

## Where to next:

The role of social media in Greek consumers' decision-making process regarding traveling plans.

Student Name: Foteini Popoli

Student Number: 540611

Supervisor: Dr. (Alexandra-Elissa) AE Necula

Master Media Studies - Media & Business  
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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## ABSTRACT

Social media have had a significant impact on individuals' lives as well as on the way they experience the world around them. They have also made a significant impact on the tourism industry. Indeed, the tourism industry is one of the few industries presented with such important marketing opportunities through social media. Facebook, Twitter and mostly Instagram, which is the focus of this study, have proved to consist of a powerful tool when it comes to traveling. However, focusing on consumers' aspect due to the over-abundance of information and their skepticism towards marketing campaigns, they tend to seek for reliable information, when looking to decide for their next travel destination. The focus of this study is on Greek consumers' way of deciding for a travel destination and their perceptions regarding the role of social media in their decision-making process. This paper aims to investigate the sources of information Greek consumers tend to rely on and whether travel-related posts from social media influencers on Instagram have an effect on consumers' decision process and as a result, proposes the following research question *What is the role of social media in Greek consumers' decision-making process regarding traveling plans*, as a focus for analysis. The study is conducted through the prism of the theories of WOM, eWOM, Influencer marketing, the Push and Pull theory, the ELM model and lastly the Uses and Gratification theory to examine the topic and ultimately interpret the results. Moreover, a qualitative approach is chosen through in-depth interviews in order to extract information regarding individuals' perspective on the researched topic. Thematic analysis in combination with the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach is used to analyze the data. The findings indicate that concerning the sources of information, Greek consumers' preferable choice is a combination of both WOM and eWOM to gain information for a destination. Regarding the influence of social media influencers first, there is an analysis of the reasons why they tend to follow them. Furthermore, the credibility of influencers is being analyzed in comparison to celebrities revealing their superiority and lastly, influencers' persuasion using the ELM model reveals the reasons why they tend to be influenced by them when choosing a destination with the emotional factor to dominate.

**KEYWORDS:** *Social media, Traveling, Decision-making process, Greek consumers, Sources of information, Social media influencers, Instagram.*

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# 1. Introduction

From digital advancements to the growth of social media influencers the travel industry has evolved significantly. The tourism industry is attempting new ways to attract tourists to travel into specific destinations. With the dominance of digital communication platforms, new opportunities have been created for individuals as well, from searching for information and sharing their experiences online to deciding for their next travel destination. With low-budget airlines and the ability to fly further and faster, traveling has become increasingly easier and thus more appealing to different generations.

Individuals today tend to be far more educated and up to date with the continual changes, thus far more active as consumers and in control of their actions as they have the means to explore and research their decisions. The constant evolution of the internet, as well as the continuous growth of societies, has led to conceive new forms of communication and consequently new consumer behaviors (Olga Lo & Razaq, 2014). Indeed, the dominance of digital communication platforms has enabled users to connect, interact as well as exchange ideas and information in a much more easy and convenient way than before (Xu & Pratt, 2018). In the same way, online social networks have had a significant effect on the travel industry (Xu & Pratt, 2018), as tourists nowadays are able to look for and explore travel-related information in a much easier way than before, plan their own travel and share their experiences online in real time.

That is why it would be interesting to investigate whether digital communication platforms have affected how consumers choose their travel destinations. The focus of this research will be on Greek consumers as it would be valuable to extract information considering that Greece is a predominately touristic country with tourism being a core economic sector. Much attention has been placed on the reasons behind choosing Greece as a destination but not that much attention has been given to locals' incentives when deciding for their travels. Hence, focusing this research especially on the Greek market and the way Greek consumers behave will enable a better understanding of the consumers' way of acting. Thus, investigating this topic from a cultural aspect will enable the researcher to find similarities and differences with other researches on similar topics, such as the one conducted by Ghandour and Bakalova (2014) regarding the influence of social media on the holiday decision-making process in the UK and gain knowledge regarding how each culture differentiates from each other in their decision-making process.

### **1.1. - Research Question**

Considering these observations regarding the goals of the current study, the main research question (RQ) is formulated as follows: *“What is the role of social media in Greek consumers’ decision-making process regarding traveling plans?”* With this question, the researcher aims to explore in which ways social media, with a focus on the platform of Instagram, and especially whether social media influencers affect the way Greek consumers decide for their travel destinations. Two sub-questions helped to study the topic in order to answer the main research question.

In detail, sub-question one (SQ1) is related to the sources of information consumers choose when deciding their travel destinations: *“What sources of information do consumers rely on when deciding their travel destinations?”* Here, the researcher aims to investigate the different ways in which consumers tend to gain information with possible expectations being that traditional ways of gaining information have given their place to social media.

The second sub-question (SQ2), *“How do travel destination-related posts from social media influencers affect consumers’ decision-making process?”*, explores the role of social media influencers’ posts and more specifically how these influencers affect consumers when deciding for their travels. This question could bring more insights regarding the role of social media influencers and whether they impact the decision of a destination.

### **1.2.- Academic and Societal Relevance**

The academic relevance of this paper lies in the fact that academics’ interest in producing knowledge regarding social issues is increasingly developing. Especially because the tourism industry is evolving, this has generated a growth in academics’ interest in order to unveil different aspects of individuals’ behavior and specifically learn people’s cultures as well as their cultural behavior by looking into their traveling interests. Nevertheless, there is not substantial literature focusing on Greek consumers and with this study, the researcher aims to fill this gap in the literature. The reason for this is that while reviewing the existing literature it is evident that research papers addressing the topic of social media exist in abundance as well as papers regarding the Greek market. However, research has not been conducted combining these two topics. A combination of these two topics will allow new perceptions to arise regarding Greek consumers’ behavior as travelers, while creating new discussions around this topic. So, this research will contribute to the tourism field, with the focus being given on tourists’ behavior when deciding for a destination. Additionally, with the focus on social media, and especially on Instagram, the media field can also benefit from this research gaining insights on the ways individuals use social media platforms to obtain information regarding travel-

related interests. Furthermore, the existing literature focuses on influencer marketing, as well as on influencers themselves and the way they act online, such as Booth's and Matic's study (2011). Nonetheless, Booth and Matic (2011) point out that not enough attention has been given on consumers' perceptions, even though they consist the reason why influencers rose to prominence. Especially Greek consumers' perceptions of this phenomenon on Instagram has not been investigated adequately and thus this research aims to fill this gap. Moreover, most of the previous research that has been conducted is quantitative and thus through a qualitative scope new insights will be provided in understanding more accurately consumers' perceptions and especially through the use of in-depth interviews, exploring their patterns of thinking.

Concerning the societal relevance of this paper, tourism is acknowledged as the method through which individuals can communicate their distinct cultures (Paul, 2012) as they are able to exchange values and pass on traditions through their travels. For this reason, it is relevant to examine individuals' perceptions regarding this topic in an era of constant changes, because people tend to rely on specific sources to decide on their travels and spend significant time on these platforms. Thus, it would be beneficial to examine whether individuals' choices could be potentially connected with their distinct values and ethics.

Furthermore, from a different perspective, businesses can also benefit from a deeper investigation of such a topic. In detail, businesses, in order to gain insights on the ways people decide for their travels as well as how they take advantage of the different opportunities that are open to them in the era of dominance of digital platforms, can use such a study to access useful insights of individuals' opinions that otherwise would not be so easily acquired. Through the understanding that the consumers have the power to decide whether a marketing effort is going to be successful or not it is important for businesses to learn consumers' perceptions.

Lastly, for the societal relevance of this study, social media influencers can benefit from this study as well. Through this research, they can learn more about what their followers expect from them so that ultimately they can understand them better and improve their online presence. As their role in society becomes increasingly important and they contribute to shaping individuals' perceptions and attitudes, with this research they can gain more knowledge into their influence in shaping individuals' attitudes.

### 1.3. - Chapter Overview

This section will provide an outline of how this study is structured following a chronological order. In the following paragraphs, the researcher will present an overview of the content of each chapter, so that the reader knows what to expect.

In the chapter of the *Theory*, the theoretical framework which this research is based on will be presented and explained thoroughly. To elaborate on this, first, the researcher will provide the definitions of tourism and social media influencers along with the Push and Pull theory. The chapter will continue with the WOM theory first so that afterwards the reader can understand the eWOM theory. This sub-section of the theory chapter will serve as a foundation to examine the sources of information that consumers tend to rely on when looking for information for their next travel destination. In other words, it will provide the necessary information for the first sub-question of this research. Then, emphasis will be given on social media influencers and the ELM model to delve into their effect on individuals. This specific section will provide the necessary information for the second sub-question regarding their influence on Greek consumers' decision-making process. The last theoretical concept of this chapter will be the Uses and Gratification Theory, from which useful information can be derived both for the sources of information consumers rely on as well as the effect of social media influencers in consumers' decision-making process, by analyzing the reasons behind individuals' specific choices.

Continuing with the overview of the paper the next chapter is the *Method*, relating to the methodology that was implemented in this study. A detailed explanation of why the qualitative approach was selected and specifically in-depth interviews will be provided in this chapter as well as the research design of this study. Furthermore, there will be an exhaustive explanation concerning the sample of the study as well as how the interviews were conducted. The operationalization will be explained with the topic guide of the questions that were made to the participants and their connection to the theory. The data collection and the data analysis process will be analyzed and lastly, the reliability, validity and the ethical considerations that were taken into account throughout the research will be demonstrated.

The next chapter is the *Results*, where the findings of the research will be presented. The report of the results will be presented in accordance with the theory. This chapter will consist of the presentation of the prominent themes that were created from the analysis of the interviews with specific examples from the participants. Additionally, the results will be analyzed in comparison to existing research in order to provide reliable answers to the SQs and, ultimately, the RQ.

The last chapter of the paper is the *Conclusion* where the results will be generally presented in relation to the topic of the current study. Aside from the interpretation of the findings in relation



to the SQs and RQ and their connection with the theoretical framework, the researcher will also focus on the limitations of this research and make recommendations for future research. The current study provides some suggestions for additional research, with the aim of becoming a starting point for further analyses of this topic.

## 2. Theory and Previous Research

### 2.1. Tourism, Social Media Influencers and the Push and Pull theory

#### 2.1.1. Tourism

It would be beneficial for a better understanding of the topic, to begin with defining the concepts. As tourism is a very broad term it should be clarified for this study. First, the researcher will begin with the definition of tourism, which is “the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs” (Cook, Hsu, & Marqua, 2014, p.5). Following the definition of the broad concept of tourism, it should be said that the researcher is looking to examine the “tourism products” and more specifically the travel destinations that consumers are interested in. As it was proposed by Pearce (1989), the term “destination” can be understood as the combination of both products and experiences an individual can find in one place and is attracted to them. In other words, it can be associated with any other consumer product only in this case tourism consists of multi-dimensional aspects, such as the cultural aspect or even the economic aspect as it contributes equally to these sectors either with the preservation of heritage or with the improvement of the economy. For this paper, the relevant aspect is the term “tourism products” as the scope of it is to examine the different ways in which Greek consumers tend to buy this type of product, as well as whether there has been a change in the ways consumers decide for their travel destinations.

The tourism product, however, is not a simple item as Olga Lo and Razaq (2014) mention. In detail, it is “a bundle of activities, services and benefits that constitute experiences” (Medlick & Middleton, 1973). Thus, it is composed of a variety of features such as services and characteristics of the tourism industry, which makes it distinguishably more diverse than any other physical good (Olga Lo & Razaq, 2014). This opinion is echoed by Kozak (2002) who referred to travel destinations as multi-products, whereas Mohammed Abubakar (2016) seems to acknowledge the intangible nature of tourism, indicating that tourism consists of elements that cannot be seen or touched. Indeed, what differentiates tourism products from other products, is that when it comes to tourism it is not a single product as it consists of a combination of items, experiences and services an individual can get when choosing to go to a travel destination and moreover these services are available for a specific time period. In that regard, the intangible nature of tourism as Mohammed Abubakar (2016) suggested can be explained as the services and experiences provided by tourism are only available in the moment of experiencing travel.

Jing Bill Xu’s (2009) contribution is equally important to be mentioned as it is suggested that the evolution of the tourism industry has enabled the evolution of tourism products accordingly. As

Jing Bill Xu (2009) suggests while there is no standard definition of such products, its appeal to travelers is commonly accepted as the main feature of it. What differentiates Jing Bill Xu's (2009) opinion from the ones already mentioned is the distinction between two scopes one can examine these products. On the one hand, the individuals' perspective and on the other hand the marketing perspective. The first perspective serves individuals' need of gaining experience from a multi-dimensional product. The second perspective has a focus to satisfy consumers both with its tangible and intangible features (Jing Bill Xu, 2009). The focus of this study is more on the consumers' needs part, as its main quest is to investigate the way individuals and specifically Greek consumers accomplish to satisfy this need of choosing their travel destination and ultimately gain experiences from this choice.

### *2.1.2. Social Media Influencers*

Following the analysis of the "tourism" term, which constitutes the core concept of this study, another important aspect of this paper is "social media influencers". With the term social media influencers, the researcher aims to explore those individuals who have established a large audience and can persuade others, while becoming representatives of certain products, because of their authenticity and their reach (Smith, 2019). This term is relevant for this study, as one of the main interests is examining whether social media influencers' posts of travel destinations has led to an alteration in individuals' decision-making process regarding traveling.

For this study, the intention is to examine Influencers on the platform of Instagram, whose interest is traveling. The reason why this study is focused on Instagram is because of its unique characteristic of being able to create intimacy between influencers and their followers (Giles & Edwards, 2018). This can be achieved through the way individuals portray themselves, which is through posting photos of themselves in more spontaneous moments, the so-called selfies. In this way without having to organize a professional photoshoot, individuals can intensify the engagement with their followers and build their online social network, by sharing even more personal moments and occasionally more vulnerable sides of themselves. This selfie culture that dominates Instagram has enabled traditional celebrities to turn to Instagram in order to enhance their publicity but more importantly, it has enabled the creation and the establishment of social media influencers (Giles & Edwards, 2018). These individuals have turned to Instagram in order to portray more authentic and not so pretentious aspects of themselves and their everyday lifestyle and ultimately create a deeper connection with their audience.

