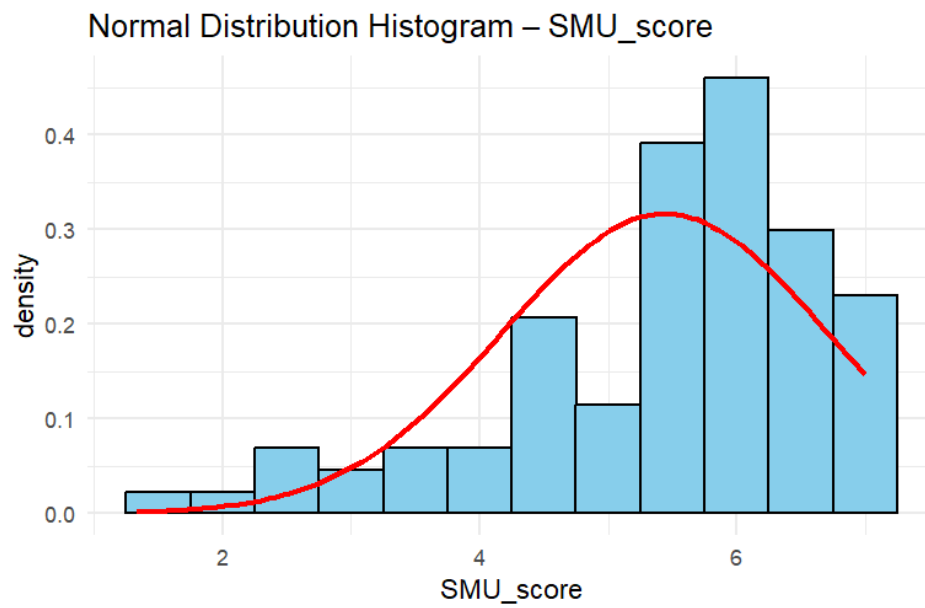


Figure 3 – Normal Distribution Histogram DI_score

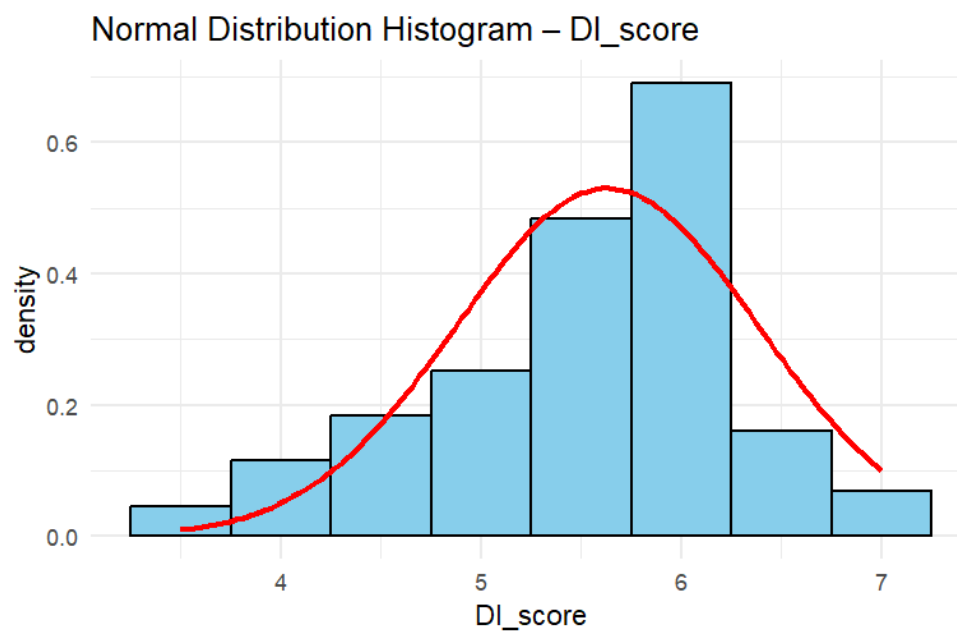


Figure 4 – Normal Distribution Histogram INS_score

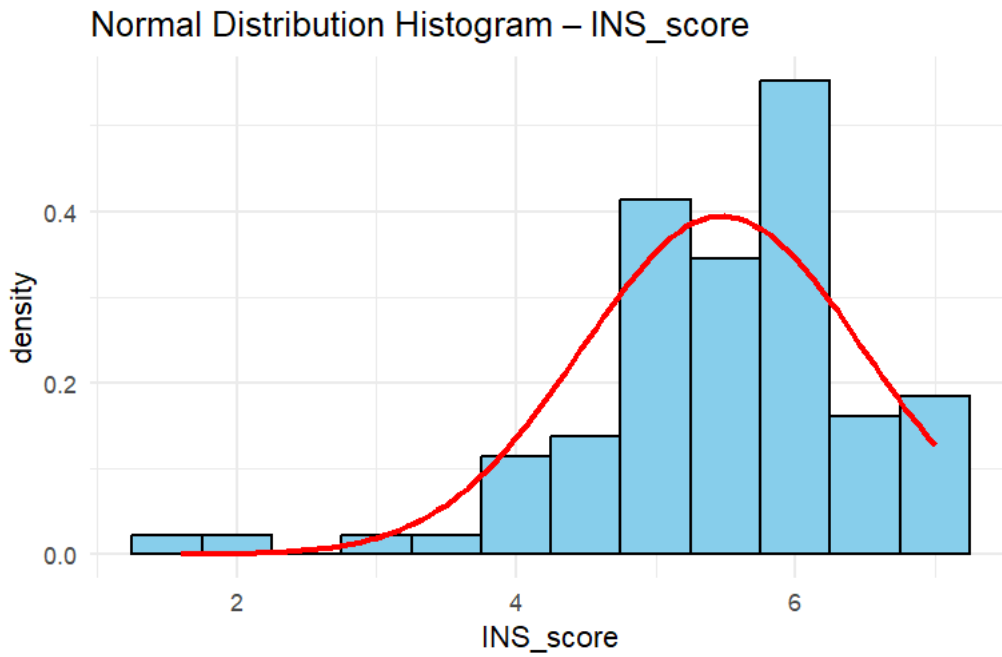
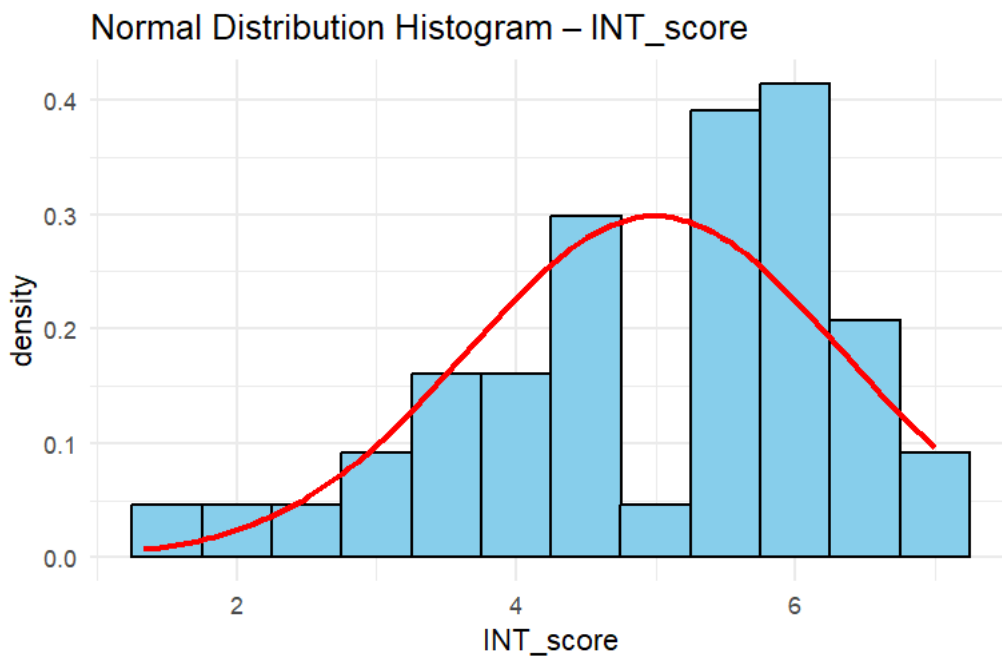


Figure 5 – Normal Distribution Histogram INT_score



8.3 Correlation Results

Table 9 – Spearman Correlation P-Values

	SMU_SCORE	INS_SCORE	DI_SCORE	INT_SCORE
SMU_SCORE	0.00	5.83e-06	9.38e-06	1.00e-06
INS_SCORE		0.00	2.20e-10	1.54e-11
DI_SCORE			0.00	5.24e-10
INT_SCORE				0.00

8.4 Regression Analysis Results

Figure 6 – Multiple Regression Analysis with Int ~ SMU + Ins + DI

```
Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  -2.2041    0.7516   -2.933  0.00434 **
SMU_score      0.2549    0.0838    3.042  0.00314 **
INS_score      0.4464    0.1352    3.302  0.00141 **
DI_score       0.5978    0.1840    3.249  0.00167 **
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.9023 on 83 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.56,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.5441
F-statistic: 35.21 on 3 and 83 DF.  p-value: 8.876e-15
```

Figure 7 – Simple Linear Regression Analysis Ins ~ SMU

```
Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   3.98476    0.45721    8.715 2.03e-13 ***
SMU_score      0.27407    0.08189    3.347  0.00122 **
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.957 on 85 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.1164,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.106
F-statistic: 11.2 on 1 and 85 DF,  p-value: 0.00122
```

