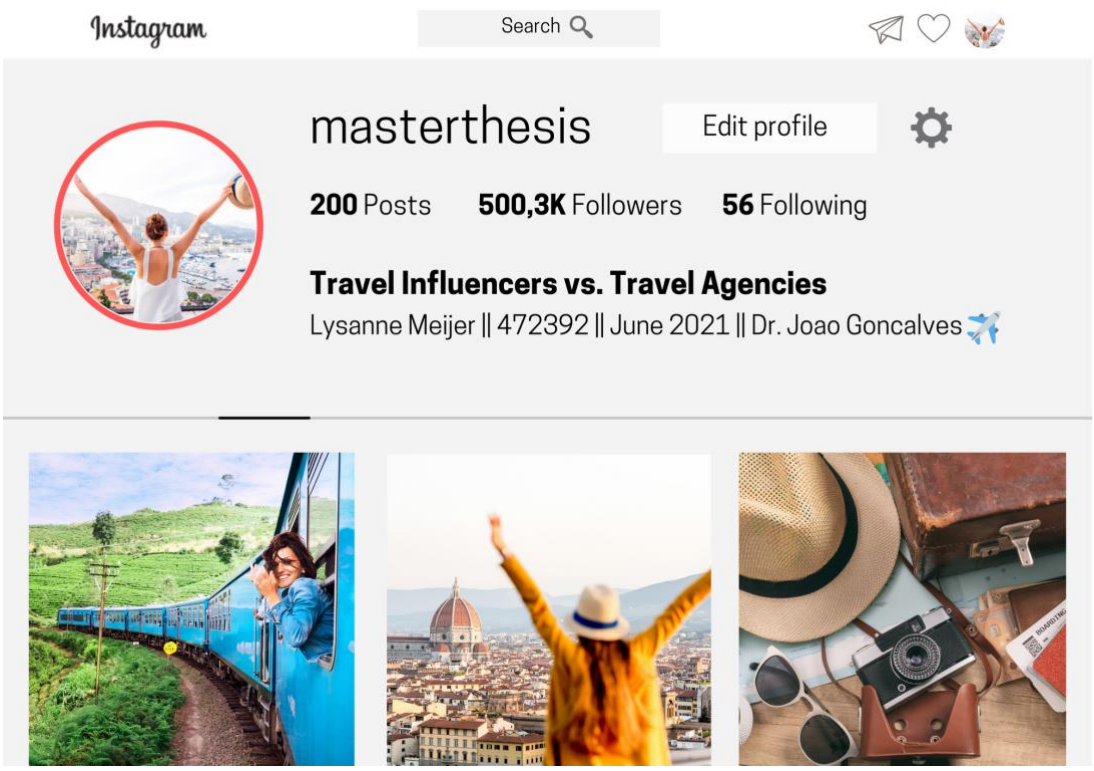
Travel Influencers vs. Travel Agencies: The Impact of Instagram Travel Content on Young Adults' Perceived Source Credibility, Travel Planning Behaviors and Destination Choices

A quantitative research into the differences between sponsored content made by travel influencers, non-sponsored content made by travel influencers and content made by travel agencies on Instagram.



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ABSTRACT

The general aim of this study was to increase one's understanding of how Instagram travel content influences young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices. By conducting an online between-subjects experimental survey with four conditions, the researcher aspired to examine the differences between the following types of Instagram content: (**1**) sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers, (**2**) non-sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers, (**3**) Instagram content made by travel agencies, and (**4**) anonymous Instagram travel content. Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that young adults between the age of 18 and 24 perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies. Besides, young adults from this age group were expected to be more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices. While the former relationship was assumed to be moderated by young adults' ability to recognize advertisements, the latter relationship was assumed to be mediated by young adults' perceived source credibility. Multiple statistical analyses in IBM SPSS, including Hayes' PROCESS Macro, were conducted to test the considered relationships. According to the results of the statistical analyses, the researcher could conclude that actually the opposite is true. It appeared that young adults between the age of 18 and 24 perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as less credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies. However, this is only the case when the former type of content contains sponsored elements (=moderating effect). Furthermore, it turned out that young adults do not prefer one type of Instagram travel content over another when it comes to using it in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices. This is because perceived source credibility only mediates young adults' decisions to use Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors. Still, the results of this study contribute to the larger theoretical framework of understanding the implications of Instagram travel content. While young adults can use the findings of this research to learn more about the persuasive elements of travel (influencer) marketing, travel influencers and travel agencies can use the findings of this research to learn more about their target audiences' preferences. To further explore advertising skepticism among young adults, future researchers are advised to also investigate the impact of partiality disclosure.

