

# **“The Experiential True Story”**

*How Travel Experts Believe Marketers Can Sell to Travellers 2.0*

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## **Abstract**

The field of travel marketing has undergone a paradigm changing transformation with the rise of Web 2.0 and the subsequent Traveller 2.0. The key offerings of the travel industry have gradually become more consumer-centric and experiential, catering to the wants of travellers who crave authentic experiences, as opposed to tourists who were not content seeing destinations under the *tourist gaze*. How then, do travel experts believe that travel marketers can use Web 2.0 to attract new customers to their “traditional” businesses? By getting insight on the core concepts of Web 2.0 marketing, selfie and tourist gaze, hyperreality on social media, prosumption, storytelling, customization, influencer marketing and trend creation, this research aims to explain how Web 2.0 can be leveraged to effectively market experiential travel to this generation of DIY travellers. These themes were explored via conducting ten semi-structure in-depth interviews with travel marketing experts from around the world and were interpreted via thematic analysis. The results of this study provided substantial insights on the travel tendencies of Travellers 2.0 and how experiential marketing with a sustained emphasis on storytelling via Web 2.0 can be used to attract customers. Further revelatory insights were provided on travel marketers’ perceptions of prosumer-dominated review platforms and the effectiveness of influencer marketing in travel. To conclude, critical assessments of limitations and recommendations for future research were discussed.

**Keywords:** Travel marketing, Web 2.0, Experiential marketing, Influencers, Storytelling, Social media marketing

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The travel industry today has lower entry barriers and more consumers than ever – which has been aided by the rise and rapid adoption of the Internet. It is no surprise that travellers' increased adoption of information and communication technologies (referred to as ICTs) and the progressive digitization of the travel industry has coincided with a period of extensive growth of the travel market. The World Travel Monitor (as quoted in ITB World Travel Trends Report 2017-2018, 2018) reports that outbound travel grew by 8% in the first eight months of 2017 alone, with destinations worldwide during this period welcoming 901 million international tourists. This figure was 56 million more than in the same period in 2016 according to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer (as quoted in ITB, 2018). This shows that despite recent economic downturns and geopolitical incidents, the travel and tourism industry has grown extensively in sales and volume of travellers.

However, this wasn't always the case. Marketing and advertising initiatives within the domain of travel and tourism like most other commercial fields during the latter parts of the 20th century were mono-directional in nature. This implies that the travel organization, establishment, city, or destination was the active enforcer of marketing and advertising exercises, while consumers took up the role of passive receivers. This period was characterized by travellers depending on travel operators as the primary viable source on leisure travel, apart from word of mouth recommendations and specialized travel publications. Internet adoption and development of its capabilities as a medium for learning, communication, and marketing were in their infancy during this time. Thus, this environment was congenial for the growth of the already dominant stock-itinerary packaged tourism, allowing travel agents to position themselves as authoritative trendsetters in the travel value chain.

While there is no established universal definition for social media owing to its dynamic utilities, Solis' (as cited in Bowen, 2015) definition stands out due to the emphasis it places on the conversations that are made possible because of it, stating its adoption signaled the shift from "a one-to-many environment to a many-to-many model" (p. 222). In the context of the travel industry, this would mean that social media helped usher the shift from one-to-

recommendations from individuals (i.e. travel agents and experts) to many-to-many conversations, as we see on travel-based social media and review sites. Such websites have been integral in birthing the idea of User Generated Content (referred to as UGC) and electronic Word of Mouth (referred to as eWOM), which are integral concepts central to travel marketing. Zeng and Gerritsen's (2014) overarching description of travel-based social media provides useful elaboration: "social media includes social networking sites, consumer review sites, content community sites, wikis, Internet forums and location-based social media" (p. 28).

Social media works effectively as a marketing and advertising tool as it "emphasizes the role of fantasy and imagination as part of a fluid tourism experience" (Munar, Gyimothy, & Cai, 2014, p.2), while becoming the foremost source of collective online value creation. In the era of Web 2.0, travel marketers are now able to tell dynamic and visual-based stories to large demographics with unprecedented functionality and ease.

Munar, Gyimothy, and Cai (2014) stated that "the information age has gradually become the social age" (p.1), showing how extensively social media's capabilities are being used to disseminate and interact. These capabilities have gone a long way in shaping online as well as offline tourism cultures, which goes to show tourist-generated content and peer-to-peer reviews benefit other tourists (Munar, Gyimothy, and Cai, 2014). With the advent and subsequently rapid adoption of these platforms, travellers can research new destinations and experiences freely, share recommendations with other travellers, and could even become their own travel agent with platforms and Online Travel Aggregators (referred to as OTAs) that gave them the functionality to become prosumers (Bellman, Johnson, Lohse, & Mandel, 2006; Niezgod, 2013). They are empowered by guides and insider-insights from websites like Lonely Planet and reviews on travel and hospitality-based social media like Tripadvisor and Yelp. Their lives are made convenient by online travel aggregators like Kayak, Priceline, Expedia, Airbnb, and Booking.com that enable them to manage every aspect of their travel. Furthermore, they are exposed to online marketing, follow travel influencers on social media, and are actively base their travel agendas on online reviews (TripAdvisor, 2014).

Seeing the wide functionality provided to travellers by their competitors, traditional travel agents have seen their role diminish in the travel value chain if they failed to adapt to the more informed consumer who craved immersion, involvement, and customizability. From being trend-setters in pre-internet travel industry, travel agents find themselves at a critical inflection point where their need to evaluate their marketing strategies based on the millennial traveller. Owing to this, *tourism innovation* has become an imperative issue in tourist economies. Hjalager (as quoted in Chan, To, and Chu, 2016) explains tourism innovation as "...types of new process,

service, policies, and marketing efforts” (p. 25). Chan, To, and Chu further elaborate to this conceptualization by explaining that that tourism innovation does not necessarily need to entail “... a new breakthrough or perfection against existing tourism attractions and enjoyable experiences” (p. 25) , but may just involve differently marketed and novel tourist offerings. The need for travel companies to constantly innovate in the era of numerous disruptors and prosumer travellers is an essential one is essential. This research is aimed at fundamentally finding out how have they been able to do so.

The travel agents and marketers that have found some degree of success in a travel market dominated by digital native and digital immigrant millennial consumers have done so via digitizing their operations and utilizing social media as a marketing tool. Woerner (referenced in Bellman, 2015) predicted that in 2015, 5% of online sales would be from social media. While this may not seem to be a substantial amount on the surface, in actuality this figure represents US \$5 billion. The need for travel marketers to best utilize the capabilities of social media and Web 2.0 is made even more urgent due to the rise and subsequent prominence of OTAs, prosumer platforms, and travel-based mobile applications. These new competitors are effectively leveraging the vast capabilities of online marketing to efficiently target and influence the tech savvy demographic of digital natives by taking advantage of the fragmented ownership structure of hotel industry (Bellman, 2015).

So then, how do travel marketers compete with OTAs and prosumer platforms to attract travellers by best utilizing Web 2.0 while still maintaining their credibility?

## 1.2 Research Question

This research strives to gain insight into the online marketing and advertising strategies that have been used by travel experts to attract leisure travellers who crave more personalized and authentic travel experiences, edging out competitors in the process. To this effect, the research question for this Masters’ Thesis reads: *How are travel experts applying what they leverage from Web 2.0 in their marketing?*

While its primary focus lies on the aforementioned concept, this research also aims to quantitatively explore industry trends, the role of OTAs, the significance of experiences and immersion on leisure travellers, and the significance of travel-based social media, and how travel marketing is affected by eWOM, influencer marketing, and user generated content. Therefore, in order to better navigate and explore the aforementioned concepts, four sub-questions have been formulated in relation to the primary research question:

*S.Q.1 – How has the understanding of travel marketing changed after the travel industry's adoption of ICTs and what are the challenges in marketing to tech-savvy travellers?*

*S.Q.2 – What role is played by experientialism, customizability and storytelling in travel marketing?*

*S.Q.3 – What is the impact of ICT-enabled social media, eWOM, UGC, and prosumer platforms and services on travel marketing?*

*S.Q.4 – What is the effectiveness of influencers in travel marketing – and what key performance indicators should be used to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns?*

*S.Q.5 – How are travel trends created in the era of Web 2.0 and who creates them – consumers, influencers, or companies?*

The researcher believes that by answering the primary research question as well as the sub-questions, he will be able to gain a unique industry insight into leisure travel and how the travel industry is employing social media marketing strategies and experiential storytelling to gain digital native customers. The relation between the sub-questions and the research question is explained in the Operationalization section.

### 1.3 Scientific Relevance

The scientific relevance of this research lies in bridging the existing gap in academic literature that focuses on the travel industry, marketing strategies, and the impact of Web 2.0 and social media on them. While there are numerous relevant academic sources on the how social media can be leveraged for marketing success (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011), the impact of eWOM marketing (Lee & Tussyadiah, 2010; Tussyadiah, 2012), recommender systems (Yoo & Gretzel 2008; Zhang, Zhao, and Xu, 2015; Bronner & de Hoog, 2011), and the impact of social media on travel information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Fotis et al., 2012; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012), there is no one academic text that addresses each of these factors in conjunction to each other in specific.

There are further exemplary academic sources regarding the travel industry's adoption of social media (Moscardo, Benckendorff & Pendergast, 2010; Yoo, Gretzel, & Zach, 2011; Munar, Gyimothy, & Cai, 2014; Minazzi, 2015; Bowen, 2015; Chan, To, & Chu, 2016; World



Economic Forum & Accenture, 2017), each of these are either quantitative researches based on surveys and opinions or literature reviews on existing research on the topic.

A qualitative research will enable the researcher to investigate trends amongst travel marketers and look into the “why” aspect of the research question. This research will comprise in-depth interviews with executives and decision-makers operating in the travel domain regarding insights into travel marketing strategies and the impact of Web 2.0-enabled prosumers and recommender systems consumers on travel marketing initiatives.

The academic literature with the most similar objectives to this research is Bowen’s literature review on the implications of social media growth on the travel industry titled “Trends affecting social media: Implications for practitioners and researchers” (2015). Seeing as this paper is a broad overview and critique of existing literature on the travel industry and marketing in a Web 2.0-era, it does not conduct any qualitative research on these topics. However, Bowen recommends that future research on this topic look into the “why” behind the impact of Web 2.0 on the travel industry and aim to provide more in-depth insights into successful travel marketing strategies across various online platforms, industry insiders perceptions of the travel demographic, and what type of marketing damages the perceived credibility of travel advertisers. This thesis looks to build on Bowen’s recommendations for further research, while additionally researching the impact of the new generation of travellers on marketing initiatives, and the impact of newer prosumers and OTAs on industry-wide marketing efforts.

A large portion of the academic sources that were referred to are over five years old. This preceded the rise of prosumer platforms and OTAs who were recent disruptors in the field of travel marketing. While Niezgoda (2013) does write about the origins of prosumer culture and the potential of it to alter the travel industry, this research aims to update previous literature on prosumer platforms in the travel industry and their impact on marketing initiatives. Seeing as we live in a world that is evolving at such a rapid rate and that social media is another primary theme, this thesis would serve to provide an updated framework for academic research that is more in line with current technologies, social media avenues, and consumer trends.

#### 1.4 Social Relevance

Munar, Gyimothy and Cai (2014) acknowledged the increased attention the rapidly-changing tourism landscape has received from academic scholars, believing that “there is an emerging interdisciplinary field of study attempting to describe this phenomenon (emergence of a virtual

and digital tourism landscape) and to understand its consequences on tourist decision-making, behavior, and strategic communications. While this management theory-based “(post) positivist methodological approach” (Sigala et al., referenced in Munar, Gyimothy and Cai, 2014) has provided numerous academic works on the topic of leisure tourism and ICTs, a large majority of them come from the consumers’ perspective.

This research is socially relevant as it contributes to the understanding of the divide between generic travel marketing strategies and the strategies required to effectively market to millennial travellers in a digitised travel industry. There are numerous academic studies that examine how millennial consumers are different from their predecessors like Prensky (2001) Atwal and Williams (2009), Chu and Kamal (2011), and Dalmas (2014). While comprehensive, these studies provide minimal understanding of the preferences, habits, and tendencies of millennial travellers as they provide negligible insights catered to the travel industry. Since, travel is an activity with consumers from a variety of demographics, it is important to create an understanding of how travel marketing can be leveraged for these consumer types and cohorts. Further, this research studies the phenomenon of prosumption and how it stems from the recent phenomenon of self-awareness and independence amongst modern consumers. By examining how this impacts travel marketers, this research aims to shed light on the relevance of prosumption on a consumer-centric travel market. By interviewing decision-makers within the travel industry, the researcher hopes to aid existing and future professionals in the leisure travel space by consolidating key expert insights on online travel marketing, the impact of ICT and Web 2.0-enabled prosumer platforms and review sites, experiential travel, generational marketing, and trend creation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study aims to help provide a base for subsequent research on the topic of travel marketing in the era of Web 2.0, while answering critical questions regarding the role of experientialism, customizability, and storytelling in travel marketing, the impact of prosumers and prosumer platforms and eWOM and UGC-led review sites, influencer marketing in the travel industry, and trend creation. In order to do so, a comprehensive framework of established academic theories is essential, which synthesizes relevant concepts and theories. The theoretical framework of this research consists of the following themes:

### 2.1.1. Web 2.0 and Travellers 2.0

This research employs Constantinides and Fountain's (2008) conceptualization of Web 2.0, wherein they define it as a "...collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes" (p.73). The justification behind using this definition is two-pronged: firstly, because of its mention of the Internet's capabilities as an open-source, interactive and user-controlled medium and emphasis on business in this definition. Secondly, this definition puts emphasis on the concepts behind eWOM and UGC, prosumers, and the influence of social media influencers, which are central concepts to this study. Therefore, this definition is most relevant to this research, seeing that this thesis aims to explore at how travel experts utilize Web 2.0-enabled social media, UGC, eWOM, prosumer-encouraging services, and social media influencers to sell destinations and experiences to customers.

Web 2.0 has been significant disruptor in the travel industry. The interactivity that it has fostered has overhauled the travel decision-making process, making it significantly easier for travellers to search for information regarding a potential destination, often negating the previous generations dependence on travel agents and traditional forms of travel-based media (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica & O'Leary, 2006; Jun, Vogt, and Mackay, 2007). Buhalis and Law (2008) found that the integration of these online communication channels into travellers lives has directly contributed to an increased number of destinations being considered by them in the travel planning process, showing a more globalized and socially connected virtual marketplace. Another research found that travellers employing the ICTs for their travel planning are more likely to spend more at the destination as compared to those who consult offline sources (Bonn, Furr, & Susskind, 1998; Luo, Feng, and Cai, 2004).

Owing to travellers' adoption and extensive usage of Web 2.0, Parra-López, Gutiérrez-Taño, Díaz-Armas, and Bulchand-Gidumal (2011) coined the term *Travellers 2.0*. This primarily digital native demographic are characterised by a tendency to "... look to the web to obtain information on holiday travel, share experiences, buy travel-related services etc., purposes for which they utilise a variety of devices (PCs, smart phones, tablets, etc.)" (Parra-López, et al., 2011, pg. 173). The researchers classified the key uses of technology by travellers 2.0 into two key functionalities: *information searches* and *information posting*. They described travellers' needs by mentioning how Web 2.0 has enabled them to search for information regarding various products and services that can be used in a destination. They emphasized that this search process is not merely limited to pre-travel research, but also extends into during and after travel. Numerous other market researches (Tripadvisor, 2014; Expedia, 2016) have established how initial destination researches are critical in the decision-making process for committing to a trip.

While the creators of this framework mentioned traditional search engines as the main enabler of these searches, the researcher found it integral to update this model, by further including social media and OTAs. This was done based on evidence from numerous market white papers (Tripadvisor, 2014, Expedia, 2016) that show how OTAs and travel-based social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Tripadvisor have become essential sources of information for modern travellers over the last few years.