To gain a better understanding of the term Pang, Yingzhi Tan, Song-Qi Lim, Yue-Ming Kwan, and Bhardwaj Lakhanpal (2016) define social media influencers as a new form of endorsers who

have the ability to formulate and affect people's opinions, beliefs and behaviors. They achieve that through the use of different social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and other types of blogs. Living in such an Internet-dominant era, as one might describe it, social media influencers have indeed the ability to formulate people's behaviors and way of thinking and their dominance is evident in a plethora of social media platforms. Moreover, they are generally used by companies to either promote certain products or inform their followers with the needed information that will make it easier for them to buy each product. They tend to engage with their followers by updating them on a daily basis with the latest information.

Social media influencers can be both individuals and organizations who have certain credibility to their audience (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). Specifically for the tourism industry, companies tend to rely on social media and especially to those influencers in order to understand their consumers and even more to gain answers from them in order to upgrade the services they provide (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). That is why one of the main questions of this research is whether those aforementioned influencers can actually impact consumers' decision-making process when organizing their travels.

### *2.1.3. The Push and Pull Theory*

Focusing on the decision-making process of individuals and especially in regard to social media platforms, it would be ignorant to neglect the change that digital communication platforms have brought to consumers' decision-making process into choosing their travel destination. With the dominance of social media, individuals' intentions are constantly changing because of the abundance of images and information that can be found online.

A significant part of the literature regarding tourism is dedicated to the motivation behind choosing a travel destination. The reasons behind choosing a travel destination is one of the main questions this research aims to investigate and thus it would be beneficial to further explore this aspect. Motivation is the reason behind consumers' behavior and the starting point of their decision-making process (Rita, Brochado & Dimovad, 2018). The same goes by for their behavior in tourism (Woodside, 2017), as it can explain the reasons behind tourists' selection of travel destinations. To be more specific, travel motivation has been examined thoroughly in the existing literature and is correlated with travelers' way of behaving as well as the reasons behind their choice of destinations (Rita, Brochado & Dimovad, 2018). Thus, examining and more importantly understanding the reasons why travelers proceed to certain choices will aid the researcher into providing an answer to the posed research question of this paper. More specifically, it will assist the researcher into unveiling whether social media have become central into consumers' decision-making process when

it comes to their travel plans or whether more traditional ways, such as friends and family's suggestions continue to dominate.

In the theoretical framework regarding the motivation of individuals and travel destinations, there is one theory that dominates. Specifically, the push and pull theory is commonly accepted by researchers of tourism. To explain more this theory, it is related to the internal and external reasons as to why an individual tends to select a travel destination (Rita, Brochado, & Dimovad, 2018). The internal factor has to do with the way, which means the inner reasons of why individuals are pushed to select a travel destination while the external factor is more related with the where and the destination itself that pulls individuals into this direction (Rita, Brochado, & Dimovad, 2018). The above-mentioned opinion is found and in Cook, Hsu, and Marqua (2014) as it is suggested that individuals are "pushed" to travel destinations either because of a personal need or because of their personality and "pulled" to travel by the characteristics of these destinations. A combination of these factors is essential in order to understand both peoples' wish to travel and the travel destination they eventually choose. To get a better understanding of this theory some push factors that contribute to an individual's decision to travel could be to escape from the daily routine and mundane everyday life. Concerning pull factors, they can be associated with the resources that each destination can offer to individuals and the overall experience it can create for them. Regarding the correlation of the push and pull theory with the research question, the researcher aims to examine whether individuals' decision-making process can be affected by other push and pull factors, other than their desire for escapism. For instance, whether the advice and recommendations of family and acquaintances can have as a result individuals to travel to a destination and whether pull factors such as the way influencers portray potential destinations on their social media profile, can eventually act as a characteristic that can pull individuals into selecting this destination.

## **2.2. Word-of-Mouth and Digital Communication Platforms**

### *2.2.1. Word-of-Mouth*

In order to provide an answer to the question regarding the sources of information that consumers rely on, one should consider the different ways in which individuals tend to make their decisions and "WOM" is one that dominates. Previous research identifies WOM as a way of interpersonal communication between consumers regarding their thoughts and experiences with a certain brand or service (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). It is important to consider this theory as it is one potential factor of individuals' decision-making process when attempting to buy a certain product. Especially because WOM is considered a powerful marketing force in consumers' buying process, including traveling, the researcher included this theory in this research paper.

WOM is considered by the more traditional communication theories as a highly credible and powerful tool in influencing individuals and more specifically their behavior as consumers and how they evaluate products and later decide on their choices as consumers (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). The credibility of WOM lies in the fact that individuals acting as receivers of information are far more active and engaged than passively accepting an advertisement (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Indeed, WOM seems to have a significant impact on consumers especially in their attempt to formulate an opinion regarding a product. For instance, in the process of deciding whether to buy a product the first step is to search, examine and attempt to find other peoples' opinions in order to eventually make a decision. Thus, instead of accepting what an advertising promotes, individuals prefer to tailor their research into their own needs and preferences. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association is "the official trade association dedicated to word of mouth and social media marketing" which has now joined forces with the ANA (Association of National Advertisers), one of the oldest trade association in the marketing industry (ANA, 2018). That is why the WOM industry has undergone a great development, as since 2004 the Word of Mouth Marketing Association has expanded and starting from 3 it counts over 350 members (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

The significant importance of WOM is evident in Katz's and Lazarsfeld's research (1966) in which they had emphasized WOM's power in consumer behavior. To be more specific, they conducted one of the first formal studies indicating that concerning household and food products, WOM consisted of the most important source of information that influenced the vast majority of consumers (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966). WOM's influence was seven times more effective than newspapers and magazines, which further validates its value (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966). However, times have changed since then, and new means of communication have been created. In the following years since then, the advent of television changed drastically the ways in which consumers were making their decisions. Nonetheless, according to studies that were conducted during the time of 1960s WOM, through interpersonal communication, continued to hold a high position (Brown & Reingen, 1987). For this reason, it continues to remain a relevant issue to examine as its endurance despite the technological advances is a topic worth examining.

Following the advent of television, the arrival of the internet and the use of mobile devices in the 1990s did not affect the dominance of WOM in extreme ways. However, it changed the ways in which it was spreading through individuals (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2013) with the emergence of discussion forums, chats as well as blogs and emails. Thus, it can be said that throughout the years WOM has successfully conquered the preference of consumers when it comes to their decision-making process when buying a product. Although, the ways in which it was transmitted have undergone several changes following the technological advances as well. To further reinforce this

opinion, in a research conducted in 2007 by Keller, it was revealed that the average American consumer was involved in over 120 discussions per week that were brand-related (Keller, 2007). With this research, Keller advocated that WOM has become the most important and most efficient channel of communication (Keller, 2007). Thinking about the dominance of social media platforms in combination with the lack of trust that consumers have regarding the more “official” marketing campaigns, it seems that indeed the notion of consumers recommending to each other products and services has taken over as more authentic and reliable. While Keller (2007) suggests that the majority of these conversations of consumers are happening face-to-face, and more specifically 76 per cent of them, Kimmel and Kitchen (2013) advocate that WOM is not limited only to face-to-face conversations but through the use of the Internet as well. An opinion that seems quite relevant for this study as well, especially when taking into consideration the speed in which news can now spread through the Internet and social media platforms, and how people from all over the world can communicate with ease.

In their effort to keep up with all these changes that were mentioned above both the marketers as well as researchers attempt to adjust to these developments that have an impact on the society as well. From an academic perspective specifically, there is a significant amount of literature dedicated to WOM and especially regarding its place in the tourism industry. A significant amount of literature on the topic of travel destinations is regarding the way individuals tend to decide where they are going to travel. Nicoletta and Servidio (2012) argue that the motivation to choose a travel destination can be categorized into two factors, the rational and the emotional one. This notion can be found in Decrop and Snelders (2005) as well, where it is mentioned that the decision process is one that does not conclude when the decision is being made, as many factors could contribute to altering the first decision and adjust the plans accordingly. This opinion is relevant to this study because the researcher aims to explore whether factors such as social media and specifically Influencers’ posts could eventually formulate individuals’ opinions and define their travel choices.

The emotional factor owns a significant place in this process, as individuals have the tendency to arrange their travels based on temporary feelings (Decrop & Snelders,2005). Thus, when individuals rely on their emotions to decide for a travel destination, factors such as their admiration towards a social media influencer, for instance, could potentially act as a driver for the decision to choose a specific travel destination. On the contrary, for individuals who tend to rely more on the rational side, the above-mentioned notion could seem as something incorrect for them to do, as according to what Nicoletta and Servidio (2012) mention the more rational travelers tend to also be more realistic and more careful when it comes to their decision-making process. Nevertheless,

personal interactions can also affect such a choice. Especially, the recommendations from family members as well as acquaintances acquire a dominant place in this decision-making process (Olga Lo & Razaq, 2014). However, it is not yet examined whether this is equally true for both rational and more emotional travelers and so this is another aspect that this research comes to examine.

Additionally, one cannot help but wonder in a society where social media have a long-established dominance, are personal interactions still valued as an important factor in the decision-making process? As Olga Lo and Razaq (2014) suggest individuals feel the need to minimize as much as possible the uncertainty that comes with planning to buy such an intangible product and Word-of-mouth seems to be considered a highly important tool for them. This notion is supported by Keller (2007) as was mentioned above, as the uncertainty and the lack of trust that consumers seem to have towards marketing campaigns make WOM interactions more trustworthy. Even more when thinking about the impersonal nature of these kinds of campaigns in contrast to face-to-face interactions. In this way, WOM continues to play an important role in the decision-making process despite the dominance of marketing campaigns.

### *2.2.2. Digital Communication Platforms*

Nonetheless, one thing is certain: The Internet has altered fundamentally the way individuals act and how decisions are being made. Consequently, traveling-related choices have not been left unaffected (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and that is why the researcher aims to explore the correlation of traveling plans with social media. More specifically, travelers in order to reduce the amount spent on deciding where to travel, have changed the ways in which they seek for travel-related information. In detail, as suggested by Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione and Ahmad (2008) the Internet has been the preferred way for consumers to obtain information and therefore to decide for their next travel destination. Following the Internet, other sources of information succeeded in consumers' preferences when looking for information such as friends and travel agents, idea which relates to the above-mentioned analysis regarding WOM.

After the emergence of Web 2.0 followed by the dominance of digital communication platforms, there has been a drastic change in how consumers find and consume products. Travel products such as travel destinations are not excluded from this either. What has been of great interest in the existing literature is how consumers have gained more control in this process and are able to actively collaborate in the production of information and moreover in creating information themselves (Yoo & Gretzel, 2016). This change has enabled consumers to be in charge and more powerful in the market field, as now they can drastically affect the marketplace. Especially in the tourism market, there has been a significant shift both in the ways marketers interact with



consumers and vice versa (Yoo & Gretzel, 2016). Marketers seem to have left behind the more traditional ways of reaching consumers and acknowledge the fact that only with altering the until now established ways of gaining customers they can achieve engagement with individuals. For instance, marketers seem to initiate online communities and encourage consumers to share their opinions or complaints with them (Yoo & Gretzel, 2016). When it comes to the behavior of consumers they also seem to recognize their power either in relation to co-creating value or even providing feedback and creating online communities to share their opinions with marketers. That is why this study aims to examine in-depth the individuals' perceptions regarding online communities that have been created related to travel destination as well as the efficiency of marketers choosing social media influencers to attract more consumers.

### **2.3. eWOM, Social Media Influencers and ELM model**

#### *2.3.1. eWOM*

This shift that is being discussed regarding the ways in which consumers have become more powerful in relation to finding and consuming products, is evident in platforms such as Instagram and YouTube as they have become a medium that has facilitated the traveling experience. To be more specific, the popularity of these platforms has enabled consumers to alter their travel experience either when it comes to using social media to choose for a travel destination or even to showcase their traveling experience to their followers online and even look for other people's opinions and provide their own feedback. Friends and family seem to have conceded their place to social media personalities and individuals seem to be more willing to search online and interact with others in their own convenient pace than pursuing offline interactions. Due to their visible presence online and their fame online these social media personalities have become dominant in individuals' preferences (Xu & Pratt, 2018). As Xu and Pratt (2018) suggest this "digital revolution" has enabled consumers to act as prosumers as well, as they now have the ability to actively participate in the production of content and influence marketers by becoming the voice of the products and decide on either the success or the failure of a company. The term prosumers refers to the individuals who contribute to the creation and not just to the consumption of products and have obtained the power not only to select who will become a celebrity but moreover they have the choice to become one themselves (Cocker & Cronin, 2017).

This new norm of creators has generated a new order while "disturbing" the previous established and structured authority of the media system (Cocker & Cronin, 2017). To be more specific, these creators have the ability to reinvent rules, establish their own and ultimately influence other people to follow their steps into creating a new reality, in which they have become dominant. Thus, it could be said that while WOM is considered an important source of information,

electronic Word-of-Mouth, (eWOM), has earned significant importance. With eWOM, the researcher identifies the electronic version of the original WOM. In detail, while WOM consists of people sharing their thoughts and experiences to others through face-to-face conversations, the eWOM can take the form of review sites, blogs and immediate interaction between consumers and brands and it is believed that it has the potential to influence consumers' decisions (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). When it comes to the tourism industry, it is suspected that individuals tend to rely more and more on eWOM as the primary source of gaining information and stay up to date with traveling-related news. Through this study, this tendency will be examined so that the researcher can either confirm or reject this suspicion.

This alteration in consumers' behavior is evident in the tourism industry as Cantallops and Salvi (2014) suggest, as the advances in technology and the new norm that has been created has had significant changes in the way consumers act. Subsequently, the travel decision-making process is expected to be even more influenced by eWOM as using the Internet for travel planning is becoming the prominent choice of consumers (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Before delving deeper into the distinction of eWOM with traditional WOM, this new norm of consumers is apparent in the tourism industry, as mentioned above, with the appearance of a new form of travel. In detail, the expansion of Web 2.0 in the tourism field has created the Travel 2.0 as it has been characterized by Chung and Buhalis (2008).