KEYWORDS: *Instagram Travel Content, Travel Influencers, Travel Agencies, Travel Planning Behaviors, Destination Choices*

Preface

Acknowledgements

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Finally, a big thank you goes to everyone who took the time to fill in and share the experimental survey of this study. Without your answers, this thesis wouldn't be as valuable as it is now. I am always open to talk with you about the results or about the future of (travel) influencer marketing. Besides, if you want me to fill in or share one of your quantitative surveys, I am happy to do so.

Enjoy reading,

Lysanne Meijer

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of topic

The development of Web 2.0 drastically changed the travel and tourism industry (Cox et al., 2009). In today's society, individuals no longer depend on traditional communication channels such as television, radio and news outlets to obtain information about potential travel destinations. Instead, through social networking sites (SNS) like Instagram and YouTube, individuals collect travel information in more subtle and advanced ways. As stated by Xiang & Gretzel (2010), however, SNS' powerful impact extends beyond simply recommending individuals *where* to travel to. Nowadays, future travellers also turn to the photo- and video-sharing platforms for information on *how* to travel and *what* to experience when they do.

In the age of social media, online travel content plays an increasingly important role in influencing young adults' travel intentions and planning behaviors (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). In general, the development of Web 2.0 is what made this change in information acquisition possible. According to Reactive (2007), Web 2.0 refers to 'the second generation of web-based services that have gained massive popularity by letting people collaborate and share information online in previously unavailable ways' (p.3). In today's society, ordinary citizens upload travel content and imagery to the web for others to see and respond to. This information, which is also called electronic Word of Mouth, highly impacts the travel and tourism industry and creates compelling fields of study (Akehurst, 2008).

According to multiple scholars (e.g. Cox et al., 2009), especially electronic Word of Mouth created by travel influencers serves as a travel guide and provides individuals with continuous travel inspiration. Travel influencers can be described as new types of third party endorsers 'who have the ability to influence the behavior and opinions of others within the area of travel and tourism' (Stainton, 2020, para. 17). Because travel influencers have become extremely popular in determining (future) travel trends, more and more holiday destinations and travel agencies such as airlines and tour companies aim to cooperate with them (Gretzel, 2018). In general, this development results in the emergence of extended influencer marketing and a big increase of (sponsored) user-generated travel content.

Previous studies in the field of tourism have already investigated online travel content made by travel influencers from various perspectives. This includes the examination of consumers' motivations to follow travel accounts on Instagram (e.g. Barbe et al., 2020), the exploration of travel influencers' desires to share online travel content with followers (e.g. Kang & Schuett, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2020), and the inspection of how prospective travelers search for travel content made by e.g. travel influencers on the Internet (e.g. Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Particularly, an interesting example of a study about influencer marketing in the travel

and tourism industry is the study conducted by Xu and Pratt (2018). According to the researchers of this study, a higher degree of perceived congruence between a consumer and a travel influencer, or between a travel influencer and a travel destination, results in a more positive attitude towards the travel destination and increases consumers' visit intentions. This means that travel influencers are powerful marketing tools for travel agencies to mark the distinctiveness of a destination (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

After carefully studying previous studies on influencer marketing in the travel and tourism industry, however, interesting questions arise. To what extent, for example, do young adults perceive online content made by travel influencers as more credible and useful than online content made by travel agencies? Besides, does this perception change when they recognize that the online content made by travel influencers is sponsored? And, if yes, what consequences does this have for the effectiveness of travel influencer marketing? In reaction to these questions, and in order to learn more about the phenomenon, this particular research aims to conduct an online between-subjects experimental survey with three experimental conditions (**1=** sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers, **2**= non-sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers, and **3**= Instagram content made by travel agencies) and one control condition (**4** = anonymous Instagram travel content). Its main goal is to examine the differences between the influence of (sponsored) Instagram content made by travel influencers and the influence of Instagram content made by travel agencies. The research question of this investigation is as follows:

To what extent does travel content on Instagram (made by travel influencers vs. travel agencies) influence young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices?