The second primary use of technology by travellers 2.0 according to Parra-López, et al. is for information posting. By positing that the chief characteristic of the modern traveller is content creation (i.e. UGC), information posting is further divided into travel pictures and comments. The prominence of posting travel pictures is explained by taking into account how Web 2.0 has enabled instantaneous sharing and dissemination of information by mass-used social media and travel platforms. Comments, on the other hand, are more critical in nature, with travellers becoming increasingly willing to share their opinion on their travel experiences via rating mechanisms or typed reviews of such travel-based review platforms (Parra-López, et al., 2011). For conceptual clarity, the revised model adapted from Parra-López, et al. (2011) to show travellers 2.0's is shown below:

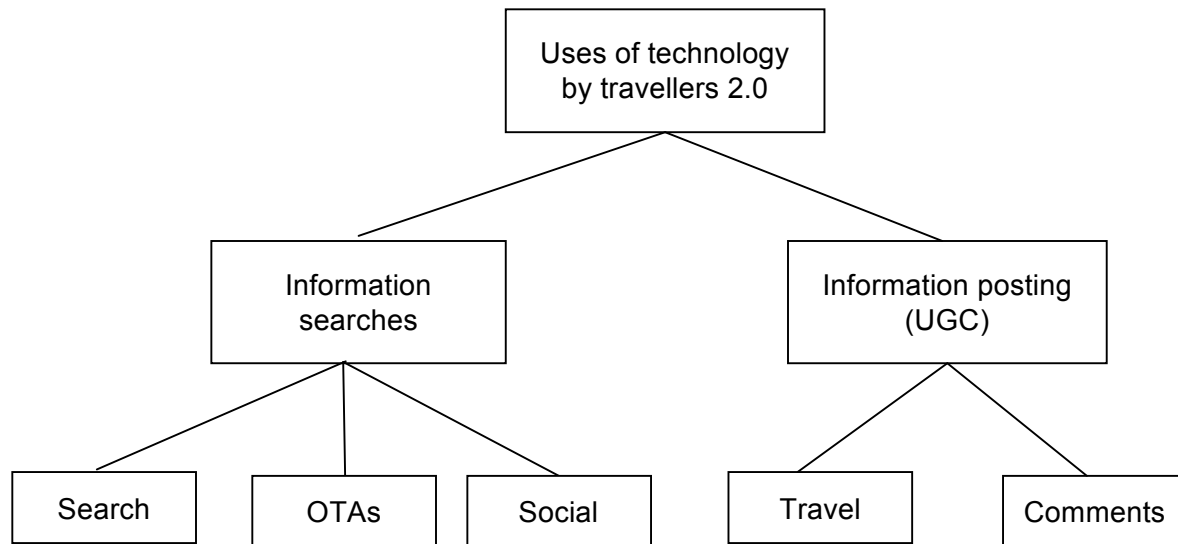


Figure 1: Main uses of technology by travellers 2.0 – Parra- López et al (2011)

### 2.1.2 Tourist and Selfie Gaze: Changing How Travel is “Seen”

In order to explain the postcolonial and consumptive behavior of tourists and their interactions with locals, Urry (1990) introduced the concept of *tourist gaze* or heritage commodification. He explains that this gaze is a set of expectations possessed by all tourists in search of authentic travel experiences, which has been perpetuated by dominant tourism institutions and enforced by the media and tourism industry. Urry explained that any individual culture that wants to position itself for tourism would require a selling point – which could be tangible like monuments or intangible like lifestyle and culture – in order to attract tourist capital. Thus, a certain degree of cultural appropriation is required in order to give tourists the impression that they are experiencing something new and authentic. These selling points are then marketed, effectively creating a brand for a particular destination or experience, which is authentic as it is based on their own local culture.

An essential component in the understanding of tourist gaze, as highlighted by Berger (1972, as cited in Urry & Larsen, 2011) is that it is subject to alterations and reformulations based on trends, societies, and historical epochs. This is attributed to the tourist gaze being socially patterned and reinforced “ways of seeing” (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p.2), which manifest themselves in tourist expectations. In the era preceding ICTs, these expectations were reinforced by traditional media, travel agents, and to a lesser extent, interpersonal recommendations. If an individual wanted to travel, travel agents were often considered the

primary authority, tastemaker, and source regarding experiences, destinations, and services – essentially making them a one-stop-shop for all travel needs. This position allowed travel agents to set the trend of pre-designed and mass-consumed packaged tourism, conceptualized via Urry's idea of the tourist gaze.

As discussed previously, the ascension of Web 2.0 as a medium of knowledge and communication led to a more globalized and connected world. This phenomenon led to the diversification of the means by which travel information was received and communicated by consumers. Thus, the ideas of heritage commodification and tourist gaze were transformed. Social media enabled any amateur traveller to engagingly document and easily share their experiences with a wide audience (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Lee, & Tussyadiah, 2011). This meant that, powered by the internet, travellers could be more than just passive consumers of narratives presented by the travel industry and actually create their own narratives from personal experience and be privy to travel experiences from other travellers.

In order to update Urry's framework on the tourist gaze for this era of technology and self-awareness, Magasic (2016) conceptualized the *selfie gaze*, which he defined as the "...personal usage of social media to record and share travel experience and the impacts this has upon the practice of travel" (p.174). He believed that travellers engage in taking pictures and videos of their travel experiences because they are aware of an audience who would view their content on multiple platforms. Magasic explains that the enhanced connectivity and freedom of expression that has been ushered by Web 2.0 motivates travellers to share their experiences as it "...is the mode of conception which helps us decide when, where and how we produce these self-referential texts" (Magasic, p. 180).

With Urry's theorization of tourist gaze and Magasic's of the selfie gaze, it becomes possible to explain consumer motivation behind travelling and sharing travel experiences and would provide an ideological framework for most of the Web 2.0 capabilities being discussed in this research like UGC, eWoM, prosumers, and social media influencers.

### 2.1.3. Marketing to a Different Generation of Traveller

Differentiating millennial (or Generation Y) travellers from their Generation X predecessors is integral as their ideas of travel, culture, and spending are very different. The older millennials, being digital immigrants and younger millennials, being digital natives have distinct traits and characteristics and their conceptualization of travel is shaped by ICT technologies and what they see on the Internet (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Chu & Kamal, 2011; Pew Research Center,

2014, Garikapati, Pendyala, Morris, Mokhtarian, & McDonald, 2016). From a segment that did not exist in the mainstream of travel just four decades ago, millennials today are the largest segment of travellers and are also the largest living generation of consumers (Pew Research Center, 2016).

In order to understand how travel marketing has changed with the industry's adoption of Web 2.0, it is essential to explore the contrast between travellers from the pre ICT-era from *Generation X* and the current millennials (or 'Generation Y'). Generation X is the term given to individuals born between 1965 and 1980 (Prensky, 2001; Pew Research, 2016). This generation of consumers was the primary consumers of travel in the era of packaged tourism, before the advent of ICTs and Web 2.0, with the latter consumers from this cohort being digital immigrants. Millennials, on the other hand are the generational cohort born between 1981 and 1997 (Pew Research, 2016) and have adapted or are native to an increasingly technologically sophisticated, connected, and globalized world.

Millennials have distinct traits and characteristics that have been shaped by the world around them, which includes most of them being digital natives and more amenable with Web 2.0 technologies than the previous generation (Dalmás, 2014, Atwal & Williams, 2009; Chu & Kamal, 2011). Since they are extensive users of social media, millennials feel more comfortable as part of online communities and do not shy away from sharing their opinions online. For millennials, it is important to share their experiences with peers on social media. 69% millennials claim to experience a "fear of missing out" (referred to as FOMO) when they are not up to date with the latest news on social media or when they see peers having enviable experiences through social media, which is accentuated by their dependence and willingness to share their own experiences on social media (Eventbrite, 2014; Boston Consulting Group, 2015)

As they are either born into or adapt to a digitized world, millennials are aware of when they are being sold to on social media according to Dillon (2016) and are therefore, not swayed by online advertising that is too blatant or staged. While travel marketers could previously explicitly advertise their services via fixed-itinerary packages offline to Generation X consumers, they need to make sustained efforts to tell compelling stories with their marketing in order to attract millennial consumers. Contradictorily, Christou (2015) in a research of the travel habits of Greek travellers examines how the current cohort of millennial travellers are less brand loyal when it comes to travel as compared to previous generations, instead focusing on getting better deals and experiences at more affordable prices. While both opinions have their own merits and may be truer with some demographics than the others, compelling travel marketing to millennial travellers should ideally strike a balance between affordability, innovation, and storytelling.

### 2.2.1. Hyperreality via Social Media

Hyperreality is an important aspect of postmodern philosophy and key concept in order to rationalise the effectiveness of picture-based social media in travel marketing. Introduced by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in the early 1980's, hyperreality according to him is "models of a real without origin or originality" (as quoted in Dahl, 2018, p.113). This means that a hyperreal image "...creates something with an actual meaning attached to it, although this image does not actually exist – or has never existed" (p.113). This principle has been leveraged extensively in social media marketing, which is primarily picture-based.

Atwal and Williams (2009) further discuss the importance of hyperreality and symbolism in the consumer purchase process. They postulate that "... people have become fascinated by signs, and as a result, they exist in a state where signs and images have become more important than what they stand for" (p. 340). This theorization makes sense of the rise of image-based social media like Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest, which are now used extensively for promoting travel.

Travel services provider and meta-search engine Expedia (2016) conducted a research on the travel habits of over 8000 millennial travellers and found that the "Instagrammability" of a destination is the main motivation behind choosing to holiday there. In this report, it is explained that consumers are more likely to be intrigued and experience "wanderlust" while being fascinated by a well-marketed and engaging experience they see online, as opposed to signing up for an offline-marketed pre-packaged tour. Therefore, it can be said that contemporary consumers prioritise imagery over the possible meaning or representation behind it, which rationalises the impressionability of consumers browsing travel experiences on picture-based social media.

Taking into consideration the ever-growing adoption of Web 2.0 platforms, social media with picture-sharing capabilities like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Tripadvisor are essential proponents of online travel marketing and have been used to great effect by travel marketers world over. However, Hanan and Putit (2013) identify Instagram as the most effective channel to conduct travel-marketing exercises on as it focuses primarily on picture and video content. Instagram is the third most widely used social media platform by millennials in the USA with 63% individuals between 18-29 saying they use Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2018). Further, the rate of adoption for this hyperreality-promoting social media is expected to increase



exponentially over the years. Therefore, travel marketers would be well aided by reaching customers with effective and engaging image and video-based content on Instagram.

Hanan and Putit (2013) posit that Instagram has rapidly become a multi-faceted digital travel-marketing tool owing to its instantaneous picture-sharing capabilities and the degree to which it uses the concepts of hyperreality and FOMO to create desire amongst consumers towards particular destinations and experiences. They conclude their research by illustrating why Instagram is a particularly effective tool for using hyperrealism to promote travel: “ The uniqueness and the art of snapping the picture can create a certain kind of emotion and feeling toward the destination ... the balance of technology and human touch will lead to the success of the destination marketing and create good destination image for the tourism destination” (p. 473-474).

### 2.2.2. Experientialism in Travel

Experiential travel has emerged as a major mass-marketed travel segment in the era of Web 2.0. An example of travel innovation that has been leveraged by the travel industry, it taps into the sense of adventure and desire for unique and immersive experiences of modern travellers (Chan, To, and Chu, 2016). It entails going beyond merely having standard touristic experiences and involves unique and novel means of immersing travellers in the local culture.

Conceptually, experiential travel borrows heavily from experiential marketing. Theorized by Pine and Gilmore, experiential marketing involves “...taking the essence of a product and amplifying it into a set of tangible, physical and interactive experiences that reinforce the offer” (as quoted in Williams, 2006, p. 341). However, it must be noted that the addition of experience-related specificity to consumption is a concept that has been the subject of academic economic-based discussion for many years. In 1955, Abbott (quoted in Holbrook, 2006) emphasized that “... what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences” (p. 714). Lebergott (1993) too, was off the same opinion, believing that experience via consumption is the primary motivator behind all economic purchases. This shows that while experiential marketing was not a prevalent marketing strategy in the past, academic discussion and appreciation for experientialism and hedonic consumption did still exist. Holbrook (in Tsaur, Chu, and Wang, 2007) assesses that this change in mindset by marketing researchers occurred as “consumers behavior in the form of purchasing outcomes and more as flesh-and-blood humans who

daydream about pleasurable adventures, respond emotionally to consumption situations, and use products in various playful leisure activities” (pg. 48).

Chan, To, and Chu (2016) rationalise millennial travel habits through consumer psychology, explaining that these travellers tend to avoid repeated visits to a single destination and are increasingly less satisfied by conventional patterns of tourist activities, owing to their “intrinsic tendency of neophilia” (p. 25). The term for the inherent desire to be novel and unique, neophilia is also a prevalent motivation for millennials’ social media posting, therefore making experiential travel and millennials’ social media tendencies a uniquely synchronous fit.

Travel innovation to make a trip more experiential is not merely limited to the choice of destination, with a clear trend of trip planning to include products that are central the travel experiences being seen over recent years (Xiang, Dan, O’Leary, and Fesenmaier, 2014). They found that products with lesser financial significance than lodging and air ticketing to travellers like dining, museum tickets, and shopping (i.e. “experience goods”) have gone through significant growth in importance amongst newer travellers. They contend that the Internet has played a major role in the popularization of these experiential goods, referring to Smith’s theorization that “...the perceived economic value of the Internet has increasingly been shifted toward these products traditionally perceived as secondary” (p. 23). Further, the convenient digitization and distribution of tickets for cultural, sports, and music events has been an important contributory factor for the surge in popularity of such travel experiences, reemphasizing the crucial role of ICTs in the rise of experiential travel.

For the aforementioned reasons the concept of experiential travel has been successfully mass-marketed to and become popular amongst millennials. In their survey-based report titled *Millennials: Fuelling the Experience Economy* (2014), Eventbrite discusses the importance of experiences in the lives of millennials and how they prioritize personal gratification and fulfillment via spending large sums on major events, sports tickets, music performances and festivals. They rationalize this by further elaborating that unlike their predecessors, millennial consumers are less reliant on career status and material possessions and gauge the quality of their lives based on unique and enriching experiences, believing that “Living a meaningful, happy life is about creating, sharing and capturing memories earned through experiences that span the spectrum of life’s opportunities” (Eventbrite, 2014, p.1). Perhaps most importantly for travel marketers, this research discovered that 72% millennials claimed that they would like to dedicate a larger part of their discretionary income towards experiences instead of material belongings. This serves to show how subsequent generations of travellers would prefer to invest in experiences incrementally and would essentially evolve within their own experiential

journeys. Therefore, it is important for travel marketers to not only sell an experience through their marketing efforts, but also put a distinct focus on telling an engaging and attractive story through their marketing, in order to attract more consumers.

### 2.2.3. Mass Customization and Bespoke Travel

Stemming from the aforementioned neophilic tendencies of travellers and their ICT-enabled ease of access to research destinations for their ideal travel experience, mass customization or bespoke travel has emerged as a popular offering amongst travel companies (Buhalis, 2000; Chan, To, & Chu, 2016). The very fact that the consumer segment of prosumers does exist is indicative of the “customer sacrifice gap between the desired and available tourism products”, according to Migas, Anastasiadou, and Stirling (2008, p.242), showing how there is a need for customization and bespoke travel services in the travel market.

Defined by Hart (1996) as “the use of flexible processes and organization structures to produce varied and often individually customized products and services at the price of standardized mass produced alternatives” (p. 13), mass customization is not merely limited to travel companies providing tailor-made itineraries to customers. In his article titled *The Four Faces of Mass Customization* (1997), Gilmore explains how numerous types of customization are possible for individual customers in high volumes and at a relatively low cost due to freely available information technology on destinations and flexible work processes. He further identified four main types of customization: *Collaborative*, *Adaptive*, *Cosmetic*, and *Transparent*. Collaborative customization requires interaction between consumer and product. Adaptive customization caters more to prosumers as it involves the product being adapted by the customer to their personal preferences. Cosmetic customization (or customization of presentation) essentially involves presenting the same product in a different way, to a different demographic. Transparent customization is a long-term process that involves observing individual customer preferences through interaction with them and subsequently tailoring products and services based on trends and tendencies learnt. Each of these types of customization are essential to travel innovation and based on their goals and budgets, a travel company can adopt numerous mass customization strategies (Gilmore, 1997).

The trend of mass customization in the travel industry has been expedited due to tourists becoming more demanding customers, who expect high quality products and value for money in this crowded consumer market (Migas, Anastasiadou, & Stirling, 2008). The reason why customization is attractive to modern consumers has been the subject of comprehensive

marketing research previously, with the added convenience of reduced search costs, more relevant information, and expertise from professionals all being discussed as viable causes (Rowley, 2002; Rumetshofer, 2003). Additionally, it is an invaluable way for marketers to create value by obtaining detailed information about consumer behavior and allowing them to experiment and adapt their offerings to suit consumer needs (Migas, Anastasiadou, & Stirling, 2008)

Modern travellers “expect to be addressed in personalized ways, to receive information that matches their personal expectations, and to live a unique holiday experience” (Migas, Anastasiadou, & Stirling, 2008, p.238). These expectations have been aided by the rapid ICT advances that have created infrastructures to tailor products and services in the product development phase via a process known as mass customization (Jiang, 2002). Mass customization serves to strengthen the relationship between the travel companies and travellers in an increasingly deal-loyal travel market, by providing them a personalized user experience to create brand loyalty and satisfaction (Migas, Anastasiadou, & Stirling, 2008).

It must be noted that there are travel companies that do not need to adopt comprehensive mass customization strategies due to incongruence with their business plan, paucity of budget, or the nature of the product to truly make their product bespoke. However, adoption of the less substantial of Gilmore’s (1997) aforementioned mass customization strategies can go a long way in building favor amongst consumers. Yet, there are many travel companies that yet remain static with their user experience, as they merely use their presence on Web 2.0 platforms to relay information, as opposed to creating customer-focused content (King, 2002; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003 as referred to in Migas, Anastasiadou, & Stirling, 2008).

#### 2.2.4. Storytelling in Travel

Storytelling is yet another form of tourism innovation that has made a substantial impact on how travel is marketed today. Essentially the “art of conveying events in words, images, and sounds often by improvisation or embellishment” (Alexander & Levine, 2008, p.1), storytelling frames “information so that it is understandable, meaningful, and memorable” (McLellan, as quoted in Akgün, Keskin, Ayar, and Erdoğan, 2015, p. 577). To rationalise the role of storytelling, McIntosh (as referred to in Hsiao, Lu, and Lan, 2012), justifies that storytelling-based travel marketing impacts the online behavior and perception of potential customers because of the fact

that tourism is an experience good. However, the role of online storytelling is not merely limited to influencing customers purchase decisions: storytelling is also an effective branding tool, which increases the likelihood of customers being emotionally invested in travel on a product and corporate level (Aaker and Smith, 2011). Pulizzi (2012) does not just believe that storytelling is an important aspect of online marketing, but that marketing strategies are “worthless” without it : “whether the brand goals are rooted in search engine optimization (getting found), lead generation (conversion) or leveraging social media tools, none of them will be effective without compelling storytelling” (p. 119).