Tourists use the Internet before, during and after their traveling experience. The first stage is to obtain information and gather peoples' opinion to decide on a travel destination. The so-called dreamy phase of traveling is followed by the second stage during the trip when individuals collect information about places to visit and the last phase is when tourists use the social media platforms to expose their experience online and share their travel (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). Thus, as individuals use the Internet more actively for various reasons, in the same way, it has become an indispensable part of travelers as well (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). This notion is supported by Elci, Abubakar, Ilkan, Kolawole, and Lasisi (2017) as well, who state that Travel 2.0 consists of all the components of Web 2.0 such as blogs, videos and forums online which can actively change the decision-making process of travelers and eventually formulate their whole traveling experience. Travel 2.0 is referred as well to Stiakakis and Vlachopoulou (2017) where it is mentioned that changes due to the dominance of social media platforms are evident also in the tourism industry. For instance, the process of planning a trip can be conducted solely on the Web. Stiakakis and Vlachopoulou (2017) focus on the possibilities given to travelers to post online their travel experience and share their opinions which can later act as recommendations for future travelers. The focus of this research is whether these kinds of influences such as online reviews, blogs and forums around traveling, which consist of the

Travel 2.0 idea, can actually affect the decision-making process of individuals prior to their traveling. Regarding the posts that individuals might share during or after their travel experience, these could reinforce the idea that consumers actively participate online in producing traveling-related content. In this regard, the current research will be further analyzing whether such individuals, together with the content they produce, could act as possible recommendations to future travelers

Analyzing eWOM, it differs from the offline WOM that was explained, as an individual doesn't need to have created social ties to share information. That is why consumer forums and platforms have become essential tools for eWOM, as reviews and ratings of products by consumers seem to be highly important for their decision-making process (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Especially, consumers tend to rely on online reviews as they provide information and at the same time act as guidance to future consumers. However, one other aspect seems to be considered as more significant and it is the one regarding their credibility, as they include other consumers' experiences and perspectives. As Gretzel and Yoo (2008) suggest when it comes to "purchasing highly involvement products" (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008, p. 37) consumers seem to prefer other consumer reviews for their decision-making process than a marketing advertisement for instance. Therefore, the same goes by with traveling as it is a high involvement product as well, as individuals can only experience this intangible product only after making the decision to purchase it. This notion is echoed in Buhalis and Law (2008), as they describe the adoption of information and communication technology in the tourism industry (eTourism) with the appearance of online reviews for instance (eWOM). This goes on to suggest that eTourism reduces the risk for travelers to select a destination that will not be up to their expectations and can also improve the quality of their trip. For this paper, the researcher is going to delve into the topic of online reviews as well as online forums and chats in order to explore the notion whether individuals tend to rely on online sources when it comes to their traveling experience. With a focus on the Greek consumers, the researcher will be able to explore in detail this niche group and examine whether this opinion is valid in this specific group of consumers.

To elaborate more on the subject of eWOM, Leung, Law, Van Hoof and Buhalis (2013) argue that this new form of WOM can either be characterized as eWOM or User Generated Content, responding to the consumers' need of gaining information that comes from fellow consumers and their personal experience, without the commercial element on it. As mentioned before one distinction between WOM and eWOM is that, while the first one requires the existence of a social network, the latter overcomes such boundaries, of close friends and relatives, providing access to users from all over the world (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013).

When it comes to eWOM, Chung and Buhalis (2008) mention that an increasing number of people share their views and opinions online through their social media platforms, forums or blogs. This increase in online communities showcases the need for people to communicate online. Regarding the tourism industry, the same pattern is followed, as travelers tend to share their travel experiences online, connect with other individuals through their experiences on different destinations and based on that make their decisions on each travel product they are interested in buying (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). One reason for that is because the Internet is considered to be a limitless source of information that individuals can have access to with zero effort, reinforcing, even more, the idea that social media platforms have become one powerful tool for consumers and especially travelers to decide and plan their travel experience (Amaro, Duarte, & Henriques, 2016). Individuals according to Amaro, Duarte and Henrique (2016) tend to consider this online content, created by other travelers, even more, credible than information provided by marketers. This notion can of course cause some severe challenges for marketers as they need to adjust to this new reality, otherwise, consumers, and specifically in this case travelers, could possibly rely solely on other consumers' reviews for information.

From the above-mentioned, it is evident that social media have indeed become one of the preferable options for individuals to decide regarding their consumer experience and specifically their travel experience as well. To further strengthen this opinion previous research also analyzed this aspect, such as Amaro's, Duarte's and Henriques' (2016) which showcased that in the United Kingdom, social media are considered the primary source of information when individuals plan their traveling while in the Asia-Pacific region 44% of travelers took advice from these platforms to decide for their travel destinations. Another opinion worth mentioning is by Leung, Law, Van Hoof and Buhalis (2013) who argue that the participatory nature of these kinds of platforms enables people to share information and collaborate. This "user democracy culture" as they characterize it, has "disturbed" the previously established and has enabled consumers to be in charge of their decisions (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013).

Hudson and Thal (2013) suggest that the change that has occurred through the domination of digital communication platforms has affected the purchasing process of consumers as well. Furthermore, they identify the decision-making process of consumers and break it down into four parts. In detail, they suggest that consumers first consider their options, then they proceed to evaluate them and then buy the products so that ultimately, they can enjoy, advocate and bond with the product as well (Hudson & Thal, 2013, p. 156). The change that has occurred though is that social media make the steps of evaluating and advocating the product very relevant (Hudson & Thal, 2013). Specifically, before making the decision to buy a product, consumers now have the choice to search

for other peoples' opinions and then proceed to select the product. The same goes by with traveling as social media act as an unlimited source of information which travelers can make use of. Especially when it comes to marketers of the tourism industry, they should identify these new options and take advantage of these platforms to engage even more with their consumers. One possible way for marketers to connect with their audience and affect their decision-making process is the use of social media influencers to promote travel products such as travel destinations. That is why the second sub-question of this paper is going to examine whether posts from social media influencers on Instagram can actually impact travelers' decision to select a destination.

### *2.3.2. Influencer Marketing*

To delve into this subject, individuals tend to rely on specific people online who have knowledge regarding their niche field and have the power to influence their audience. Thus, the domination of social media influencers arises as a natural consequence, as they are the ones regarded as opinion-leaders (Xu & Pratt, 2018), intending to provide information with their expertise and ultimately engage with their followers. In detail, social media influencers can be defined as a recent form of endorser with the ability to form individuals' opinions and behaviors through their activity online through their blogs, photos, videos (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). As it is suggested by Freberg et al. (2011) while some scholars tend to confront social media influencers as competitors, others recognize their audience reach and their ability to cooperate with a brand in order to promote their products and services.

What is mentioned above can be characterized as influencer marketing, which in other words is the usage of an influencer from a company to promote its goods and engage with their audience (Lim, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). Audience engagement can be achieved through the regular update of their followers through their social media accounts. Over the years, social media influencers have succeeded in being accepted as one of the most effective tools for a marketing strategy in different sectors, and tourism is not an exception. In detail, while the practice of influencer marketing was used on a great scale into the fashion and beauty industry, in recent years it has become prominent in the tourism sector as well (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). In tourism, those influencers can be used to share their experience online by documenting their travels and sharing information with their followers. Those influential individuals can be used to attract tourists to destinations and ultimately shape the perception of each destination they visit (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). That is why influencer marketing can be described as a company's effort, and in fact, a successful one, to enhance the engagement between the company and its consumers. Another

aspect that adds to their effectiveness into promoting destinations is their low cost considering their impact and their reach on their followers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020).

Furthermore, as Lim, Cheah and Wong (2017) advocate, consumers tend to rely on influencers in their decision-making process when attempting to buy a product as it is reported that their followers are more likely to follow their recommendations and accept them as credible figures. Especially, compared to celebrities who act as endorsers, social media influencers are regarded far more trustworthy, insightful and informed and can persuade their followers in their decisions as consumers (Lim, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). Especially when it comes to travel influencers they can share insights of their travel experience online, while maintaining a friendly tone when distributing this information online. This is achieved as they address their advice on a niche segment of people (Lim, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). Another aspect of influencer marketing that seems to make it even more dominant in the tourism sector is the fact that companies can control influencers' impact on their followers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). In detail, with the aid of new technologies, it is now easier than before for companies to understand the reach and the engagement of these influencers to their followers. Taking into account this information, marketers can save time and plan their future campaigns, so that ultimately can increase their customer reach.

### *2.3.3. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)*

Similarities with the notion of influencers' efficiency in persuading individuals can be found in Magno and Cassia (2018) as they advocate that the influencers' persuasion is constantly becoming greater to their audience. Influencer's persuasion strategies are going to be examined, as it has been proposed by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This model seeks to examine whether individuals tend to elaborate on what they see, in detail, whether they use the central route of processing which means that individuals evaluate a product based on its practical elements or whether they rely more on the satisfaction of their emotional needs, which in this case indicates they use the peripheral route of processing. Specifically, for this research, this model will be useful as the researcher will attempt to analyze whether people tend to be influenced by travel influencers in social media because they are interested in traveling and they face influencers as a source of information to provide them useful advice or whether incentives such as wishing to imitate them, for instance, determine their impact. The researcher will draw inspiration from this model as it is central to studies concerning consumers' behavior, as it seeks to explain how individuals process stimuli differently and the outcomes of these processes on changing attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Especially concerning Greek consumers' decision-making process when it comes to their traveling

plans it is important to examine how social media influence this process and if so, the reasons why Greek consumers can get influenced by social media and especially by social media influencers.

Furthermore, to gain a deeper understanding of the ELM model it can be said that in the analysis of the behavior of consumers different models have been invented, and ELM is one of them. In other words, this model is associated with the likeliness of an individual to examine thoroughly what it is presented to them. Particularly, according to this theory, there are two routes one can follow when making a decision; The central route and the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). On the one hand, the central route describes the process of thinking deeply about what the message describes. Specifically, the central route processing requires that the individual is very interested in the message and that is why there is a high degree of involvement with it (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For this reason, individuals examine thoroughly the message presented to them and are very interested in learning more about it, however, they understand what is useful and important for them. In other words, they consider carefully the message from every possible aspect with critical judgement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). To connect the ELM model and more specifically the central route processing with the researched topic, an example could be an individual who is very interested in visiting a specific destination and thus when a social media influencer posts a photo of this destination online, the individual will critically observe every detail about it. In this case, the individual will process the message with the central route.

On the contrary, when it comes to the peripheral route processing individuals do not focus just on the message and it is possible to get distracted by external factors and form their choices accordingly (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). To elaborate on this, individuals who are not that interested in the usefulness and the applicability of the message projected, will not devote time to think deeply about it. They will put less effort into scrutinizing the message presented to them and that is why for these individuals it becomes easier to be influenced by other factors, except the message itself, such as the way it is presented for instance. When an individual follows a peripheral route processing this means that the individual is not engaged with the message and that the message is not critically assessed (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Because individuals are not that interested in the practical elements of the product, they will not pay attention whether it is important or not and that is why it becomes easier for these individuals to get distracted by other elements besides the message. This is where marketing campaigns prove to be useful. For instance, when focusing on the tourism sector, if an individual is not certain about which travel destination to choose, when looking at a story or a post on the social media platform of Instagram by an influencer these could potentially affect him into making the decision to travel where each influencer advocates. Moreover, when an influencer projects an ideal destination with an impressive landscape on the background then it is likely that

individuals can be influenced without critically accessing other factors such as the budget that they will need to do this trip for instance.

The ELM model can be implemented in the research of the consumers' behavior when deciding on their travel destination, especially considering the dominance of social media platforms and influencers as was stated in the above-mentioned examples and their power to influence drastically consumers' choices. That is why through this research an important aspect that will be examined is whether individuals tend to use their central or peripheral route processing when looking at a message online and, in this case, when looking at travel influencers and how they promote each destination.

#### **2.4. Uses and Gratification Theory**

The "Uses and Gratification" model will assist in the process of considering how influencers affect individuals' decision-making process. The basis of this model is that people tend to decide which media to choose to satisfy their specific needs. The uses and gratification theory is an audience-centred approach that regards individuals as active users and not passive consumers of media (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016). Thoroughly, the uses and gratification theory consists of a media use paradigm that explores the reasons why individuals use specific media for their needs (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016). It provides a valuable aspect of how individuals tend to communicate daily and how they tend to make their decisions. In detail, it provides insightful information regarding the understanding of individuals' behavior when it comes to their use of social networking sites, such as Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. It enables researchers to interpret peoples' needs and ultimately marketers to design their products and campaigns according to these types of needs.

The uses and gratification theory has become even more relatable because of the dominance of digital communication platforms, as it can provide useful insights on individuals' perspectives. In detail, as Korhan and Ersoy (2016) suggest social media's dominance has generated a drastic change to the way consumers act and as stated above has enabled consumers to become more powerful giving them the possibility to participate actively in the way decisions are being made and exchange opinions and views. There are different needs that can be met through the use of social media. These could be interacting with others, sharing their opinion, informing themselves and of course entertaining themselves. Considering that traveling is a form of entertainment for people, this theory seems relevant to explore and eventually explain even better travelers' behavior. For instance, with the uses and gratification theory, the researcher can obtain insights into why travelers feel the need to interact with online communities about their travels, the reasons why they share their experiences online and why they tend to use social media platforms to gain information regarding their travels.



The researcher chose to include this theory in order to evaluate the role of social media to other forms of mass media, for instance, more traditional ones, as it combines two aspects. On the one hand the characteristics of the media and on the other the characteristics of the users (Kayahara & Wellman, 2007). As the focus of this research is related to the role of social media in the decision-making process of individuals concerning their traveling plans this theory will help the researcher to firstly begin with the assumption that individuals are active users and secondly that their decisions are taken concerning their needs. Thus, the sources of information that consumers tend to rely on when deciding for their travel destinations are the ones that will satisfy their needs best. Regarding the influence of travel-related posts created by social media influencers, this theory will aid the researcher to analyze the reasons why individuals could be affected by such posts. While socialization is a significant factor when using the Internet, the focus of this research is more narrowed, as the researcher is interested in finding whether and how individuals use the internet to decide for their travel destinations and if travel-related posts affect this process.

To conclude, the uses and gratification theory relates to people's use of mass media as it concerns the ways in which individuals tend to satisfy their needs in regard to the use of media (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016). The researcher will make use of this theory in order to gain insightful information about the sources people use when deciding for their traveling plans. Moreover, it will enable a better understanding of why people tend to be affected by social media influencers when it comes to posting photos of their traveling or advocating travel destinations online.