1.2. Academic & societal relevance

In the past, travel recommendations that prospective travelers evaluated were mostly suggested by organic sources such as family members, friends or printed brochures (Wang & Pizam, 2011; Gretzel, 2018). Nowadays, however, prospective travelers also get travel recommendations suggested by online sources like travel influencers with whom they have no personal relationships. This development is made possible by Web 2.0 and has a huge impact on the travel and tourism industry (Akehurst, 2008). Because this development changes the way in which travelers make travel decisions, and influences the way in which travel agencies such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor operate, it is worth being investigated in the current study.

Firstly, the findings of this research are of crucial importance as they contribute to filling in a research gap. As aforementioned, little is known yet about the differences in effectiveness

and influence between travel content made by travel influencers and travel content made by travel agencies. Previous studies did already investigate travel content made by travel influencers (e.g. Oliveira et al., 2020), however, only as a single entity and not compared to other types of travel content. For this reason, this study aims to investigate the differences between the influence of Instagram content made by travel influencers and the influence of Instagram content made by travel agencies. Besides, because also little research has been done yet on sponsorship disclosures in travel influencer marketing, this study further strives to investigate the differences between the influence of sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers and the influence of non-sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers. Its main focus is on travel content published on Instagram, which is a web-based application that allows users to edit and share self-made content (Musonera, 2020). Because Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, it offers a multitude of opportunities to travel influencers.

Secondly, the findings of this research are of crucial importance in understanding the popularity of Instagram travel content and its contribution to successful (influencer) marketing. On the one hand, young adults' can use the findings of this study to learn more about the persuasive elements of (sponsored) travel content posted on Instagram. On the other hand, travel influencers and travel agencies can use the findings of this study to learn more about their target audiences and their attitudes towards (sponsored) Instagram posts. Furthermore, the findings of this study will help holiday destinations and travel agencies to further improve their influencer marketing strategies. As shown in a benchmark report of the Influencer Marketing Hub (2021), 90% of the businesses in the world currently believes that influencer marketing is an effective form of marketing. 75% of them even indicates to dedicate a budget to influencer marketing in 2021. If Instagram content made by travel influencers proves to be effective according to the results of this study, this spending turns out to be a strategic investment. Likewise, if Instagram content made by travel influencers proves to be ineffective according to the results of this study, travel agencies might want to rethink their decision and go back to traditional content made by themselves.

1.2. Structure

The current study is structured as follows. It starts off with presenting a structured overview of the most important findings from previous research about travelers' decision-making processes and travel influencer marketing. After formulating its hypotheses based on these findings, it continues with explaining the methodology of the current investigation. To be precise, this chapter dives into the usability of quantitative experimental surveys and provides the reader with information on how respondents are recruited and examined. After carefully representing all of the results of the experimental survey, the current study discusses its

conclusion, implications and limitations. And last, but not least, it gives the reader access to the experiment guide and the experimental survey flow.

2. Literature review

The current study aims to investigate how different types of Instagram travel content influence young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices. This particular angle is chosen by the researcher based on what is found and what is not found in previous research about online travel content. The following sections of this chapter present a structured overview of the most important findings from previous research and formulate the hypotheses of the current investigation. In short, this chapter starts off with defining the travel and tourism industry, after which it accurately explains the different stages of travelers' decision-making process. The second part of this chapter is focused on influencer marketing in tourism and discusses important concepts such as source credibility, homophily and para-social interactions (PSI).

2.1. Travel and tourism industry

2.1.1. Travel and tourism industry defined

The travel and tourism industry is an interesting industry. This is due to the fact that it contains a service rather than a product. According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2007), the term tourism can be described as 'the short-term movement of people from their origins to destinations to indulge in different pleasurable activities' (p.4). Over the last couple of decades, the tourism industry has developed into one the fastest growing industries in the world (Camilleri, 2018). Multiple figures show (e.g. Lock, 2020) that travelling on both international and domestic levels has become increasingly popular.

It is important to mention, however, that traveling used to be less common than it is right now. Only from the Second World War, people began to perceive traveling as a free-time activity (Blackall, 2019). Before that time, tourists were seen as individuals who traveled to foreign countries because of health-related reasons, educational reasons, spiritual values or self-indulgence (Pearce, 1982). As stated by Blackall (2019), mass tourism developed in the 1960s when significant developments in transportation simplified traveling. Especially the rise of air travel opened doors for tourists to travel and discover the world.