Liu and Wu (2011) believe that storytelling and the in-depth nature of travel narratives go hand-in-hand as they enable the inclusion of more relevant information than traditional sources about a destination and thus evoke more emotion in the consumer. Using the age-old age “a picture is worth much more than a thousand words”, Conor (as referred to in Lim and Childs, 2016, p.1), explains that picture and video-based social media are particularly effective tools when it comes to creating stories about destinations and offerings. Akgün, Keskin, Ayar, and Erdoğan (2015) reference Mossberg to illustrates that compelling storytelling for a particular destination or experience on these platforms has the potential to give a destination a unique competitive advantage and tourists a more immersive experience. In today’s Web 2.0 marketing ecosystem, content marketing is a prevalent type of marketing that is built on the idea that storytelling is essential to attract and retain customers. It can be defined as the “creation of valuable, relevant and compelling content by the brand itself on a consistent basis, used to generate a positive behavior from a customer or prospect of the brand” (Pulizzi, 2012, p. 116). He continues explaining that content marketing manifests itself in many forms in the travel industry, including brochures, magazines, newsletters, blogs, videos, webinars, and websites.

Storytelling in marketing is expedited by attractive audio-visual aesthetics, production, and layout design. However, the two fundamental prerequisite dimensions for crafting engaging storytelling according to Bruner (1990) are: firstly, the landscape of action which comprises events that are visible by sight or inference; and secondly, that of consciousness, which lets the consumer get inside the heads of the story’s characters and empathize with them. Aaker and Smith (2011) believe that travel narratives are particularly effective in evoking readers’ empathy because of the ripple effect seen on social media technologies: “ ... individuals get opportunity to reach everybody regardless of their emotional intensity and social distance, (while) companies have a better chance of reaching their customers in a short time, directly and more intensely” (Akgün, Keskin, Ayar, and Erdoğan, 2015, p. 578).

### 2.3. UGC and its Manifestations in Prosumer and Review Sites

Offshoots of the collaborative aspect of ICTs and integral components of the collective value creation of Web 2.0, UGC and eWOM have rapidly assumed their position as amongst the most essential aspects of the online travel-marketing ecosystem today. Nielsen's *2012 Global Survey of Trust in Advertising* (as referred to in Liu, Chou, & Liao, 2015) shows that 92% of consumers world over trust "word-of-mouth recommendations from their trusted influential peers, vastly exceeding any other form of marketing, such as advertising or branded communications" (p. 35). This shows the degree to which these recommendations have become near indispensable in the purchase process of consumers. With travel, which requires a larger financial investment than most products, there seems to be a greater need of consumers to look up eWOM and UGC about their potential destinations and experiences.

Encompassing eWOM, UGC is essentially the blanket term for online content that enables consumers to generate content and seek recommendations on Web 2.0 platforms. According to The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (as referred to in Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), UGC is characterized by three essential prerequisites: it should be publically available on an ICT platform, be considered creative, and be produced for personal and not professional or monetary reasons. While there is ambiguity about what type of content may be considered "creative", the researcher has interpreted this as content that is original and genuine in nature.

eWOM is type of user generated content which enables customers to generate content and seek recommendations online. Dellarocas (2003) theorized that with these Internet-powered capabilities, "...individuals can make their thoughts, opinions, and personal feelings easily accessible to the global community of Internet users" (p.1407). It is important to highlight that eWOM describe an opinion on a particular product or service, regardless of whether it is positive or negative (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

The prevalence of UGC is a departure from the pre-ICT era wherein travel agents and experts were solely responsible for setting travel narratives and trends. With UGC, travellers can create and join online communities on social media, which eventually become platforms for information, content, and discussions. As a cause for this, Anderson (2008) mentions an "inversion of power", due to which consumers began to trust individuals more than they did organizations. This rose from consumers becoming aware of the lack of genuine interactions between them and companies, who are constantly trying to sell and advertise online. With social

media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Pinterest, and an ever-growing number of specialized travel and service-based platforms at their disposal travellers are able to share recommendations and generated UGC to partake in eWOM with increasing convenience and functionality. These acts of self-sufficiency according to Toffler (2001, as quoted in Niezgoda, 2013), were linked to growing prestige amongst consumers. Niezgoda (2013) theorizes that this phenomenon is related to the heightened sense of individuality, image, and personal identity amongst newer generations of travellers. This leads to them having an increased interest in undertaking tasks that they would previously pay businesses to do, which in the case of the travel agency could be travellers making booking hotels, hotels, or liaising with luxury services via OTAs.

And thus, rose the segment of travel consumers known as prosumers. Defined as "... a more-than average active consumer who is aware of his/her individual needs, is knowledgeable about the products, shares that knowledge with other consumers, and is active in designing or creating the product" (Niezgoda, 2013, p. 132). Therefore it is necessary to establish that consumers' want for heightened involvement and control in their transactions and communities, supplemented by the rise of online travel-related platforms like AirBnB, Tripadvisor, FlightFox (a crowd-sourced flight search platform), Lola, and HelloGBye (both semi-automated itinerary-making services) has made it appealing for travellers to turn into prosumers.

Owing to prosumption, online recommendations have rapidly assumed an important role in the travel industry. Li, Li, and Hudson (2013) add that traditional travel agents are feeling the pressure to innovate from a new group of competitors: " via social media, as customers are increasingly relying on other customers' recommendations and opinions" (p. 161).

A Tripadvisor report (2014) reveals that more than 50% of global respondents do not make travel bookings before they refer to reviews and research what other travellers' opinions are about the property or service. The same research highlights that 80% of these respondents read a minimum of six and a maximum of twelve reviews before they commit to a booking. Another survey showed that 86% of respondents trust fellow travellers reviews and posts on social media more than any form of marketing or advertising from a hotel or destination (Dillon, 2016). This shows that despite travel marketers creating engaging and compelling content, their work can be undone by not engaging with travellers and potential customers on UGC platforms.

The aforementioned Tripadvisor report highlights the importance of properties or services on travel review platforms to respond to customer feedback in a professional manner, as 87% of travellers in this research said that their impression of a hotel/property would change with a professional response to a bad review (Tripadvisor, 2014). Looker, Rockland and Taylor

(2007) highlight that while word of mouth online cannot be controlled, it can be managed and leveraged effectively for reputation and business gain. This holds true especially with the currently dominant demographic of millennials, who judge brands' care and receptiveness towards them based on how effectively they respond to their reviews on social media and review websites (DeMarco, 2013).

However, it must be highlighted that negative UGCs about a particular service or experience can lead to rapid decline in reputation and more quantifiably cancellations (Bowen, 2015). Therefore, hotels and services within the travel industry need to be proactive in the case UGC on review sites. If they do not adapt their frameworks to the trend of online reputation management, they will be left behind just as in the beginning of the Internet boom and Web 2.0 when many travel agencies reluctance to digitize their operations led to online travel agencies capturing a massive market share in the travel industry (Ellis-Green, 2007).

There has been skepticism amongst industry insiders regarding UGC platforms like Tripadvisor. Ooi and Ek (2010) do not entertain the notion that Web 2.0 is a domain independent of commercial interests and question the altruistic motives of review platforms, suggesting that there is are hidden commercial motives behind such platforms, which raises questions about authenticity and trustworthiness. Munar, Gyimothy and Cai (2014) explain why hotels, restaurants, and experience providers would try to fabricate and manipulate UGC on these platforms: "When aggregated, positive travel stories posted on TripAdvisor become valuable commercial assets and rhetorical ammunition in market communication" (p.5). Fake reviews and profiles on platforms like Tripadvisor are typically used by dishonest practitioners in the travel industry to manipulate favor amongst unknowing consumers by posting reviews that paint them in a positive light or by even creating fake accounts to deliberately post negative reviews about their competitors.

Thus, while the benefits of UGC and eWOM on review platforms for travellers and travel marketers are manifold, there is clearly a paradoxical and delicate balance between transparency and necessary moderation and control mechanisms. Munar Gyimothy and Cai (2014) articulated this paradox accurately when they stated, "Interactive media is a double-edged sword that provides opportunities for emancipation and socialization and for increased control and monitoring" (p.5).



## 2.4. Trend Setting in Travel

As established previously, the travel industry has been susceptible to numerous trends and niches over the years, with numerous segments being especially created to deliver to the needs of increasingly demanding consumers. The question of trend setting in online marketing is therefore, a critical one. By replacing traditional news portals as the primary channel for information exchange, online social media has also changed the diffusion patterns of social networks, bringing significant changes to the understanding about trend creation. Social media enables such analysis by providing easily accessible aggregated data of behavioral records to investigate the dynamics of trend creation and diffusion in social networks from a variety of perspectives (Zhang, Zhao, and Xu, 2015). Trends are reflected on social media in the form of hashtags, topics, and neologisms like Internet slang, wherein the "... collective attention underlying popularity peaks indicate the participation of a massive number of individuals during the diffusion of the relevant information" (Zhang, Zhao, and Xu, 2015, p.3).

Influencer marketing has proven to be a breakthrough in Web 2.0 marketing, allowing marketers to advertise to previously difficult-to-reach demographics and consumers of various niches via the help of opinion leaders. In the first few years' of adoption, influencer marketing showed great success, with a joint research study finding that it can trigger as much as 11 times more return on investment annually than traditional advertising (Kirkpatrick, 2016). Return on investment in marketing is conventionally measured by sales, but with digital marketing, key factors like reach and engagement are also observed. Travel companies have used influencers for trend propagation owing to their clear effectiveness in implicit and explicit advertising: one-third of millennials say they follow an influencer on Twitter or Vine and 40% people say that they have purchased an item that has been advertised by an online influencer (Swant, 2016).

The key premise of Gladwell's best selling marketing book, *The Tipping Point* (2000), is the topic of trend creation. He suggests that trends are started by small groups of individuals who influence, inform, and communicate them to society, owing to their higher propensity to propagate product information. In his research, Gladwell found that there exist certain types of consumers who propagate the virality of trends: "throughout history, the start and success of social, political, and fashion trends can all be traced back to specific types of people who can be categorized as connectors, mavens, or salespeople" (Wright, Khanfar, Harrington, & Kizer, 2010, p. 75). This is in line with conventional diffusion theory, which opines that minorities of people called influentials are considered to be the most integral factors affecting information cascades, as their greater numbers of connections exert a greater influence on dissemination (Rogers, 2003; Luarn, Yang, & Chiu, 2014). Watts and Dodds (2007) referred to this

phenomenon as the *influentials hypothesis*, on the key assumption that these influencers can bring large-scale popularity at fractionally less costs than conventional marketing techniques.

On the other hand, there exist numerous studies, which question the influence of influencer marketing, concerned specifically with their disruptive influence on organic trend formation. One such research noted how the behavior of influencers can affect the irregular dynamics of emerging trends, especially in the case of exogenous events (Varol, Ferrara, Ogan, Menczer, & Flammini, 2014). It is also proposed that the impact of influencers in online marketing is overrated due to their popularity, with Zhang, Zhao, and Xu (2015) highlighting that more popularity does not necessarily translate into great influence and great influence can only convert into sales if leveraged effectively. Challenging their own Influentials Hypothesis, Watts and Dodds (2007) argue that social epidemics are often driven by easily influenced individuals whose attention can also be leveraged by companies themselves, instead of getting influencers to propagate their message. It has also been noted that trend propagation is dependent on the network structure of the online community, with marketers giving influencers all the credit for something that is made impossible by such important factors (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2015)

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Choice of Method**

The key themes of this research have all been the subject of multitudinous quantitative academic research in the past. However, as mentioned before, these five themes have not been studied qualitatively and in relation to each other previously. By interviewing travel marketing experts, the researcher aimed to understand how they believe Web 2.0 capabilities and a more tech-savvy generation of travellers has impacted travel marketing. Voorbij and Ongering (2006) described the main objective of descriptive research "...to support local decision-making or to provide benchmarks against which to compare the results of future studies." (p. 232).

Descriptive research was chosen, therefore, as this thesis aimed to synthesize the findings of the expert interviews and provide a reference point to travel marketers and assist researchers of future academic literature on this topic.

Qualitative research enables the exploration of the "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p.1277). A total of ten expert interviews were conducted for this research, with Veal (2006) describing qualitative research as that which "...tends to collect a great deal of 'rich' information about relatively few cases rather than the more limited information about each of a large number of cases which is typical of quantitative research" (p.193), rationalizing why this study, instead of quantity of respondents focuses on increased in-depth analysis of the expert interviews. Bryman (2004) explained the opportunity to explore a research topic more comprehensively when the number of correspondents and knowledge on them is limited, as it allows for an increased and more in-depth). Sandelowski (2004) similarly writes about the aim of qualitative research, which is to study how humans "understand, experience, interpret, and produce the social world" (p. 893). Inferring from the aforementioned two statements, qualitative research is the ideal methodology when the research calls for probing, making observations, and deriving inferences about human phenomenon.

For this research, the type of qualitative research method chosen was in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews were chosen as a research method as they are highly interactive in nature and allow for a greater opportunity to get insights from respondents via facilitating and "...generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, p.113). As semi-structured interviews "contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life

experiences hold for the interviewees” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314), they are the most suitable method for this research. Rosenthal (2016) explained that semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended and follow-up questions, which assist in facilitating an in-depth understanding of the interviewees’ knowledge, perceptions and feelings. Rubin and Rubin (2005) explain that the illustration of personal experiences and describing of motives facilitates individual interpretation, which proved to be instrumental in delving deeper into the meanings behind the individual perceptions of the interviewees towards the marketing of travel in the era of ICTs and Web 2.0.

A list of several questions and probes concerning the topics under investigation was prepared prior to the interview in the form of an interview guide (Appendix B). These questions, which aim to answer the sub-questions of this research – therefore answering the primary research question and sub-questions – were formed on the premise of the five key themes of this research – experiential travel marketing, the impact of ICT and Web 2.0-enabled prosumer platforms and review sites, generational marketing, social media influencers, and trend creation within the travel industry. The next section provides a further, in-depth operationalization of each of the salient themes in this research, explaining how existing travel, travel marketing, and Web 2.0 theories were used to formulate the interview questions.

The often-reactionary nature of semi-structured interviews gave the researcher flexibility to improvise and pose additional questions based on each interviewee’s responses – be it seeking clarity on a statement or investigating whether the respondent had some further insight to give on an answer they provided. This structure was highly beneficial for the research, since it firstly permitted the interviewees greater influence over the flow of conversation and secondly, it allowed the researcher to freely delve into interesting and relevant conversation topics, even if they were overlooked in the interview guide (Harvey, 2011; Herzog & Ali, 2015). This allows for individual interpretation of terms and ideas, leading to reliable and comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

To make sure that the interviews were of a satisfactory quality and took into account industry perspectives, jargon, and terminology, the interview guide was shared with an industry insider and was subsequently amended to include feedback. Post this, a pilot interview was conducted with this industry insider, aiming observe whether respondents would be able to understand and provide in-depth answers to my questions, while simultaneously checking whether all lines of questioning were covered in the guide. The pilot interview was excluded from sampling frame of this research and the interviewee was subsequently not interviewed for the final research.

### 3.2 Operationalization

The objective of this section is to explicitly show how the key concepts of the theoretical framework are linked to each other and are linked to the research questions and sub-questions of this study. In order to effectively and comprehensively answer the research question of this research: *“How are travel experts applying what they leverage from Web 2.0 in their marketing?”* the key topics of focus were identified and formulated into five sub-questions. The first sub-question *“How has the understanding of travel marketing changed after the travel industry's adoption of ICTs and what are the challenges in marketing to tech-savvy travellers?”* assisted in setting context for this research by aiming to contrast travel marketing pre and post Web 2.0 adoption and understanding how millennial travellers are a challenging demographic to market to owing to their different mindsets and social media usage. The second sub-question: *“What role is played by experientialism, customizability and storytelling in travel marketing?”* aimed to get insight into the rise of trends like experientialism, customizability, and storytelling in travel marketing and how they are perpetuated by social media. The third sub-question: *“What is the impact of ICT-enabled social media, eWOM, UGC, and prosumer platforms and services on travel marketing?”* was essential to the researchers understanding of eWOM and UGC in travel marketing, but perhaps more crucially, was important in providing industry insight on the travel review platform, Tripadvisor and how it has impacted Web 2.0 marketing for the travel professionals. The fourth sub-question: *“What is the effectiveness of influencers in travel marketing – and what key performance indicators should be used to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns?”* deals with perceptions of influencer marketing and whether it is effective in travel marketing, while also aiming to get insight on the more recent trend of micro-influencers. The fifth sub-question: *“How are travel trends created in the era of Web 2.0 and who creates them – consumers, influencers, or companies?”* aimed to get industry insight into the impact of Web 2.0 on trend creation in the travel industry.

Having provided an explanation of the main research concepts behind each sub-question, rationalization of the interview guide is provided below. In the beginning of each interview, each travel expert was asked to give insight into their background in the travel industry with questions like *“How has travel marketing changed today as opposed to when you first started in the industry?”*, in order to ensure a comfortable atmosphere for the interview to take place. It also aided in providing context to the researcher for interpreting the opinions in the interview. This also worked as an effective segue into the first main line of questioning, which included questions like: *“What role has social media and Web 2.0 played in the development of the understanding of travel?”* and *“How is marketing travel to millennials different? Further*

probes were made into millennials' social media usage, tendencies, and whether they had made any changes into their infrastructure and business to cater to this demographic. The second line of questioning was concerned with three key concepts of this research: experientialism, storytelling, and customizability. The questions posed include: "What role does experientialism play in travel marketing?" "What role does storytelling play in the marketing of experiential travel?", and "What is your opinion of niches in travel and how is customizability aiding this?". The third line of questioning, which has to do with the impact and manifestations of eWOM and UGC, included questions like: "Do you believe the leisure travel industry is heavily dependent on word of mouth and recommender systems?" and "What is your opinion of Tripadvisor as a review platform". Concerned with the phenomenon of influencer marketing, the fourth set of questions includes: "Social media has given rise to Influencers and opinion leaders that have effectively been used by other industries in marketing efforts. Do you think travel has followed suit?" and "How impressionable is your clientele to influencers?" The fifth line of questioning, which was concerned with trend creation travel, included questions like: "What are some recent trends in your segment of travel and who has set them?" and "Is the travel industry still the tastemaker for trends or do you see a more customer-centric approach?". Before the interviews were concluded, the interviewee was asked if there were any more topics they would personally like to discuss in relation to the questions posed to them. Please refer to Appendix B for the complete interview guide.

