

Young Greek Travelers and Instagram's representations:

Do they break the circle of representation?

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Preface

Writing this master thesis was one of the most challenging projects I have ever carried out in my life. Things did not always go as expected, however the ups and downs throughout the process allowed me to cultivate many favorable aptitudes that will accompany and guide me throughout my life.

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Abstract

Visual representations have always been an important aspect of the traveling process due to the fact that firstly, tourism and photography are an inseparable pair and secondly, tourism is a visual experience. Consequently, representations' influence on travelers' gaze is undeniable throughout the years. However, often, they become part of the travelers' mindset and by reproducing them, it leads to the so-called hermeneutic circle. Due to the uptake of social media and digitalization, visual representations have increased dramatically; destinations images are being produced not only by official tourism stakeholders but also from travelers. Therefore, Instagram being a solely visual media platform, it provides ideal conditions to co-produce and co-create the destination image of a place. This research aims to analyze the influence of Instagram's representations on a specific group of young Greek people when traveling. More specifically, this research investigates the influence of visual representations of Instagram on young Greek people employed in the creative sector; in their tourist gaze as well in their photo-taking and sharing process. The use of in-depth-interviews as a tool to research on the viewpoints and experiences of these people and thematic analysis helped to organize the data meaningfully in codes, which led to the final themes of answering the initial question. All in all, it was concluded that young Greek peoples' tourist gaze and photo taking process are influenced vastly from Instagram's images. Nevertheless, it deduced that the respondents follow the hermeneutic circle to an extent and on their own terms; after visiting the main points of interest, they will try to find their own places to explore and capture, a necessary process to have an authentic and real experience. Although they will share pictures of main attractions attached to their unique style, at the same time, they will also share images of new places that they personally found interesting. This leads to the creation of new images in the imagery of destinations. Consequently, the research showed that the sample of young Greek people does not simply follow a pre-defined hermeneutic circle as Urry (1990) suggests, but through their photographs, they can fully experience and re-create the place.

KEYWORDS: visual representations, tourist gaze, hermeneutic circle, photography, Instagram, sharing content

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1. Introduction

Tourism and photography have always been an inseparable pair (Sontag, 1977; Chalfen, 1979; Urry, 2002). As destinations were being widely represented by organizations, guide books, travel brochures, and films in the form of pictures, these visual representations of a destination, helped people learn about unknown places and over time consciously or subconsciously form a certain image of a place (Albers & James, 1988; Jenkins, 2003).

Tourism is mainly a visual experience (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997) and photography plays a significant role in the promotion of a destination (Garrod, 2008). Images that advertise or characterize a destination are “*tracked down*” (p.308) and reproduced by travelers when the actual visit to the destination takes place (Jenkins, 2003). These previously seen images define their gaze and lead them to picture landscapes in a specific way. Urry (1990), talked about the so-called “Tourist Gaze”, which refers to the specific way tourists see landscapes and destinations. As traveling has become “*a strategy to collect photographs*” (Sontag, 1977, p.9), when the actual visit to a destination takes place, travelers reproduce the same images that they have seen before visiting the destination, making their own photographic piece (Urry, 1990) which will represent their experiences. This phenomenon is called hermeneutic circle (Urry, 1990) and is associated with the broader term circle of representation (Jenkins, 2003).

Like every phenomenon that is being affected by the rise of social media and the digital era, visual representations regarding traveling could not be the exception. During the era of social media platforms, visual representations are rapidly increasing as everybody can simultaneously not only consume a variety of visual representations but also produce content within an environment of high social interaction.

Users now have a variety of influential sources, and different kinds of visual content to consume; from official content promoted by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO's) or travel agencies, which co-exist with the traditional advertising practices (brochures, etc.), to the individual's social network, which is defined as User-Generated

Content (UGC) and has become a major force in increasing the information about the destination image of a place (Leung et al., 2013).

Apart from the influence, "*the consumer-traveler*" (p.22) engages actively as a content creator, being able to share opinions and experiences (Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013). Travelers can produce places through photography (Larsen, 2006) while contributing to the "*collective imagination of a destination*" (Latorre-Martinez et al., 2014, p.19). Therefore, the destination image of a place consists of multiple coexistent representations from different producers (Choi et al., 2007; Hunter, 2016).

Given the fact that Instagram is based wholly on visual content, as a visually-based social networking site (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) and is a mobile application on which users can share images with followers and see the photos of the users they follow (Latorre-Martínez et al., 2014), it renders it the ideal platform for this thesis to examine the role of visual representations on the tourist gaze and the theory of the hermeneutic circle. Concerning the research method, this thesis used a qualitative analysis with in-depth interviews and thematic content analysis, suitable to present the opinions of the interviewees.

1.1 Problem Formulation

1.1.1 Academic Relevance

Although the concept of representations in traveling has already been analyzed in the traditional photography context (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997; Jenkins, 2003; Caton & Santos, 2008; Garrod, 2009, Stylianou-Lambert, 2012) it has not been analyzed to any great extent in the digital era of the social media context. As Instagram is the fastest growing social network site globally (Wagner, 2015, as cited in Sheldon & Bryant, 2016 p.89), it provides the ideal conditions to study visual representations and gain further insight about people's choices and behaviors in sharing content when traveling. Thus, as Balomenou and Garrod agreed, Jenkins's (2003) "circle of representation" "should be revisited and updated" (p. 208) in the social media era.

Instagram has been examined in general through quantitative approaches, thus there is a great need for more qualitative approaches to emphasize on the perspectives and experiences of the users in the Instagram platform (Chen, 2018). Moreover, little

emphasis has been given to Instagram as far as visual representations are concerned. In fact, only a few contemporary studies are referring to Instagram and representations (Hongadi & Williams, 2015; Voynow, 2015; Kibby, 2016; Landa Mata, Fossgard, & Haukeland, 2018) which will be presented in the literature review section. Additionally, Greek people and their general use of Instagram or their use of Instagram when traveling have not been examined much. The most recent research on Greek people and their use of social media was conducted in 2013 by Dionysopoulou and Mylonakis (2013) focusing on youth tourists and their travel choices as influenced by Social Media.

Therefore, it would be very interesting to emphasize on how young Greek people in their late twenties, who are employed in the creative sector, travel often and post regularly on Instagram, are affected by visual representations on Instagram concerning their trips and their capturing and sharing process. The specific sample has been chosen because they belong to youth tourists as defined by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) report of 2008, and because they are the largest age group of Instagram users (Duggan et al., 2015 as cited in Alhabash & Ma, 2017). These youth tourists have been affected the most by the digital revolution as they are intensely exposed to the Internet from a very young age, which results in making social media an inevitable aspect of their everyday routine (Birtzigiani & Dionysopoulou, 2013; Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013). Their creative professions will ensure that they share similar aesthetics in posting since displaying creativity in photography skills is one of the motives for sharing online (Sheldon & Bryant 2016).

1.1.2 Societal relevance

Concerning societal relevance, this thesis might be valuable for DMO's, government organizations and travel planners in understanding what the role of representations and images in the Instagram context is and accordingly, organizing their strategy to promote destinations and create a sustainable destination image. Consequently, since images tell stories, their interpretations might instruct trip planners and trip designers (Groves & Timothy, 2001).

1.1.3 Research questions

As it has already been stated, this thesis aims to continue the ongoing academic discussion concerning visual representations and the hermeneutic circle in the traveling context, while focusing on the digital aspect and providing information about young Greek' attitudes and opinions concerning visual representations on Instagram. Consequently, the main research question has been formulated: *“How do Instagram representations influence young Greek people when traveling?”*

In order to answer the main research question, it is essential also to include the following sub-questions:

1. What is the role of Instagram in the pre-trip phase of young Greek travelers?
2. What is the role of Instagram in the during-trip phase of young Greek travelers?
3. What is the role of Instagram in the post-trip phase of young Greek travelers?

The three sub-questions are answered through the analysis of the results, while the main research question is answered through the discussion in the conclusion section.

1.2 Chapter overview

This thesis is divided into five main parts starting with the introduction in which the central topic, as well as the purpose of this research will be introduced. The theoretical framework will follow the introduction, where the existing literature on visual representations, hermeneutic circle, tourist gaze, social media and sharing culture will be provided. In the following chapter, the methodology of this research will be presented step by step, as well as the rationale behind the choice of the qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews and the research design. In the results' chapter, the findings from the analyzed data will be presented, discussed and aligned with the theoretical framework chapter. Specific examples and quotes from the participants will support the findings. Finally, in the conclusion-discussion chapter, the research questions will be answered, and the main points of discussion will be brought together. Additionally, the relevance of the topic, how it contributes to the field of tourism research, the limitations and suggestions for further research will also be addressed in this chapter.

2. Theoretical Framework

Tourist photography, the hermeneutic circle, and travel representations on social media constitute the foundational concepts of this master thesis. The essential aspects of these concepts are presented and explained below. The existing literature review related to how travelers are influenced in their photo-taking and sharing process and whether they follow a hermeneutic circle within the digital context of Instagram (which has been chosen as a case study for this master thesis) is also presented, with the most important findings being highlighted.

2.1 Tourist Photography

Photography and mass tourism emerged around the same time and have always been an inseparable pair (Sontag, 1977; Chalfen, 1979; Urry, 1990; Crawshaw & Urry, 1997; Larsen, 2006; Garrod, 2009). Several scholars have provided different definitions of the term tourist photography. For instance, Larsen (2008) defines it as *“leisurely picturing practices conducted away from home”* (p.142), while Michael (2000) describes it as an opportunity to discover one’s *“taste and self-identity”* (Michael, 2000, p. 35). For Albers and James (1988), tourism photography was seen as a medium that indicates what tourists see, how they see it and how they interpret it.

Before the Kodak Corporation’s foundation in 1888 and the promotion of its *“user-friendly, lightweight and cheap”* camera (Larsen, 2008, p.141), when most people started to take photographs, capturing was a truly elitist process, which required relevant skills (Larsen, 2008). Ever since its foundation, the Kodak Corporation has encouraged people to go on holiday and return with impressive and unique photos of exotic places using taglines such as *“a holiday without a Kodak is a holiday wasted”* (Munir & Phillips , 2005, p. 1673). Kodak, as a commercial brand, has attempted to sell more products by insinuating into people’s minds that photography is a mandatory part of a trip. The outcome of this is that the traveling process has turned into a more superficial activity (Munir & Phillips , 2005). A century and a half later, the process of taking photographs has changed once again with the rise of the Internet and the digital sharing environments.

In her book "On Photography" which constitutes one of the earliest studies related to travel and photography, Susan Sontag discusses among other the relationship between the two, the reasons for capturing images and the importance of photographs. Sontag (1977) claimed that "*travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs*" and that all our experiences were "*democratized through their translation into inexpensive photographic images*" (p.7). For her, it seemed unnatural to travel merely for pleasure without taking the camera along because photographs serve as the evidence that the trip was made, and the experience was gained. In a similar manner, Markwell (1997) quoted that "*to be a tourist is to be, almost by necessity, a photographer*" (p.131). Many years later, Haldrup and Larsen (2003), perceived taking photographs as an emblematic tourist practice and found it almost unthinkable to travel for pleasure without bringing "*the light-weight camera along and returning home without snapshot memories*" (p.24).