Nevertheless, the researcher of the present study acknowledges that traveling has become less self-evident again because of COVID-19 (Fotiadis et al., 2021; Sigala, 2020). To limit the spread of the coronavirus, governments across the globe have taken drastic measurements such as travel bans and lockdowns. Because of the declining demand for global tourism, airlines, hotel chains, tour operators and other tourism suppliers are slowly going out of business. According to multiple scholars (e.g. Chang et al., 2020), the pandemic has a serious impact on the tourism industry and it is uncertain how and when it will recover.

Nevertheless, even though the researcher is aware of COVID-19 and its consequences, she does not treat it as one of the main subjects of the investigation. The study's general aim remains to investigate the influence of 'ordinary' Instagram travel content, which is uploaded on the photo- and video sharing platform either before or at the beginning of the pandemic.

2.2. Travel planning behaviors & destination choices

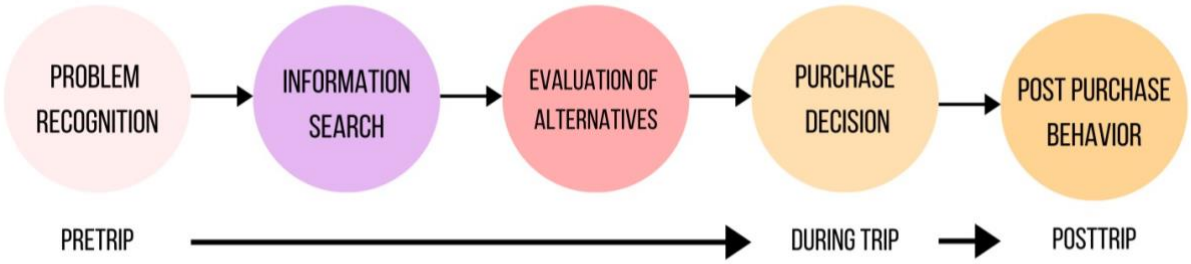
2.2.1. Decision-making in tourism

In order to learn more about the influence of online travel content, it is important to understand how travelers make travel decisions. Overall, planning a trip can be an intensive and complex activity. This is because travelers are asked to spend large amounts of money on something that is intangible (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). In order to make sure that they make the right decisions, travelers are highly interested and involved in the decision-making process. According to Engel et al. (1990), travelers' decision-making process generally consists of 5 different stages, which are: (**1**) problem recognition, (**2**) information search, (**3**) evaluation of alternatives, (**4**) purchase decision, and (**5**) post purchase behavior.

In short, travelers' decision-making process starts with the need or desire to travel (Engel et al.,1990). When this need is recognized, travelers begin to search for information about potential destinations, accommodations and/or transports. After collecting information, travelers evaluate and compare the alternatives and choose the most favorable option(s). As explained by Hudson (2008), travelers' final decisions are often influenced by internal and external factors such as reference groups, culture and motivations. It must be highlighted, however, that travelers not only make decisions before they actually go on holiday. Also during their trips (e.g. when they go out for dinner), travelers constantly gain information, evaluate alternatives and make decisions. Besides, evaluations made after a holiday are of crucial importance as well as they affect the first phases of a travelers' next decision-making process. To be precise, they determine whether or not a traveler will revisit or recommend a previously visited travel destination (Engel et al., 1990). The next sections of this chapter explain every stage of travelers' decision-making process in detail.

Figure 2. 1

Travellers' decision-making process



Note. This model is adapted from Engel et al. (1990)

2.2.2. Problem recognition & information search

The first two stages of the decision-making process involve problem recognition and information search (Engel et al., 1990). As aforementioned, travelers' decision-making process starts with the need or desire to travel. When this need or desire is recognized, travelers begin to search for useful information. In general, there are two ways in which prospective travelers collect information about potential travel destinations, accommodations and/or transports (Wang & Pizam, 2011). One the one hand, travelers use internal search, which refers to retrieving knowledge from their own memory. On the other hand, travelers use broad external sources such as online web engines and peers. According to Wang and Pizam (2011), especially the latter strategy of data collection has become increasingly popular in recent years. Nowadays, consumers' tourism practices and destination choices are more and more influenced by the opinions of family, friends, destination specific literature, travel consultants, and/or the media. Especially developments in technology explain why consumers have turned into more informed, curious and demanding seekers of external travel information (Law et al., 2009). The increased amount of information offered online results in a constant and growing tendency of travelers to search for recommendations and reviews (Gretzel, 2018).