### 3.3 Sampling Method & Choice of Technology

Seeing that this research strives to examine how travel experts are changing their marketing strategies in the light of an ICT-empowered era dominated by more tech-savvy travellers, the demographic of respondents is already limited in nature. As it has been explained before, this research aims to provide an industry perspective. Thus, the target respondents for the in-depth semi-structured interviews would essentially be limited to 'experts' within the field of travel and travel marketing, who are in an executive or decision-making position when it comes to the marketing of travel and tourism-based services. Apart from providing an industry insight into travel marketing strategies in today's' online travel ecosystem, this research also aimed to be globalized in nature and representative of travel marketers from various countries and segments to ensure a more comprehensive outlook. Therefore, care would have to be taken in order to ensure that respondents were not concentrated from one country of origin or were mostly

operating in one particular travel segment – respondents would ideally need to be operating in different travel markets geographically as well as specialization-wise. Interviewees were representative of the following travel markets – North America, Europe, India, and South-East Asia. Demographically, interviewees for this research operated in the following travel markets – India, UK, USA, Singapore, Austria, Germany, and Russia.

Owing to the research question and specific nature of the ideal respondent for this research, purposive sampling was chosen as the primary sampling method. Purposive sampling is simply defined by Matthews and Ross (2010) as “a sample of selected cases that will best enable the researcher to explore the research questions in depth” (p. 154), with Neuman (2014) elaborating it as “a non-random sample in which the researcher uses a wide range of methods to locate all possible cases of a highly specific and difficult-to-reach population” (p. 273). From the above theorizations of purposive sampling, it is clear that this method of sampling is dependent on the discretion and judgment of the researcher, which allowed me deduce whether “...certain types of subjects seem more central to understanding than others” (Babbie, 2014, p. 207). This allowed for the necessarily maneuverability to operate under the demographic limitations that were set for this research as in this form of sampling, “individuals are recruited specifically because they have the experience under investigation” (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 511). As mentioned above, since the interviewees are travel-marketing experts who are in executive and decision-making positions, they are often hard to reach owing to their busy professional schedules and lack of time. This consideration further strengthens the need for purposive sampling on this demographic of interviewees, as it was a population that was difficult to reach and schedule interviews with.

Snowball sampling was used as a secondary sampling method of recruiting respondents. Hall (2010) describes snowball sampling as: “A snowballing technique, here meaning ‘allowing pre-existing networks of friendship, kinship and community to guide choice [of informants/interviewees]’” (p.192). Hall is of the opinion that snowball sampling is a particularly effective sampling method in locating and connecting with hard to reach or “deviant populations” (p. 115). In the case of this research, decision-makers in travel marketing are considered to be “deviant” as they are firstly few in number and secondly, are executive-level decision-makers who would not conventionally be available to be interviewed.

Owing to the fact that the respondents for this research operated in different parts of the world, it would not have been feasible to conduct the interviews face-to-face, which would have been the ideal setting of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Instead, these interviews were conducted via video call on Skype, a telecommunications application software. While the

interpersonal aspect of the traditional interview aspect is lost while conducting interviews via Skype, as the interviewer and interviewee are not face-to-face, however Hanna (2012) has refuted these criticisms, by alluding to the ease of access and the "...synchronous interaction between the researcher and their participant" (p. 241) provided by it. Further, Skype is advantageous to other means of telephonic communications in the context of qualitative research as it allows easy and seamless audio recording, which provides clearer audio files for transcription and subsequent analyses. Therefore, the choice to use Skype as a medium for conducting interviews is justified.

### 3.4 Interviews

A total number of ten interviews (N=10) were conducted. Having mentioned this studies' emphasis on ensuring that it is global in nature and taking into account that the travel marketing experts were from seven different countries – namely India, UK, USA, Russia, Germany, Austria, and Singapore – it was decided that the medium of instruction and conversation in each of these interviews be English, for the sake of uniformity and convenience. The researcher interviewed one travel marketing specialist from each of the aforementioned countries, barring India, which had three interviewees and UK, which had two. A list of interviewees their designations, companies, industry, and country can be found in *Appendix A*.

Identified potential respondents were initially contacted via email, in which they were provided with a brief description of the aims of this research. Care was taken to ensure that not too much information was disclosed about the research in order to prevent respondents from 'preparing' content for the interview. If the researcher received a positive response from a potential respondent, he would proceed to try to schedule a time slot that would be convenient for me to conduct the interview. This email would also inform them of the requirement to record the interview, explaining why the researcher would prefer a Skype call over other forms of telephonic communication, attaching the standardized consent form to the email. While most interviews were able to be scheduled in advance for a later date, in four instances the researcher was unexpectedly contacted by respondents to prepone their interview and conduct them sooner than expected. However, keeping in mind that decision-makers and executives in travel marketing are typically expected to keep busy schedules, provisions were made to conduct these interviews, even at at short notice. While ideally the researcher would have preferred to conduct the interviews with videos in order to observe and take note of facial



expressions and body language, the initial four interviewees stated their preference for audio calls. Three interviewees were not averse to having their interviews conducted with video, but for the sake of uniformity, it was decided to keep all videos audi-based, sans video.

The data collection (i.e. conduction of interviews) was done by the researcher. In order to be able to analyze the interviews, the researcher was required to record each one of them. Since the interviews were being conducted via Skype, the researcher was able to record the interviews via a standard recording application on my computer, while additionally ensuring that he used the voice recorder on his smart phone in the event of an unforeseen problem with the primary recorder. The duration of the interviews varied between 34 and 76 minutes, with an average length of 50 minutes. Despite having each respondent sign a consent form, care was taken to ensure that verbal consent to record was given by them to me in the beginning of the interview. While conducting the interviews, the researcher made notes about further questions and additional observations in order to further consolidate his findings.

The resultant data (i.e. audio recordings of interviews) were generated in .mp3 format and each audio file was transcribed verbatim. As a result, 105 pages of transcriptions originated. The resultant corpus of transcripts was used as data to analyze and interpret. Phillimore and Goodson (2004) describe how in-depth interviews provide the interviewer with data from listening, feelings, questions, recording, and examination. The next section is centered around explaining and describing thematic analysis, the chosen method of analysis.

### 3.5 Thematic Analysis

In order to analyze and synthesize the data from the in-depth semi-structured interviews, the method of thematic analysis was chosen. Thematic analysis is defined as "... a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Their theorization of thematic analysis stands out as it highlights its emphasis on the essentialist or realist method, while rationalizing its effectiveness in reporting meanings, experiences, and the reality of participants.

Seeing as the qualitative methodology being employed in this research is in-depth semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis works as a good compliment. Braun and Clarke contend that owing to the fact they involve participants as collaborators, semi-structured interviews are particularly effectively analyzed by thematic analysis. Moreover, seeing as this research is guided and based on a framework of existing theories, thematic analysis allowed me freedom

and flexibility in devising and using the theory frame. Further, seeing that the sampling method of choice for this research was primarily purposive in nature, thematic analysis allows for immediate outcomes to be decided upon subsequent data collection (Boeije, 2010). This implies that latter stages of data collection can be made more thorough, as it can be aided by analysis of previous data. This translates into increasingly fruitful and effective interview experiences after each interview, seeing as the researcher typically transcribed an interview as soon as he completed conducting them. Therefore, via thematic analysis, the data set of transcriptions will be summarized via the identification of key patterns and themes, in order to fit the theoretical background that forms the focus of this research.

In order to conduct thematic analysis, coding is essential – Darlington and Scott (2002) define it as “...an integral part of the analysis, involving sifting through the data, making sense of it and categorizing it in various ways” ( p.145). While transcribing and subsequently studying the transcripts, the researcher identified the preliminary (or open) codes, , which involved “ breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing” data (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, p. 61), therefore providing context for analysis . The process of coding was undertaken manually, with each code being identified, color-coded and marked on the transcripts. The criteria to select codes were on the basis on the themes and meaningfulness of the responses. This led to the creation of a coding scheme, which, contained a considerable number of codes (Boeije, 2010). The initial codes were consolidated, grouped, and organized in an Excel sheet. This process allowed me to omit irrelevant portions of the interview, as they did not require coding and focus on identifying initial codes that were key to my research. This is in line with Boeije’s suggestion that open coding is important for organizing data based on the specific needs of the research..

Post open coding, is the process of discovering and identifying axial codes. With the main themes – which emerged while conducting axial coding – selective coding helped identify the themes and sub-themes that would be used to provide segmented answers to the research question, via answering the sub-research questions.

Furthermore, each theme and sub-theme was characterized and briefly defined, in order to simplify the process of writing my findings and results. Finally, each of these would be transformed from analyzed data and themes to interpretable text, based on the narrative provided by the research questions and theoretical framework.

### 3.6 Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure the validity of the research, care was taken to ensure that the research design was structured in order to thoroughly provide answers to the research question and sub-questions (Leung, 2015). To prevent any personal bias from influencing interviews and interpretation, care was taken to appreciate the fact that various respondents have different perspectives and view the world in a different way from the researcher and each other due to various influencers like cultural beliefs and attitude towards certain topics. (Farr, 1982). Due to various interviewees working in different segments of the travel industry: luxury, youth, experiential, and incentive travel and hospitality and travel marketing, as well as them operating in a variety of different travel markets (India, UK, USA, Austria, Germany, and Singapore), the researcher had to ensure he was well-versed with their area of expertise and professional career. Further, the researcher began each interview with requesting the interviewees to introduce themselves and provide insight into their professional background in the travel industry. This is done in order to ensure enough information and key context from the interview, whose aim is to understand and interpret the respondents' life world (Farr, 1982).

The second key concept to consider in qualitative research is reliability, which essentially looks at if the findings are stable and if the study could be replicated by another researcher following the same methodology (Silverman, 2016). Unlike quantitative research, perfect reliability cannot be attained in qualitative research. However, care was taken to ensure the consistency and transparency of the data. In order to do so, detailed information of the research design, sampling, data collection, and analysis were provided. The operationalization section includes the relevance of the chosen theories in the theoretical framework, as well as how they aid in answering the research questions and sub-questions. In order to provide further proof and reliability, the data set was submitted with this research: which includes .mp3 audio recordings of the expert interviews, along with a 99-page document which contains the verbatim transcriptions of these interviews.

#### 4. Results and Findings

As per the formed research question, this research aims to examine how key Web 2.0-enabled functionalities have been leveraged by travel marketing experts in order to attract new consumers. Additionally, this research is concerned with further exploring and reporting insights on Web 2.0-enabled functionalities and their consequences, which were identified as the key themes of this research. Those themes are experiential travel marketing, the impact of ICT and Web 2.0-enabled prosumer platforms and review sites, generational marketing, social media influencers, and trend creation within the travel industry.

Structured according to the research question and sub-questions, this section includes key findings from the ten semi-structured interviews of travel and travel marketing experts. The transcripts of the interviews were systematically analyzed via thematic analysis, which included open and axial coding. The axial codes were further analyzed into themes or selective codes, which form the foundation of this section. The selective codes are in line with the key themes and therefore, sub-questions of this research. They will be discussed by presenting the relevant patterns that were discovered in the data analysis, which will be further supplemented with important quotes from interviewees in order to explain the findings in a comprehensive fashion.

##### 4.1 Travel Marketing in a Web 2.0 Travel Ecosystem

The Background section of this research describes the ever-changing travel landscape, explaining how the adoption of Web 2.0 was a major inflection point for the travel industry – not only from a marketing perspective, but at a larger level, for the power structure and flow of information within the industry. This section is concerned with examining the degree to which this impact was felt by the demographic of travel marketing experts, particularly focusing on how drastic changes in Web 2.0 capabilities and the travel marketing landscape have impacted travellers by creating a contrast between travellers pre and post Web 2.0 adoption. To this effect, this section is dedicated to answering the first sub-question of this research: *“How has the understanding of travel marketing changed after the travel industry's adoption of Web 2.0 and what are the challenges in marketing to tech-savvy travellers?”*. Via coding and data analysis, 3 core patterns were revealed. They were coded as: pre and post Web 2.0 marketing, generational marketing, and millennial tendencies. While each of these attributes may be considered independent, they are all birthed from the adoption of ICTs, and are therefore connected and correlated.

#### 4.1.1 Contrast Between Pre and Post Web 2.0 Travel Marketing

As mentioned previously, prior to the age of the Internet and social media, travel agents assumed a pivotal role in the travel industry. This was due to them being the sole source of information regarding destinations and experiences for travellers, barring travel publications, journals, and interpersonal recommendations. Seeing as 8 out of 10 interviewees are industry veterans with over two decades of experience in travel and travel marketing and have therefore operated in the previous travel ecosystem, they were able to provide a contrast between travel marketing exercises, tendencies, and strategies before and after the adoption of Web 2.0. Each interviewee stressed on the stark contrast between travel marketing before and after Web 2.0 adoption, particularly highlighting the importance of Web 2.0 in creating a consumer-centric power structure within the travel industry. They also highlighted how travel marketing was executed in a travel agent and marketer-centric travel ecosystem, which can be seen from the dominant travel offering of this era: fixed packaged itinerary tourism. Loveleen Arun, Founder and Director at Panache, an Indian experiential luxury travel company highlighted the power of travel agents and travel marketers in the pre-ICT era by explaining fixed package itinerary tourism:

“Let's take an example of a person from Europe who wants to visit a country like India, 15 or 20 years ago. How it would work was that a big travel company in Europe – something like TUI or some other company – would get in touch with a big travel agent in India who had a good buying power. They work together, collaborate on itineraries, and a smaller travel agent in India would bid for this business...The travel agent in Europe would print beautiful brochures, posters, and then he would put these out for marketing with different resellers, who are more travel retail agents. He would then put out departure dates to India – for example on December 1, December 15, January 15, etc. People would buy in to these dates and these retail agents were spread over towns and villages all across Europe. That's how groups would get together and then come to India. So that was the only form of marketing. People had a lot of questions because they were going to a country where they don't know what the weather was, what to expect, whether it was malaria free or not. There are all kinds of questions and it had to have a human interaction for people to sell – which there wasn't”.

This quote highlights numerous characterizations of travel marketing before ICT adoption, which is the dominance of larger travel companies, the process of designing itineraries, the fixed nature of these itineraries, the lack of marketing mediums, and collaboration between travel agents and consumers. As was illustrated in the above excerpt, it was the larger and more established travel companies who primarily facilitated most leisure travel, albeit through localized travel agents and resellers. These companies established a stronghold over the travel industry by facilitating fixed itinerary tours around the world at affordable rates. They would add “insider” knowledge about destinations via collaborating with large networks of travel agencies and local ground partners, which was converted into printable itineraries, posters, and travel brochures. Seeing as fixed itinerary packaged tours were typically marketed via these posters and brochures pre-ICTs, marketing strategies would focus primarily on distribution, aiming to ensure that as many potential customers see them. Chris Townsend, Director at What Marketing Company, a travel marketing company in the United Kingdom, remembers from his own youth the existence of “...a lot of shops where people purchase holidays from, with brochures. You go somewhere like Thomas Cook and you would see a selection of brochures that would highlight different countries and areas”. As they were pre-produced and mass marketed, these itineraries typically did not allow for a great deal of personalization and tailor-making trips for consumers, who couldn’t customize much about their travel apart from their travel dates.

Travel has assumed a key role in consumer culture in the 21st century, but this was not always the case. Travelling was not always as affordable as it is today, neither was it facilitated as quickly as we see in the age of apps, smart phones, and e-commerce. Further, the United Nations World Travel Organization (2012) attributes the sustained success of the travel segment to rising income in emerging markets and the continual commitment to travelling despite economic and geopolitical uncertainty from people in developed markets. Amit Kalsi, Founder and CEO of Experiential Travel Journeys, an India-based experiential travel company, explained how a few decades ago, leisure travel was a luxury reserved for the traditionally wealthy families. Only those who were financially well off were considered to be the target audience of travel marketers. Four out of ten interviewees also noted that previously, the number of trips per person in a year were previously much lesser in number and required numerous months of planning and formalities to even facilitate. Amit Kalsi contrasted this effectively in the following quote: “ ... And now it’s a given that if you have a summer holiday, you have to go out (for a holiday). Earlier people used to plan in such a way – I’m talking

probably 20 years back – they would just take one holiday a year and would plan for that holiday.”

The adoption of ICTs in the early 21st century by digital immigrants and natives has transformed the travel industry, providing them with functionality and access to information like never before (Munar, Gyimothy, & Cai, 2014). While each interviewee spoke at length about the impact of ICTs on travellers, they also stressed on how these changes affected existing travel companies in the industry and how ICTs facilitate lower barriers to entry for new organizations in the industry. Sanjar Imam, Founder and Director of Panache, an Indian experiential luxury travel company enunciated this in the following quote:

I think we've seen a long tail as far as the travel community is concerned where earlier it used to be just a few big travel houses that used to control all the travel. Today we see someone savvy enough with Internet set up a company and start marketing and do business. Because of this, a lot of travel companies have come up. So that has obviously increased competition to a huge extent. The consumers are more listening than talking, now that they have a lot of voices to hear. And so even the big travel companies now need to sort of evolve and transform to reach out to the consumers, because there is a threat of that long tail.