2.2 The Hermeneutic Circle

The "hermeneutic circle" (Urry, 1990) is strongly associated with the broader term circle of representation (Jenkins, 2003) and the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). According to the circle of representation, tourism advertisers and marketers use mass media (television, advertisements, travel websites, brochures etc.) to promote images of a destination which may inspire people to take a trip there (Urry, 1990; Albers & James, 1988, Jenkins, 2003; Caton & Santos, 2008). While at the destination, the tourists will most probably visit the most famous and iconic tourist attractions they had previously been exposed to because of the projected images by mass media. It is very likely that the tourist will record their experience by capturing images (Jenkins, 2003). These photographs will be shown to friends and relatives after the trip to prove that they have actually traveled to the particular destination (Jenkins, 2003). This can constitute another form of image projection, and by influencing the perceived images other individuals hold, the circle might begin again (Jenkins, 2003).

The hermeneutic circle phenomenon is noticeable during the first trips taken by people (Urry, 1990). It refers specifically to the reproduction of famous and iconic images in the tourist's personal photography after seeing them in advertisements and brochures (Albers & James, 1988; Urry, 1990). This phenomenon is explained as a circle

that begins with the photographs that advertise a trip and make people anticipate going there and ends with travelers “sealing the very same images in their own photographic productions” (Albers & James, 1988, p.136). This means that tourists may travel to certain places to consume the previous image they had seen and not the site itself (Sharpley, 2018 p.182). Consequently, “*what is sought on holiday is a set of photographic images, as seen in tour company brochures or on TV programs*” (Urry, 1990, p.140) and it is a “*ritual*” for tourists to capture the same photo that had previously been captured by professional photographers (Horne, 1992, p.112).

Therefore, this also means that the tourist gaze, which is a way of seeing things and picturing tourist landscapes in a certain way (Urry, 1990) cannot really escape the dominance of professional images found in guidebooks, postcards and other touristic brochures and define what is important and what is worth seeing (Urry, 2002). Therefore, the visual representations people have in mind prior to the visit, guide their tourist gaze (pre-defined gaze), (Urry 1990; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Garlick, 2002; Jenkins, 2003) and according to this phenomenon, it leads to the reproduction of the same images and the closing of this circle the moment the new photos have been taken (Jenkins, 2003). In this way, tourist photography seems to be more of “a process of confirmation than of discovery” (Osborne, 2000, p.79).

However, this practice tends to limit the imagination and prevents the development of the tourist’s imagination, as well as the destination image of a place. By not following the circle, tourists can be more explorative, following their instincts and creating new spaces in the imagery of tourism (Scarles, 2009; Hunter, 2016).

2.2.1 Critique on the Tourist Gaze & the Hermeneutic Circle

Although many scholars agree on the importance of the tourist gaze, they criticize it in many ways. To begin with, MacCannell (2001) focuses more on the individual and criticizes Urry’s traditional tourist gaze. With the so-called “second gaze”, he emphasizes on the individual who looks for the unexpected, the authentic, and the original aspect. Garlick (2002) has also criticized the concept of the traditional tourist gaze and has attempted to connect the tourist gaze with art, suggesting that travelers

are evoking a kind of art when taking a picture and not just merely copy a shot (Garlick, 2002).

Scarles (2009) noted that tourists are sometimes trapped within these collective thoughts that *“enframe destinations using distinctive icons that minimize the possibilities of articulating alternative narratives”* (Meethan, 1996; Morgan & Pritchard, 2005, as cited in Scarles, 2009, p.468). She deemed tourists as more active and did not view them as passive receivers that accept all the stimuli from images and try to imitate them blindly. By having this agency, it means that tourists’ photographs are not under the dominance of the tourist industry images, but preferably, they are focusing more on an explorative path of the destination. Tourists can be seen as actual actors who can interact with the destinations they visit and are not merely observers (Larsen, 2006). They act as *“active cultural producers”* (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012), able to create and construct unique places and experiences from their point of view. The same argument is also supported by Robinson and Picard (2009), who claim that people prefer to take their own pictures even if the weather conditions are not ideal, rather than buying postcards which are *“normally reserved for sending to others”* (p.11).

Nevertheless, another critique of the traditional tourist gaze is that the tourist experience cannot be reduced to just mere sight-seeing; senses and bodily experiences cannot be skipped (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Additionally, the hermeneutic circle has been criticized for placing too much value on the power of tourist photography and takes for granted that every photographic process should be mechanistic without any agency or reflection (MacCannell, 2001; Scarles, 2009). In reality, every photograph involves conscious decisions about what will and will not be in the picture (Robinson & Picard, 2009).

Scarles (2009) moves beyond the concept of the hermeneutic circle and characterizes photographs as *“complex performative spaces that extend beyond invisible boundaries of the before, during and after travel experiences and infiltrate the entire tourist experience”* (p.465). Consequently, tourists do not just exist in a circle with a fixed and pre-decided beginning and end (Urry, 1990) but through their photographs,

they can fully experience and re-create the place with the ultimate goal of “taking part in rather than reflecting upon the world” (Crang,1997, as cited in Scarles, 2009, p.466).

Taking all of the above into consideration, it is obvious that there is an ongoing academic discussion concerning tourists and the use of their camera. Scholars that support the hermeneutic circle think of tourists as passive and mere consumers who imitate and reproduce the photos they have already consumed, being trapped inside a hermeneutic circle that tries to guide them leading them to visit and visually consume the prescribed must-see scenarios and attractions (Urry, 1990; Osborne, 2000; Jenkins, 2003; Urry & Larsen, 2011). As opposed to this, other academic studies consider tourists as active agents and cultural producers (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012) who creatively reproduce the places through their photos leading to unique experiences via their unique point of view (Scarles, 2009; Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). The latter studies support the agency of tourists, indicating that they have the will to choose their destination and what do they want to see there; taking advantage of the occasion to leave their own photographic piece (Scarles, 2009). This leads to a reinvigoration of the pre-existing images as well as an increased distribution of the destinations’ images that are officially promoted.

2.3 Travel representations and social media

2.3.1 The rise of social media & the travel/tourism industry

The Internet has radically changed and transformed the ways individuals plan and consume travel experiences, as well as the way information is passed around (Buhalis & Law, 2008). It challenges the role of intermediaries in the travel context, since the consumer can be directly involved and render tourism service suppliers supplementary (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Additionally, it encompasses a majorly significant platform for exchanging information between different stakeholders; the consumer-tourist, industry suppliers such as hotels, attractions etc., intermediaries such as travel agencies, governments as well as destination marketing organizations (Werthner & Klein, 1999 as cited in Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p.180).

Becoming one of the most important features of people’s everyday reality (Green & Quigley, 2010), social media has radically affected the travel industry and it has

fundamentally changed the way users “*search, assess, produce, purchase and consume information, products and services*” (Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013, p.22). Social media can be defined as “*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of “User Generated Content”*” (Kaplan & Haenlain, 2010, p.61). This is a definition used to describe the content that is created by every user and that is publicly available to all (Kaplan & Haenlain, 2010). Social media has undeniably a significant effect on travelers and travel stakeholders (Parra-López et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and has played a significant role in structuring the tourist gaze (Lo & Mckercher, 2015).

2.3.2 Social Media in the traveling process

The tourism experience is closely connected to the search for information (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012) and storytelling (Moscardo, 2010). Therefore, in the social media context both are taking place; people are increasingly using social media to search for information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) but also for destinations, as the online communities encourage the diffusion of information. In the same manner, they use photography to narrate and share stories with their circle for “*further social engagement*” (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012, p.1822) and bearing in mind that Instagram is a visual content sharing platform, it can strengthen this social engagement. Additionally, social media has been incorporated into the whole travel planning process and through the content that is available in the social media platforms, consumers can gain information from their acquaintances as well as from users all over the world (Leung et al., 2013). Therefore, content is produced by people to be consumed by themselves, in contrast with content provided by marketers and suppliers that is produced one-way (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Travelers use social media during all the phases of the travel planning process (Choe et al., 2016); in the pre-trip phase, they use it to search for information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). During the trip, travelers begin to share their own travel experiences by uploading visual content (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013) and predominantly they use it after holidays to share experiences (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012). The three phases of the traveling process (pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip) were introduced by Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1990).

2.3.3 Travel representations on social media

Travel representations on social media come from organic sources; user-generated content (UGC) uploaded by everyone and from commercial sources; posts from official cities' accounts (DMO's), travel bloggers and travel agencies.

(a) Travel representations from commercial sources: DMO's

Aristotle referred to representations as mimesis, an attempt to realistically imitate reality (as cited in Walker Rettberg, 2017, p.8) and linguistics of the 20th century referred to representations as a system of "*signs, sounds, words, images or objects that stand instead of a concept or a thing*" (as cited in Walker Rettberg, 2017, p.3-4). Another important scholar of this phenomenon is Stuart Hall, who indicated that "*representation is a set of illustrating practices and a process that symbolizes and presents the reality and the imaginary which is communicated through language (words, icons, etc.)*" (Stuart Hall, 1997 as cited in Zhao, Zhu & Hao, 2018, p.727). Photography is also a representation system that carries meanings (Crang, 2003 as cited in Zhao, Zhu & Hao, 2018, p.727).

Travel representations' draw their own line in history, starting from the paintings brought back by Grand Tourists (Butler, 1990), and afterward with the photographs and postcards that helped people learn about unknown places and constructed the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). Representations throughout the years could be found in books, newspapers, paintings, television, documentaries etc. (Jenkins, 1999), and through them the individuals over time while cognizant or oblivious, form a specific image of a destination, which most of the time increases the intention to visit it (Moscardo, 2010).

During the last century, marketing took over the representations of destinations and enhanced them from a commercial point of view in order to give to destinations an attractive image and therefore attract potential visitors. The rationale behind this is the competition among destination marketing organizations (DMO's); private or public management organizations responsible for projecting a desired image for the destination with photographs as their main tool, *because "a picture is worth a thousand words"* (Aramberri & Butler, 2005, p. 44), but also since tourism is above all, a visual experience (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). This promoted desired image is what renders

the destination alluring in order to attract more potential visitors (Wang, 2011) and help them differentiate this particular place from other similar ones (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011).

However, in their attempt to make the destinations alluring, these organizations tend to exaggerate. In the age of “*computer manipulation*” (Wheeller, 2004, p.471), everybody can demonstrate a glorified image of reality, idealistic and unreal (Wheeller, 2004). That is the reason why Wheeler (2004) deems that the “*camera lies*” (p.472) because when an image is presented, it might not be the most reliable due to the idealistic representation. The promoted images may lead to the creation of “*place-myths*” (Butler & Hall, 1998 as cited in Jenkins, 2003) as the involvement of the myth is needed for the social construction of a place (Barthes, 1977).