Research to date demonstrates that prospective travelers collect different types of travel content depending on what stage of the decision-making process they are in: pretrip, during trip or posttrip (Choi et al., 2007; Seabra et al., 2007). According to the authors of one of the most comprehensive investigations of online travel planning (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006), there are 10 key travel decisions for which travelers seek information, namely: (**1**) travel partners, (**2**) the travel destination, (**3**) the expenditure required, (**4**) activities, (**5**) travel dates, (**6**) attractions to visit, (**7**) transportation providers, (**8**) the length of the trip, (**9**) rest stops, and

(**10**) food stops. Nevertheless, it has been proven that most forms of travel information are acquired by travelers in the early stages of the travel decision-making process. This is because, as aforementioned, they want to minimize the risks of making poor destination decisions (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002).

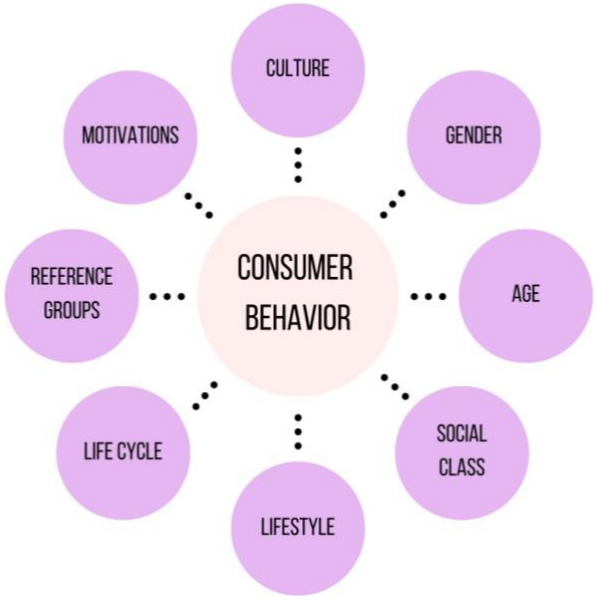
2.2.3. Evaluation of alternatives & purchase decisions

The next two stages of the decision-making process involve evaluating alternatives and making actual purchase decisions (Engel et al.,1990). After searching for useful information about potential destinations, accommodations and/or transports, prospective travelers evaluate the different opportunities and choose the most favorable option(s). However, although these steps sound logical, there are not always easy to carry out. This is because traveller's final decisions and preferences are constantly influenced by internal and external factors. A model created by Hudson (2008), which is shown in figure 2.2, includes 8 different factors that are known for impacting travelers' final decisions: (**1**) motivations, (**2**) culture, (**3**) gender, (**4**) age, (**5**) social class, (**6**) lifestyle, (**7**) life cycle, and (**8**) reference groups. Although all factors are important predictors of travelers' choices, there is one in particular that stands out in today's society: (online) reference groups.

Among the vast array of information sources prospective travelers can turn to when planning an intangible travel experience, electronic Word of Mouth (eWoM) made by online reference groups is one of the most influential (Cox et al., 2009). As a form of user-generated content, eWoM can be described as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or a company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions over the Internet' (Moran & Muzellect, 2017, p.150). Because eWoM is produced outside of professional routines, consumers tend to trust and be more influenced by this type of information (Litvin et al., 2007). Especially when it concerns intangible products, such as tourism, these product recommendations are very important (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). According to Hyung-park et al. (2007), exposure to eWoM maximises the likelihood that that prospective travelers visit a recommended destination. Furthermore, as stated by Beeton (2010), eWoM posted on social media platforms made by online reference groups plays a more important role in choosing travel destinations than advertisements made by hotel institutions.

Figure 2. 2

Factors influencing consumer behavior



Note. This model is adapted from Hudson (2008)

2.2.4. Post purchase behaviors

The very last stage of the decision-making process involves carrying out post purchase behaviors (Engel et al.,1990). As aforementioned, evaluations made after a holiday are of crucial importance as they affect the first phases of a travelers' next decision-making process. To be precise, they determine whether or not a traveler will revisit or recommend a previously visited travel destination. According to Dunne et al. (2011), post purchase behaviors of travelers include comparing their tourist product experiences with their previous expectations. Ultimately, these comparisons result in either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In reaction to these feelings, travelers turn to social media platforms such as Instagram to express their positive or negative opinions and experiences (Kang & Schuett, 2013). This form of eWoM is influential as it has the ability to influence their own and other travelers' next decision-making process (Engel et al., 1990).