Post Web 2.0 adoption, the travel industry became a dynamic job creator, seeing as newer segments were discovered and the rise of newer platforms and consumer tendencies. From being dominated by the larger travel houses, the travel industry witnessed a rise in boutique travel companies and prosumer platforms that effectively promoted Do It Yourself (DIY) travel. Apart from being more well-informed about destinations owing to the vast repository of knowledge of the Internet, consumers in the Web 2.0 era are also spoilt for choice, seeing that they can choose from the services of numerous travel companies catering to virtually every travel segment, niche, and destination. Loveleen Arun noted that travellers today do not need a travel agent at home, neither do they need one at their destination. The Internet enables them to be their own travel agent in many ways and research and communicate with a degree of freedom that they could not in the pre-Web 2.0 era. Owing to the convenience of the Web 2.0-empowered ecosystem and a increased discretionary income and experience in travel over the years, Amit Kalsi believes that travellers are “maturing and evolving to the next level”. He explains:

The best part about the product is that the number of travellers has increased over the last 25 years. Every year within those number of travellers you have a certain percentage to mature to the next level. When I say mature to the next level I mean they're mindsets towards leisure travel, value of spending on experiences and accommodation also changes. That's why we have a lot of mass market travel in India but at the same time we have the the high end segment which is discerning travellers and spending high-end for all these expensive trips and investing in experiences that are very that are very exclusive, just like the mature markets.

This idea of maturation is explained as a byproduct of consumers becoming more well-versed and experienced in travel – from spending on experiences on instead of typically tourist activities, to reaching out to and understanding new destinations, people, and cultures. It is also in line with Chan, To, and Chu's (2016) theorization behind the rise of experiential travel, which is rooted in neophilia and saturation with conventional tourist experiences. Maja Schroder, Owner and Managing Director of aom Art Of Motivation a German incentive travel company, noted that modern travellers can be characterized as "...more adventurous because they're looking for something always more authentic in that field". To illustrate better her point, she used the example of travellers to Africa: "Before they (travellers) would have been happy by just going to a tribal village, which could have been rather touristic. People now are looking for something more authentic. Now, travellers don't want (to travel to) a place that has been visited or gets visited every day by 50 tourists. They're interested in experiences where people...you know... kind of change from the T-shirts that they usually wear into traditional dresses and pretend things are the way they used to be (in olden times). They want either to go to remote places where things are still really authentic or at least not in the tourism sector in order to get in touch with people directly." This illustrates how modern travellers are looking to differentiate their travel experiences from those of others, which this research confirms as a major motivator for millennial travellers in the following sections.

#### 4.1.2 Generation X Tourists vs. Millennial Travellers

In 2016, millennials eclipsed baby boomers as the largest living generation, according to a Pew Research (2016). Does this signal a need for change in marketing and advertising strategies employed by the travel industry? Should marketing efforts now being diverted to the more



experience-fuelled and tech-savvy millennials? This part of the results section is concerned with answering the aforementioned questions.

Six out of ten interviewees for this research operate in millennial-centric youth, student, and experiential travel. Further, four interviewees are actually millennials themselves, so this research was able to gain some important insights about millennial travellers from the perspective of those who are marketing travel to this segment. Anna Korobkova, Overseas Relations Officer at TravelWorks Russia, who offers work and travel programs to students, believes that millennials have revitalized the travel industry because of their default degree of sophistication with technology as compared to previous generations. Owing to this, they are more flexible with the internet. She further elucidates this point by explaining how as recently as five years ago, participants of TravelWorks programs from Kazakhstan would have no option but to come to TravelWorks' offices in Russia to plan and enquire about their trips. But as the rate of adoption of digital technologies increased, she noticed that most enquiries from interested customers come via direct messages on Facebook and Instagram. This illustrates how the millennial traveller has leveraged technology and ICTs to better communicate with travel companies.

According to Chris Townsend, "Millennials are more interested in purchasing experiences rather than things", which is an important quote to understand seeing that it explains the popularity of experiences and immersion in millennial culture. Sanjar Imam is of the same opinion, highlighting that: "We often have younger travellers who are breaking the bank and spending large amounts of money on once-in-a-lifetime experiences like football matches and music festivals. Where they will compromise is on accommodation and travel, for which they look for cheaper options. For them it is the experience that is important, not where they sleep."

Austin Abram, Director of Entertainment Travel at In The Know Experiences (ITKE), an experiential luxury travel company in the United States of America believes that her millennial clients' want for authentic experiences and immersion rises from the fact that they are more well-travelled than their predecessors when they were younger. Having travelled with their families at a younger age and seen what would be considered touristic, when the time comes to pay for their own travels, millennial travellers would prefer to see a different side to cities they've already been to like London and Paris. She believes that the drive for authentic experiences manifests in the want to experience a destination like a local would and go beyond tourist attractions and online listicles about Top 10 Things To Do in a city.

Marie Nadal, Founder of Them, You, & Me, a Singapore-based digital marketing company, from her experience in working in luxury travel marketing believes that millennials are attracted to the exclusivity that comes from experiential travel: "...it (experiential travel) has also previously been more privileged before. More people were looking into authentic and experiential (travel), associating that with luxury (travel). Right now, you have the possibility to really go in depth with a certain culture without even looking at the expensive side of things." Seeing as many experiences were simply out of reach for most people previously, it adds to the novelty and uniqueness of travelling to a destination.

#### 4.1.3 Marketing Memories (via Experientialism) to Millennials

While still under the complement of ICT services, social media has played a vital role in the development of the modern traveller and their understanding of travel, apart from the fact that it provided travel marketers an effective platform to target new customers. Munar, Gyimothy, & Cai (2014) stated that in the travel industry, social media is the foremost source of online value creation. Lee McAteer, Co-Founder and CEO of Invasion Camp Group, Americamp, Camp Thailand, and numerous other UK-based niche youth travel services, resonates with this, believing that modern travellers are not just using social media to research and communicate travel. The modern traveller, according to him, is conscious of what they post on social media about their travel:

We've gone from everybody wanting their 15 minutes of fame (in the previous generation) to all of a sudden, a time where privacy really really matters. But at the same time it is all about the image we portray on social media to our friends and family now – but that isn't necessarily what your real life or what your real experiences are.

The above excerpt is particularly insightful as it also highlights the difference between travellers' real experiences and how they are portrayed on social media. As discussed before, digital native millennial travellers are characteristically and ideologically different from their digital immigrant predecessors. Therefore, the marketing strategies for each of these types of travellers must essentially be different – from platform, to messaging and marketing collaterals.

Lee McAteer attributes the success of his youth and student travel companies to the fact that he himself is a millennial and was part of the “Facebook and Twitter generation”. Because he was an avid user of Twitter himself, he explains it was easier for him to understand his target demographic and devise marketing strategies based on this understanding. Targeting primarily the 18-25 demographic of students and young adults, he believes that tapping into their need for social gratification and exploiting social media envy plays a big role in devising an effective travel marketing strategy for digital native travellers: “As a storytelling tool, social media is being used by travellers to tell a story about how amazing their time was, to make other people jealous and make people go “Oh wow! That’s an amazing picture” to get their own engagement by getting likes and extra level of popularity for themselves.” Dr. Mihir Nayak noted this tendency too, believing that the fear of missing out (FOMO) when they see an aspirational destination or experience on social media is an important motivation for digital natives to travel. These opinions ratify Magasic’s (2016) theorization of the selfie gaze, which attributes travellers sharing pictures, video, and texts about their experiences on social media to the awareness that they have an audience who would view their content. Additionally, it is also in line with Expedia’s findings in their survey on millennial travel habits (2016), which revealed that the “Instagrammability” of a destination is the primary motivator behind picking a holiday.

On the contrary, the need to constantly share travel experiences and seek gratification from them on social media is not felt as strongly by travellers from previous generations. Amit Kalsi opines that the older generation of traveller is not as competitive as their younger counterparts as they are comparatively well-seasoned travellers and comparatively have a lack of engagement with social media from an early age, seeing as they adopted these technologies and were previously used to less sophisticated forms of communication. The difference between marketing to millennial travellers and Generation Y travellers extends to the platform and means via which it is conducted. Since travellers are using social media more than traditional media like newspapers, TV, and radio, companies have shifted their promotional budgets to social media (Bowen, 2015). Sanjar Imam, Lee McAteer, and Loveleen Arun highlighted the importance of speaking in the language of the target audience, on the platforms that they are present. It is important to take into consideration the limitations of these cohorts of travellers – younger millennials would not have as much money to spend on travel as their older counterparts. Marketers of millennial travel need to keep up with current trends and activities, seeing their the transient nature of trends that exist today. On the other hand, marketers of luxury travel to the oldest digital immigrant millennials and Generation Y travellers need to be weary of the fact that their customers are typically used to a certain degree of comfort, which

would be their main priority, even more so than authentic and experiential travel experiences. The key takeaway from this point is that a successful travel marketer would necessarily need to understand their key demographic and tailor content and experiences to their own niche.

A new trend that has emerged in social media marketing is the widespread adoption of videos as a medium of marketing, overtaking the previously dominant text and image marketing collaterals. Chris Townsend, whose company, What Marketing Company, focuses primarily on video-based content for clients in the travel industry world-over, believes that video content works very well for marketing travel, as sometimes pictures don't do justice to a destination. In order to showcase functionalities and experiences, video is able to capture the essence of a destination more effectively. He believes that video content is aspirational for millennial travellers, who crave authenticity and believability, which can be provided to them by creating engaging video contents about destinations and experiences. He explains that well-made video marketing allows a travel company to differentiate themselves from companies in a similar segment, by showcasing different niches.

However, it is important to note that despite their acceptance of the fact that video content is most effective in marketing travel on social media, Anna Korobkova and Amit Kalsi said that they personally are not as engaged by video content as they are with long form articles and pictures. This was attributed to the content not being engaging enough in both cases.

#### 4.2 “Experiential” – The Latest Buzzword in Travel

A key product of travel innovation, experiential marketing (or engagement marketing) is concerned with a company and consumers connecting at a deeper level, beyond merely looking at consumers as passive receivers. As explained in the theoretical framework, experiential travel borrows from the core ideation of experiential marketing in the way that it calls for deeper engagement and authentic experiences in travel, as opposed to touristic run-of-the-mill travel. This section is concerned with studying to way experiential marketing is used by travel experts to attract consumers to experiences, particularly focusing on the role of storytelling and customizability in travel marketing. Therefore it aims to answer the second sub-question of this research: “*What role is played by experientialism, customizability and storytelling in travel marketing?*”. The four main codes drawn from the thematic analysis are experientialism in travel, the trend of customizability, and storytelling. They are discussed in detail below.

#### 4.2.1 Experientialism in Travel

Crafted on travellers' desire for more authentic travel experiences and borrowing from key ideas of experiential marketing, experiential travel involves going beyond being merely a tourist in a destination – it involves interacting with the local culture, food, and people in a personalized way. This form of travel leverages millennial travellers' desire to go off the beaten path and experience a destination the way a local in that destination would and has become hugely popular amongst travel companies. Chris Townsend opines that experiential travel “is all about new” and that social media has greatly expedited the rise of this form of travel. As experiential travel in its purest form is typically out of the box and are novel in nature, they are the type of experiences people would want to share on social media. Amit Kalsi explains how experiential travel is essentially “a deeper experience within that same destination, from a different perspective”:

You can go to Singapore, go to Sentosa, go to the flea markets there, shop at Orchard street and come back. But experientially – say you are a big fan of food and were into culinary tourism – you would go to Singapore for the street food, Michelin starred restaurants, the fine dining, and the rooftop bars.... It's a completely different perspective on the same destination.

This quote is particularly important as it links back to Urry's (1980) conceptualization of the Tourist Gaze or heritage commodification, which explains how “touristic” experiences came into prominence. With experiential travel growing in stature, we see less heritage commodification, with a higher propensity for niche travel. Perhaps what expedited the rise of experiential travel the most, however, was consumers' increased exposure to and intrigue about different cultures via ICTs – be it through cinema, social media platforms, or travel-based publications. Loveleen Arun spoke about how popular TV show *Game Of Thrones* was almost single-handedly responsible for revitalizing the Croatian travel industry and much of their economy, seeing that their economy is almost entirely dependent on tourism (Rodriguez, 2015). Since most of the episodes of this series was shot in Dubrovnik and other smaller towns in Croatia, these cities have become an important touristic experience for fans of Game Of Thrones. The local travel industry in these cities have embraced this and have successfully curated travel experiences for fans of the show which would take them to places where important scenes were shot. “Set-jetting” (i.e. tourism motivated by TV and cinema) is not a new trend in travel, but the creation and marketing of such experiences, according to Loveleen Arun can be hugely positive. This

can be evidenced by the impact of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit* film series on tourism in New Zealand – which generated \$7 billion in 2014 alone (Rodriguez, 2015).

Sanjar Imam and Loveleen Arun believe that in many ways, experiential travel resonates with the core and perhaps idealistic reason behind why people travel: to experience and imbibe a different culture, learn from it, and adapt them to somehow make a positive impact on their family and friends when they return home. This explains why experiential travel is fundamentally linked to communication and interaction: be it with locals, cuisines, or cultures.

Interestingly, four out of ten interviewees believe that experiential travel is an abused term in the travel industry. Sanjar Imam explains that the travel industry has lately been susceptible to finding key terms that would define a certain period of time and latching onto that bandwagon. He explained that ‘luxury travel’ was that buzzword for the last two decades, but over the last five years or so ‘experiential travel’ is a word that has captured the imaginations of travel companies, whether they provide experiential services or not. According to Loveleen Arun, the degree of experientialism of an experience is impossible to gauge, seeing as experiences are inherently subjective. By that logic, anything can be an experience, be it standing in line for two hours to go atop the Eiffel Tower (typically touristic in nature) or having a Parisian native take you on an insider's tour of the city (typically experiential in nature).

Amit Kalsi believes that the experiences that form experiential travel should be the cornerstone of every trip planned for a client. He suggests that the conceptualization of a trip should begin with experiences and then the travel designer should work backwards from there, designing the holiday around the experiences. From a marketing perspective, marketing experiences instead of hotels and services works very effectively, as it has already been established that modern travellers would much rather spend their money on experiences instead of things. This section, thus, resonates with Holbrook (2007), Xiang, Dan, O’Leary, and Fesenmaier (2014), Chan, To, and Chu’s (2016) theorizations behind the core motivations and unique selling propositions of experiential travel. It further ratifies Lebergott’s (1993), opinion that experience via consumption is the main aim of any economic activity.

#### 4.2.2 Creating Value with Customizability

Bespoke and tailor-made travel planning in today’s crowded travel market are almost taken for granted because of the large number of travel companies that offer tailor-made customizable travel and platforms that allow travellers to be involved in every step of their travel planning

process. However, we do not need to go far back in time to see how recently the only form of travel available to consumers was fixed itinerary tourism, with tailor-made itineraries being reserved for affluent travellers. Post the ascension of Web 2.0 and Travellers 2.0, travel companies have no option but to offer tailor-made services seeing that travellers are today able to plan their own travel with OTAs and prosumer platforms. Six out of ten interviewees said their travel companies offer tailor-made itineraries based on the preferences of their clients. Lee McAteer realises the importance of customization and tailor-making in experiential travel. He illustrates:

If I'm a big fan of fishing – it might be in Thailand, for example. When i'm there, I wouldn't necessarily care about going to the temples. So even though you're going to the same location, every trip can about your own experience based on thing you want to do.

Tailor-made and customizable travel experiences have played a vital role in making experiential travel as popular as it is today, as great experiences are subjective in nature and difficult to quantify in a uniform fashion. The quote above also alludes to the fact that it is easier to create a service tailored to customers, instead of convincing customers to change their mind about a particular service, experience, or destination. We can see how this alludes to Gilmore's theorization of transparent customization (1997), which is a long-term process that involves tailoring services to consumer preferences.

In her experience with large corporate groups, Maja Schroder has noticed that customizability and maneuverability are two things a travel agent should always offer to clients. She believes that a personalized approach that makes travellers feel special is the only way of developing brand loyalty in a deal-hungry travel market. She rationalizes this by explaining that travellers are often travelling to unknown lands, which are out of their comfort zone – the travel agents who tailor-make itineraries and add a degree of customization to their services are the ones who succeed.

The want for bespoke trips, according to Austin Abram is birthed from modern travellers' tendency to be involved in creating their own travel experiences and be in the know about the cost of everything they are paying for. She believes that travel companies can no longer be a one-size-fits-all service which offers clients stock itineraries and a one line invoice of \$10,000 for a trip to Italy – they will necessarily need to be accountable to their clients for every aspect of the holidays, seeing that travellers are often as well read and researched about destinations as the travel agents in some cases. At her company, ITKE, they have realized that each person is

different and that no one travel experience is the same for two people. If need be, they refer unsure clients to pre-made itineraries curated by them, after which they are able to customize the stock itinerary to the preference of their clients. This is

As mentioned before, four out of ten interviewees do not offer tailor-made travel services like itinerary and destination customization for a variety of reasons including an incongruence with their business plan, lack of budget, and the nature of their travel offering. However, each of these interviewees stressed on the importance of adding some degree of personalization to their services, in order to develop a deeper bond with their customers, which is in line with Migas, Anastasiadou and Stirlings (2008) conception of mass customization. Lee McAteer, whose companies are known for their budget youth travel offerings says that while he would ideally like to provide customizability within the camp offerings he has, it is logically unsustainable to do so seeing the large size of groups he sends abroad and lack of profit margins. Chris Townsend believes that the problem with bespoke travel is that it is tough to scale properly and the added cost of doing so. Since he and Lee McAteer primarily work with deal-loyal younger millennial travellers who are looking for value for money, the additional cost brought about by bespoke planning is something they would like to avoid.