This chapter addresses this thesis' main theoretical points of departure to get an understanding of individuals' decision-making process when it comes to their traveling plans. In essence, the researcher began the theoretical chapter with a definition of the core concept of tourism and more specifically the destinations which are the combination of products and experiences an individual can find in one place and is attracted to them (Pearce, 1989). Following this, social media influencers were explained in relation to the push and pull theory to understand the motivation behind choosing a travel destination. This decision-making process of individuals can be achieved through the interpersonal communication between consumers, which is described by the term WOM. However, with the dominance of digital communication platforms consumers and especially travelers in an effort to reduce the amount spend and simplify their choices turn to the online world. In this way, the online version of WOM, eWOM, seems to have dominated. This research is focused on a specific form of eWOM which analyzes the social media influencers and the researcher chose to also include the ELM model to examine their influence on consumers' behavior. To understand travelers' behavior in depth, the Uses and Gratification theory will be used in relation

to why they use specific media for their decision-making process. Considering all the above-mentioned the present study is set to explore the role of social media in Greek consumers' decision-making process regarding their traveling plans with a focus on the sources of information that consumers rely on and whether travel-related posts from social media influencers affect this decision-making process. The next chapter looks at how this research will answer these questions following a methodologically systemic approach.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research Design

To investigate insights into individuals' preferences, it is believed that a qualitative approach is the most suitable, as it enables a better understanding of people and the ways they make sense of the world (Hermanowicz, 2002). Furthermore, with the qualitative approach, the researcher is able to deliver a thick description, by immersing beyond the surface of understanding and exploring the deeper meaning of behaviors (Tracy, 2019). Regarding the researched topic, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to extract information regarding people's beliefs concerning traveling and understand their incentives in their decision-making process. As Tracy (2019) suggests qualitative research is fitting for approaching and ultimately understanding a culture. Instead of just asking what people say that they do, qualitative research gives the researcher the ability to explore what people actually do (Tracy, 2019). Indeed, what the researcher aimed to accomplish through this study is understanding Greek consumers' perceptions and examining in depth their actions when it comes to deciding for a travel destination. The more the researcher succeeds in understanding individuals the better the interpretations and the understanding of their behavior will be (Tracy, 2019). Especially regarding this paper, as the aim is to understand Greek consumers' behavior regarding traveling, following a qualitative approach seems fitted as it provides the researcher with the necessary tools to investigate Greek consumers' thoughts when it comes to their decision-making process.

In order to explore and interpret the patterns of thinking as well as the ways of understanding people's experiences and opinions upon a certain topic, a conversation is required (Kvale, 2007). In terms of research, this approach is known as qualitative in-depth interviews. For this research, semi-structured interviews were used. To be more specific, as the first sub-question investigates the different sources of information that individuals rely on when deciding for their travel destinations, semi-structured interviews were used, to examine the reception of individuals and their opinions regarding this topic. Furthermore, the researcher was interested in investigating individuals' opinions and learn where they stand regarding this decision-making process. The aim was on focusing on the personal perspective of individuals and extracting information regarding the sources of information they tend to rely on and especially whether social media have affected their decision-making process. In this way, the researcher can provide an answer to the research question and a general perspective on the topic of research which is the effect of social media in individuals' decision process.

The interviews were semi-structured as in this way the interview could be more flexible, giving the researcher the ability to explore issues that may occur during the conversation (Doody &

Noonan, 2013). For instance, with the use of semi-structured interviews, an issue not originally planned to be investigated arose such as the differentiation when it comes to deciding for a destination in Greece or abroad. This issue is going to be explored in detail in the results chapter. Moreover, regarding semi-structured interviews, they tend to be the most common type that researchers use. The reason why is that while a topic guide for the interviews (Appendix A) is created with the questions the researcher aims to address to the participant, the researcher can ask for clarifications, change the order of the questions or even adjust some questions to follow the flow of the conversation (Doody & Noonan, 2013). This flexibility is useful for the researched topic, as the focus is given on Greek consumers' perceptions and thus each interview could evolve differently according to participants' views. So being flexible enough will aid the researcher to adjust each interview accordingly. Furthermore, it is believed that using semi-structured interviews enables participants to discuss in depth and express their opinions, allowing the researcher to collect meaningful data for the analysis (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Since the focus of this research is on consumers' perspectives this point is significant for extracting their opinions, as it allows participants to build on their answers freely.

Additionally, the second sub-question examines how travel-related posts on Instagram affect the decision-making process of Greek consumers. To answer the above question semi-structured interviews were used as well, as the focus of the research is regarding individuals' beliefs around this topic and how they make sense of the above-mentioned questions. So, with the interviews, the researcher was able to obtain information about their personal feelings and their perceptions on this topic, unveiling the reasons why Greek consumers' traveling plans can be affected by social media influencers online. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewees to make additional comments and provide information that otherwise may not have been revealed.

### **3.2. Sample**

For this study, 11 interviews of 45 – 60 minutes were conducted in April 2020. Regarding the selected number of interviews, 11 interviews were considered to provide enough information to answer the posed research question of this research, taking into account the length of each interview and the amount of data that were derived from. Moreover, as the research purpose is to provide a starting point in relation to Greek consumers' decision-making process regarding traveling, 11 interviews were conducted acknowledging the time constraints. Especially, considering the time frame for this research to be completed, which was 6 months, this provides enough time for researching the amount of data set for the topic, with the expectation of gaining in-depth knowledge. The duration of the interviews was 45-60 minutes as it is believed that it was enough time for the participants to contribute to this research by sharing their opinions on the researched

topic (Jamshed, 2014). In this way, the participants had enough time to feel comfortable and fully understand the focus of the interview, and they were able to answer in-depth interviewer's questions. Additionally, the interviews were conducted online, through Skype due to both the researcher's convenience and constraints related to the research design, as explained below.

The sampling method used was purposive sampling. The researcher aimed to include individuals whose interest is traveling, in order to have the opportunity to explore in-depth their opinions and shape an overview of the existing attitudes regarding traveling. Moreover, the interviewees were Greeks 18-29 aged both men and women, as the focus of this research is on Greek consumers' perspective and because this age group is the one most likely to use social media (Perrin, 2015). Especially for this research as the focus is on different sources of information Greek people use, social media included, and one aspect being the focus on social media influencers, the researcher believed that this age group is the most suitable to provide answers for this topic. Furthermore, purposive sampling was implemented for the execution of this research, as the individuals for the interviews were selected according to the researcher's judgement (Sarsted, Bengart, Shaltoni, & Lehmann, 2017). In detail, the researcher used snowball sampling as in this way individuals could suggest other participants to take part with similar interests as theirs so that they are the ones who can contribute the most to this research. The first respondents came from the researcher's broader social circle, as it was convenient due to the researcher's nationality, which corresponds to the cultural focus of the current research. However, they did not have a close relationship with the researcher.

### **3.3. Operationalization**

The questions are operationalized by the theoretical framework focusing on topics such as WOM and the relevance of more traditional ways in the social media era as well as the influence of social media when deciding for travel destinations. To be more specific, the interviews begin with some warm-up questions so that the interviewees feel more comfortable. It is crucial for interviewees to feel comfortable in order for the researcher to establish rapport with the participants (Bell, Fahmy & Gordon, 2016). In detail, rapport (making the interviewee feel comfortable) can be achieved through the creation of a friendly environment of a pleasant conversation between the two individuals along with treating the respondents with respect and the necessary attendance (Bell, Fahmy & Gordon, 2016). In this way, individuals feel at ease and are able to discuss and contribute to the conversation.

In the first section, which gives the opportunity to respondents to know more details regarding the topic of the interview, the questions concern topics such as traveling in general and

the use of social media. In particular, the first section includes questions regarding the reasons why individuals enjoy traveling and if they have social media accounts, which medium they tend to use the most. There is also a focus on the social media platform of Instagram and the reasons behind using this platform, as the focus of the study is on this specific social medium.

Following this, more specific questions follow having as guidance the topics that arise during the theoretical framework of the paper. Specifically, the second section of the interview concerns the different sources of information that consumers tend to choose when deciding for their travel destinations with questions regarding WOM as well as the digital communication platforms, to answer the first sub-question. In detail, the topic guide for this section begins with more general questions such as whether individuals tend to trust and consult their friends and family when thinking of buying a product to more specific ones to the topic such as whether individuals tend to decide for their travel destinations based on friends' and family's recommendations. Moreover, this section includes questions such as participants' opinions regarding online discussion forums and chats about traveling and whether they tend to trust these types of sources to decide for their travel destination. With these questions, the researcher is able to gain an understanding of whether WOM is still central to peoples' lives when it comes to buying a product or whether digital communication platforms have taken over when it comes to their decision-making process.

The third section of the interview is centred around eWOM and social media influencers and how individuals perceive them, to provide an answer to the second sub-question. Thoroughly, this section begins with eWOM, with questions about whether individuals rely on online reviews for information and guidance and how they describe other people's reviews in a matter of credibility. Moreover, it is examined if participants think that looking for information online is easier than reaching their social network. These questions set the basis for the questions regarding social media influencers. In detail, in this part, there are questions concerning the reasons behind choosing to follow a social media influencer on Instagram, if they perceive them as credible and last whether factors such as the number of followers an influencer might have affects the decision-making process of individuals specifically concerning traveling plans. These questions aid the researcher to answer the role of influencers in the way consumers decide for their travel destination, in relation to eWOM and ELM model.

As the interviews are semi-structured, any follow-up question that may occur will be included in any topic that may emerge from the interview. Lastly, the final question of the interview allows respondents to provide any other information they prefer to add about their most recent trip and specifically regarding the process behind deciding for it and the reasons behind choosing the

travel destination. In this way, any additional thoughts of the respondents related to the main research question can be expressed and the interview concludes on a lighter note.

### **3.4. Data Collection**

In April, after thoroughly researching existing literature in relation to the chosen topic, contact with potential individuals that would take part in the research was initiated. The interviews were conducted in Greek, as interviewees felt more comfortable discussing in their native language regarding the researched topic. The interviews were organized through Skype as due to the nature of the study its focus is on Greek respondents and thus it was more convenient both for the researcher and the participants to conduct online interviews. Moreover, as the respondents were not in the Netherlands it was a straightforward choice. Nonetheless, the organization of the Skype interviews ran smoothly, and respondents felt at ease. The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. The transcriptions assisted in extracting information through the coding process of the implemented thematic analysis, which is discussed in the next section and later answering the research question. As the interviews were conducted in Greek that meant that following the verbatim transcription of the interviews, a summary was made in English, so that they could be commonly understood. Additionally, these summaries enabled the researcher to identify some interesting elements which were included as direct quotations when presenting the results following appropriate translations, as necessary.

As mentioned above, a verbatim transcription of the interviews was selected as this type of transcription has been proved to enhance the validity and the trustworthiness of the research (MacLean, Meyer, & Estable, 2004). A verbatim transcription implies that the researcher needs to transcribe every word of the recording along with non-verbal communication such as participants' or interviewer's laughter, coughing or any pause that may occur. Although the verbatim transcription of the interviews proved to be a highly time-consuming process, it enabled the researcher to gain a clear view of participants' opinions and familiarize with the data. Moreover, it enhanced the analysis productivity, as there is no need for the researcher to repeatedly go back to the recordings in order to listen to the interviews of the respondents.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

To be able to form conclusions regarding the main research question, thematic analysis was used to first identify and later analyze the existing patterns of the gathered data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in combination with the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach, so that any new topics that may occur during the analysis of the data could later be analyzed as well. Specifically, regarding the thematic analysis, it is a commonly used method in qualitative research as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest. The reason why is that with the thematic analysis the researcher is able to organize and later analyze the data with great detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, for this research thematic analysis was used as a realist method, as it aided the researcher to explore, investigate and ultimately report the different experiences of the participants and how each of them grasps their reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the thematic analysis provides a base for the analysis of the data by constantly connecting them with the existing theory in order to provide an answer to the posed research question. Since this study is based on the theories of the Uses and Gratification, the Push and Pull theory, the ELM model as well as the WOM and eWOM, thematic analysis seemed appropriate.

The researcher followed the six phases of thematic analysis, that Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate. Thus, the researcher began with firstly “familiarizing with the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87), through first conducting and later examining the transcriptions of the interviews. The next step was “generating initial codes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) which meant coding the data in a systematic kind of way by organizing the data into groups according to their relevance. The third phase of the thematic analysis was “searching for themes” along with “synthesizing themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) which is the connection of the already existing theory with the data and the creation of some pre-defined themes extracted from the existing theory. Following this step is “reviewing the themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) that were generated so that the researcher can then define the dominant ones. In this step the researcher named each category that emerged from the transcription of the interviews. The next step was reviewing the data and checking for additional elements keeping in mind the research question while examining participants’ responses. The last step was “producing the report” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) which in practice was the process of identifying the main categories and establishing the clear connections between the findings and the existing theoretical framework. An indicative example of the predefined themes that were formed according to the existing literature is regarding the two sources of information and specifically WOM and eWOM that consumers rely on when looking for information.

Nevertheless, the researcher found it would be interesting to apply along with the thematic analysis, the CGT approach. This method of analysis contributes to this research as it enables the



researcher to be sensitive and open into detecting new categories that can possibly emerge from the data rather than just using established theoretical propositions (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). Especially for this research as the focus is on Greek consumers' perceptions, the researcher found the CGT approach suitable as it enables the researcher to identify any possible new behaviors individuals may have. Indeed, a representative example that occurred during the analysis was the *attractiveness* and the *reliability* as reasons to follow an influencer. Thus, a combination of both methods is used in this paper, so that the researcher is able to have as a basis the already known information to define themes, following the guidelines of thematic analysis, as well as the option to expand the research with new themes that may arise, according to the CGT approach.