Figure 8 - Simple Linear Regression Analysis DI ~ SMU

```
Coefficients:
              Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   4.42237    0.33589   13.166 < 2e-16 ***
SMU_score      0.22184    0.06016    3.687 0.000398 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.703 on 85 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.1379,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.1278
F-statistic: 13.6 on 1 and 85 DF,  p-value: 0.0003984
```

Figure 9 – Multiple Linear Regression Analysis with Int ~ Ins + DI

Coefficients:

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	
(Intercept)	-1.7192	0.7697	-2.234	0.028161	*
INS_score	0.4972	0.1406	3.537	0.000661	***
DI_score	0.7086	0.1890	3.749	0.000325	***

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.9456 on 84 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.5109, Adjusted R-squared: 0.4993
F-statistic: 43.87 on 2 and 84 DF, p-value: 9.011e-14

8.5 Survey

The role of social media in travel planning

Thank you for your interest in participating in this academic study. As part of my Bachelor's thesis in International Business Administration at the University of Twente, I am conducting research on the influence of social media on travel planning. This study aims to explore how content on social media platforms affects travel inspiration, destination image, and travel intentions. You will be asked to answer a few questions about your social media use and travel behavior.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating. Your responses will remain completely anonymous and will be used for academic research only. Participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

The survey takes approximately 5–10 minutes to complete. All data will be handled confidentially and in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

By continuing, you consent to your answers being used for the purposes of this research.

If you have any questions, please contact me at m.h.c.vanopzeeland@student.utwente.nl

Thank you for your time and participation!



This section asks about your general exposure to travel-related content on social media and your social media usage habits. Please answer each question based on your own experience and opinions.

In the past 12 months, how often have you come across travel content on social media (e.g., posts, reviews, videos)?

☐ Never

☐ Rarely

☐ Occasionally

☐ Often

☐ I have not used social media for travel inspiration or planning

On average, how much time do you spend on social media per day?

☐ Less than 1 hour

☐ 1–2 hours

☐ 2–3 hours

☐ 3–4 hours

☐ More than 4 hours

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☐ Very often

Which social media platforms have you used for travel inspiration or planning?

☐ Instagram

☐ TikTok

☐ YouTube

☐ Facebook

☐ Pinterest

☐ TripAdvisor

☐ Other:

☐ I have not used social media for travel inspiration or planning

The following questions are about your use of social media in the context of travel. Please answer each question based on your own experience and opinions.

I use social media to search for travel information when planning a trip.

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

Once I have chosen a destination, I use social media to plan the details of my trip.

Once I have chosen a destination, I use social media to plan the details of my trip.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

Before traveling, I use social media to find additional information about my destination.



Before traveling, I use social media to find additional information about my destination.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree



Reviewed by Qualtrics QA

This section focuses on how social media may influence your interest in traveling or discovering new destinations. Please answer each question based on your own experience and opinions.

Seeing travel destinations on social media inspires me to visit those places.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

When I see a destination on social media, I feel a strong desire to experience it in person.

When I see a destination on social media, I feel a strong desire to experience it in person.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

Social media content about travel destinations increases my interest in visiting those places.



I feel motivated to visit destinations that I find on social media.



Social media content about travel destinations increases my interest in visiting those places.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

I feel motivated to visit destinations that I find on social media.

I feel motivated to visit destinations that I find on social media.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

I often feel an urge to travel to destinations I discover through social media.

I often feel an urge to travel to destinations I discover through social media.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

This section explores how destinations are presented on social media. Please answer each question based on your own experience and opinions.

The travel destinations I see on social media generally have a positive image.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

I find the destinations shown on social media to be attractive places to visit.



I find the destinations shown on social media to be attractive places to visit.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

Overall, I have a favorable impression of travel destinations that I discover on social media.



Overall, I have a favorable impression of travel destinations that I discover on social media.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

I think that visiting the destinations I see on social media would be worthwhile.



I think that visiting the destinations I see on social media would be worthwhile.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

This section asks about your intentions to visit destinations you have seen on social media. Please answer each question based on your own experience and opinions.

I would like to visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.



☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Somewhat Disagree

☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree

☐ Somewhat Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly Agree

I intend to visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.



I intend to visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

It is likely that I will visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.

It is likely that I will visit destinations I have seen on social media within the next 12 months.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Disagree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Somewhat Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree



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To better understand your background, please answer the following demographic questions. Please select the option that best reflects your current situation.

What is your age group?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18–24 years old
- ☐ 25–34 years old
- ☐ 35–44 years old
- ☐ 45–54 years old
- ☐ 55–64 years old
- ☐ 65 years or older
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe:
- ☐ Prefer not to say

How many leisure trips (not for work or study) have you taken in the past 12 months?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1

How many leisure trips (not for work or study) have you taken in the past 12 months?

☐ 0

☐ 1

☐ 2-3

☐ 4-5

☐ More than 5



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Thank you for completing this survey. Your time and input are greatly appreciated. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact me at m.h.c.vanopzeeland@student.utwente.nl



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