In general, effective eWoM about travel destinations is often distributed by online reference groups who just returned from their vacations. Reference groups can be defined as groups of individuals whom consumers compare themselves against and strive to be like (Childers & Rao, 1992). Foundational tourism theories from the 1970s and the 1980s already integrated the phenomenon of previous tourists serving as reference groups to distribute

(electronic) word of mouth about newly discovered destinations (e.g. Plog, 1974). Blog writers, for instance, have long been influential marketing tools for impacting travelers' travel expectations and planning behaviors (Mack et al., 2008). Nowadays, in the age of social media, powerful reference groups are social media influencers who are active on (e.g.) Instagram and YouTube. These online opinion leaders, which can be described as third-party endorsers with attractive online personalities, gained their popularity through the creation and distribution of travel content on social media (Freberg et al., 2011). In general, the most established component of social media influencers' success is the relationships they build and foster between their followers and brands. These relationships are important in order to grow their own media brand and are built on carefully crafted foundations of credibility (Abidin & Ots, 2016).

According to Abidin and Thompson (2012), influencers are able to build strong relationships with their followers by creating content that is focused on a niche topic. These niches can range from travel and tourism (e.g., Gretzel, 2018) to fashion and beauty (e.g., Duffy, 2017) and to videogames (Cunningham & Graig, 2017). Social media influencers that particularly focus on the travel and tourism industry can also be described as travel influencers. The author Stainton (2020) states that travel influencers are persons 'who have the ability to influence the behavior and opinions of others within the area of travel and tourism' (para. 17). They do this by partnering up with travel organization such as airlines, tour companies and local businesses. Travel photography is a big part of their eWoM and usually contains food, scenery or images of local people and traditions. In general, travel influencers' purpose is to share their passion for traveling the world and to inspire their followers to go on holiday as well (Stainton, 2020).

2.3. Influencer marketing in tourism

2.3.1. Commercial use of travel influencers

According to Lou & Yuan (2019), influencer marketing refers to 'a form of marketing where marketers and brands invest in selected influencers to create and/or promote their branded content to the influencers' own followers and to the brands' target consumers' (p.58). Travel organizations have realized the benefits of influencer marketing on Instagram and are increasingly collaborating with travel influencers to advertise their destinations (Barbe et al., 2020). In return for payments or sponsored products or services, travel influencers are asked to produce and distribute user-generated content on social media that represents their personal opinions and identities. As discussed in an article by Evans et al. (2017), Instagram is one of the most popular channels for travel influencer marketing due to its photo- and video-sharing capabilities. By allowing travel influencers to share visual content in the form of

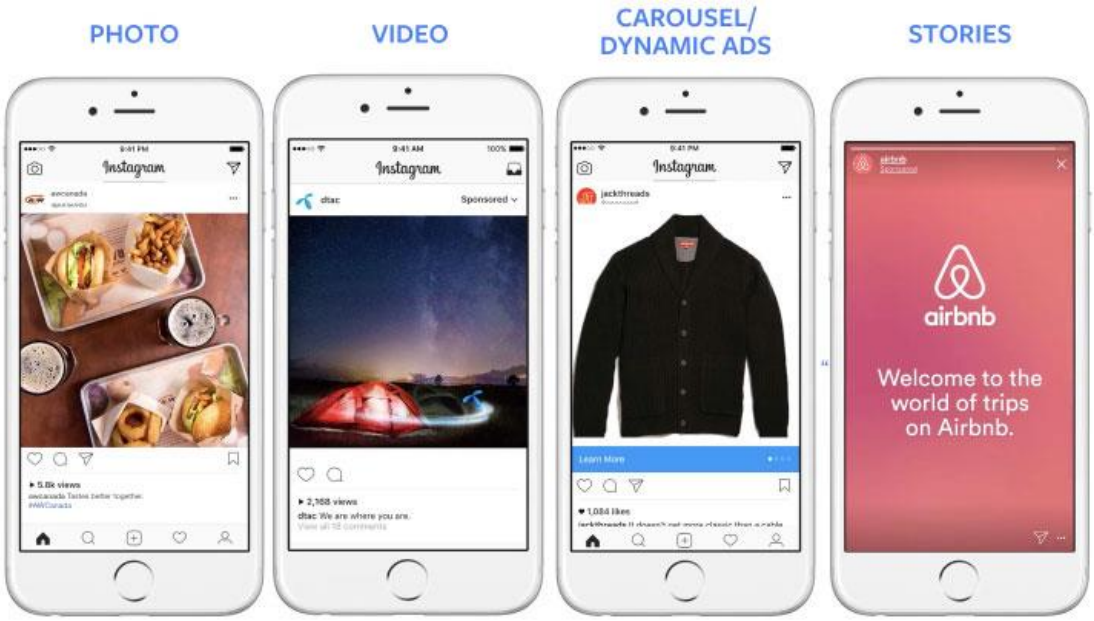
photographs and videos, the platform enables the sponsored promotion of particular travel destinations and the building of travel communities. In general, influencer marketing on Instagram is especially beneficial to travel organizations as it helps them to create brand awareness, to improve brand advocacy, to reach new target audiences, to improve sales conversion and to increase share of voice (Nanji, 2017).