Regarding the steps taken to apply the GCT method on the data, the analysis firstly began with open coding, which is the primary step of the analysis, followed by axial coding and lastly selective coding which aided the researcher to formulate the final themes (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990). To be more specific, coding aided the researcher to distinguish the main themes and topics and look for possible theories that can be extracted beyond the obvious, theory-based interpretations (Boeije, 2010). The process began with open coding as mentioned above in order to identify all the codes by coding the data word by word (Clarke, 2003). In this step, 202 codes were created such as *I rarely check online forums and chats* and *Influencers are honest*. The axial coding followed, by bringing together the data into groups to form the categories (Kelle, 2010) for instance the creation of the sub-theme *experience* for influencers' credibility or *variety of information* for eWOM. The last phase is the selective coding in which the researcher further groups the categories formed into main themes, facilitating the researcher to ultimately provide an answer to the research question (Kelle, 2010). Some indicative examples are *WOM* and *eWOM* for the first sub-question.

### **3.6. Reliability, Validity and Ethics**

To ensure the reliability, as well as the validity of this research different steps, were applied. First with the term *reliability* the researcher refers to the extent to which the findings of the study are independent of fortuitous conditions (Silverman, 2011). In detail, it relates to the replicability of the research, which is the ability of this research to be repeated by another researcher and have the same results (Silverman, 2011). Regarding the reliability of the interviews of this research, this is achieved by making the research process as transparent as possible. To be more specific, in order to be as objective and transparent as possible, there was a detailed documentation of the steps that the researcher followed. This meant a clear description of how and with whom the interviews were held, which were constantly consulted during the analysis and report of results. Furthermore, transparency was also achieved through the creation of the interview guide (Appendix A) as it

enabled the researcher to pose the same questions to all the individuals that participated in the research. The reliability was also ensured because of the iterative nature of the qualitative approach, which relates to adapting the methodology throughout the research process. For instance, adapting the topic guide was one change that occurred in order to reflect and examine more accurately the topic of the study. In an attempt to minimize bias, the topic guide was checked by another researcher, in order to ensure that it was formulated according to the theoretical framework of the paper. Lastly, regarding reliability, the researcher applied reflexivity in order to minimize the involvement with the study (Berger, 2015) by reflecting over the data and reanalyzing it in order to ensure an objective perspective on the interpretations.

Moreover, concerning the *validity*, this was defined as “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Hammersley, 1990, in Silverman, 2011, p. 367), in other words, whether the interpretation of data by the researcher is reasonable. Validity is ensured as all interviews were recorded so that later a verbatim transcription could be applied, ensuring that the exact words and phrases used by the participants were used later in the analysis of the data. Also, in the data analysis phase the findings were constantly compared with each other so that any deviant cases could be detected (Silverman, 2011). With deviant cases, the researcher defines those cases that do not fit the expectation which is based on the theoretical framework that was discussed at the beginning of the paper. Thus, validity was ensured through the selection of the proper sampling and specifically with the selection of Greeks aged 18-29 in order to provide an answer to the research question. Moreover, validity was reached through the constant comparison of the data collected from the interviews in relation to the concepts examined in the theoretical framework, as well as through tracing of deviant cases and the examination through the same prism (Silverman, 2011).

Additionally, there are also ethical issues one should consider when including interviews into the research (Kvale, 2007). To be more specific, first, the researcher provided participants with the written consent form through email so that the researcher can gain their permission for participating in this study. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher also informed interviewees regarding the focus of the study and in detail the topic of the research. Then the participants were asked to give their verbal consent as well, as the interviews were conducted through Skype, to participate in this research. The researcher also reminded them at the beginning of the interview that they have the right to refuse to answer any question they do not feel comfortable with. Furthermore, the researcher also informed participants and asked their permission to record their interview, as the recording aids the researcher to keep track of what is being discussed (Kvale, 2007). Lastly, the researcher informed the participants that their personal information would not be published if they

did not wish to. In this way, the anonymity of the participants taking part can be ensured and the researcher will be able to gain participants' honest opinions as they will not be concerned that their identities may be exposed. Thus, pseudonyms instead of their real names are presented in this paper. Some indicative examples are George, Zoe and Bill. Lastly, after the completion of this study, the transcripts, as well as the recordings of participants, will be destroyed to further ensure the ethical approach of this study.

This chapter of the research paper focused on the method that was used to answer the researched topic. Specifically, the qualitative approach was used to provide an answer to the research question regarding the influence of social media in Greek consumers' decision-making process when choosing a destination. Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool to explore Greek consumers' perceptions and extract information about their behavior. In detail, 11 interviews of 45 – 60 minutes were conducted in April through Skype and participants were selected using purposive sampling. The questions were operationalized in accordance with the theoretical framework as was presented in the correspondent chapter beginning with questions regarding the sources of information consumers use and continuing with the topic of social media influencers on Instagram to provide an answer to both sub-questions. The interviews were recorded and later verbatim transcribed for the data analysis to be feasible. Regarding the data analysis phase, thematic analysis was used in combination with the CGT approach. In the last section of this chapter, the researcher delves into the subject of reliability, validity as well as the ethical considerations that were taken into account throughout this research.

## 4. Results

The current study aims to investigate the role of social media and specifically Instagram's role in Greek consumers' decision-making process when it comes to their traveling plans. In order to provide an answer to this question, this research focuses on exploring first the sources of information that consumers rely on when deciding their travel destination, followed by the ways in which travel-related posts from social media influencers on Instagram affect their decision. For this reason, in-depth interviews were used as a tool to gain insights into Greek consumers. Thus, eleven interviews were conducted with Greek consumers aged 18-29 and later their transcriptions were analyzed through the use of thematic analysis in combination with the CGT approach.

In this chapter, the findings of the research will be presented in relation to the theory that was introduced in the theoretical framework. The first section of this chapter (4.1) will provide interviewees' answers regarding the first sub-question concerning the sources of information they rely on, while the second section (4.2) will give an answer to the second sub-question in relation to the influence of travel destination-related posts from social media influencers in individuals' decision-making process. The recurring themes and patterns will be thoroughly discussed, together with their connection to the theoretical framework and specific examples will be given. The quotes, as well as the examples used, are translated from Greek.

### 4.1. Sources of Information Consumers Rely on When Deciding for their Travel Destination

In the effort to answer the first sub-question regarding the sources of information that Greek consumers tend to rely on when looking for information two main themes were created. In detail, the first theme concerns the *WOM* as a source of information and especially the information taken from friends and family and the second theme the *eWOM* and in essence, the information taken from online sources, from people online such as online reviews and online forums and chats (see Table 1).

Table 1: The two themes of sources of Information

WOM	eWOM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Trustworthy source of information</li><li>- Alike preferences</li><li>- Influential source of information</li><li>- Limitations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Variety of information</li><li>- Honest opinions</li><li>- Reliable source of information</li><li>- Pluralistic information</li><li>- Limitations</li></ul>

#### 4.1.1. – Push and Pull Theory and the Decision-Making Process

As it was previously mentioned one of this research's main question is the plethora of information sources consumers tend to rely on in their effort to decide for a travel destination. As introduced in the theoretical framework the Push and Pull theory is one that dominates when looking for the motivation of individuals behind choosing a destination. This theory explores the internal and external reasons as to why an individual tends to select a travel destination (Rita, Brochado, & Dimovad, 2018). While the internal factors (push factors) are more related to individuals' desire to travel, the external ones (pull factors) relate with the destination itself and in this case whether individuals could possibly be affected by social media and specifically social media influencers on Instagram.

To begin with, regarding the *push factors* in individuals' decision to travel all eleven respondents indicated that the main reason that provides them with the motivation to travel is their need of escapism from their daily routine and their desire to explore new places, new cultures and discover different lifestyles. As expected, the *internal factors* dominate in this process of deciding for a travel. Concerning the *external factors* that pull individuals to a destination, the results differed from one respondent to another. In detail, the external factors can be categorized into two main categories, as it is evident from Table 1, which are going to be explained in detail in the following sections, which is the online and the offline word-of-mouth process that can influence an individual to select a destination. To elaborate, seven out of eleven respondents admitted that their friends' and family's opinion can influence them to choose a destination. Especially, as participant A. (female,22) mentioned in her decision-making process in order to choose a destination her preferred choice is asking for her friends' opinions as their taste is very similar.

However, that was not the case with respondent M. (female,23), who stated that her selected choice for choosing a destination is looking online and she justified this because of the variety of information she can find as well as other peoples' comments who have shared their travel experience from a destination online. While participant F. (female, 25) in the question regarding her preferred sources of information to decide for a destination admitted that:

The truth is that when it comes to traveling nowadays even Instagram with just a picture that you may see on someone's feed can create you the desire to travel to a place and go to a destination you have never thought of before. So even a simple photo online can make me want to travel to a specific destination.

From the above-mentioned, it is evident that while the internal factors of deciding for a travel destination seem to dominate among respondents, a combination of both internal and external factors are considered important by the participants to decide for a travel destination. This finding seems fitted to what Cook, Hsu, and Marqua (2014) suggest regarding the merge of push factors that drive individuals into deciding to travel, along with pull factors such as online resources and in this case, Instagram, in their effort to find information and ultimately decide for a travel destination. The topic of online and offline sources of information is going to be examined thoroughly in the following section in order to provide an answer to sub-question 1 of this research.

#### 4.1.2. WOM as a Source of Information

Through this study, it became apparent that the majority of participants acknowledge friends' and family's influence and trust them as a credible source of information. This opinion verifies what was discussed by Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) regarding WOM being a highly credible tool when it comes to influencing consumers and especially in evaluating products and deciding on their choices as consumers. To be more specific, four sub-themes were created while reviewing and analyzing the transcriptions of respondents regarding the topic of *WOM* as a source of information (see Table 1). Thoroughly, the first sub-theme that occurred was that *WOM* and specifically friends and family are a *trustworthy source of information*. The main reason is that individuals know well their social environment and recognize them as a credible source when it comes to sharing information. For instance, participant A. (female, 26) stated that she considers the information that she can find in offline sources such as friends as trustworthy, as she generally trusts her social environment more than people online. What participant A. (female, 26) mentioned is alike to what Keller (2007) suggests regarding the uncertainty and the lack of trust that consumers seem to have towards online sources and marketing campaigns that make *WOM* interactions more reliable.

Another pattern that was observed during the analysis of participants' interviews was that a significant factor for relying on *WOM* is the *alike preferences* of individuals with their offline social connections. Specifically, seven out of eleven participants stated that they would ask for information from their close friends and family for the reason that they know their taste and their preferences in general, so it would make sense for them to look for information for their travel experience as well. An example of the above-mentioned sub-theme is the following in which participant G. (male, 25) mentioned that it is the preferred choice for him to ask for advice and information from a specific target group of his friends and especially those that he has travel experience with and their taste is very similar.

Continuing with *WOM* as a source of information for individuals when it comes to deciding for a travel destination, the third sub-theme that was created during the analysis was that *WOM* consists of a highly *influential source of information* for participants. In detail, seven of the participants admitted that when it comes to seeking for information from friends and family their opinions are highly powerful in their final decision and especially when it comes to friends who have travel experience and more specifically those who have already visited a possible destination. This finding seems consistent with the research conducted by Keller (2007) who suggested that *WOM* has become the most efficient channel of communication for individuals. An indicative example is from Participant Z. (female, 24) who mentions:

For sure I can choose a destination based on my friends' recommendations, especially if they tell me that they went to this specific destination and it was amazing, and they had a great time then for sure this would affect my decision. So yes, if my friends suggested that a place is worthy, I would be influenced.

However, during the interviews it was evident that *WOM's* dominance in the information consumers tend to rely on, does not exclude the *limitations* that come along. The analysis of the data reveals that five respondents stated that they do not trust completely the information that comes from their social environment either friends or family. Especially participant A. (female, 26) mentioned that in the case of a friend of hers who has a negative experience from a destination, this does not signify that this destination is excluded as a possible choice for her. Participant M. (female, 23) suggested that her decision-making process is not solely based on her friends' recommendation indicating that if she is interested to go to a specific destination and one of her friends suggests not to go there, although she will keep this information in mind, that would not stop her from continuing her research or asking more of her friends for a second opinion.

Another respondent suggested that a factor that could possibly act as a limitation for *WOM's* efficiency as a source of information, is that this information comes from specific individuals who have constrained opinions as well as experiences. As participant N. (female, 21) suggested regarding offline information and especially her friends and family, they have specific preferences of traveling as well as particular opinions regarding what they like and what they do not, so that acts as an obstacle for her to rely on them.

Thus, it seems that insights from the interviews endorse the idea first supported by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) and later from Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) that *WOM* indeed remains one of the preferred and most reliable sources of information for individuals. However, according to the

interviews, this does not imply that individuals rely exclusively on this source as there are several limitations they acknowledge regarding *WOM*. The above-mentioned information enabled the researcher to shed light on the first important source of information which is the *WOM* and proceed to examine *eWOM* in order to answer the sub-question regarding the sources of information consumers rely on. Thus, in the following section of the analysis, there will be a detailed description of the second important pillar when it comes to consumers finding information which is *eWOM*.

#### 4.1.3. *eWOM as a Source of Information*

As suggested in the previous section, another important source of information for individuals is *eWOM*, which indicates the information individuals can find online regarding possible destinations from other people. During the analysis, it was discovered that because individuals use the Internet more actively for different reasons, in the same way, it has become an indispensable part of travelers, an opinion that is coherent to what Chung and Buhalis (2008) and Gretzel and Yoo (2008) have proposed. To be more specific throughout the analysis five sub-themes seemed to dominate (see Table 1). To begin with, the first one is the *variety of information* that respondents can find online with three of them stating that online they are certain that they can find what they are looking for. One example is participant A. (female, 26) who claimed that it is easier to look for information online because there is a variety of opinions and there is lots of information so most of the times she will find an answer to what she is looking for, easier and quicker than offline.

Other than the variety of information individuals can find online, six respondents stated that they trust the information from online reviews, as in their view, especially compared to advertisements, they provide an *honest opinion*. Specifically, respondents seem to believe that while advertisements promoting a travel destination have a specific purpose which is attracting more visitors and creating a very attractive offer for individuals, that is not the case when it comes to online reviews. Therefore, this sub-category appears to be in accordance with previous research and especially with what Gretzel and Yoo (2008) suggest regarding consumers' preference of online reviews over advertisements. For instance, participant E. (female, 22) suggested that in relation to an advertisement online reviews are more trustworthy because an advertisement is always targeted in selling a product either this is an actual product, or a destination and it will present this product in its best form. She commented that the advertisement will present a product idealized as its goal is to be as attractive as possible. On the other hand, online reviews are purer (Participant E., female, 22).