(b) Travel representations from organic sources: User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-Generated Content (UGC) is a concept that has changed the balance in traditional marketing. The definition refers to the content that does not have marketing purposes, but it is merely a “*naturally occurring process of destination consumption*” (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015, p.37). UGC consists of organic images, which are defined as the images that present the destination as it is, without any exaggeration for promotional purposes, as opposed to the concept of “*place myths*” which DMO’s want to build (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015, p.38).

The creation of the destination image of a place has been ‘democratized’ and users, apart from consumers, they have become co-creators of content and can produce photographic content shaping the destination image themselves from their own point of view (Gretzel, 2006; Larsen, 2006; Hunter, 2016). Although DMO’s are responsible for the projected image of a destination, they are not responsible for what additional characteristics this destination can have from the UGC. Therefore, the power of a destination’s visual representations is no longer managed by the elites but by everybody due to the fact that individuals now have the ability to co-construct the image of a place (Castells, 2009 as cited in Boy & Uitermark. 2017) via a single photograph.

As a result, a kind of competition takes place between official stakeholders and UGC non-commercial content because it seems that the latter has a significant influence on tourists' decision-making behavior (Akehurst, 2009; Tussyadiah et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2013; Kennell & Rushton, 2015), and it is considered to be essential for the pre-trip information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Apart from this, another critical issue that challenges the official stakeholders is the increased trust in peers' opinions more than in official stakeholders (Lo et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2013).

2.3.4 Trust in travel representations

Research has indicated that virtual communities are really influential in the travel sector and that people trust virtual communities and the content of their peers more than the content of marketing promotion of a destination (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012; Katsoni, 2014). Akerhurst (2009) argued that UGC is more trustworthy than traditional marketing communications and Simms (2012), also demonstrated that a higher percentage of individuals use UGC when traveling internationally or when visiting a destination for the first time, showing how much they value other people's opinions.

Thus, it can be argued that consumers see themselves in UGC and can understand the experience better from their peers' perspective in a virtual community than from an official commercial source (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalú, 2008) because the experience that is being displayed seems more real to them (Cox et al., 2009). This can be explained by the fact that the travelers that have visited a place do not have the commitment to promote it if they were not satisfied completely (Pan, MacLaurin & Crofts, 2007) and their photographs do not have any kind of authority (Hunter, 2016). That is why their opinion matter more than a DMO's feed that could be deemed unreliable. Inevitably, travelers tend to rely on this content shared by others because they follow this process themselves (Akehurst, 2009). Consequently, generally there is a great contrast between the content displayed by the stakeholders and the content displayed by users. The content of stakeholders aims to persuade in comparison with the content from users, which aims to inform and reflect personal experiences (Xiang, Wöber & Fesenmaier, 2008).

2.3.5 Reasons for capturing and sharing travel images on social media

There are several reasons for which travelers tend to capture and share images from their trips on social media platforms; to share their experiences (Azariah, 2017), to narrate a story (Belk & Yeh, 2011) to express their identity (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012), but also as evidence (Hillman, 2007), as means of collecting memories (Groves & Timothy, 2001), as an element for social relations (Van House et al., 2004).

(a) Photography as an expression of self and identity through photos

Travel inspires the construction of narratives about journeys and destinations. It is seen as part of the online tourists' narrative which "*triggers memories and further social engagement*" (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012, p.1822) and a demonstration of their self-online as well as of their experiences (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012; Azariah, 2017; Bernardi, 2018).

Sharing photos online with a wider audience has an impact on many aspects of their life. Using digital photography technology to capture images gave the possibility to travelers to "*experiment with their identities*" (Haldrup & Larsen 2010, as cited in Lo & Mckercher, 2015, p.105). People have started to care more about the image they are displaying for themselves; their posts have a part of their identity inside (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). They are aware that by posting something they give a specific impression to their followers (Belk & Yeh, 2011) as well as that their posts can possibly be a source for judgment (Walther, Heide, Kim, Westerman & Tong, 2008 as cited in Lo & Mckercher, 2015, p.105). Additionally, travelers are really conscious about the images they capture because they are aware that these images can reveal how they would like to be seen, with what kind of people and in what kind of places (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012), thus, camera is a tool that promotes the creation of self-identities through its active use (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). Larsen (2008) separates the practices of photography before the shot, including "*looking for, framing and taking photographs*" (p.143) and post-practices including "*editing, displaying and circulating photographs*" (p.143).

Furthermore, travelers nowadays have their own agency to choose the snapshot or the way they are going to capture a specific image, which means that photographs are

also “*visual representation carriers of tourists’ cognition related to the destination image*” (Zhao, Zhu & Hao 2018, p.726). The same study argues that travelers uploading travel photos do not simply want to recall experiences but to display them as a self-representation element in an attempt to share their personal gaze. Garlick (2002) indicates that travelers are selective with the objects they want to capture; the objects have to be aligned with the specific narrative they want to promote about “*their holiday, their life and, in the end, their ‘world’*” (p.297). Thus, he agrees with Crawshaw and Urry (1997) that this narrative constitutes not only the agency of the traveler but also the images that are accessible in their culture.

Moreover, for individuals, images are strongly connected with personal meanings; they imbue them with as far as their travel experience is concerned (Groves & Timothy, 2001). Additionally, apart from the meanings, individuals add specific values to images, as they are taking pictures of the specific places they want to remember the most, making the process a personalized experience (Groves & Timothy, 2001). Thus, it is something unique that travelers take from their trip, that connects them personally with the place they had been “*even if thousands of other tourists have stood on the same spot taking what is essentially the same photograph*” (Belk & Yeh, 2011, p. 348-349). The intention towards capturing the photograph is what it differentiates it from a common, and probably more delightful, postcard (Nguyen & Belk, 2007, as cited in Belk & Yeh, 2011).

(b) Photography as evidence

Photography has been seen as evidence, indicating that it verifies that the visit to a place has taken place (Hillman, 2007). The need of tourists to take photographs derives from the fact that they want to have evidence that they physically visited a specific place and confirm that the trip was taken, and the experience was gained (Sontag, 1977). There is also a need for verification of experience for themselves (Jenkins, 2003), which sometimes might include placing themselves in the picture in an attempt to prove that they were there (Bell & Lyall, 2005). This is also the case with sharing them online; the reasons that people share content online on their personal accounts is to denote that they have “*been there and seen that*” (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015, p. 30).

(c) Photography as a means of collecting memories

Another role of photography that ought to be mentioned is the one concerning memories. Photographs are one of “*the most treasured reminders of people’s vacations*” (Groves & Timothy, 2001, p.311) and “*physical representations*” (p.311) of the experience. They can evoke memories, allowing people to share stories with others who were not present (Groves & Timothy, 2001). They can easily transfer people to particular moments and help build travel memories (Bærenholdt et al., 2004). Moreover, photography is the transformation of something intangible into something tangible (Osborne, 2000), and by doing this, individuals have the power to own and direct their experiences (Sontag, 1977). Photography has been characterized as a “*personal souvenir*” (Sharpley, 2018, p.182), to remind travelers of a particular experience. Additionally, photos help to capture the memories that will be later transformed into narrations and travel stories (Lo et al., 2011).

(d) Photography as an element for social relations

Photographs are able to build and sustain social relationships (Van House et al., 2004) and can produce and demonstrate bonds of family closeness (Larsen, 2005). Similarly, it is suggested that individuals use pictures to create relationships with other people, their cultures and their places (Edensor, 2000). The creation of relationships through photographs can be divided into two categories (Lo et al., 2011). The first one refers to the moment when tourists capture the same photo, in a way that they share the same experience. The other has to do with the sharing process that takes place after the trip with people that were not on the trip, accompanied by great verbal narrations (Lo et al., 2011).

Apparently, these close systems of gathering and sharing travel stories have entirely changed with the uptake of social media. Photo sharing is now of importance and has become easier than ever, not only for the person’s close system but in a broader context in the public domain (Boyd, 2008).

2.4 Literature review

As it was mentioned in the introduction, little emphasis has been given to Instagram as far as visual representations are concerned. There are some theses (Voynow, 2015; Hongadi & Williams, 2015) that recently researched the representations on Instagram and two academic articles. Thus, the researcher found it relevant to add and analyze them in the literature review section.

Voynow's work (2015) focuses on Nepal's trekking regions, examining its visual representations and their spatial effects. Photographs of trekking in Nepal are available in various sources such as Instagram and Facebook, travel blogs and magazines. Concerning Instagram, users were found to post images of picturesque mountains, villages, villagers and of themselves in front of impressive landscapes. The study also pointed out that only locals, the Nepali people, shared pictures of non-iconic landmarks of Nepal's trekking regions.

In her research Kibby (2016) uses as a case study the Monument Valley, a remote, dry and under-populated destination in the US. Attempting to capture the tourist gaze by examining the images taken by tourists who served as research participants as well as Instagram images with the tag "Monument Valley", it is pointed out that contemporary digital media and social network services have influenced tourists' photographic practices. More specifically, her findings show that tourists mostly take images of the iconic landmarks of Monument Valley as a source of evidence, proof that they have visited and experienced the particular authentic and exotic place. Through such images, tourists construct an identity related to the type of tourist they represent, as well as a narrative that results from their memories and experiences. In other words, the circle of representation in travel imagery/photography remains closed, but it has expanded to set up a narrative deriving from diverse sources.

Hongadi and Williams (2015) draw similar conclusions by comparing images from Instagram accounts of Singapore tourism institutions' and of tourists who have traveled to Singapore. In the context of Instagram, Urry's theory on tourist gaze (1990), remains valid as tourists seem to re-create the images they have seen on Instagram accounts of tourism institutions. Tourists are also found to narrate stories and express their

identities through their shared images on Instagram, which is consistent with Kibby's findings.

On the other hand, Landa Mata, Fossgard, Haukeland (2018) use as case studies two major Norwegian destinations, Geirangerfjord and Nærøyfjord (part of the UNESCO World Heritage area of West Norwegian Fjord) and compare through a categorization scheme relevant online photographs shared by Instagram users and destination management organizations (DMO's). More specifically, they examine the extent to which images of the destinations shared by Instagram users reflect the images promoted by DMO's. As opposed to Hongadi and Williams (2015), and Kibby (2015), the results show that the user-generated content differs from that of DMO's, with Instagram users mostly capturing and posting their own photographic impressions of the two Norwegian destinations, indicating a non-hermeneutic circle of representation.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used to investigate the aforementioned research questions. In the following sections, the rationale that led the researcher to choose a qualitative analysis will be explained, and particularly why in-depth semi-structured interviews were thought to be the most suitable research method for this topic. Moreover, the criteria for choosing this specific sample will be explained and the operationalization of the research will be analyzed. Additionally, the ways that the data had been collected and analyzed using a thematic analysis will be stated. Finally, validity and reliability will be discussed, concepts that are central to a qualitative research.

3.1 Research design

In order to answer the research question, qualitative analysis was used and more specifically, in-depth semi-structured interviews. According to Kothari (2004, p.3), a qualitative approach aims at discovering the underlying motives and desires. The choice of using in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews proved most valuable. Most of the time, it was easy to focus on concepts that were relevant to this research topic with the follow-up questions that were most suitable for each participant. Additionally, the observation of their facial expressions as well as their probes was valuable for understanding many of their feelings that accompanied their disclosed data such as enthusiasm, hesitation, confidence, denial, detestation or involvement. With probes, according to Charmaz (2006), the interviewer might understand more about the vague attempts of the participants to explain what they think regarding their stated thoughts.