#### 4.2.3 The Importance of Storytelling

Another aspect of experiential travel is how it promotes storytelling as a tool of transparency, sending messages, and eventually novel way of attracting customers. Further, telling a story through their online marketing is what each of the interviewees believes should be the main thought behind content creation. Dr. Mihir Nayak, Senior Professor at Hochschule Fresenius University of Applied Sciences and hotelier explains that while storytelling in travel is not a new concept, social media has greatly aided it – anybody can immediately tell a story today, to a large audience. Further, he believes that the Internet is a repository of endless instances of storytelling, which can be studied and leveraged into marketing. This can be explained by the ripple effect mentioned by Aaker and Smith (2011) to explain the expeditory effect of Web 2.0 on travel storytelling. Marie Nadal believes that storytelling – via social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat and other collaterals like website and newsletters – can be utilized to great advantage by travel marketers as it can separate their content and offerings from their competitors with it. Resonating with Liu and Wu (2011) and She believes that consumers of online marketing are more aware than ever of when they are being sold to and



gravitate towards content that has a genuine tone of voice. She further adds that the same way the claim to fame of some social media influencers is that they are authentic and have a genuine tone of voice, travel companies can differentiate themselves from others by telling genuine stories via their market and add the marketing aspect to it, as opposed to adding a story to an existing marketing exercise. This is in line with Akgün, Keskin, Ayar, and Erdoğan's recommendations on compelling storytelling in travel (2015), which stress on telling authentic and believable stories. According to Lee McAteer, storytelling should be based on multiple pre-decided narratives – for his companies, which is having a good time and making a positive social impact to the destination of the camp. As part of the camps and trips offered by his companies involve volunteering at wildlife sanctuaries or teaching English to schoolchildren, he believes that through the power of cultural exchange, storytelling helps him showcase how trips with his company about more than just having a good time, but the positive impact that can be made on these trips.

Chris Townsend, further adds that by telling stories in marketing with the right tone of voice on a daily basis enables a travel marketer to build up an audience that is interested in their offering and are invaluable in increasing knowledge about a company. However, he believes that “storytelling is not a one-time operation; “it is a sustained effort that reaps dividends over time”. He attributes this to the content-hungry tendency of consumers and social media algorithms alike, both of whom will not pay heed to marketing efforts of companies that undertake one video campaign a year. Therefore, storytelling on ICT platforms must essentially be a sustained effort, across numerous platforms and collaterals.

When executed correctly, storytelling can be an invaluable sales generator, as it has been for TravelWorks Russia according to Anna Korobkova. Storytelling is a vital consideration that is made before any video is produced by them and they were able to divide this storytelling into two parts: firstly, testimonials from existing and past students of their programs to prospective students and secondly, through webinars and videos which feature industry experts and eminent speakers providing advice and tips to future students of their program. She believes that this storytelling adds relatability, reliability and approachability to their brand, seeing as they portray themselves as an organization who is genuinely intent on helping students from Russia who want to study and work abroad. This resonates with Bruner's dimensions for crafting storytelling (1990), as these videos not only describe the travel-work programs to the viewer, but also allows them to put themselves in the shoes of the individuals who are giving their testimonies.

Digital marketing initiatives in the current technological ecosystem must essentially contain a story and key messaging, seeing that storytelling as a form of marketing has existed long before the travel industry's adoption of ICTs and will continue long into the future. According to Lee McAteer, storytelling in travel marketing will in the future, manifest with virtual reality (VR) and 4D technologies. He predicts that in the future stories will be told to travellers who will have the ability to view a potential holiday destination, including accommodation and experiences, in four dimensions. Therefore, as can be seen, storytelling can be leveraged by travel marketers to set any narrative of their choosing: be it transparency, or positive social impact or approachability and reliability.

#### 4.3 Marketing via Social Media

As shown in the section above, the core concepts of experiential travel marketing: experiences, customizability, and storytelling are greatly enabled by the rise and adoption of social media. Prior to that, the broader impact of ICTs like social media on the rise of the travel industry was discussed, highlighting the differences in perception of travel marketing between millennial and Generation Y travellers. But which social media-enabled strategies, platforms, and functionalities can be used by travel marketers to create genuine and engaging content, thus convincing people to invest in travel experiences? And what attitude should they adopt to eWOM and prosumer platforms? This section aims to get synthesized key insights from the demographic of travel and travel marketing experts. Therefore, it aims to answer the third sub-question of this research: "*What is the impact of ICT-enabled social media, eWOM, UGC, and prosumer platforms and services on travel marketing?*", with the key themes being social media strategies, eWOM and UGC, travel-based review sites like Tripadvisor, and prosumer platforms. They are discussed below:

##### 4.3.1 Travel Marketing

As discussed in the theoretical framework, consumers' increased usage of social media is rationalized by the theoretical concept of hyperreality: which postulates that people have become fascinated by images and videos as these marketing collaterals create meaning for them based on the marketers' and/or their own narratives (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Dahl, 2018).

Picture-based social media, by this logic, is a valuable tool and an integral platform for selling in every travel marketers arsenal.

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) discovered that a substantial portion of search engine results regarding travel are directed to social media sites, which is indicative of social media becoming the primary tool to attract new customers. This also shows that effective social media marketing increases the likelihood of a potential customer 'stumbling upon' a travel company's social media page. Loveleen Arun agrees with this, believing that the best way for a travel company, hotel, or experience to be discovered on social media is by ensuring that they are present on the relevant platforms and regularly creating engaging, story-driven content. Seven out of ten experts interviewed stressed on the importance of creating content regularly, in order to continually stay in the mind of and eventually interact with potential consumers and create a brand story and personality. Sanjar Imam synthesized the need for constant engagement by travel marketers opinion effectively, when he stated: "...as far as marketing is concerned, it's not about just getting the eyeballs (of the potential consumer) once, but it's for getting the eyeballs over and over again, ideally every day."

Social media platforms that are typically strong avenue for travel marketing are those which are picture-based or facilitate picture and video-based content: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Youtube. Apart from these, there are numerous other platforms that are region-specific like Baidu in China, and VKontakte (VK) in Russia that are leveraged by travel marketers in these areas. Facebook is currently the most popular social media platform in the world and has a wide demographic of active users – from Generation Z to Millennials to Generation Y. Dr. Mihir Nayak, who as the owner of a luxury hotel in Goa, India, believes that Facebook works well as the primary social media for travel companies, hotels, and services who are advertising to a wide range of consumers. As he uses it to target consumers in the higher income bracket, he believes Facebook is an invaluable way of reaching older millennials and Generation Y travellers, both of whom are still the largest spenders in travel today and may not be active users of newer social media like Snapchat and Instagram.

Instagram has emerged as a formidable platform for travel marketing since its inception, especially owing to the fact that it is a picture-based service and according to Loveleen Arun: "...no matter how good you are with words, pictures speak a thousand words". After Facebook, it is the second most widely used social media platform, which has been aided by their constant innovation, for example the Story feature and their incorporation of e-commerce and online shopping on their platform. As discussed previously, the "Instagrammability" of a destination is a primary motivator behind millennials travel choices – which shows how extensively consumers

are seeking travel inspiration from Instagram. Austin Abram, whose company ITKE (@intheknowexperiences) has over 18,200 followers on Instagram (as of May 2018), opines that the success of their page comes down to regularly sharing their own travel experiences and ensuring they communicate it with a genuine tone of voice. They utilize the Story feature regularly, especially when members of their team are travelling. Sharing experiences via Instagram, according to her, also allows them to showcase the full range of their capabilities as travel facilitators, including the hotels they like and the most luxurious and rare experiences they arrange for their clientele. Seeing as ITKE is primarily concerned with luxury travel, their profile is aspirational in nature and taps into viewer's innate desire for unique and luxurious experiences, showing how hyperreality in social media can be leveraged by travel marketers.

Even though it is not a picture-based social media platform, Twitter is yet an important platform to find new audiences, interact with customers, and provide customer support. Lee McAteer, who has built all of his companies via Twitter, is big proponent of its effectiveness as a marketing tool. Having been an avid user of Twitter himself, he realized early on the importance of the live search engine feature of Twitter which can allow marketers to find people tweeting about a particular travel experience or destination with the help of a few keywords. On the topic of marketing on Twitter as compared to Facebook, he adds:

Facebook now is a little bit different – it's more about having a shop in which you're trying to attract people to come inside. Whereas Twitter – even though it isn't as popular as it once was – is almost like going down the High Street and seeing what people are shopping for, approaching them, and automatically they want to speak to you because you know what they want.

While Twitter today is limited compared to other social media as it is not a primarily picture-based platform, it's importance in providing support and communicating with existing customers and reaching out to new customers is heavily undermined. Even though it does not facilitate large amounts of media sharing, Lee McAteer did mention that the bio section of his companies' Twitter profiles always contain hyperlinks to their websites and Youtube page, in order to provide customers with further information and content.

Chris Townsend, whose company creates video, graphic, and animation content for travel companies, believes that marketing travel in the age of Web 2.0 is marginally more convenient and effective than before, primarily because of social media and the wide array of analytic features it offers to marketers and content creators. He believes that the more

analytically led a product is, the better. Via analysis of previous posts from the insights provided by social media sites, travel marketers are able to ascertain the demographic of the crowd they are reaching, which type of content works best, what is the right time to post, and the general effectiveness of their campaigns. By studying these, travel marketers can go back to the drawing board and modify their existing social media strategies, optimizing them for maximum effectiveness. Austin Abram believes that these analytics quantify the efforts of travel marketers and social media managers and provide a reliable barometer to gauge the success of a campaign, giving accountability to travel marketers as they can assess and analyze quantifiable analytics. Anna Korobkova described how the marketing department at TravelWorks Russia was set up after the leadership of the company realized that the travel industry has moved forward and has adopted social media and digital marketing as the primary form of marketing. Apart from running analytics of their social media content, TravelWorks' marketing team operates extensively on Google AdWords, conducting weekly searches on keywords and search trends amongst their target audience. Especially as they operate in and are advertising to people in different countries, these analytics help them gauge the effectiveness of their content in different markets and allows them to tailor it to which strategies work in these markets.

Six out of ten experts interviewed believe that it has become exponentially tougher to build a brand on social media than it was a few years ago. In line with Liu, Chou, and Liao's (2015) beliefs about Internet saturation, Lee McAteer believes that owing to saturated online marketplace and consumers' frustration with the large amount of advertising on these platforms, social networks are taking steps to improve their user experience. He explains that this bad for travel marketers as understanding the algorithm for marketing and selling products on these platforms becomes increasingly difficult. Dr. Mihir Nayak believes that the only way to circumvent this would be to create effective and engaging content, which stands out from what competitors are doing. Four out of ten interviewees were of the opinion that the end goal of all social media marketing on travel is conversion via transaction i.e. people booking trips after they have been influenced by the marketing. Sanjar Imam believes that "unless that transaction happens, that whole exercise fails if there is no result in terms of business getting produced ... It may be a great marketing exercise and you may have great tools, but if it doesn't eventually transact someone, it's a failure."

#### 4.3.2 Prosumption-manifested eWOM, UGC

From initially primarily providing information, ICTs have metamorphosed into social and communicative mediums, which in turn have shaped online consumer culture (Munar, Gyimothy, & Cai, 2014). Essentially word of mouth communication via the Internet, eWOM in travel allows travellers to share their opinions about a company, hotel, restaurant, or experience, regardless of how positive or negative it is. Platforms that display eWOM have also become essential for people to refer to and read reviews from past users, before they invest in a holiday or experience. As explained previously, eWOM can be manifested into user-generated content (UGC), which can then be used by companies in the travel industry in their marketing initiatives.

eWOM can be rationalized by Anderson's (2008) theorization of the inversion of power post the rise of ICTs, due to which individuals are trusted more and institutions less, seeing as consumers are now aware that they are constantly being sold to. Amit Kalsi believes that eWOM adds a human touch to travel marketing and that ideally, it is not sponsored, affiliated, or monetized. Having expressed his concerns with the genuinity of review platforms like Tripadvisor, believes that eWOM provides potential customers with important information about a destination or experience without any explicit or implicit marketing involved. He illustrated this by mentioning the example of Travel Talk, a Facebook-based closed group with over 88,000 members (as of May 2018). Envisioned as a community for travellers to share their experiences and reviews with fellow travellers, it is a platform that encourages independent opinions, without any moderator trying to influence the discussions with sponsored posts and reviews. In fact, he mentions that the moderators of this group regularly delete posts from people selling their own services on this group, which is the degree to which the creators of this travel community are committed to making sure Travel Talk stays marketing-free.

UGC is a form of marketing content that stems from eWOM and can be leveraged by travel marketers, to circumvent the problem of individuals being more trusted than institutions. Effective UGC involves taking testimonials from people who have used a service before, in order to attract new customers. Eight out of ten interviewees believe that testimonials and recommendations from previous clients are one of the most effective methods of travel marketing. Chris Townsend believes that while a travel marketer can hope for positive eWOM from customers, they can expedite the eWOM into UGC by creating testimonial videos and pictures of their clients' experiences, which according to him is one of the most effective forms

of marketing. The believability of such reviews hinges on whether the testimonial is marketing-motivated or has a genuine tone of voice. An added insight to this was that Chris Townsend's company actively tries to get these video recommendations from people who match the profile of their target audience, so that it is easier for the viewer to relate to the person giving the testimonial and imagine themselves in their position.

#### 4.3.3 The Case of Tripadvisor and Reviews

Created on the concept of eWOM and UGC, but seemingly losing credibility in today's travel ecosystem, Tripadvisor was a controversial topic amongst the interviewees. While each interviewee had both positive and negative opinions about Tripadvisor, Dr. Mihir Nayak, Amit Kalsi, Anna Korobkova, Marie Nadal, and Sanjar Imam had a generally positive perception of this platform, attributing its transparency, large amounts of content, and ease of access to their opinions. The remaining four interviewees, Lee McAteer, Chris Townsend, Loveleen Arun, and Austin Abram believe that while Tripadvisor is a great reference point for potential travellers, it has numerous fundamental problems.

The obvious first problem is that of legitimacy. Fake and misleading reviews that are monetarily motivated were a consistent theme of discussion that emerged in the conducted interviews. Further, Tripadvisor expanding and handing out Certificates of Excellence to select hotels, restaurants, and services – which would indicate collaboration – took away from the authenticity of the platform. Lee McAteer, illustrated this point by providing the example of the Shed At Dulwich, the 'fake' restaurant which became London's top-rated restaurant on TripAdvisor in December 2017. This was made possible without serving a single customer, based on well-written reviews and aggressive marketing, perfectly showing how Tripadvisor can be leveraged for dishonest marketing practices and why people referring to this site should take what they read on it with a pinch of salt. These beliefs resonate with Munar, Gyimothy, and Cai's (2014) concerns about the legitimacy and ulterior motives behind reviews on these sites.

Secondly, there exists a concern about if Tripadvisor reviews are even a fair means of judging a service. Lee McAteer and Austin Abram opine that more often than not, people either leave reviews on Tripadvisor when they have had a negative experience, or an extremely positive one. Not many people would take the time to review a good experience, according to Austin Abram. Therefore, these reviews cannot be reflective of the general experience of an offering on Tripadvisor owing to the large polarization between reviews.

Thirdly, another concern amongst the skeptics of Tripadvisor is the subjectivity in preferences and tastes amongst reviewers, which makes it tough to ascertain whether a negative or positive review is justified. Maja Schroder opines:

There are some people who have experience in Michelin star cuisine and they would observe a kitchen in different ways than others. And on the other hand, there are people who are normally only used to fast food and when they get something completely amusing they don't normally even appreciate it.

The interviewees who have a more positive opinion on Tripadvisor believe that while fake reviews exist and that reviews on this platform generally should be taken with a grain of salt, Tripadvisor's benefits far outweigh its disadvantages. In line with Ellis-Green's (2007) recommendations that travel companies must adapt or perish to online review sites, Dr. Mihir Nayak, is one of such interviewee who highlighted the honesty and accountability these sites have brought to the travel industry. Things that a hotel or restaurant could get away with by exaggerating their services ten years ago can no longer be concealed from people owing to the two-way information flow that this platform facilitates, which means that a potential customer is getting information about a listed service from the service provider, as well as from reviewers who have experienced it before. Despite having expressed her concerns with the platform, Austin Abram appreciates the user-submitted photos feature, which allows Tripadvisor users to share pictures of their experience at restaurants and hotels. She rationalizes, by stating that customer-submitted images are the most believable images of a service and are not edited for marketing purposes, and therefore are authentic.

Marie Nadal believes that owing to its popularity amongst consumers, Tripadvisor is an integral tool for an institution to have a voice online and communicate with customers via review responses, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. In the case of negative reviews, she believes that travel marketers should necessarily give their own opinion if they believe a negative review is unfair, in order to defend their own interests. She continues:

You have people talking badly about their version of a travel experience, but you also have people who have had great experiences defending you. It's just that now, it's visible. Because of this visibility though, people have a way to defend themselves ... I think there's a global understanding in the travel community that things happen and not



every travel experience can be perfect. It's more about how people react to negativity on these platforms that paints them in a positive or negative light.

Sanjar Imam and Dr. Mihir Nayak are also appreciative of the substantial amount of content that is created by Tripadvisor, with listicles, articles, and unique recommendations. Further, users of this platform have the functionality to up-vote certain restaurants and hotels to the top-most classifications, which provides a great deal of traction.

However, despite their varying opinions on Tripadvisor's benefit to the travel industry, Loveleen Arun, Maja Schroder, Dr. Mihir Nayak, Lee McAteer, and Sanjar Imam agree that ignoring Tripadvisor by not responding to reviews is something that a hotel or restaurant should do at their own peril. Regardless of their opinion on it, Tripadvisor has been accepted as the norm in travel reviews and has integrated itself into the minds of modern travellers. To this effect, it is essential for travel marketers to constantly engage in reputation management on Tripadvisor and similar review sites.