The fact that in online reviews people can find more honest opinions regarding a destination and in general a more accurate description of a destination is emphasized by participant B. (male, 24) as he claimed that online there is more freedom for individuals to express their opinion about a



destination and that is why someone may rely on this type of information to decide for a travel destination. This notion reflects the point of view of Chung and Buhalis (2008) along with Stiakakis and Vlachopoulou (2017) as they advocate that travelers especially, wish to connect online and share their experiences so that ultimately they make their decisions based on other peoples' views. Thus, it seems that online reviews constitute a *reliable source of information* for individuals and especially when it comes to the comparison of online reviews with the information that an advertisement provides.

Regarding advertisements, all respondents acknowledge that their purpose is the promotion of travel destinations and making them more attractive. For this reason, they seem to not consider advertisements as a credible source of information. Following the research of Amaro, Duarte and Henrique (2016), this finding corresponds to the credibility of this type of information in relation to the information provided by marketers. While asking respondents directly regarding advertisements they all agreed that they are not a credible source of information, nonetheless during their conversation with the researcher it became apparent that advertisements continue to be influential. Thus, there seems to be a contradiction, as although they do not regard them as credible they continue to be influenced by what advertisements promote. Even sub-consciously they tend to get inspired for possible destinations, as through the use of colours, images and impressive videos indirectly advertisements influence consumers to take action. An indicative example is participant G. (male, 25) who stated that the advertisement may influence his choice to a greater extent, because of the power of the image and the video even though he trusts online reviews. Furthermore, he mentioned that the image will excite him and make him think that this is a nice possible destination to travel to in a way that he can even overcome the information that would have found in online reviews (Participant G., male, 25).

Nonetheless, the reliability of online reviews is echoed by the majority of the participants in this study. In detail, eight respondents agree that online reviews provide reliable information when it comes to traveling and choosing a destination. Specifically, they recognize online reviews as a reliable source for the reason that people share their own experience online. In detail, Participant A. (female, 22) stated that the reason why she trusts online reviews is that they express an opinion which most of the times is accompanied by a photo or a video making this information even more trustworthy. Plus, she mentioned that they have a better view of a destination than the one she has by simply reading information online about a destination, because they have experience (Participant A., female, 22).

The reliability of this information is brought by three more participants, however from a different perspective. In comparison to the information provided by an advertisement, participants

consider the information from online reviews reliable, as people do not have something to gain from. They believe that there is no reason for people not to trust this kind of information as it is associated with individuals' experience and thus it can be characterized as authentic information. As participant B. (male, 24) mentioned people do not have anything to benefit from posting their experience online, so they are credible.

Continuing with the perceptions of people regarding *eWOM* another sub-theme that dominated was the one regarding the *pluralistic information* that this source provides. To elaborate, all of the respondents seem to agree that there are different opinions one can discover when looking for information online. Moreover, online there is a diversity of opinions which enables individuals to compare the information that they find online before reaching a decision, while in an advertisement this is not possible. Especially, as participant F. (female, 25) suggests:

I will trust online reviews to get information, as an advertisement will only showcase the positive characteristics of a place. On the contrary, in online reviews, there is a greater range of information and no one has anything to gain from it and that is the whole point when it comes to posting your travel experience online that people are sharing their reviews online and not a company.

These insights from the interviews endorse the idea regarding the limitless information one can find online suggested by Leung, Law, Van Hoof, and Buhalis (2013). However, despite the advantages that *eWOM* provides to individuals there are several *limitations* that participants stated during the interviews. Despite the majority of participants recognized *eWOM* as a reliable source of information two of them suggested that although they accept online reviews as a credible source of information they would not look for information there as a first choice. Instead, they suggested that their first option would be asking their offline social connections and if they still need some guidance to reach to a decision then they would choose to get information from online reviews. This finding reinforces Keller's opinion (2007) concerning WOM efficiency as a channel of communication, despite the dominance of social media. It seems that people continue to be influenced by family members and friends even in this social media age and that WOM consists of a powerful answer to modern marketing techniques.

Another limitation when it comes to *eWOM* as a source of information for a travel destination was the one regarding their reliability. To be more specific, even though it seemed generally accepted by participants that online reviews are far more trustworthy than an advertisement there are some challenges that individuals face when they rely on them. Eight

respondents stated that this information becomes reliable only if many people online agree on the same opinion. Moreover, they seem to believe that online reviews, in general, are trustworthy, however when it comes to their own use of online reviews they were hesitant to declare them as reliable. That is why they claimed that they can be useful for them only under the condition of the same opinion being repeated by various people online. To elaborate on this, participant F. (female, 25) stated that she cannot be sure of what each individual expects from a travel and whether their opinions match and thus would not trust just a random opinion online. Moreover, participant N. (female, 21) stated that:

For online reviews I would say they are trustworthy, however, it depends on individuals' preferences [...]. When there are plenty of comments online either positive or negative then you can see a certain tendency either positive or negative for a place. So yes, if I see many people online expressing the same opinion I would think it is a trustworthy opinion and I would follow their suggestions.

In addition, some participants mentioned that they cannot easily trust these kinds of sources as everyone seeks different experiences when it comes to traveling and thus for them it would be more rational to rely on their social environment in order to decide for a travel destination. However, participant G. (male, 25) mentioned that he does not exclude utterly online reviews in his decision-making process. On the contrary, he claimed that he would trust online reviews for more practical issues such as whether a destination is expensive or not. In such cases, opinions can be more objective and do not conflict with each other (Participant G., male, 25).

When it comes to online forums and chats the participants of this study stated that this is not a preferred source of information for them. To elaborate on this, seven participants mentioned that they have never used online forums and chats to find information in order to decide on a travel destination. The reason behind this is that they believe they do not need to consult this kind of information when they can easily approach their friends and family. Additionally, regarding social forums and chats, six participants describe this source of information as highly subjective. To be more specific, participant M. (female, 23) suggested that she is very reserved when it comes to online forums and chats because she cannot be sure of what people expect from a trip and if what they expected did not meet the reality. She added that everyone has a different background and different experiences and expectations for a travel destination, so it does not make sense to rely a decision only on this source (Participant M., female, 23). The remaining four participants claimed that they acknowledge that online forums and chats can provide inspiration and can act as a second

opinion. Specifically, participant E. (female, 22) claimed that she thinks it is an interesting way of finding information and having a conversation online if she has doubts about a place or needs an extra opinion other than the information collected from friends and family.

This sub-section addressed the topic of eWOM relating to participants' opinions. Different elements of the data support what Kimmel and Kitchen (2013) advocate, that WOM is not limited only to face-to-face conversations but through the use of the Internet as well and especially for this study through online reviews. This sub-section helped the researcher to examine the second option of obtaining information which is the eWOM, reaching the decision that indeed eWOM is a dominant choice. In this regard, WOM in the social media age seems to continue to be powerful taking the form of online reviews, blogs and communities online as people take advantage of the possibilities online to communicate, share their opinions and empower themselves as consumers. While it is undeniable that people tend to get influenced by their friends and family it seems that they consider equally reliable the information provided by complete strangers online who share their experiences on products, and travels.

#### *4.1.4. - Uses and Gratification Theory and Sources of Information*

The Uses and Gratification theory enabled the researcher to understand in-depth individuals' needs when it comes to relying on specific sources of information. During the analysis of the interviews, it was discovered that the first option for people when looking for information is to search online. To elaborate on this, nine participants seemed to believe that looking for information online is inevitable as for them it is the easiest and the most convenient option. This finding reinforces the idea suggested by Amaro, Duarte, and Henriques (2016), that the easy access to information online is a primary reason for individuals to choose this option. Moreover, it was suggested that when looking for information online there is a great chance that individuals will find useful information and inspiration for a possible travel destination. For instance, participant A. (female, 26) suggested that her preferred way is online due to the variety and the amount of information she can find and participant F. (female, 25) mentioned that reaching her phone and looking for info online is the easiest option for her while participant E. (female, 27) claimed that online she can find a spectrum of information from different people.

Concerning offline sources of information, only four participants suggested that when looking for information for a product they would trust their friends' and family's opinion far more than online reviews. However, when it comes to traveling, seven participants seem to believe that it is important to take advice from their social environment and that their advice would influence them into possibly traveling to a specific destination. For example, participant E. (female, 22) suggested

that she would rely on and follow their advice because she trusts their opinions, so it is easy to be influenced by them as well while participant G. (male, 25) claimed that if a member of his family or a friend of his describes his experience about a destination that would influence him into choosing or not this specific place.

Thus, it can be said that although individuals tend to rely on information online, that does not diminish WOM's influence in their decision-making process. To elaborate, it seems that there is no clear answer to the question regarding the sources of information Greek consumers tend to rely on as the difference is not that significant. While nine individuals seem to believe that looking for information online is their first option, that does not signify that they do not rely on WOM, as seven respondents seem to trust WOM. This finding seems to reflect the theory regarding the dominance of eWOM and online sources in individuals' preferences (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). However, it seems contradictory to what Schegg, Liebrich, Scaglione and Ahmad (2008) suggest, as they advocate that consumers obtain information and decide for their next travel destination only through the Internet, an opinion that is not consistent with participants' answers, as their preferred choice is a combination of both offline and online sources.

#### *4.1.5. – Additional Themes – Traveling Abroad or in Greece*

During the interviews, another pattern occurred although not initially expected. To be more specific, during the discussion of the sources of information that individuals tend to rely on for their travels, the majority of respondents identified that there is a distinction in choosing sources of information when looking for a destination inside Greece or abroad. In the theoretical framework of this study, such an approach was not mentioned, as previous literature did not point out the existence of this pattern, so this possibility was not taken into account due to the missing information in the sources. This idea derived solely from participants' sayings giving the researcher the ability to delve into and explore this point of view.

This distinction between participant's chosen sources of information according to national vs. international travel destinations provides new insights regarding the behavior of Greek consumers. In detail, it provides useful information regarding the correlation between travel destinations and the reasons why Greek consumers trust either WOM or eWOM, enabling the researcher to explore another aspect and give an answer to the sub-question concerning the sources of information they rely on. To elaborate, eight respondents claimed that there is a difference when deciding for a destination in Greece or abroad. The opinion that dominated was that when deciding for a national destination individuals tend to be more flexible with what they expect, their decisions are more spontaneous and more importantly that WOM is the most reliable source for these kinds

of destinations. Individuals stated that there is a great chance someone from their social environment has already experience from a place and thus it is easier to rely on them for information.

On the contrary, when looking for information for an international destination online reviews occupy a strong place in their decision process. Four participants claimed that it is more complicated to organize a journey abroad and for this reason, the search of information takes place online due to the variety of sources and information they can find. As participant N. (female, 21) stated, it is not that common to find people from ones' social environment who know information about a destination abroad, so it is more likely to use the internet for such a destination.

Therefore, a significant theme that was extracted from the participants is their preference for WOM when looking for information and deciding for a national travel destination. However, when it comes to an international destination eWOM and especially online reviews seem to dominate as a reliable source of information. Thus, when deciding for such an intangible product as traveling WOM is very powerful as people tend to trust other people's opinions, especially coming from their social environment, when it comes to choosing a destination. They tend to prefer this way of getting information for destinations in Greece as they assume that it is likely that their offline social connections have knowledge about such destinations. Moreover, individuals tend to not spend so much time looking for information or different sources of information as the highly spontaneous nature of planning a journey in their home country enables them to be more flexible when looking for information as well. On the contrary, the risk when deciding for a destination abroad is bigger and planning for such travel is far more complex and therefore they believe that with eWOM and the fast way of accessing information from all over the world, they can obtain more detailed information and plan a more complicated journey such as the one abroad.

#### **4.2. Influence of Travel Destination-Related Posts from Social Media Influencers**

This section of the results will provide participants' views regarding the second sub-question and especially whether travel-related posts from influencers affect Greek consumers' decision-making process when it comes to selecting a destination. First, the reasons to follow influencers will be discussed, followed by the Uses and Gratification theory in relation to social media influencers posts and lastly, the ELM model will be used to understand individuals' perceptions regarding social media influencers' effect. These sections will provide the researcher with the needed information to answer the second sub-question.

#### 4.2.1. – Influencer Marketing: Reasons to Follow Influencers

Table 2: Reasons for following Influencers

Reasons for following influencers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Inspiration</li><li>- Opinion-seeking</li><li>- Aesthetically pleasing content</li><li>- Relatability</li></ul>

Apart from eWOM, individuals tend to rely on specific people online who have the power to influence through the content they upload, especially on the social media platform of Instagram. Regarding social media influencers, eight participants admitted that they follow these influencers on Instagram while three were more negative towards influencers and stated that they do not. Nonetheless, even the three respondents who do not follow influencers admitted that their effect on people is undeniable due to Instagram's dominance. To delve more into this subject throughout the analysis of the interviews there were four sub-themes created (see Table 2) regarding the reasons why people follow influencers and specifically those who showcase their travels and the destinations they visit: *Inspiration, opinion seeking, aesthetically pleasing content* and the *relatability of influencers*.

The first sub-theme regarding the reasons why individuals follow these influencers is that they provide *inspiration*. Specifically, six participants claimed that by depicting their travels, they provide new ideas to their followers for possible destinations as they project unexpected places. For instance, participant F. (female, 25) suggested that she follows travel influencers to give her inspiration for her next travels while participant Z. (female, 24) also added that they can provide ideas and influence her, even before she decides that she wants to travel somewhere, just by looking at all those places they provide her with the desire to travel.

Inspiration is also linked to *opinion seeking*, in the sense that through social media influencers, individuals can look for advice and suggestions when it comes to new places and products. This sub-theme appears to be in accordance with what Xu and Pratt (2018) advocate regarding social media influencers being opinion-leaders who provide information to their followers. Because influencers address in such a niche segment they provide their followers with information regarding their lifestyle and their interests in a way that their followers trust them for suggestions. Indeed, one example is participant M. (female, 23) who suggested that what she likes about

influencers is the fact that they upload not so mainstream places and she can draw inspiration or even ask for further information if she is interested in visiting a destination they have shown on their Instagram feed. Additionally, participant N. (female, 21) claimed that she has noticed that influencers go to the nicest places and they show different perspectives and sometimes unknown places that the majority of people haven't heard of before.