More specifically, in-depth interviews, that *“provide a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives”* (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114), were chosen in order to explore the way the chosen participants were being affected by visual representations when taking their own picture, as well as when traveling in general. By using in-depth interviews, the interviewer had the opportunity to explore and understand participants’ patterns of thought freely. Additionally, semi-structured interviews, allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions where needed, based on something important the participant referred to (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Due to the flexibility provided by semi-structured interviews, they can lead to rich and detailed

answers (Bryman, 2012) and proved to be a highly valuable research tool throughout the interviews, since they provided the possibility of adjusting questions according to each participant.

In total, twelve interviews were conducted during the months of April and May (22nd April- 10th May); nine of them were conducted in Athens and three of them were conducted in Amsterdam since some of the respondents selected for this research reside in the Netherlands. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, whereas four of them were conducted via Skype due to the busy schedules of the participants and the interviewer. Although face-to-face interviews are preferential when conducting interviews, it proved quite troublesome to set a date and time in a location where both interviewer and participant would be.

Despite this, it was not challenging to find respondents; the challenging part was clearly to make potential participants commit to a date and time. Given the fact that this thesis had a timeframe and strict deadlines, rendering the conduct of the interviews a vital but time-sensitive part of the research, the interviewer decided to conduct three of the interviews online through the Skype platform, making it more convenient for the respondents and ensuring that there was ample time to complete the thesis.

Each of the twelve interviews lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. It should be noted that all the participants were outspoken and did not have any issues with speaking their minds regarding the questions asked, which facilitated the collection of sufficient data instead of dealing with participants that are either shy or not talkative. However, if one participant was more talkative, the interviewer ensured that they were steered back to the initial question and avoiding going off-topic in order to continue with the questions contained in the topic guide.

3.2 Sampling Procedure

A purposeful sampling method was used (Bailey, 2007) since the participants had been targeted according to specific criteria, which included: young Greek people in their late twenties, employed in the creative sector, who post regularly on Instagram, share the same aesthetics and travel often. The research participants had been chosen with this age criteria specifically because they belong to a group that is more active on social media as

they have grown up in this digital environment (Bolton et al., 2013), social media is part of their everyday lives (Birtzianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013; Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013) and they are the most common age group of Instagram users (Duggan et al., 2015 as cited in Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Their occupation with creative professions will ensure that they share similar aesthetics in posting, as well as being able to display their creativity in their photography skills, which had been proved as a motivational factor (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

The researcher started with people she knew from her previous jobs that fulfilled all of the criteria. She contacted them via phone or social media and kindly asked them if they wanted to participate in this research. Regarding people that accepted the invitation, only two refused to participate due to their heavy workloads. The researcher provided them with suitable dates when the interviews could be conducted in Greece and they had the opportunity to choose a day that suited them best, which was flexible.

Participants were working in the creative sector either as photographers, designers, artists or creative directors because the researcher wanted to ensure that respondents had a more heightened sense of aesthetic values than other individuals that do not work in the creative sector whatsoever. This warrants them to have a certain digital personality when posting on Instagram. Another condition to participate in this research was them being frequent travelers; therefore, it was mandatory that they traveled at least three times the previous year to any destination and that they are daily users of Instagram, posting regularly.

Finally, the researcher wanted to choose people of the same nationality in order to have a homogenous cultural background; nonetheless, the gender is not of great importance, something that was also proved during the interviews. Therefore, all the participants were Greek, and the spoken language of the interviews was Greek, due to the fact that it is the native language of the interviewer and of the participants assuring that no language barriers arose during the interviews. Participants aged between 23 and 29 and the majority of them (9 out of 12; 75%) were female. All the information concerning the participants can be found in Appendix B.

When in-depth interviews are conducted for research goals, anonymity is always offered, as well as assurance for the protection of the participants' personal and sensitive data. However, in the case of this research, while anonymity was offered to all the respondents, they all declined and gave permission for their real names to be used, as displayed in Appendix B.

The participants were open to discuss their travel experiences, which included taking photos and posting on Instagram when traveling, which is an activity that is really familiar to them. Accordingly, the majority of them expressed their love for photography and traveling, as well as their enjoyment in capturing and uploading their own shots. They seemed to feel comfortable sharing their travel and photo sharing experiences. They were intrigued by the research topic and most of them asked for the results of the research to be passed on to them.

All of the interviews that were held in Athens took place either in the house of the participants or in a café that the participant suggested with a friendly and cozy atmosphere where they would feel relaxed. All interviews were conducted individually and in person in order to achieve direct contact between the participant and the researcher (Bryman, 2012). For the interviews that were conducted via Skype, the participants were still in the comfort of their own house, and the Internet connection was fully satisfactory as there were not any connection problems. It should be mentioned that no differences were noted between the Skype interviews and the face-to-face interviews.

3.3 Operationalization & Topic List

Despite the fact that the interviews were semi-structured, the researcher did have an initial plan and a basic structure that could easily act as a guide throughout the process; there were some particular topics that had to be covered but at the same time participants needed to share their stories (Rabionet, 2011). Consequently, a topic list was created, which worked as a thematic questions' guide in order to keep the interviewer on track (see Appendix A).

Concerning the topic list, it was pre-arranged that the same core topics would be asked in all the interviews in order to guarantee consistency and neutrality (Noble & Smith, 2015). Thus, the semi-structured questions helped the interviewer to emphasize

more where needed, as has been justified above; follow up questions aimed to make the participants justify some choices or actions, for example, the reasons and the frequency they post specific images on Instagram.

Questions were divided into four parts, as seen in Appendix A: the first part consisted of general questions referring to Instagram as a medium in general and its use. It also consisted of questions regarding participants' last trip in order to get the conversation flowing. Furthermore, the second part included the interviewer exploring the respondents' Instagram accounts; more specifically looking at their pictures of their last trip and asking questions about it, e.g., "Why did you take this specific shot?". Followingly, questions about Instagram as a means of influence and a travel information guide were asked. Specifically, how the user can be influenced and consume travel representations by different producers; friends and family, official DMO's of a destination, travel bloggers, or by the Explore tab of the platform. In this phase, an exploration of participants as consumers of visual representations took place.

Lastly, the questions focused further on their travel experience and specifically on the photo-taking and sharing process. This aimed to explore participants as active agents when capturing and uploading a picture. The questions were structured that way in order to help the interviewer realize which representations are consumed more often, in what ways they affect the participants, and what is their influence in their photo-taking process.

The questions had been structured in an indirect, implicit way in order to understand whether the photos they share are exact copies of the images they have already seen and planned the trip for, or they were reproductions of their own unique point of view. In this part of the interview, the interviewer also tried to understand if and why they imitate or differentiate themselves from the already perceived image, as well as identifying thoughts and feelings connected with their behavior and attitude. In all parts, the interviewer let participants talk freely about their experiences, thoughts, opinions and points of view.

In a parallel manner, the interviewer aimed to connect the core topics with the theoretical framework that served as an inspiration for the questions posed throughout

the interviews with the participants of the research. The researcher found it relevant to choose some of the key questions along with their aims and link them with theory which are depicted in the Appendix A as well.

3.4 Interviews

During the interviews, the discussion flowed smoothly and quite naturally; there was an adequate flow of conversation. Every single one of the participants was genuinely interested in the topic of this research, as Instagram and traveling are two of their passions and most of them wanted to know the final results after this research had concluded, to satisfy their personal interest. The respondents were listened to carefully and when more details were needed, the researcher asked additional or probe questions to clarify things, such as “could you elaborate on this?” without interrupting them unless they were going off-topic.

It ought to be mentioned that at some points, the interviewer also shared some personal experiences about Instagram and traveling so that participants felt more comfortable and their trust was gained which allowed them to open up more about more personal issues, such as whether they care about likes, to what extent do they want to be likable and the issue of copying other people’s photos. Moreover, there were some specific moments where the discussion was centered on likes and comments and the concerns for their online presence in general, in which the interviewer worried that the participants were giving diplomatic or socially desirable answers, as Hine (2011) stated, due to the fact that they might feel under scrutiny, so they adjust their behavior.

In all cases, the interviewer asked for permission to look at the participants’ Instagram profile and talk about some photos that they had uploaded from their trips. They were more than willing to do that, and it was a valuable way to further inquire about the kind of pictures they upload as well as about the topic of likes and comments. Their posts were used as “material probes” which according to De Leon and Cohen (2005), include objects and places which prompt and motivate informants in order for the researcher to learn about stories through their photos. After all questions had been asked, the interviewer asked them if they had anything to add concerning the topic and most of the answers were quite interesting; mostly sharing information about the general use and conditions

of Instagram nowadays. After each interview was over, the interviewer wrote a small paragraph with the initial impressions and some main bullet points. For example, in the case of Demetra E. (23):

- photo taking process is a really spontaneous process
- takes photos mainly to keep them as remembrance
- only through her personal gaze, street photo mainly
- she likes to have her own photos of places
- she searches for destination on Instagram before doing a certain trip to see “what’s going on”
- these visual representations will not affect her in taking exact the same photo

3.5 Data analysis

The analysis strategy of this thesis included the researcher utilizing thematic content analysis, which helped to identify common themes and key elements regarding the way the sample was affected by visual representations. Content analysis involves “*establishing categories and then counting the number of instances in which they are used in a text or image*” (Joffe & Yardley, 2003, p.56) and is the usual method of investigating texts. Accordingly, thematic analysis pays greater attention to the qualitative aspects of the data that are analyzed and it gives the researcher the right to analyze frequent themes “*with analysis of their meaning in context*” (Joffe & Yardley, 2003, p.57). It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where themes become the data for analysis (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “*a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question*” (p.82).

In most cases, the researcher tried to complete the transcription as soon as possible after the interview was conducted. Although the transcripts were in Greek, the coding was conducted in English, as well as all the thematic analysis afterward. Some topics referring to the profession of the participants and their photographic skills, as well as the

description of some of their trips were skipped because they did not have anything to offer in terms of the selective topic.

Based on Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis should be accomplished in six stages: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and reporting the emerging themes (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.87). The above six stages were applied in order to complete each step of the process.