#### 4.4 Influencer Marketing

As discussed previously in the theoretical framework, social media influencers are constantly faced with the dilemma of picking between the desire to be authentic and the need to communicate and sell to an unknown audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This has translated into influencer campaigns with drastically different results, which has led to varying perceptions of influencer marketing within the travel industry. This section aims to get insight into why influencer marketing divides opinions, factors to weary of before conducting these campaigns, the process of choosing the right influencers, and what key performance indicators (KPIs) should be used to measure the success of these campaigns. To this effect, this section aims to answer the fourth sub-question of this research: "*What is the effectiveness of influencer marketing in selling travel – and what key performance indicators should be used to measure the effectiveness of these campaigns?*". The key themes that were discovered to answer this question are discussed below:

#### 4.4.1 Issues with Influencers

From the corpus of interviewees, six out of ten travel experts: Lee McAteer, Maja Schroder, Amit Kalsi, Austin Abram, Anna Korobkova, and Loveleen Arun have a generally negative opinion about the effectiveness of influencer marketing in travel. The reasons provided for this include a lack of relatability, uncertainty, limited scope, large costs and a general incongruence with travel marketing.

Anna Korobkova explains that her organization, Travel Works does not use travel influencers primarily owing to their lack of relatability. They believe that their target audience is seldom interested in the lives of influencers and instead want to hear success stories of people in similar circumstances than themselves, who are more relatable to them. She also believes that Travel Work's commitment to storytelling from the perspective of ordinary people is counterintuitive to the concept of influencer marketing. She explains that telling stories through fellow Russian students of the same age resonates effectively with their target audience, as these influencers are more relatable to them, referring to this as the "traditional, simple way". This opinion resonates with that of Lee McAteer's, who questions the logic of influencer marketing for travel companies:

If I see one of my heroes on a trip to Barbados, it doesn't really make me want to go on a trip to Barbados. Even if it does do that, I wouldn't necessarily believe that I could only do it with the particular travel company being advertised by the influencer.

This goes to show that while influencers can advertise and create awareness for destinations, impact of influencer marketing on selling a particular travel service or endorsing a travel company is typically minimal, which is in line with Zhang, Zhao, and Xu's (2015) theorization that popularity does not necessarily mean influence. Lee McAteer further debates the effectiveness of opinion leaders, believing that influencer marketing is a transient marketing trend that has already begun to wane in effectiveness. This is owing to the fact that consumers have been able to see through the subliminal marketing and realize that celebrities and influencers or social media are just trying to sell them products or services. Maja Schroder's concern about influencer marketing rises from her belief that they are ineffective for reaching the older segment of travellers. So therefore, unless a travel marketer is exclusively targeting younger millennials and Generation Z travellers, influencer marketing is ineffective owing to the large costs of even conducting such an exercise. Loveleen Arun agrees with this, citing the lack of return of invest (ROI) from these typically expensive influencer-marketing exercises.

According to her there are many loose ends when it comes to influencer-marketing, unless the influencers' culture and ethos are a perfect fit with that of the travel brand, which is not the case most times.

#### 4.4.2 Benefits of Influencers

On the other end of the spectrum, four out ten interviewees: Chris Townsend, Dr. Mihir Nayak, Sanjar Imam, and Marie Nadal have a positive perception of influencer marketing, believing that it is a formidable marketing strategy if executed in the right manner. Additional reasons for their opinions include influencers' considerable reach, devoted follower-base, and positive brand associations for, which are furnished with examples of well-executed travel influencer marketing campaigns when necessary.

Sanjar Imam believes that social media influencers and travel are a great fit, seeing that these influencers were first used to market luxury goods and fashion, both of which are intrinsically linked to travel considering their considerable costs, as well as coming under the larger umbrella of lifestyle marketing. He opines that influencer marketing will get even larger in scale and scope owing to consumers' want for authentic storytelling and original content, which are typical characteristic of effective influencers. To illustrate, he provides the example of the Doğu Ekspresi or the Eastern Express train route in Turkey. Starting at the Turkish capital city of Ankara, this 24-hour journey travels through the heart of the country, ending at Kars, which is in the northeastern part of the country. Despite this train line being operational since 1962, it was in 2016 when this journey became a popular experience for younger travellers owing to the impact of the early Turkish influencers who embarked on this journey and shared content on Instagram to popularise this route and destination. Lonely Planet (2018) reports that the tickets for this train journey are booked out months in advance and hotel occupancy in Kars is more often than not at 100% – which goes to show how influencers have popularised travel destinations and brought in tourists via social media in the past. However, it must be noted that the people who popularised this journey were not paid influencers and were not affiliated to the train journey or the tourism department of Turkey.

As mentioned before, in order for an influencer campaign to work in travel marketing, the influencer and travel service provider need to be the right fit i.e. have congruence with each others mission, core ideologies, and values. While she is generally against influencer marketing, Maja Schroder does believe that influencer marketing can be very effective for a travel company

operating within a specific niche, if they are able to find influencers who are experts in that very niche. For example, travel companies who specialize in fishing trips could stand to benefit by recruiting an influencer who is an authoritative figure within the fishing community of a particular social media platform.

Chris Townsend opines that the reason why most ambitious influencer travel marketing initiatives fail today are because the companies are often choosing influencers based on their popularity and not on their relevance to the product or service being sold. He explains that before an influencer is decided on for a travel marketing campaign, it is essential to profile them and gauge if they resonate with the brand and if they have established themselves as authoritative in their niche. By profiling their own target audience and searching for influencers who are in the same demographic as them, they are able to find influencers who are more relatable and authentic to the target audience and therefore, solving the problem of relatability which critics of influencer marketing have with using celebrities as influencers.

Marie Nadal, who has first-hand experience of influencer marketing due to her regular collaborations with influencers, resonates with Chris Townsend's opinion of the large impact of influencer marketing and the power that influencers have to impact their audience's purchases. However, it needs to be done the right way, by ensuring there is constant communication between the company and influencers and clearly defining the objectives and measures of success of the campaign, which is discussed in the next section. Often, influencers are not given enough room to innovate and think of means to make the sponsored content of a campaign look authentic and relatable for their audience. Marie Nadal believes that by allowing influencers to create content based on their strengths and in their own tone of voice, the sponsored content would receive a larger number of engagements.

#### 4.4.3 Micro-Influencers and Customer Brand Ambassadors

Three out of six interviewees who have a negative perception of influencer marketing, as well as each of the four interviewees who looked at influencer marketing positively, expressed their approval for Micro Influencers and other innovative influencer marketing methods like consumer-influencers and company-influencers.

While they may not have the reach and influence of larger influencers, Micro-Influencers have a considerably higher ROI owing to the reduced costs of conducting campaigns with them. Seeing as they have mostly authentic followers who are typically of the same demographic as

them, they are considered more relatable too, according to Lee McAteer. He highlights how instead of paying large amounts of their advertising budget on influencers and celebrities, the Invasion Camp Group sponsors numerous British student societies and work extensively with the Presidents and Treasurers of these societies, whom he calls “BNOCs” or the big names on campus. He believes that these students are opinion leaders of their own and via interpersonal recommendations and act as shepherd of their travel communities, influencing members to sign up these trips too.

Loveleen Arun believes that the age of social media influencers are part of a diminishing trend, simply because consumers have wized to the fact that they are constantly being sold to. She thinks that interpersonal recommendations, however, will never face this problem and discussed the idea of customer-influencers on social media, who come at no additional cost to them and effectively act as brand ambassadors of a travel service when they share pictures or videos. In order to better illustrate this, she provided the example of the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island resort, who were the first hotel in the world to provide guests the services of an *Instagram Butler*. More than just someone who takes pictures for guests, the Instagram Butler conducts tours around the Island’s most photogenic locations, suggests ideal camera angles, offers expertise on the best times of the day to take a picture, and even do small setups with traditional Maldivian clothing. Owing to the fact that the Instagram Butler consciously tries to show different aspects of the island instead of taking generic pictures of the beach, the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island resort is able to distinguish themselves from other hotels. Loveleen Arun thinks that these small steps to make a guests’ experience at hotels look as good as possible goes a long way in creating curiosity and intrigue amongst their social media network. To this effect, guests of the hotel are providing interpersonal recommendations to people they know.

Despite having worked effectively with influencers, Chris Townsend also discussed the possibility of using larger travel channels as social media influencers, citing the example of British travel-based pages like *LADBible Travel* and *UniLAD Adventure* who constantly put out engaging content and have a huge following in the 18 to 25 age demographic. Built up over a period of time, viable pages have harnessed believability and reputations for being impartial, but are not averse to subliminally marketing travel services via creating content in relation to the service or destination being offered.

#### 4.4.4 Measuring Success

As highlighted and discussed in Section 4.3.1, four out of ten interviewees believe that the end goal of all social media marketing exercise is conversion via traction. Each of the six sceptics of influencer marketing mentioned a lack of ROI as big motivation behind their negative opinion of it, believing that travel influencer campaigns do not generate enough conversions to warrant their large costs. Therefore, from the aforementioned findings, it can be assumed that the KPI being used to gauge these campaigns are conversions and sales.

Marie Nadal and Chris Townsend, both of whom have extensive experience with influencer collaborations on marketing campaigns, opine that influencer campaigns are likelier to be viewed as ineffective as long as conversions continue to be used as the solely important KPI when gauging the performance of these campaigns. While both agree that conversions are an integral barometer for success in travel marketing, it should not be the only barometer for success in travel marketing. Marie Nadal expands on the problem with gauging all marketing with conversions:

If you have a very tangible product and you're measuring the impact by seeing if people will buy it – but they can buy it today or in a year, despite being inspired by that very form of marketing. What used to be offline is now online – but it's still marketing. All those years where people were doing magazines, brochures, and flyers –how were you measuring the ROI then?

The aforementioned excerpt indicates that unlike fast moving consumer goods, travel is a substantial investment, irrespective of whether it is student travel or luxury travel. The consumption of it, therefore is not immediate as a potential customer can be inspired by influencer-promoted travel content they see on social media and act on it a few months later. This would indicate that the travel influencer campaign has worked as a conversion generation, even if it were to occur a year after the campaign has ended. The excerpt also referenced travel marketing in the pre-ICT era via magazines, brochures, and posters. These forms of marketing technically have the same pitfall as influencer marketing, as like influencer marketing, pre-ICT marketing techniques were not assured to bring in immediate conversions. However, travel marketers in this era would continue to advertise via these mediums owing to the brand visibility and awareness that it brought about, in order to stay in the minds of potential customers. Similarly, Marie Nadal believes that a well-planned influencer marketing campaign with the right influencers can be an invaluable branding exercise for travel companies, which boosts brand

visibility and awareness for when the consumers eventually do decide to book a holiday. Chris Townsend believes that travel marketers' refocusing their KPIs to look beyond conversions into branding can allow them to see how collaborating with the right influencers can lead to positive brand associations and separate them from competing travel service providers for when consumers decide to act on their inspiration from such influencer campaigns.

While gauging the effectiveness of such campaigns is made tougher since travel agents cannot always know what motivates travellers to book holidays or experiences with them. However, with social media analytics making rapid strides over the past few years, Chris Townsend believes that tracking influencer campaigns for impressions, engagements, and new followers can be an instrumental way of tracking other brand-related KPIs when it comes to quantifying the success of influencer marketing. He does however, mention that owing to the cost of such campaigns, influencer-marketing campaigns are best recommended for large travel service providers or organizations with a marketing budget that would enable such campaigns to function optimally.

#### 4.5 Trend Creation in the Travel Industry

Part of the lifestyle segment, the travel industry has been susceptible to numerous trends over the years, which as a means of travel innovation have been leveraged by the travel industry. These trends can be manifested in the form of destinations, segments, or technology. In the pre-ICT era, there was general consensus that travel trends were created and enforced by the large tour operators who dominated the travel value chain. Influencers as a marketing concept was unheard of and owing to a lack of knowledge and communication, customers were restricted to the role of passive receivers and consumers of travel marketing. However, the ICT revolution gave consumers the functionality to communicate and gain knowledge like never before. From being dependent on travel agents for every aspect of their travel planning, travellers can instantaneously book nearly every aspect of a holiday sans a travel agent. Owing to these added functionalities, we have seen the travel industry move towards a more consumer-centric model. This section is primarily concerned with exploring whom the interviewed travel experts believe creates trends in travel today and whether a subliminal collaboration exists between influencers, travel marketers, and consumers when it comes to trends. Interestingly, a variety of contrasting opinions emerged from the corpus of interviews, with a variety of drastically different opinions. To this effect, this section is concerned with

answering the fifth sub-question of this research: *“How are travel trends created in the era of Web 2.0 and who creates them – consumers, influencers, or companies?”*. This section is divided into two parts: the argument for consumers and the argument for the travel industry. Additionally, a residual category emerged, which was the argument for influencers and early adopters, which has been added to the arguments for consumers. They are explained before:

#### 4.5.1 The Argument for the Travel Industry

Three interviewees – Lee McAteer, Chris Townsend, and Maja Schroder – believe that the travel industry still maintains its role as primary trend creator. This stems from the core fact that travel companies still possess the final discretion when it comes to ideas becoming trends and are responsible for creating a product or segment to match them. While the travel industry has seen newer travel companies emerge to capitalize on consumers wants, the major trends in travel still remain discretionary of the tastemakers within the travel industry. Lee McAteer, whose Invasion Travel Group comprises 35 separate travel brands, explains that every time he has launched a travel brand, it has been on the back of a trend. He explains that discovering trends before they become commonplace involves a considerable amount of market research – whether it would involve extensive social media searches, feedback from existing clients, or analysing search engine analytics. While it is the consumers who are coming up with these ideas for trends, it is the travel companies who are researching, ideating, and conceptualising these ideas into trends. Further, he believes that in order for an idea to become a trend, it needs to be presented as an attractive proposition for customers and be marketed extensively. He elaborates:

They (travel companies) create the idea ... and make it a palatable proposition for somebody to actually book on. But then at the same time let's say for example – Costa Rica. People might not necessarily want to go to Costa Rica. But if a company like ours really gets behind Costa Rica and what that experience could be and we put it all over our distribution channels with amazing photos and videos, we're creating a market at the same time.

Chris Townsend believes that while the travel market does react to consumers, this does not imply that consumers create travel trends, emphasizing the difference between ideation of



trends and creation of trends. He believes that while consumers may think of trends, the travel industry declares them based on research and creating a product out of these ideas. To this effect, from a marketing perspective, he constantly monitors trends being followed by industry leading companies and competitors.

#### 4.5.2 The Argument for Consumers

The belief that travel companies still maintain a stronghold over trend creation in the travel industry is contrasted with the five interviewees – Amit Kalsi, Anna Korobkova, Sanjar Imam, Loveleen Arun, and Marie Nadal – believing that consumers are the most influential tastemakers in a digitally-empowered travel industry. As an outlier, Dr. Mihir Nayak opines that influencers are the facilitators of travel trends – but despite being early adopters, influencers can still be classified as a type of consumer.

Amit Kalsi believes that consumers not only introduce trends to travel, but can even lead to them dying out. He explains that a trend is only popular as long as there are people following it – “if every user of Instagram decides to stop using it, the platform will be dead in six months”. Moreover, he believes that rapidly changing trends are indicative of consumers dictating them, seeing the accelerated new travel trends and niches have been emerging in the Web 2.0 era. While she does believe that travel companies should necessarily offer services that cater to the travel trends of the time, Anna Korobkova has noticed that because consumers have become increasingly individualistic and are discovering their own trends. She believes that this drive for setting trends amongst consumers stems from greater knowledge and a desire to have unique travel experiences. So while TravelWorks does offer numerous trend-based travel options, they have had a noticeable increase in clients’ who reject popular, industry-manufactured trends and are looking to travel and work in different markets. This is in line with Niezgodna’s (2013) theorization of prosumers, which rationalizes travellers’ increased involvement in the travel industry due to their heightened sense of individuality.

Going beyond believing that consumers are the primary tastemakers in the travel, Loveleen Arun noticed that because of younger travellers being the most up-to-date with trends, they were often the ones creating new ones via social media. She explains:

Earlier, the trend was that whatever the elder travellers did, the younger people would follow and say, “Okay, I want to do this”. But now the younger people create the trends

and the older people want to follow those trends. So, some destinations are becoming popular because, the Instagrammability of that place is high because the younger people have put so much content out on it.

In order to provide further clarity, Loveleen Arun provided the example of Ubud in Bali, Indonesia. This town was typically a quieter and more cultural part of the Balinese island and was a popular tourist destination for the older generation of travellers. However, younger millennial travellers discovered the Bali Swings, which became popular amongst them because of how Instagrammable and authentic the experience was. The social media exposure received by Ubud was substantial, making it a popular destination amongst experiential travellers of all ages. Owing to this, numerous high-end hotels and travel services have invested in properties in Ubud. This trend led to the rebranding of Ubud, from a quiet tourist spot for older travellers to a vibrant destination for cultural immersion amongst millennial travellers – showing how younger consumers are leveraging social media to set trends in today's travel ecosystem.

Mihir Nayak opines that while it is the consumers who are responsible for setting trends, it is mainly the upper echelon of influencers amongst the consumers who are doing so. A believer in the power of social media influencers and a proponent of Gladwell's (2000) theorization of influencers being key for dissemination of information in an Internet connected world, he opines that upon closer studying of travel trends, it is evident that a few key influencers are responsible for popularizing these destinations and experiences, even if they didn't discover them. In their capacity as opinion leaders, they have devoted followers who are look to them for expertise. Via this channel, influencers are able to expedite the popularity of trends. Mihir Nayak also expresses how travel marketers should make it a regular practice to follow these influencers in order to keep their ear to the ground regarding popular trends, asking themselves how they can ride the wave (of the trend) with services that cater to that particular trend.