However, it became apparent that the majority of participants and in detail seven of them stated that most of the times they will not turn to influencers for advice by their own initiative. On the contrary, they claimed that most of the times they happen to see a place they are interested in or a product accordingly, by scrolling on their Instagram feeds. Specifically, participant G. (male, 25) suggested that looking at influencers' posts is a nice activity to do in his spare time when he scrolls on his Instagram feed and has nothing else to do.

Another reason that was dominant in participants' interviews relates to the *aesthetically pleasing content* of their account, as the majority of the individuals mentioned that this was a strong incentive to follow them in the first place. Participants recognize that one of the things they find appealing is their polished and tasteful content and the fact that influencers pay attention to detail. An example of the above-mentioned can be found in participant F.'s (female, 25) interview in which she stated that:

Either to have a visually pleasing profile or to advertise something or somewhere they have been, they provide their followers with beautiful and polished photos, for instance, for travel influencers the images they upload can easily be used from a travel agency to promote this destination, because this photo will have the proper lighting, the right background [...]. It is their aesthetic and their way of projecting either products or destinations.

This unique way of individuals portraying themselves online contradicts however Giles' and Edwards' suggestion (2018) concerning their distinct way of creating intimacy with their followers. While the theory suggests that either with posting selfies or more spontaneous photos of themselves individuals tend to feel closer with influencers, as they feel they are one of them, through this research it becomes apparent that the more attractive and polished their content is the bigger their influence and the possibility of individuals to follow influencers on the first place. Furthermore, regarding high quality productions and especially marketing strategies it is interesting to think that they continue to be more persuasive than a more realistic version of the product. Thus, to a certain extent, it seems that a "polished outer image" is more effective than reality itself, indicating that people continue to be in search of something special that is different from their lives



patterns. That is why, the attention to detail and making their profile as appealing as possible are significant factors for individuals to get influenced by their Instagram posts.

Another dominant sub-theme that occurred is the *relatability* of influencers with their followers. In detail, the similarities of the style and the personality between the influencers and the interviewees was another decisive factor for following influencers. More specifically, the majority of the participants pointed out that the primary reason for them to decide whether they will follow an influencer or not is the degree of relevancy with their own style, opinions and lifestyle in general. This opinion is illustrated best from participant B. (male, 24) as he mentions that the influencers he follows, and trusts are the ones he likes their personality and their character and can identify with them. He suggested that they are the ones who he feels are authentic and real and in general, close to his way of thinking and personality as well. In this way, he explained that he does not feel that they always want to gain something from the posts they make online or that they use him.

However, two respondents indicated with their answers that relatability can also act as a reason for an individual to stop following an influencer. Especially participant A. (female, 22) suggested that when these influencers travel in luxurious places and in general when their lifestyle is far from hers and she cannot identify with them, she will not follow them because their way of living is very different compared to hers.

In this sub-section, the researcher provided participants' views regarding their reasons to follow an influencer. In detail four sub-themes were created: *Inspiration*, *Opinion-seeking*, *Aesthetically pleasing content* and lastly *Relatability of influencers*. This sub-section forms the basis for the second sub-question and enables the researcher to continue with the Uses and Gratification theory in the following section.

#### 4.2.2. - Uses and Gratification Theory and Social Media Influencers' Posts

Table 3: Credibility of Influencers

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Credibility of Influencers
- Realness
- Experience
- Engagement

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The Uses and Gratification Theory provides a base for discussion not only for sub-question one. According to the data analysis, the theory can also be applied to sub-question two, as the results show that respondents recognize social media influencers' effect to their decision-making process under the condition that influencers are credible. As suggested by Lim, Cheah and Wong (2017), consumers tend to rely on influencers in their decision-making process when attempting to buy a product as they accept them as credible figures. Indeed, this opinion is confirmed by the data of this paper as three main sub-themes (see Table 3) were created regarding the conditions that influencers need to meet, in order to be accepted as credible: *Realness*, *experience* and *engagement*.

To begin with, an aspect that emerged from the interviews regarding the credibility of influencers is their *realness*. Especially in comparison with celebrities respondents tend to view influencers as more real and more approachable, finding which seems to be consistent with the opinion introduced by Lim, Cheah and Wong (2017), where they advocate that social media influencers are regarded far more trustworthy, insightful and informed and can persuade their followers in their decisions as consumers. Thoroughly, participant A. (female, 22) suggested that influencers are more approachable because they are not afraid of ruining their image online as they have built their online persona by being more accessible and more real, not so stiff and unnatural as celebrities. Moreover, four respondents admitted that influencers are more authentic than celebrities because they have a higher percentage of freedom to express their honest opinions and more personal issues. An example that indicates best what is mentioned above is by respondent N. (female, 21) who advocated that influencers depict online different aspects of their personality, more real because they are not afraid of being judged by the press or magazines and they have more freedom into expressing themselves and uploading online what they wish, even a more personal moment of themselves for example. She went on to suggest that celebrities, on the contrary, tend to hedge their statements and opinions to become acceptable and thus influencers are more authentic (Participant N., female, 21).

Continuing with the theme of credibility and specifically focused in comparison to celebrities, seven participants acknowledged that what makes them trust an influencer and especially for a travel destination is their travel *experience*. More specifically, respondent E. (female, 22) suggested that what makes their profile attractive and even more a source that she can trust is the fact that they are depicting their whole travel experience and it becomes a story around their travel in which she can take part in. Another opinion that echoed this notion is stated by participant Z. (female, 24) as she mentioned that if an influencer travels a lot and looks for non-mainstream destinations then she can understand that their taste is similar and can trust their suggestions. The above-mentioned statements concur with the research of Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2020), who

point out that influencer marketing is a prevailing tool for the tourism sector, as these influencers can attract tourists to the destinations they visit and ultimately shape their perceptions. Indeed, individuals seem to trust those influencers who have a specific area of expertise, in this case traveling, and provide suggestions for their followers for the destinations they visit themselves as well. Additionally, as participant F. (female, 25) stated influencers do not get paid from a destination so their feedback is objective and as this is part of their job they have the ability and the budget to travel to a lot of places, so they have the knowledge to compare destinations. So, their overall experience of traveling to different places makes them even more credible.

Another dominant sub-theme that was created during the analysis is their *engagement* with their followers. Especially when it comes to influencers depicting their travels individuals revealed that they regard them as trustworthy when they devote time to connect with their followers. In detail, as participant B. (male, 24) stated he trusts those influencers who create a connection with their audience, spend time to respond to their queries and upload consistently either posts or stories. A similar opinion was found in participant G. (male, 25) as he stated that:

I like to follow their travels to see if this destination interests me as well to visit at some point [...]. I enjoy seeing their uploads and their photos and I appreciate when they upload their whole experience through stories because in this way it is like a film which has a sequence and I find it very interesting.

These results appear to be in accordance with previous research such as Lim's, Cheah's, and Wong's (2017) who support the idea that, because influencers address a niche segment of people they can maintain a more friendly tone and engage in depth with their followers. They have created an intimate relationship with their followers with whom they share their achievements even their more vulnerable moments making them feel more connected to their audience. This opinion is adopted by the majority of the participants of this research as they appreciate influencers more when they engage and connect with them.

However, that was not the case with two respondents and especially participant E. (female, 27) and participant N. (female, 25) as they suggested that they cannot be certain whether what is depicted online from influencers corresponds to their honest opinion and thus cannot characterize them as credible. Their opinion seems to contradict Magno's and Cassia's (2018) research which suggests that influencers' efficiency is constantly increasing, while in this research it seems that it is not a widely accepted opinion that influencers have the power to formulate individuals' perceptions.

This opinion signifies that it is up to individuals' critical thinking to evaluate what they see online and whether they would trust or not influencers when they advocate either products or destinations. For example, participant N. (female, 25) suggested that on Instagram, there is no certain way to find out whether the truth is being said or whether it is just a way to get more followers or promote something.

This sub-section with the Uses and Gratification theory enabled the researcher to understand that Greek consumers rely on influencers under the condition that they are credible for them. The insights from the interviews endorse the idea that indeed influencers are more trustworthy than celebrities as stated by Lim, Cheah and Wong (2017) as well as an effective tool for the promotion of destinations, opinion stated by Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2020). This sub-section reveals also the reasons why individuals might get influenced by travel influencers' posts with *realness*, *experience* and *engagement* to dominate as incentives for their influence. In this way the second sub-question is answered as the reasons why individuals could be influenced by travel influencers are defined.

#### 4.2.3. – ELM model and Influencers' Persuasion

In the effort to understand better the way in which individuals are influenced by social media influencers, the ELM model enabled the researcher to examine thoroughly participants' attitudes. In detail, the ELM model aided the researcher to understand whether they use the central route of processing information evaluating influencers' posts through their practical elements or the peripheral route in which the satisfaction of their emotional needs dominates in the process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Through the analysis of the interviews and the use of the ELM model, it was evident that when participants view influencers' posts they tend to think about their emotional needs and the ways these needs can be satisfied, enabling the researcher to understand that Greek consumers tend to use the peripheral path for processing the information from influencers as explained by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). The way influencers promote destinations becomes so appealing to their followers, that they set aside the critical interpretation of what they see online, in a way that the visual and aesthetically pleasing content becomes so attractive that they wish to mimic them. More specifically, the majority of participants, eight, in particular, admitted that they can easily be influenced by what influencers project in their Instagram feed because of the power of image and because of the aesthetic of these photos. According to participant G. (male, 25) for instance, although the background of each individual is significant in examining critically the message, the power of image dominates in a way an individual can easily be influenced. In the same topic

participant N. (female, 21) admitted that when she takes a lot of information from an influencer through photos and videos subconsciously these images affect her decision process.

Another reason that participants admitted as significant for them to get influenced, is their desire to imitate and to look like influencers. An example that best describes this notion is stated by participant E. (female, 27) as she claimed that the majority of people are very easily influenced by what influencers project. She suggested that when they go to a particular destination or stay in a specific hotel they would try and imitate them even if this does not apply to their own lifestyle just to look like them. They believe that in this way they can gain more followers for example or more reputation.

The opinion stated by participant E. (female, 27) is echoed by participant F. (female, 25), as she admits that individuals can be influenced when influencers project the destinations they visit even more than when they promote products. In her view, though this is not because they are deeply interested in a specific destination. On the contrary, as participant F. (female, 25) suggests:

100% people are influenced by these influencers. The first phase of traveling is dreaming of it and that is exactly what they do. They make you portray yourself in this ideal destination, living in the best hotel and eating in the best restaurants [...]. Through their constant uploads, they create their followers this desire to live the same experience. The travel experience is so powerful so that when they upload an amazing destination in their Instagram they make you want to experience it for yourself and imagine yourself there.

However, three participants suggested they tend to examine thoroughly what is depicted online and evaluate them according to their needs. In this way, individuals seem to not passively accept what they come across online and use the central path of processing information, as explained by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). With their critical thinking, they can ascertain whether a product is actually valuable to them and worth buying it or even a destination worth visiting. Participant M. (female, 23) for instance stated that when influencers promote a very expensive way of living and destinations out of her reach she will not be affected by what she sees as this is not accessible to her. In this way, she may admire the photos they will upload but will not be able to identify with them and follow their suggestions. Additionally, both participant B. (male, 24) and participant Z. (female, 24) suggested that they may get inspiration for a possible destination, but they will always filter this information afterwards to examine whether it is actually fitted to their own preferences and if this information from the influencer is actually useful and important for their decision-making process.

In order to provide a stronger insight into the findings presented in this sub-section, the ELM model was used as a base to understand the reasons why participants get influenced by social media influencers and whether individuals use the central route of processing information to evaluate the practical elements or the peripheral route in which the satisfaction of their emotional needs dominates (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The ELM model enabled the researcher to evaluate individuals' perceptions when it comes first to their influence by these kinds of posts, and second the dominant reasons that push them into following influencers' suggestions, thus providing an answer to the second sub-question. The analysis revealed that most individuals tend to be influenced by social media influencers' posts using the peripheral route of processing the information, as the satisfaction of their emotional needs and their wish to experience the same as the influencers surpasses the usefulness of what is depicted from the influencers.

This section provides a general overview of the results presented in this chapter and an answer to the two sub-questions (the sources of information consumers rely on and the influence of travel-related posts from influencers). Regarding the sources of information that consumers rely on when deciding for a travel destination, which was the analysis goal of the first sub-question, it became apparent that the preferred way for participants is a combination of both WOM and eWOM. Although when looking for a destination abroad there is a clear prominence of eWOM, WOM is eminent when deciding for a destination in Greece. It seems that individuals recognize WOM's trustworthiness despite the fact that reaching for their phone to search online for information such as in online reviews is an easier and more convenient choice for them.

Concerning the effect of travel-related posts from influencers to individuals' decision-making process, that consists the second sub-question, insights from the interviews reflect the opinion presented in previous literature, that the effect influencers have on their followers is unquestionable, just as Freberg et al. (2011) suggest regarding their audience reach and their ability to promote products and services. An important aspect that was revealed through this research is that the emotional factor pushes individuals into following what influencers suggest. Their desire to look like the influencers is what drives individuals to follow their suggestions and get influenced by them. Considering the effects of this behavior on their decision-making process regarding traveling plans, it seems that individuals tend to decide for a destination with the intention to reproduce the lifestyle of the influencers they follow online and not so because of the characteristics of a place or whether this destination is suited to their general preferences.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter will present the main findings of this research and provide an answer to the research question of this paper. The theoretical and societal implications will be analyzed and lastly, the researcher will pose some limitations of this research along with suggestions for future research.

### 5.1. – Main Findings

The purpose of the current research and the main research question of the paper was the investigation of how social media have affected the decision-making process of Greek consumers when it comes to choosing their travel destination. The study was conducted through the prism of the theories of WOM, eWOM, the Push and Pull theory, Influencer marketing, the Uses and Gratification theory and lastly, the ELM model as they were presented in the specific literature-related chapter of the paper. Considering the focus of this study on Greek consumers and their way of choosing for a travel destination this study aimed to explore in depth, through a qualitative approach their views with the tool of in-depth interviews.