After all the interviews had been transcribed verbatim, they were printed and examined thoroughly on a repeated basis, so the researcher became familiarized with them. After becoming familiar with the data, initial codes emerged such as “exploration”, “feelings”, “influence” and “visual diary” which were obvious from the beginning and helped to start organizing the data in a more meaningful way, as coding separates data into smaller topics and categories (Bryman, 2012). Codes were developed and modified as the researcher conducted the analysis throughout the stage of open coding. Open coding is when codes are developed and modified throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Similar ideas were grouped together to identify patterns among participant responses. The researcher also searched for similarities between the codes, thus, statements and behaviors that were noticed on a frequent basis, including the search for images before they travel, the sharing processes during the trip etc. In search of themes, the researcher clustered together some of the codes in order to fit together in a theme. The researcher re-arranged and connected the codes and the themes often in order to find the most relevant; thematic analysis consists of a back and forth movement during the process, as Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate. The final themes that came out of the analysis of the data referred to the role of Instagram during the three phases of the trip (Engel, Blackwell & Minjard, 1990) and they were discussed and presented within these phases.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are two vital components of qualitative research. They are essential parts of a study as they constitute the basis on which other researchers may regard a part of research as knowledge that can be incorporated into the knowledge base of a particular study field (Rowley, 2002). Therefore, it is essential for the present study to

illustrate that these two issues are taken into account clearly. According to Noble and Smith (2015), validity can be defined as *“the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data”* (p.34) and according to Rowley (2002), validity consists of construct, external and internal. As this study is not an explanatory one, internal validity does not constitute a matter of concern. The researcher has attempted to increase construct validity, which refers to the application of all appropriate operational measures for the concepts under investigation (Rowley, 2002). More specifically, by citing documents and her interviews in a proper manner, she has succeeded in establishing a chain of evidence (Rowley, 2002).

In addition, external validity is related to the degree to which a research’s findings can be generalized *“beyond the specific research context”* (Bryman, 2012, p.47). This master thesis is a single case study, and hence it is typically linked with analytical generalizations where previously developed theory is matched against the empirical results of the study (Rowley, 2002). In relation to this, the researcher has attempted to identify tendencies from Instagram users and travelers and to compare them with the theoretical framework that mostly related to the role of social media role in general. This means that the results of this thesis cannot be generalized on a broader audience or an entire population, since the sample was specific, nor on other social media platforms.

Last but not least, reliability is related to the degree to which the operations of the study can be repeated and lead to the same result (Rowley, 2002). The same topics had been asked to all the interviewees so as to guarantee consistency and neutrality (Noble & Smith, 2015). Additionally, the researcher has attempted to add reliability to her research by documenting every step of the procedure as well as by developing a database including information such as the recordings and transcription of the interviews (Rowley, 2002).

4. Analysis and results

In this chapter, the data which was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and has been analyzed through thematic analysis will be presented after they have been categorized into themes. The recurring themes will correspond to the three phases of a trip (pre, during, post), introduced by Engel, Blackwell and Minjard (1990). Quotes from the interviewees will support each finding. Last but not least, based on the derived qualitative data, the researcher is able to answer the three subsidiary research questions, *“What is the role of Instagram pre-, during, and after-trip”*.

Before presenting the results, it is worth mentioning that the interviewees were more than willing to discuss their travel experiences and activities such as taking photos and posting on Instagram, which are very common and familiar practices for them and are perceived as inextricable parts of their lives. Accordingly, the majority of them expressed their love for photography and traveling, as well as their enjoyment when it comes to capturing and uploading their own shots. In relation to this, Eleni S. stated: *“I confess that I am fully and crazy in love with photography, traveling and posting on Instagram!”*. Apart from sharing their experiences, the participants were also eager to discuss and reflect on how previous visual representations affect their personal gaze.

4.1 The role of Instagram before the trip

In this section, the findings collected from the interviews are presented according to themes corresponding to the role of Instagram during the pre-trip phase: (a) Instagram as a research tool, (b) Instagram’s reinforcing role, (c) Instagram’s deterrent role (d) Instagram DMO’s and travel bloggers’ influence.

(a) Instagram as a research tool: The results pointed out that most participants (9) use Instagram as a research tool. From them, only a few participants claimed to use Instagram as a research tool to find future destinations to visit. Most participants (7), having already chosen a destination beforehand, declared that they would use Instagram hashtags to find activities to do during their trip, heritage sites, coffee places, restaurants or spots ideal for photo shootings. According to Marina K.: *“Before visiting a*

place, I use the hashtag of a city and I look for heritage sites and restaurants. For me, Instagram corresponds to at least 60% of the pre-travel preparation". On the other hand, three interviewees stated that they use more traditional tools to find destinations and information such as maps or travel websites. As stated by Minas K.: *"I don't need social media to find a destination [...] I am more traditional [...] I have never searched for destinations on Instagram"*.

(b) Instagram's reinforcing role: All interviewees stated that they could not escape the previous representations, as within a digital context, they are largely exposed to Instagram's visual images. For the majority of the participants (7), Instagram will likely give a first impression of how a destination looks like but does not influence the decision-making process. This means that these representations most of the times will not affect them in choosing destinations. In other words, it was found that there is not a significant correlation between Instagram visual representations and the actual decision-making process. Interviewees would admire the beautiful places promoted by Instagram, but this would not force them to book tickets or start the planning process of a trip. Participants declared that they are actually influenced by Instagram, mostly in the sense that the platform could reinforce their desire to visit an already chosen destination. For instance: *"I will be influenced by Instagram to a large extent. If I want to go to a particular destination, the Instagram photos will boost this desire"* [Marina K.].

(c) Instagram's deterrent role: On the other hand, some participants mentioned that sometimes the images from a particular destination they see on Instagram are so abundant that they might have a negative effect on them, preventing them from visiting this destination. According to Nefeli L.: *"Sometimes I see a certain place so many times that I get fed up with it. I don't feel like going, I say okay never mind, everyone else has already been there"*.

(d) Instagram DMO's and travel bloggers' influence: As regards travel bloggers and DMO's, the findings point out that for the majority of the participants, they have a very low degree of influence and reliability. More specifically, DMO's were found to be followed by the vast majority of the research participants (9) but were trusted by

merely four interviewees (33% of the sample) due to a lack of originality. As stated by Demetra E.: *"I am tired of seeing the same, standard, commercial spots of a city like the canals of Amsterdam"*. A significant number of participants (8) stated that they follow travel bloggers, but only two of them stated that they actually trust them. That was because the research participants felt that travel bloggers tend to promote an idealized, beautified version of reality. Concerning this Kostis K. stated: *"Travel bloggers tend to show edited, beautified, perfect destinations"*.

In relation to this, all participants agreed that Instagram visual representations differ significantly from reality due to the fact that DMO's and travel bloggers tend to display on their profiles the most beautiful and touristic aspects of a destination. More specifically, ten interviewees claimed that images on Instagram are excessively edited and tend to show a beautified and ideal reality where for instance a large group of crowds, one would normally meet when on a trip, are absent. According to Kostis K.: *"Whatever exists in the real world, it is very hard to be represented in the digital world in the same manner. Especially on social media, everything is edited, beautified and attractive for the sake of followers"*. On the contrary, for one participant, the actual destination was even better than the visual representation she had seen on Instagram:

"I had seen all those buildings with the colorful tiles on Instagram and for this reason I remember I wanted to go to Lisboa. When I actually visited the place, it was even better than what I expected" [Katerina A.].

Last but not least, there was one participant who believed that visual representations are not far from reality highlighting, that the way one perceives such representations is subjective and depends on one's tastes, style and perspective.

When compared with travel bloggers and DMO's, friends' Instagram content was deemed as a more powerful and reliable source of influence by all participants. More specifically, all interviewees stated that it is more likely to be influenced by the shared content of close friends who travel a lot or with whom they have similar tastes than by travel bloggers or DMO's. However, the friends' influence would be limited in the sense that they would not play a crucial role in the decision-making process. According to Minas K.:

“I don’t follow travel bloggers nor DMO’s, I prefer seeing what my friends are doing and the destinations they have visited, but it’s not like I will book tickets just because of a photo a friend shared on Instagram”.

To sum up, during the pre-trip phase, Instagram was found to be used mostly as a tool to search for information about an already chosen destination. It also became evident that Instagram could reinforce one’s desire to visit a destination and to give a first impression of how the destination looks like. On some occasions, the overwhelming number of pictures of a destination found on the platform contributed to preventing participants from visiting a place. Last but not least, concerning Instagram DMO’s and travel bloggers; they were found to have a very low degree of influence, with participants’ friends’ content being more reliable.

The findings concerning the pre-trip phase are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

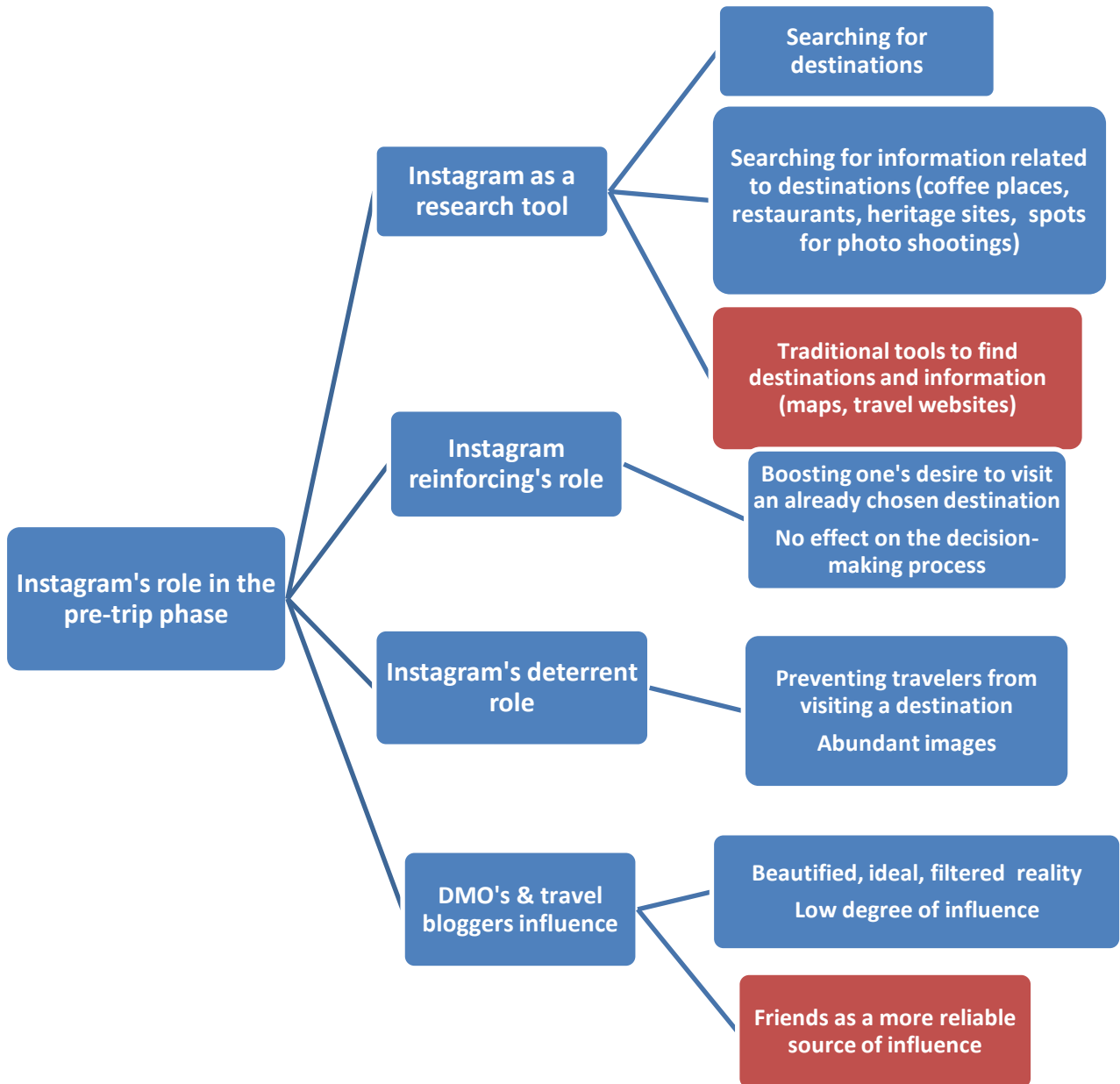


Figure 1: Instagram's role in the pre-trip phase

4.2 The role of Instagram during the trip

In this section, the findings collected from the interviews are presented according to themes corresponding to the role of Instagram throughout the during-trip phase: (a) Instagram's inspirational role on the types of images participants capture during the trip, (b) Instagram's influence on the travel experience.