However, despite having their own opinions about who is the most important proponent of trends in a Web 2.0-enabled travel ecosystem, seven out of ten interviewees believe that there exists a collective value creation amongst travel companies, customers, and influencers. This means that therefore, while each interviewee has their opinions about who is the most important tastemaker for trends in the travel industry, they also believe that these trends would not exist if not for the subliminal collaboration between travel companies, consumers, and influencers.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary goal of this research was to gain industry insight on how Web 2.0 and travel innovation strategies have been leveraged by travel marketing experts in order to cater to Travellers 2.0. Since online travel marketing is a broad and complex concept, it was essential to divide the research into key areas of focus, which would enable the researcher to comprehensively answer the research question on multiple facets and provide a theoretical base for travel marketers and subsequent researchers. Therefore, this research is additionally aimed to understand how Web 2.0 has changed travel marketing, the challenges in marketing to millennial Travellers 2.0, travel innovation in marketing through experientialism, storytelling, and customization, the impact of UGC, eWOM and the resultant prosumers and review platforms, the effectiveness of influencer marketing, and trend creation in travel. Ten travel marketing experts from around the world were interviewed in order to get a globalized perspective on the aforementioned concepts.

In order to appreciate how extensively the travel industry has been transformed post the ICT era with Web 2.0, the increased functionality of the modern traveller should be understood. Pre-Internet, customers could only refer to travel magazines, conventional media, word of mouth recommendations, and travel agents for information on travel destinations. Post the digitization of travel industry, we see increasingly consumer-centric uses and functionalities being created for travellers. In order to contrast this, the researcher adapted the conceptual model of the main uses of technology by Parra-López, et al. (2011), which was made into tabular form to aid visualization. The fact that the researcher had to adapt a relatively recent table in order to accommodate further uses of technology by travellers like information searches on OTAs and social media shows how travel is rapidly evolving and becoming more accessible post digitization. A majority of the interviewees stressed the importance of recognizing that travellers today are quite unlike their “tourist” predecessors who were content with a static and touristic travel experiences. Travellers 2.0 are not just more demanding and deal-loyal in their pursuit of increasingly experiential and immersive travel experiences to cater to their niches; the way they travel has changed. Not only are more people travelling than ever before, but they are empowered by the vast repository of the Internet to search for any destination. They are influenced by travel experiences shared by their peers and family and travel marketing on social media and are aided by user-generated reviews on destinations and prosumer platforms and OTAs, which allow them to cater to their own niches.

In order to tend to these more experienced travellers, the travel industry leveraged travel innovation in the form of experiential travel, which has transformed from a niche into a dominant leisure travel offering as it can be customized to cater to individual niches and are experiential and “Instagrammable”. Travel marketers must necessarily understand the link between experiential travel marketing and social media: both concepts are built on a foundation of neophilia. Travellers’ desire to be unique, authentic, and experiential and their emphasis on self-presentation on social media can be leveraged by travel companies in the form of more image and video-based content that focuses on communicating experiences instead of destinations. In order to succeed in today’s travel industry, it is essential for travel marketers to understand their key demographic and tailor content and offerings to their own niche. A key takeaway from the interviews regarding experiential travel is that conceptualization of trips and indeed, travel marketing campaigns should begin with experiences instead of offerings, functionalities, and price, and then be built backwards to design the trip or campaign around these experiences. This can further be rationalized by numerous academic researches that explain millennial preference of spending on experiences over material possessions (Holbrook, 2007; Xiang, Dan, O’Leary, & Fesenmaier, 2014; Chan, To, & Chu, 2016).

Another key result from the expert interviews was the importance of customizability in travel. It is often a misconceived notion that customizability is limited to offering bespoke itineraries. Yet companies who do not offer a customizable travel product can still add various degrees of customizability like collaborative, adaptive, cosmetic, and transparent (Gillmore, 1997) to their product and services to build favor and ultimately brand loyalty amongst the typically deal-loyal millennial demographic. It was also understood during the analysis that while millennials are typically not brand loyal, they are not averse to overspending on a product or service that they resonate and feel a personality alignment with. Especially in the case of travel, which requires a large financial investment, millennials are not averse to travelling exclusively through one travel company due to the added security and familiarity of doing so. This can be reinforced via effective branding via marketing, which thus crucially makes Web 2.0 marketing an effective way to build brand loyalty amongst this previously brand-agnostic group. Further, the want for accountability and transparency was found to be a major reason behind the rise of bespoke travel. Since competing OTAs and prosumer platforms are giving the end consumers functionalities to customize their own travel, travel companies have no option but to adapt to a more consumer-centric and niche-dominated market. Storytelling is yet another way that experientialism can be leveraged in travel marketing. In line with Bruner’s (1990) theorization of the fundamental dimensions of storytelling, travel marketing exercises must not just focus on

immediate aesthetics, but also crucially focus on evoking empathy and allow the viewer to “experience” the destination through the advertising. Seven out of ten interviewees emphasized the importance of consistent storyline driven content campaigns, in order to increase the likelihood of being “stumbled upon” by niche travellers and being recommended. Therefore, it is recommended that travel marketers not only create engaging and niche-driven content, but create it consistently and over a sustained period of time. There are numerous platforms that are more effective for different types of consumers and travel marketers should essentially refer to social media analytics to study if they are reaching their wanted demographic – it is of no consequence to have a marketing campaign with engaging content if it is not being marketed to the right demographic or on the wrong platform. However, according to four out of ten interviewees, no amount of compelling content and social media engagement is as important as transacting business, which they believe is the main goal of Web 2.0 marketing. This goes against theorizations of Web 2.0 marketing which list of one its’ many objectives as building brand awareness and eventually, brand loyalty. Therefore, it is interesting to see that for many travel markets, this platform is not just solely being looked as a means of attracting consumers to transact, but is not even being considered by some traveller marketers as a means of branding and fostering brand loyalty, which would eventually lead to transaction anyway.

Despite their belief and investment in travel marketing, the interviewees agreed that no type of marketing works better than personal recommendations, which can be leveraged by travel marketers in the form of eWOM and UGC. Travel marketers must adapt to the fact that explicit marketing seldom works today, considering the inversion of power post ICTs (Anderson, 2008), which theorizes why consumers trust people over brands. This is seen in the form of travellers’ referring to travel-based review platforms like Tripadvisor to research UGC. Interestingly, most interviewees expressed their skepticism with Tripadvisor owing to the large number of fake reviews, sponsored content, and subjective interpretation of events and services that can often irreparably taint the reputation of a destination, hotel, or restaurant. However, each interviewee emphasized that these platforms were not only here to stay, but help the travel industry become more accountable, and therefore more accessible to modern travellers. Thus, it is suggested that travel marketers not only ensure that they regularly respond to feedback to UGC on these review sites, but further leverage positive UGC in the form of recommendations in their own marketing campaigns. Further, it is also recommended that personal testimonials from previous customers be used in marketing efforts, as it was observed that modern travellers find it easier to empathize and relate with people who are similar to them.

This provides an effective segue into the next topic of this section, which is concerned with influencer marketing. As evidence of a severe lack of pertinent literature in travel marketing, most literature on influencers counts on them as an invaluable method of value creation and travel marketing (Gladwell, 2000; Watts & Dodds, 2005; Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2015). However, most interviewees rejected the now outdated trend of social media influencers, believing that they are not an effective travel-marketing tool any more. People have started to see that even the influencers and celebrities they follow on social media are essentially salespeople. Further, as consumers become more individualistic in their purchases, the less other people inspire them. The travel experts with this opinion believed that the trend of influencer marketing led to the cost of conducting such campaigns inflating, which has resulted in unrealistically high prices with minimal return on interest, making it a further unattractive proposition with them. Interestingly again, most interviewees mentioned that the key performance indicator for judging the success of influencer marketing campaigns is solely conversions – which is again, an academically myopic view of looking at influencer marketing or any Web 2.0 marketing concept. Travel marketing is impressionable in nature and amplifies in effect with constant exposure – therefore, KPIs like brand awareness and loyalty should also be incorporated into the adjudication of influencer marketing campaigns in order to gauge their success. However, as an alternative to influencers, the concepts of micro-influencers, customer influencers (as perpetuated by the Instagram Butler functionality at the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island Resort) and influencer travel pages on social media are also other methods of co-value creation, for a fraction of the price of the pioneering influencers.

The significant gap between academic and practical knowledge is quite evident when it comes to the concept of trend creation within the travel industry. While literature on this topic (Gladwell, 2000; Watts & Dodds, 2005; Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2015) points towards the early adopter or influencers assuming the most crucial role in trend creation, the interviewees were mostly divided between travel companies or consumers as the key trend setters in travel, with only one interviewee acknowledging the pioneering role of influencers and opinion leaders in travel trend creation. However, it seems as though there is definitely an existent system of co-creation of trends in the travel industry that currently exists – wherein it is the travel companies who are responsible for creating the trends, but this is on the basis of market research on the wants and popular trends amongst consumers. Further, the rise of DIY travel through prosumer platforms and OTAs along with the growing number of niches in travel further provides evidence to support this theorization of trend creation. Therefore, by answering critical questions about Web 2.0 marketing, Travellers 2.0, experiential travel, eWOM and UGC-led prosumer and

review platforms, influencer marketing, and trend creation, the researcher believes that he has been able to provide sufficient industry insight into how travel experts have leveraged Web 2.0 to attract modern travellers – built on a foundation of experientialism, customization, and compelling storytelling, via leveraging analytics, conducting market research, and focusing on building an effective brand.

Looking at the research question through both constructivist and interpretative worldviews, the methodology utilized was qualitative semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed and interpreted via thematic analysis. This proved to be a suitable methodology for a topic that essentially looked into understanding the key components of a successful travel marketing strategy, since the idea of “success” is subjective in nature. Further, this type of qualitative research allowed for a more in-depth analysis of particular phenomenon (Bryman, 2004), which in this case was prosumption, tourist gaze, selfie gaze, mass customization, travellers 2.0, and experiential marketing.

## 5.1 Limitations

Owing to the qualitative nature of this study, there exist a few important limitations in the research design and theoretical framework that need to be critically addressed. It must be noted that the concepts and theories in this theoretical framework were chosen by the researcher, via independent research of past studies in these fields, and recommendations from an academic advisor. Therefore, it is possible that other combinations of core concepts and theories can exist and produce deviant results.

The remaining limitations pertain to the research design. While this study aimed to be as globalized in its perspective as possible, this theory cannot be representative of travellers in specific markets. The chosen sampling method of snowball sampling relies on the connections of the travel expert initially targeted. Therefore, it contained experts from similar segments, and in two cases, from the same countries. An argument can thus be made for the homogenous nature of the sample and “reflects only the experiences of like-minded (experts) ... who happen to know one another” (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004, p.223).

Despite personally preferring to conduct the expert interviews with video in order to observe and take note of visual cues and body language, most interviewees explicitly mentioned their preference of not turning on their video feature. This was due to a variety of reasons, including them travelling and not having an adequately strong video connection and not having a webcam feature on their computers. Further, Jordan and Gibson (2004) highlighted that the methodological nature of semi-structured interviews may inherently have limitations as

“the researcher may consciously or unconsciously steer the interviewee towards expressing views that agree with the research themes sought (p.222). Time-based limitations existed on two levels: from the side of the interviewees and interviewers. In three cases, the interviewees expressed their time constraints and accordingly, modifications had to be made regarding the number of follow-up questions and probes for every answer provided. These follow-up questions and probes also pose limitations, as they are dependent on the knowledge of the researcher. While substantial efforts were made to sufficiently well-versed in the topic before the interviews, there were still some concepts previously unheard of that the researcher encountered in some interviews. This could however be attributed to the largely diverse range of cultures, markets, and countries the interviewees were from.

## 5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Upon examination of the existent corpus of articles in academic research journals about the travel industry, there is a noticeable gap in literature. Majority of the existing articles about the travel industry pertain to quantitative analysis of the hospitality sector, which includes hotels and airlines, in relation to consumers. Therefore, there is a severe lack of academic literature that is firstly, qualitative in nature, secondly, pertaining to travel companies and travel marketing, and thirdly, providing an industry perspective on the consumers of their product.

Based on the findings of this research, there are numerous issues and phenomenon that subsequent researchers could explore. Online travel aggregators (OTAs) and prosumer platforms have become major disruptors in the travel industry and have been an important cause of the change in role and perception of travel companies. While this thesis has examined the impact of OTAs at a general level and examined prosumer theory in detail, there is substantial scope for research on industry-insiders' perceptions of OTAs and how the industry can reduce their dependence on these platforms. From the perspective of media students, this is relevant as if travel companies and hotels do not use these OTAs for bookings and conversions, they could do so via social media, which would further digitally transform the travel industry while creating value in travel marketing and hospitality.

While influencer marketing was discussed extensively in this research, further research is needed to conclusively gauge the impressionability of different cohorts to travel promotions from social media influencers. While there have been studies that have aimed to explore the ROI of influencer marketing campaigns in numerous industries, there are no such studies that are specifically done with a focus on the travel industry. The studies on influencer marketing that



exist gauge ROI with parameters like conversions and business generated. It was proposed in this research that if travel marketers added KPIs like brand visibility, awareness, and image consolidation, the success of influencer marketing as a branding tool would become more apparent. Therefore, it is also recommended that qualitative research be done to test the validity of this suggestion.

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**Appendix A – List of Interviewees**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Designation</b>	<b>Travel Segment</b>
<i>Lee McAteer</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>Invasion Camp Group, Americamp, Camp Thailand, etc.</i>	<i>Co-Founder and CEO</i>	<i>Youth and Student Travel</i>
<i>Chris Townsend</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>What Marketing Company</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Travel Marketing for travel companies world over</i>
<i>Sanjar Imam</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>Panache</i>	<i>Co-Founder and Director</i>	<i>Experiential Luxury Travel and Youth Travel</i>
<i>Loveleen Arun</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>Panache</i>	<i>Co-Founder and Director</i>	<i>Experiential Luxury Travel and Youth Travel</i>
<i>Amit Kalsi</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>Experiential Travel Journeys</i>	<i>Founder and CEO</i>	<i>Experiential Luxury Travel</i>
<i>Austin Abram</i>	<i>United States of America</i>	<i>In The Know Experiences (ITKE)</i>	<i>Director of Entertainment Travel</i>	<i>Luxury Travel</i>

<i>Marie Nadal</i>	<i>France &amp; Singapore</i>	<i>Them, You &amp; Me</i>	<i>Founder</i>	<i>Digital Marketing for Travel Companies and Hotels</i>
<i>Maja Schröder</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>aom Art of Motivation</i>	<i>Owner and Managing Director</i>	<i>Incentive and Corporate Travel</i>
<i>Dr. Mihir Nayak</i>	<i>Austria and India</i>	<i>Hochschule Fresenius University of Applied Sciences and Mitaroy Goa Hotel</i>	<i>Senior Lecturer and Owner</i>	<i>Hospitality</i>
<i>Anna Korobkova</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>TravelWorks</i>	<i>Overseas Relations Officer</i>	<i>Work and Travel Programs</i>

## **Appendix B – Interview Guide**

Can you tell me a little about your background in the travel industry? <to set context>

How has travel marketing changed today as opposed to when you first started in the industry?

### *Topic 1 – Travel in Web 2.0*

How has the travel industry changed in the last two decades? (specific to your market and a generalized global perspective)

What role has social media and Web 2.0 played in the development of the understanding of travel?

How is marketing travel to millennials different?

Picture-based social media are popular medium for travel bloggers, consumers, and marketers alike because of hyperreality (focus on superficial details like pictures instead of their significance). What role has this so-called “Instagram effect” played in making leisure travel more marketable and therefore, accessible?

### *Topic 2 – Role of Experientialism, Customizability, and Storytelling*

Have you heard of the term “experiential travel”? What does it mean to you and how would you define it?

How do you think experiential travel came about and what trends have we seen over the years?

What role do you think experientialism plays in the marketing of leisure travel?

What role does experientialism play in travel marketing?

What role does storytelling play in the marketing of experiential travel?

From the era of itinerary tours and fixed package tours to tailor-made travel – there seems to be a clear focus on customizability in the travel industry. Has this change been seen in online marketing too?

What is your opinion of niches in travel and how is customizability aiding this?

### *Topic 3 – eWOM, UGC, and Prosumption*

Do you believe the leisure travel industry is heavily dependent on word of mouth and recommender systems?

What role do you believe the Internet has played in word of mouth marketing? And how is this form of marketing using in selling leisure travel?

Travellers today are described as having a heightened sense of individuality and personal identity and are getting more involved in the travel process, from making their own itineraries to reviewing their experiences (prosumption). Have websites that promote prosumers (Airbnb, Tripadvisor) contributed in changing the notion of travel marketing?

To what extent do you as a marketer of leisure travel view these aggressively marketed prosumer-enabling portals as marketing competitors? If not, what is the scope for collaboration?

What is your opinion of Tripadvisor as a review platform?

#### *Topic 4 – Influencer Marketing in Travel*

Social media has given rise to Influencers and opinion leaders that have effectively been used by other industries in marketing efforts. Do you think travel has followed suit?

Is there a way that travel marketers have managed to work with these influencers or opinion leaders? Are there any benefits you associate with doing so?

How impressionable is your clientele to influencers?

#### *Topic 5 – Trend Creation in Travel*

What are some recent trends in your segment of travel and who has set them?

Is the travel industry still the tastemaker for trends or do you see a more customer-centric approach?

Are there any topics that I have missed out on that you would like to discuss with me?