Along with the main research question (*What is the role of social media in Greek consumers' decision-making process regarding traveling plans*), two sub-questions were created, the first one to explore the sources of information consumers use, and the second one to understand the influence of travel-related posts from Instagram. The creation of two sub-questions was not only necessary in order to examine the topic, but also valuable to reveal the dominant themes and recurrent patterns regarding social media and the decision-making process of Greek consumers for a travel destination. The examination of the sources of information that Greek consumers tend to rely on, which was the first sub-question, reveals that for participants a combination of both WOM and eWOM is the preferred choice. As it has been suggested in the literature review, WOM remains prominent in consumers' behavior despite technological advances, as friends and family prevail as a trustworthy source of information (Keller, 2007). Nonetheless, contrary to previous research, the interviews showed that eWOM and especially online reviews have a significant influence on Greek consumers' decision, because of the variety of information as well as the easy access to them. Thus, it seems that an enjoyable experience, for instance, encourages tourists to share this information with other people either with face to face or online conversations. Travelers can express freely their travel experience far from purposeful information broadcasted by advertisements and that is what makes this type of information trustworthy.

Regarding the influence of travel-related posts of influencers in consumers' decision-making process, explored through sub-question two, participants' answers were sectioned in relation to the reasons why individuals follow influencers with the main findings being the *inspiration*, the *opinion-*

*seeking*, the *aesthetically pleasing content* of an influencer and lastly the *relatability* with the participants. This set the basis for the researcher to extract information regarding influencers' credibility especially relating to celebrities. The interviews revealed that influencers' *realness*, *engagement* and *travel experience* enhance their credibility in a way that participants trust them and follow their suggestions. Therefore, influencers seem to consist of a highly significant factor when it comes to deciding on a travel destination as their opinion is very trustworthy. This opinion seems to be in accordance to what Pang et al. (2016) suggest, as they define social media influencers as this new form of endorsers who have the ability to affect people's opinions and as it seems their travel behavior as well. Hence, destination marketers could face influencers as successful endorsers not only for products but for destinations as well following the findings of this research.

The current research provides answers for the ways Greek consumers tend to decide for their next travel destination and how consumers perceive social media's role in this process. The sub-questions were fundamental to answer the main research question as the researcher was able to understand that indeed social media, and especially Instagram, which was the focus of the current study, are dominant in individuals' lifestyle and therefore in their choices as consumers. Social media influencers' efficiency in promoting products and particularly destinations is undeniable, as was revealed through the interviews. Nonetheless, more traditional ways of promoting destinations such as friends and family continue to remain significant despite digital communications' platforms powerfulness.

The previous chapters of this study were essential to this research. The introduction provided more general information regarding the topic of tourism in relation to social media and the rise of concern regarding the evolution of the tourism sector as well as the new opportunities that have been created both for marketers and consumers. Moreover, the introduction showcased the study's academic relevance in relation to investigating the topic of influencer marketing for example from the perspective of Greek consumers' perceptions, and also the societal relevance concerning the examination of individuals' choices and their potential connection to their distinct values. The theoretical chapter was used in order for the theoretical framework of this study to be elaborated. It enabled the researcher to explain thoroughly the theoretical concepts of WOM and eWOM as methods of obtaining information, the Influencer marketing and the Uses and Gratification theory to understand the reasons consumers make specific choices and lastly the Push and Pull theory and the ELM model as factors that influence their persuasion level. Furthermore, the choice of the appropriate methodological approach was analyzed along with the process of the analysis of the results. In-depth interviews enabled the researcher to gain participants' valuable



insights and understand their way of thinking, while thematic analysis was used to analyze the existing patterns of the data and the CGT approach to identify any new topics that occurred.

## **5.2. Theoretical Implications**

Considering the literature review of this study, it seems that the findings of this research substantiate the value of certain theoretical discussions and in some aspects provide new insights. First with the Push and Pull theory the researcher identified that indeed the internal factors and particularly the need for escapism is what pushes individuals to travel, finding in accordance with Cook's, Hsu's, and Marqua's (2014) research. Concerning the pull factors, these have been categorized into two categories, the WOM and eWOM as both influence individuals in their travel choices. Beginning with WOM, it is interesting to note that the findings regarding WOM's efficiency as a source of information correlate with one of the first researches conducted by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) emphasizing WOM's power into shaping consumers perceptions. Furthermore, the present paper reinforces the idea suggested by Brown, Broderick, and Lee (2007) and Olga Lo and Razaq (2014) concerning WOM's credibility as a source of information and the effectiveness of it as a tool for consumers, as participants seem to base their decisions, especially for such an intangible product as the travel one, on the advice of their offline social connections.

The findings of this research were also in accordance with Kimmel's and Kitchen's (2013) research as it was evident that WOM has taken different forms. Especially, information is being transmitted through online communities as well as online reviews which constitute the eWOM. In essence, with the domination of Internet people tend to look for and share information in new ways, such as through online reviews, with online communities becoming central even in travelers' way of looking for information. Furthermore, regarding the topic of influencer marketing, this research brings complementary in-depth information to Lim's Cheah's and Wong's (2017) research as more aspects regarding influencers' credibility are revealed, such as their travel experience as an enhancement of their credibility. This research complements also Femenia-Serra's and Gretzel's (2020) research, as participants indicated influencers' efficiency in attracting individuals to travel destinations as well as regarding their predominance over celebrities when it comes to promoting products and travel destinations through their Instagram feed.

The Uses and Gratification theory regards individuals as active users and not passive consumers of media (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016) an opinion that concurs with this research as indeed Greek consumers use Instagram and rely on influencers because they consider them as reliable and thus make use of the information they upload online. Through this research, it becomes apparent that there has been a change in the way individuals act as consumers, as they are far more powerful

considering that the process of making decisions has now become more interactive with consumers being on the front line in the decision-making process. The traveling industry has not been unaffected since it seems that individuals tend to rely on influencers on Instagram who have become dominant through their content and use them as guidance to decide for their next destination.

Moreover, the ELM model identified that participants tend to get influenced by what they view online as the emotional factor dominates in this process. Particularly regarding travel-related posts individuals, in their effort to imitate influencers, they get influenced by what influencers promote, finding which indicates that they tend to set aside their critical interpretation and follow the peripheral route of processing information as suggested by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). With this finding, it appears that consumers can easily be influenced by what influencers suggest online, even unintentionally while scrolling on their Instagram feed as their desire to follow these influencers they admire prevails a more critical interpretation of such content.

Additionally, the interpretation of the findings revealed some unexpected observations, leading to new insights regarding Greek consumers' way of choosing for a destination. Indeed, the research underlines the tendency of Greek consumers to rely on their offline social connections for national travel destinations, whereas when it comes to deciding for an international travel destination online reviews, as well as social media influencers, occur a significant place in their decision-making process as their influence is significant.

### **5.3. – Societal Implications**

The key aspect of this paper is the cultural approach as its focus is on Greek consumers' perceptions and the combination of the topic of social media and the Greek market in one paper. The present study provides significant information in understanding Greek consumers' behavior, especially concerning their way of thinking when it comes to deciding for a travel destination. Indeed, through this study, the researcher was able to gain insights into how social media and especially Instagram has become dominant in their decision process. Considering the participants' profile as consumers it seems that young people recognize Instagram's power as a tool of communication and in particular as an effective marketing tool.

Furthermore, the social relevance of this study arises from the fact that it enhances the understanding of the dominance of social media influencers when promoting products and especially travel destinations to their followers. Besides that, the research also provides evidence into influencers' credibility especially in relation to celebrities as well as the reasons behind their efficiency, confirming what Freberg et al. (2011) suggest concerning influencers' significant audience reach to their followers.

#### **5.4. – Limitations and Future Research Suggestions**

A significant limitation of this study is the limited number of interviews (11 interviews) the researcher conducted as well as the focus solely on the Greek market which affects the generalizability of the study, especially in relation to other cultures. Moreover, the qualitative nature of this study entails the involvement of the researcher in the analysis and later in the interpretation of the results. As a result, there is a possibility that the results of this paper have been influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher regarding the perspective from which this research was conducted and the way results were analyzed. Thus, the qualitative nature of the study might bring different results in other similar researches according to the perspective used for analysis. Nonetheless, the use of a theoretical framework along with the creation of the interview guide enabled the researcher to maintain an objective attitude towards the study and increase the reliability and validity by providing a starting point which is outside of the researcher's own interpretations.

In relation to the aforementioned limitations, there are plenty of opportunities for future research, with the current study operating as a starting point. As the focus of this study was solely on Greek consumers a suggestion would be to conduct future research on a similar topic, however with the focus being on a different culture. In this way, a cultural comparison regarding consumers' decision-making process when it comes to traveling could be conducted. It would also be interesting to organize such a study in Greece as in this way interviews could be done face-to-face and the researcher would have the ability to recruit a larger number of participants.

Furthermore, another suggestion for future research could be the investigation of the perceptions of the experts of the tourism sector regarding the changes that social media have implemented and especially in the way they tend to promote destinations to consumers. Thus, as this research is focused on consumers' perceptions it would be interesting to examine the same topic however from the businesses' perspective and in this way examine a different aspect, especially from people who experience the changes on the tourism sector firsthand.

Finally, another possible recommendation for future research could be studying the same topic, however using a different age group. In detail, while this research was focused on Greek consumers aged 18-29, as this age group is more likely to use social media according to Perrin's (2015) research, it would be interesting to investigate a different age group and compare their behaviors regarding the decision process of choosing a travel destination. By examining a different age group, research could be focused on whether Instagram influencers prevail in a different age group as well, reinforcing the existing findings or whether there is a differentiation in results.

This research focused on examining whether social media have affected the decision-making process of Greek consumers. The aim of this research was to complement the existing knowledge regarding this topic along with offering new insights concerning Greek consumers' way of deciding for a travel destination. The aforementioned discussion of the results indicated that the findings of this research are mostly consistent with the existing theory. Especially regarding WOM's efficiency, even in a time where online marketing seems to prevail, consumers indicate their preference of other people's experiences rather than an advertisement. Furthermore, eWOM and particular online reviews seem to also constitute a preferred choice for consumers when traveling.

Influencer marketing on the other hand is indeed an undeniably powerful mean of marketing in the tourism sector with participants acknowledging social media influencers' predominance in the formation of their perceptions, not only regarding products, but for destinations as well. This finding is in congruence with the theoretical framework around this topic and enables a better understanding of their efficiency.

The findings of this research will hopefully contribute to the further exploration of the field of tourism and especially concerning Greek consumers' perceptions with the aim of this paper being a starting point for further research towards a better understanding of Greek individuals' behavior as consumers.

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## Appendix A: Topic Guide

Before the researcher proceeds to the interview with the participants, she is going to thank them for participating in the research. Then, the researcher is going to ask permission for recording the interview and share some information regarding the topic of the research.

The interview guide starts with introductory questions to make the interviewees feel comfortable. Following the introductory questions, the guide is divided into sections, according to the Theoretical Framework of the research paper.

- **Introductory Questions**

1. Do you enjoy traveling?  
Why?
2. Do you have any social media accounts?
3. What is the primary reason for having these accounts?
4. Do you use Instagram?  
If yes, are you using the platform daily?  
If no, why not?
5. Who do you follow?  
Why?
6. What are the reasons that you mainly use the platform for?

- **Word of Mouth and Digital Communication platforms**

7. Would you say that before deciding on buying a certain product you have to consider your friends' and family's opinion?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.
8. How important is their opinion?
9. When it comes to deciding your traveling plans do you trust the opinion of your friends and family?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.
10. Would you say that you may decide your travel destination because of your family's or friends' recommendations?

11. What is your opinion regarding online discussion forums and chats about traveling topics?
12. Would you trust these types of sources to decide your travel destination?
13. Would you say that you prepare for a long time before deciding to travel?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.
14. Do you think there is a difference when looking for information online than offline?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.
15. Do you feel that you have more control when it comes to finding information online and deciding for the next travel destination than offline?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.

- **eWOM, Social Media Influencers and ELM**

- eWOM**

16. Do you tend to rely on online reviews for information and guidance?
17. How would you describe other people's reviews in matter of credibility?  
Please explain why.
18. Do you prefer to read online other consumer reviews than seeing a marketing advertisement to decide for your travel?
19. Do you find it easier to seek for information online, in social media for instance, than reaching your offline social network?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.

- Social Media Influencers**

In this section of the interview the interviewer indicates that the focus of this section will be on the platform of Instagram and on influencers that are active on Instagram. The interviewer explains that with the term influencers she identifies those individuals who have an effect on people online and can influence them with their actions through their content.

20. Do you follow any influencers on Instagram?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.
21. Do you follow social media influencers that post travel related content?

22. Do you like following these specific influencers?  
If yes, what is it that makes their profile attractive to you?  
If no, please explain why not.
23. Is there anything you dislike when it comes to social media influencers? If yes, what is that?
24. Especially considering travel related influencers is there anything you dislike about them?
25. Do you trust their opinion when it comes to deciding for a travel destination?
26. What makes an influencer credible and reliable according to your opinion?
27. Do you think they are more trustworthy than celebrities when it comes to promoting products?  
If yes, please explain why.  
If no, please explain why not.
28. Would you say that individuals tend to trust them without judging further their opinions?  
Why is that?
29. Would you say that the number of followers an influencer has affects the way people perceive them?
30. Does that apply to you as well?
31. Do you think that the way these influencers promote products influence people into buying these products themselves as well?  
If yes, how?  
If no, please explain why not.
32. When it comes to travel destinations do you think they equally affect how people decide on their own travel destinations?  
If yes, how?  
If no, please explain why not.

- **Closing Questions**

33. Can you recall your most recent trip and how you decided on that travel destination?
34. After we have discussed all this, is there anything you would like to ask/add?

Thank you for your participation and your time.

- **Probes used during the interview**
  - Asking the interviewee to elaborate on a given answer
  - Staying silent to indicate that more info is expected to be given
  - Asking more details and sub-questions in response to given answers
  - Highlight inconsistencies or unclarities and ask for the interviewee's thoughts on that

## Appendix B: Interviewees' Information

<b>No.</b>	<b>Pseudonyms of Interviewees</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
1	Zoe	24	Female
2	Niki	25	Female
3	George	25	Male
4	Bill	24	Male
5	Maria	23	Female
6	Emma	22	Female
7	Anna	26	Female
8	Andrea	22	Female
9	Eva	27	Female
10	Nora	21	Female
11	Fay	25	Female