(a) Instagram's inspirational role on the type of images participants capture during the trip: To begin with, all participants declared that even though they take numerous photos during their trip, in the end, only a few of them would actually be posted on Instagram. As stated by Thanos K.: *"During a trip, I will capture between 20 and 50 images, but I will post only 6-9 of them"*.

Concerning the type of images, the participants tend to capture when on a trip, the majority of interviewees expressed their desire to differentiate from others and express their aesthetic perspective and identity by posting non-iconic landmarks of a place, spots other travelers might not even notice. Even if they ended up taking a picture of an iconic spot, the way of capturing and editing would be unique, showing their personal style and differentiating the shot from all the previous similar ones. According to Katerina A.:

"In general, when I am traveling, I don't like touristic places, therefore, the recreation of previously seen photos is avoided. I mean, I will not capture and share a photo of Eiffel Tour, so many people have already done that! What I might do is capture Eiffel Tour from a different perspective in a way I have never seen before, perhaps a close-up where the light falls, and it seems different!".

A significantly smaller number of participants claimed to be inspired by Instagram, taking and sharing images that they had previously seen mostly of iconic spots. In relation to this Myrto G. stated:

"The truth is that sometimes I do attempt to recreate photos I have seen before. For example, I remember I had seen on Instagram a very nice photo depicting a house and a tree in Notting Hill. When I visited Notting Hill, I attempted to take a similar shot inspired by the photo I had seen on Instagram".

In other words, in this case, it became evident that some participants acknowledge the influence of visual representations on their personal gaze and photo taking process. In addition, it was pointed out that the typical attractions of a destination are usually the point of interest of travelers because they have been promoted and consumed the most.

As stated above, the research participants were likely to visit the most well-known and touristic attractions due to being highly exposed to them. An interesting finding is that most participants also declared that when they are on a trip, they tend to search for new places, hidden spots, or unknown routes. This explorative part of the trip was strongly connected with a unique and authentic experience. More specifically, almost all interviewees (11) stated that for them, an authentic experience has more to do with living the moment with their senses and occurs when they are able to explore and feel the vibe of a destination, meet new people and feel relaxed. As pointed out by Eleni S.: *“An experience is authentic when you are living the moment, you are chilled, and you don’t have a strict schedule in mind. Traveling is an opportunity to see something else, meet and learn from new people”*. There was only one participant who connected authentic experiences with the post-trip phase claiming that authentic experience is when one goes home and feels a sense of completeness.

(b) Instagram’s influence on travel experience: When asked about whether they believed that posting images on Instagram influences the actual experience, eight participants said that as long as the social media posting does not take place right on the spot, it has no negative effect on the experience. For example:

“For me, posting does not have an impact on the experience. I will share content at some point during the day when I am not doing anything in particular, and thus I will not miss out on my trip” [Marina K.]

On the other hand, four participants expressed the opinion that uploading images can influence the experience negatively because it is time-consuming and prevents from truly experiencing a place at that particular moment. In relation to this, Nefeli L. believes that:

“Uploading images during the trip influences the experience negatively in the sense that we do not live the moment as we are too busy taking the perfect image, which can take a lot of time, with the ultimate goal to share them online”.

To sum up, throughout the during-trip phase, it was pointed out that most participants are not influenced by Instagram visual representations regarding their photo capturing process and do not attempt to re-create previously seen images. They mostly tend to differentiate and capture images reflecting their own personal style, tastes and aesthetics. Moreover, even though specific spots of a destination are overly promoted on Instagram, participants were found to be searching for new, hidden and unknown spots, strongly associating this explorative aspect with unique and authentic experiences. Lastly, posting on Instagram during the trip was perceived to have a negative effect on the experience due to being time-consuming and preventing from living and enjoying the moment.

The findings concerning the during-trip phase are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

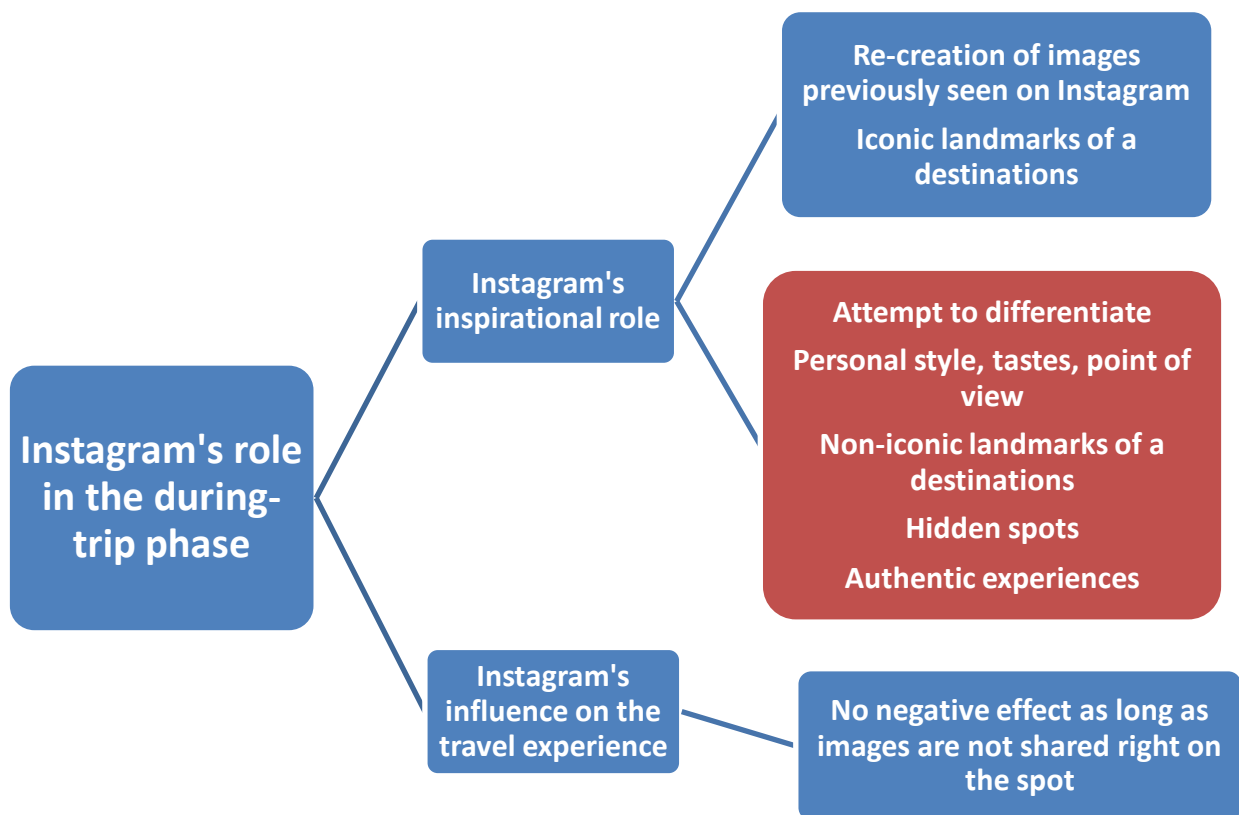


Figure 2: Instagram’s role in the during-trip phase

4.3 The role of Instagram after the trip

In this section, the findings collected from the interviews are presented according to themes corresponding to the role of Instagram during the post-trip phase: (a) Instagram as a digital album/diary, (b) Instagram as a source of evidence, (c) Instagram as a communication tool, (d) Instagram as a self-expression tool, (e) Instagram as an informative & storytelling tool, (f) Instagram as a tool to influence others. The diverse roles Instagram could serve after the trip became evident when the research participants were asked to name the reasons they would share an image from their trip on Instagram as most of them stated that they tend to post images on Instagram after the trip has been completed.

(a) Instagram as a digital album/diary: A significant number of interviewees (10) stated that they take and share pictures on Instagram because it is like having a personal album which allows them to keep a record of their moments in chronological order and to which they can go back again and again, keeping the memory alive and reliving the travel experience. According to Nefeli L.: *“I post images because I want to see them when I return from the trip. In general, I always look back to images from all of my trips because this way, you keep the memory alive”.*

(b) Instagram as source of evidence: Some participants suggested that they share photos from their trips as a source of evidence; to show their followers that they have visited a particular destination. As stated by Thanos K.: *“With my Instagram photos, it’s like I am saying: Watch me, I am on a trip, I am here! I am experiencing something different from the daily routine and reality”.*

(c) Instagram as a communication tool: For some participants taking and sharing photos on Instagram was seen as a very good way to keep in touch and communicate with family and friends. For instance: *“If I share a photo from my trip on Instagram, you will think that I am doing well. It constitutes a means of communication. Even if I don’t speak with some people every day, they can see that I am enjoying myself”* [Lila C.].

(d) Instagram as a self-expression tool: In addition, some participants cited as the main reason for taking and sharing photos, their desire to express their personality, creativity, and point of view: *“Through my Instagram profile, I want to show my character and style”*

[Katerina A.]. Instagram, in this case, was viewed as a portfolio, an aesthetic album that can be explained due to the fact that the sample consisted of people working in the creative sector. In relation to this, receiving a significant number of likes and comments was not perceived as the main reason to share a travel photo on Instagram. All participants clarified that they do not post images to get likes but to show their point of view. They tend to post images they like themselves, which satisfy their creative eye and would not share images even if they knew in advance they would get many likes. As stated by Minas K.: *"I don't care about comments and likes at all. I care about my consistency to myself and how my followers can see how I see things"*.

Only one participant added that she enjoys receiving likes from well-accomplished representatives of the creative industry: *"I like it when I receive likes from magazines or art directors, but in general I don't care a great deal about the number of likes my photos receive as the visual, photographic content I share is purely for me"* [Katerina A.].

(e) Instagram as an informing & storytelling tool: Last but not least, giving information and narrating a story were the main reasons behind some participants' photo sharing process: *"I want to inform others and narrate a story. Of course, some attractions like Eiffel tower can stand on their own, so there is no reason to post a caption about them. I like narrating stories, I refuse to visit a place and not learn something about it"* [Kostis K.].

(f) Instagram as a tool to influence others: Most participants (9) felt that they could serve as influencers exactly because they had found themselves being influenced by others. Moreover, due to sharing specific and personal moments, they felt they could remind others of their own trips and experiences or trigger others' curiosity about a destination. They supported this by mentioning that they had received messages on Instagram where people were asking for tips or more info about a place. As stated by Katerina B. said: *"Yes I do think myself of an influencer in the sense that I will also contact people on Instagram should I see something that appeals to me"*.

To sum up, during the post-trip phase, Instagram was found to have a multi-faceted role. For most participants, it is a personal digital album; they can file their images where they can go back to and relive the travel experience. For others, Instagram serves as a source of evidence, in the sense that they can show their followers that they have visited

a particular destination. On the other hand, the platform was viewed as a communication tool allowing participants to keep in touch with people they might not speak with on a daily basis as well as a way to express their creativity, personality, style, tastes and aesthetics. Moreover, some participants perceived Instagram as a tool that enables them to inform, narrate a story and to influence others.

The findings concerning the post-trip phase are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

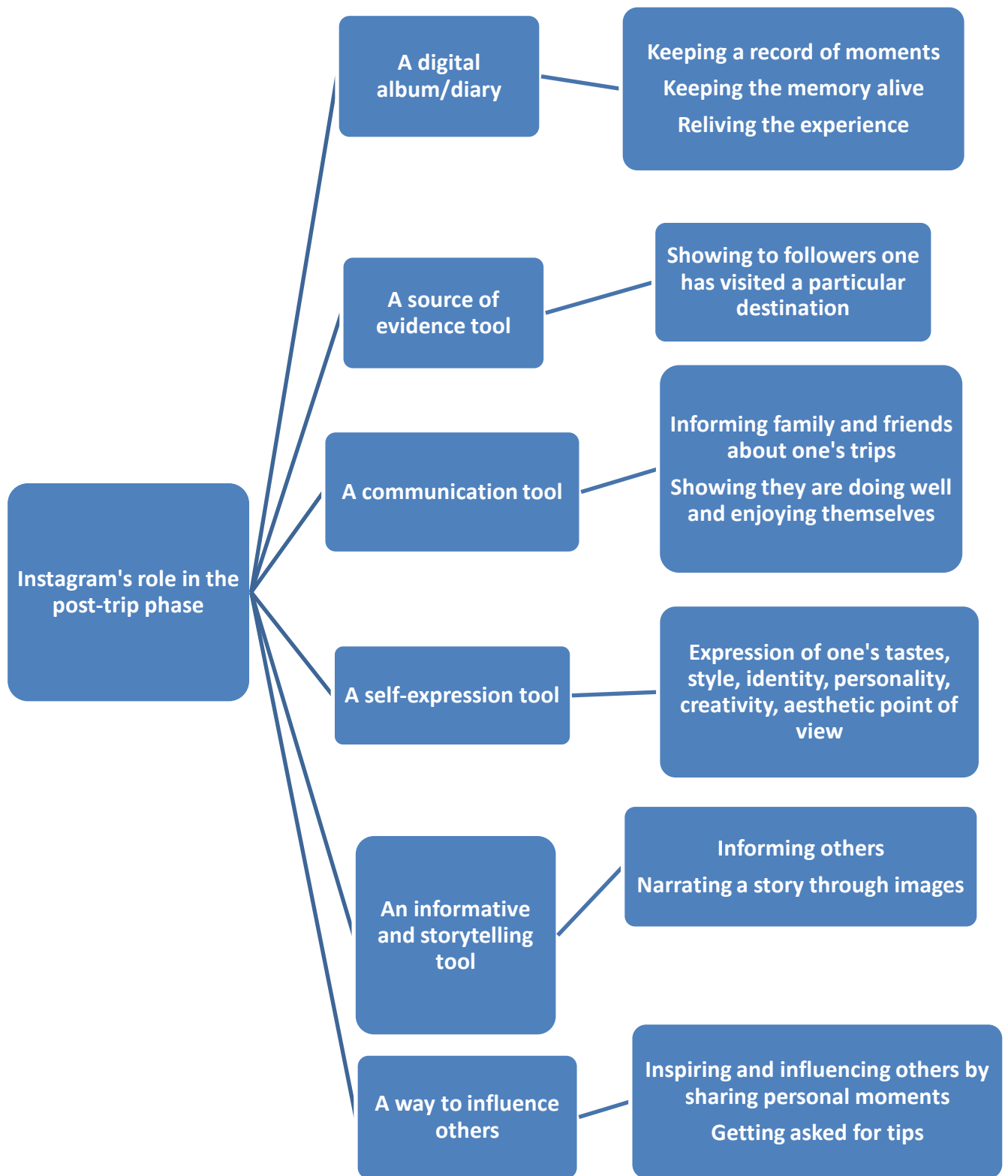


Figure 3: Instagram's role in the post-trip phase

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Discussion

This thesis aimed to examine the role of visual representations on Instagram in the traveling context taking as a case study young Greek people in their late twenties, employed in the creative sector. The use of in-depth-interviews to reveal the viewpoints and experiences of these people, as well as the thematic analysis used after that helped to organize the data meaningfully in codes, were proved to be the most appropriate tools to use in this kind of research.

More specifically, the purpose of this thesis was to explore how visual representations from Instagram can affect and influence young Greek people's tourist gaze, as well as their photo-taking process, to determine what path they follow, and to identify whether they are imitating (following the circle) or trying to differentiate themselves from the previous images (breaking the circle). This is what is addressed now by interpreting the main findings of the analysis, taking into account the theoretical framework and the literature review reported in previous chapters in this thesis. This process contributes to answering the thesis' main research question.

To begin with, the fact that the research participants tend to use Instagram in all three phases of the travel planning process (pre-trip, during-trip, after-trip phases) is in line with Leung, Lo, Hoof and Buhalis (2013) who explore the role of social media applications in all the three phases.

As regards the role of Instagram in the pre-trip phase, most participants claimed to use the platform to search for information (events, activities, restaurants) related to a pre-defined destination. This is consistent with Xiang and Gretzel (2010), who emphasize on the use of social media to search for travel information. Instagram was also found to reinforce the interviewees' desire to visit an already chosen destination as well as to give a first impression of how the destination is, implying a pre-defined tourist gaze (Albers & James, 1988; Urry, 1990; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Garlick, 2002; Jenkins, 2003). Moreover, it was pointed out that Instagram could have a deterrent role preventing participants from visiting a place due to its overexposure. This finding should be highlighted as, to the author's best knowledge, it is absent from the existing literature.

According to the participants' answers, DMO's and travel bloggers on Instagram were perceived as unreliable and did not have a significant degree of influence despite being followed by many participants. This was justified by the fact that DMO's and travel bloggers tend to show on their profiles an idealized, filtered, beautified version of reality. This finding is in accordance with scholars such as Wheeler (2004), Wang (2011), and Qu, Kim and Im (2011) who suggest that DMO's tend to "exaggerate" and promote an alluring destination image in order to attract travelers and differentiate from destinations with similar features.

On the other hand, in comparison with the marketing content displayed by DMO's and travel bloggers, participants were found to trust more the user-generated content (UGC) shared on Instagram by their friends. This argument is supported by numerous scholars that examined trust in UGC on social media in general (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Akehurst, 2009; Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides 2012; Leung et al., 2013; Katsoni, 2014). However, it also became evident that friends' shared content did not have an effect on the interviewees' decision-making process, contradicting the academic research of authors such as Tussyadiah, Park and Fesenmaier (2011) or Rushton and Kennell (2015).

Concerning the role of Instagram in the during-trip phase, the results showed that despite not being able to escape previous representations due to largely being exposed to Instagram's images, the majority of participants tend to capture images of non-iconic landmarks of a destination and to avoid re-creating images previously seen on the platform. Besides, some interviewees clarified that even if they ended up taking photos of iconic, touristic spots such as the Eiffel Tower, it would be in a way that would differentiate them from others reflecting their creativity, aesthetics, tastes and style. It could be argued that this is indicative of a non-hermeneutic circle of representation and a second gaze (MacCannell, 2001) where participants emerge as active agents and cultural producers who reproduce a destination through their photos using their personal and unique point of view (MacCannell, 2001; Robinson & Picard, 2009; Scarles, 2009; Stylianou-Lambert, 2012; Landa Mata et al., 2018). By being explorative and engaging with the destination with their senses and in a personal and relaxed manner, it seems that during the trip the interviewees tend not to follow the circle (Scarles, 2009) and to go through a unique and

authentic experience (MacCannell, 1999 as cited in Stylianou-Lambert, 2012) that will be displayed in their photos as well.

This finding is in contrast with the scholars supporting the theory of the hermeneutic circle and the pre-defined tourist gaze (Urry, 1990; Horne, 1992; Markwell, 1997; Albers & James, 1998; Jenkins, 2003; Caton & Santos, 2008) where travelers are passive agents, trapped in a hermeneutic circle that guides them and influences and determines their photo-taking process.

When they are on a trip, most participants stated that they tend not to post images on Instagram as it can be time-consuming, and it may negatively influence the experience by preventing them from enjoying and living the moment. In addition, they argued that they will always search for hidden, less touristic locations, often avoiding the specific spots of a destination that are overwhelmingly promoted on Instagram.

Regarding the role of Instagram in the post-trip phase, most participants claimed to actively use it as a digital album/diary to which they can go back and relive the experience. This finding can be associated with Sharpley's (2018) view that photography can lead to the creation of a "*personal souvenir*" (p.182), which reminds travelers of a particular experience. Some interviewees also viewed Instagram as a way to show their followers that they had visited a particular destination and that they had particular experiences. This result can be connected with the role of photography as evidence (Sontag, 1977; Garlick, 2002; Bell & Lyall, 2005; Hillman, 2007; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015) according to which photographs constitute proof and evidence that one has physically visited a place and has gained new experiences. Several participants also perceived Instagram as a communication tool, a way to keep in touch with people they would not speak with on a daily basis. This role seems to be in line with the view that photographs have the power to sustain social relationships (Van House et al., 2004).

Another role of Instagram that was pointed out by the answers of the participants was that of a self-expression tool. Using Instagram to express their personal identity, personality and show their personal point of view (gaze) via their aesthetics and creativity, is highly consistent with the findings of Stylianoy-Lambert (2012), Bernardi (2018) and Zhao, Zhu and Hao (2018) who associate uploading travel photos with self-representation.

Furthermore, the online platform was seen as a way to narrate a personal story through images. This finding is in line with Belk and Yeh (2011), who argue that people use photography after their trips to share their narratives with their circle choosing images that represent moments they want to keep from their trips and personally connect them with the destination.

Last but not least, it became evident that a significant number of the interviewees believed they could influence and inspire others through their shared content on Instagram. On the one hand, this was justified by the fact that they had found themselves being influenced by others. On the other hand, due to sharing specific and personal moments, they felt they could remind others of their own trips and experiences or triggers others' curiosity about a destination. They supported this by mentioning that they had received messages on Instagram where people were asking for tips and more information about a place. This role of Instagram as a tool to influence others can be associated with photography's role to trigger memories and social engagement, as pointed out by Stylianou-Lambert (2012).

5.2 Conclusions

To sum up, the purpose of this thesis has been to explore the effect of Instagram's visual representations on the tourist gaze and whether the participants follow or break the hermeneutic circle of representation in their photo-taking process. Based on the previous discussion, it is possible to provide an answer to the main research question of this thesis: *"How do Instagram representations influence young Greek people when traveling?"*.

In the pre-trip phase, it was pointed out that young Greek travelers cannot really escape from the power of visual representations and Instagram's visual images, due to the fact that they are active throughout the day on the Instagram platform. They will use Instagram to search for information related to a destination they would have on their list beforehand, and the platform is likely to boost their desire to visit a particular destination as well as give the first impression. Besides, results revealed that destination images being displayed on Instagram might have a negative influence as well. If they are abundant, they might lead to a *"saturation"* of the place displayed and to a loss of interest in visiting it. A

general disbelief towards DMO's and travel bloggers also became apparent due to the beautified content they tend to share. Even though at this phase, previous images seem to define the tourist gaze and travelers appear to be passive, the route they will follow on their trip and their photo taking process is an entirely different story. In the during-trip phase, young Greek people do not seem to be influenced by Instagram representations in their photo-taking process; hence they do not follow a pre-defined hermeneutic circle. On the contrary, they emerge as active agents engaging in a more personal experience, discovering new places and as cultural producers reproducing a destination through their photos, which reflect their unique personality, creativity, and point of view. In the post-trip phase, young Greek travelers remain active agents using Instagram as a digital album to keep their personal experiences and memories alive, as a source of evidence to show they have visited a destination, and as a communication tool. Last but not least, Instagram also enables them to express their creativity, personality and aesthetics, narrate a personal story through images and influence others.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This master thesis has contributed to theory in many regards. To begin with, it has managed to clearly connect the theories of the hermeneutic circle of representation and the tourist gaze with a social media context; that of Instagram. Moreover, it has made it possible to identify and understand the role and use of Instagram by young Greek travelers working in the creative sector in all three phases (pre, during, after) of a trip.

To be more precise, before the trip, Instagram serves as a research tool helping young Greek travelers find information about the destination of their choice. In relation to this, it was discovered that Instagram could also have a negative influence on people, making them lose interest in visiting a place if that place is being displayed frequently on the platform. This negative effect of Instagram, to the author's best knowledge, is absent from the existing literature and should be further researched. Moreover, despite results pointing to a pre-defined gaze, the content by Instagram DMO's and travel bloggers was not perceived to have a determining role nor influence on the decision-making process. In addition, even though friends were found to be more reliable sources of influence, their user-generated content (UGC) also did not have a significant effect on the participants'

decision-making process, which contradicts research supporting that such content can influence the tourist's decision-making behavior.

The findings related to the during-trip phase seem to confirm the findings from scholars who criticize the theories of the hermeneutic circle of representation and the tourist gaze pointing to the second gaze and the aspect of exploration. During this phase, young Greek travelers emerge as active agents and cultural producers, exploring and searching for authentic and personal experiences, capturing images that express their own unique point of view, creativity and personality. This opposes to the supporters of the theory of the hermeneutic circle who view travelers as passive receivers and reproducers of the previous images. It also shows that this is a greater and ongoing debate and for this reason further research is needed, especially within social media context.

Last but not least, this thesis points to the multifaceted role of Instagram in the post-trip phase. Existing literature discusses mostly how, after the trip, users capture photographs and share them on social media in general to share their experiences, narrate a personal story, as a source of evidence, or as a self-expression tool. This thesis adds and emphasizes on the use of Instagram as a way to influence others, a communication tool and most importantly a digital album for personal use.

5.4 Managerial Implications

DMO's, government organizations and travel planners who are vastly promoting their destinations online can utilize the results of this study to gain a deeper understanding of the role of Instagram representations in all phases of a trip and accordingly organize their strategy to promote destinations and create a sustainable destination image.

More specifically, as young Greek travelers were found to use Instagram in the pre-trip phase to search for information related to destinations, visual content related to all kinds of activities (events, heritage sites, local places, cafe, bar-restaurants) should be included in such Instagram profiles. Moreover, more destinations, and not just the most popular ones, should be promoted but not in an overwhelming manner. Hidden spots recommended by locals and non-iconic landmarks of a destination could also be used in order to trigger the user's curiosity.

The results showed that the content originating from marketing stakeholders such as official DMO's and travel bloggers is thought to be untrustworthy by a large sample of people. Therefore, this fact must be considered by the official stakeholders and promoters of places. As user-generated content was deemed more reliable and influential than that from travel bloggers, DMO's, government organizations and travel planners could consider including or reposting such content. Additionally, images that show a destination exactly as it is with its imperfections should also be found in such official Instagram profiles.

5.5 Limitations

In this thesis, some limitations need to be addressed. Firstly, this thesis was based utterly on Instagram; a single case study, and this could raise doubts concerning its construct and external validity. Due to the fact that it is based strictly on the Instagram platform, the results cannot be generalized to other types of social media. Another issue was the fact that most of the literature related to the role of social media role in general and not specifically to Instagram. Furthermore, since the research was conducted by one person, the risk of subjective bias exists. Another limitation is that, due to a specific time frame to complete the thesis, it is not a longitudinal study that could lead to even more accurate findings and results. Moreover, the number and the nationality of the interviewees serve as the fourth limitation of this thesis. As twelve interviews were conducted and all interviewees held a Greek nationality, the sample cannot be perceived as representative of the population nor generalizable. Last but not least, as Instagram and social media in general continuously develop and change, it should be emphasized that this thesis addresses the use of Instagram of a particular time period.

5.6 Propositions for future research

The research on the hermeneutic circle of representation and the tourist gaze within a social media context could be developed even further, taking into consideration that this thesis has several limitations. Future research could focus on other social media platforms (Pinterest, Facebook) or other image hosting services (Flickr). Moreover, the sample could include people of different nationalities and from different working backgrounds or from different age-groups. It would be interesting to research on a

western and non-western sample, to see possible similarities or differences in the use of Instagram when traveling. It should also be larger in order to be more representative of the population and perhaps employ quantitative data analysis. Furthermore, as this thesis has focused on the perspective of Instagram users, it would be interesting to examine and compare the views of the service providers such as DMO's.

As social media tend to progress and change as time passes, conducting a similar research at a different time period would also be useful to examine whether the results would be the same. Additionally, Instagram stories, that constitute the latest Instagram feature and videos as a medium of promoting places and tourism should be investigated as well. Experiments, where the researcher would provide different kinds of photographs of a destination and the participants would have to choose which ones would persuade them to visit it, taking into consideration the filters, the editing and the attractiveness of the pictures and without knowing where they came from (UGC or from an official account), should also be encouraged.

Last but not least, topics such as trust towards Instagram images and their relationship with the decision-making process or the reasons people tend to post images could be analyzed more thoroughly. It would be also relevant to focus on the phenomenon of Instagram in maximizing destinations' reputations (Hanan & Putit, 2014), but also the negative impacts that images might have on people, as well as the popularity that some places gain which might lead to tourism overcrowding.

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Appendix A

Interview Topic Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews

General Questions

1. Can you tell me about your last trip?
2. Can you tell me about your photo process of your last trip?
3. What photographs did you take?
4. What photographs did you upload?
5. What is the role of Instagram when traveling?
6. What is the use of Instagram when traveling?
7. How do you generally prepare your trips?

Investigating the reasons/ I will ask to see photos on their Instagram account of their last trip

8. Questions about likes & comments/ Importance
9. Why did you take this specific shot?
10. Is this a shot you have seen before? (Concerning a certain post)
11. Why do you add locations in your photos?
12. Are you aiming to tell a story with your photographs?

Destinations' Representations

13. How did you come up with this destination?
14. What is the main purpose of visiting it?
15. Into what sources did you look for info?
16. What image did you have on your mind?
17. What are your main travel representations/ main influence?
18. Do you follow travel bloggers/ DMO's?
19. From your experience how far is a visual representation of a destination on Instagram from the actual destination?

Photo process of the trip

20. What are the main reasons for taking photos on your vacation?
21. What are the main reasons for sharing photos on Instagram?
22. Would you travel to a destination without taking or sharing photos?
23. When do you feel the most satisfied with your travel experience?
24. Plans for next trip?

Interview Questions: Aims and Link with the theory

(a) Type of images participant capture during travel

'What kind of photos did you take during your last trip?'

- Aim: To elicit what kinds of images the research participants tend to capture when they travel
- Link with the theory: (i) The Hermeneutic Circle & The Tourist Gaze (ii) Circle of Representation

(b) Type of images participants share on Instagram

'What images did you share on Instagram?'

- Aim: To elicit the type of images the research participants tend to share when they travel
- Link with the theory: (i) The Hermeneutic Circle & The Tourist Gaze (ii) Circle of Representation

(c) Role/use of Instagram when traveling

'How do you use Instagram before, during and after a trip?'

- Aim: To gain an understanding regarding how the research participants use Instagram throughout all phases of their trip (before, during and after)
- Link with the theory: (i) Social media as information researching tools (ii) Social Media as destination researching tools (iii) Social media as platforms for sharing stories, narratives and experiences

(d) Sources of influence

'What are your main sources of influence regarding a travel destination?'

• Aim: To gain an understanding concerning who influences the most the research participants' perceptions on travel destinations

• Link with the theory: (i) DMOs (ii) User Generated Content

(e) Expectations vs reality

'From your experience, how far is a visual representation of a destination on Instagram from the actual destination?'

• Aim: To examine whether research participants believe that visual representations are reliable or idealistic

• Link with the theory: (i) Travel representations on Social Media/ Place-myths

(f) Motives for capturing images during travel

'What are your main reasons for taking photos during your vacation?'

• Aim: To elicit the reasons the research participants capture photos during their trip

• Link with the theory: (i) Photography as evidence (ii) Photography as a means for collecting memories (iii) Photography as a means for social relations (iv) Photography as expression of self and identity

(g) Motives for sharing on Instagram photos from a trip

'What are the main reasons for sharing photos on Instagram?'

• Aim: To elicit the reasons the research participants share on Instagram photos from their trips

• Link with the theory: (i) Photography as evidence (ii) Photography as a means for collecting memories (iii) Photography as a means for social relations

Appendix B

Demographics of Respondents

Name	Occupation	Gender	Age	Nationality
Nefeli L.	Photographer	Female	27	Greek
Lila C.	Designer	Female	29	Greek
Katerina B.	Creative Director	Female	29	Greek
Minas K.	Artist	Male	26	Greek
Katerina A.	Graphic Designer	Female	26	Greek
Thanos K.	Graphic Designer	Male	27	Greek
Eleni S.	Theater Director	Female	29	Greek
Myrto G.	Content Creator	Female	26	Greek
Dimitra K.	Photojournalist	Female	27	Greek
Demetra E.	Graphic Designer	Female	23	Greek
Kostis K.	Photographer	Female	27	Greek
Marina K.	Photographer	Female	28	Greek