When assessing Instagram, users encounter a lot of information, including sponsored travel information provided by influencers (Kusumasondjaja & Tjiptono, 2019). To avoid being bombarded by information, they tend to look at only a selection of photos. This means that, in order to attract consumers' attention effectively, influencers need to design striking travel advertisements that captures users' interests. When users stop scrolling to look at one particular photo, their first impression impacts their following behavior towards the photo and the products and/or services that it contains (Tuch et al., 2009). While some studies advise travel influencers to pay attention to the visual complexity of their advertising designs (e.g. Sohn et al., 2017), other studies encourage travel influencers to create simple advertising designs (e.g. Wong et al., 2015). In general, this is because complex advertisements distract Instagram users from the actual messages of the advertisement.

In general, as shown in figure 2.3, travel influencers on Instagram are able to advertise travel products and/or destinations in 4 different ways (Sharma, 2018). Firstly, they can choose to showcase products and/or destinations in regular Instagram photos or in 1-minute videos. These most frequently used features of the photo- and video-sharing application allow influencers to tag commercial companies such as travel agencies and to write appropriate descriptions (=captions). Secondly, travel influencers can choose to showcase products and/or destinations in carousal/dynamic advertisements. The biggest difference between these types of advertisements and the aforementioned Instagram photos and videos are for whom they are made available. While regular Instagram photos and videos are made available for travel influencers' followers, carousal/dynamic advertisements are made available for explicit target audiences. And lastly, travel influencers can choose to showcase products and/or destinations through Instagram stories. These specific stories are different from carousal/dynamic advertisements and regular Instagram photos and videos, as they are only available on the application for 24 hours (Sharma, 2018).

Figure 2. 3

Types of Instagram advertisements



Note. This figure is adapted from Sharma (2018)

2.3.2. Authenticity & credibility

Previous scholars argue that the two key norms of the influencer industry are *authenticity* and *credibility* (Wellman et al., 2020). In general, these two norms contribute to an ethical framework premised on being true to one's self and to one's audience. The first norm, which is authenticity, can be described as the quality of being real or true. The second norm, which is credibility, refers to the 'quality of the information or a source that may or may not result in trusting intentions and/or behaviors' (Weitzl, 2014, p.115). Credibility can be divided into three main categories, which are source credibility, content credibility and medium credibility. Especially the former category of credibility is of crucial importance in this research. Namely, this is because source credibility is an important predictor of eWoM persuasiveness (Weitzl et al., 2016). According to Ohanian (1990), there are three dimensions that can be defined as components of source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. While expertise refers to the degree to which an endorser is perceived as a source of valid assertions, trustworthiness refers to the degree to which an endorser is perceived as a source of objective information (Erdogan, 1999). Attractiveness, furthermore, concerns the extent to which an endorser is perceived as physical attractive. According to Ye et al. (2011), tourists generally perceive eWoM created by fellow travelers as more credible than information created

by commercial sources such as travel agencies. Multiple reasons for this development are explained in the next paragraphs of this chapter.

The current study expects to find that young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies. Furthermore, this study assumes that young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices. Particularly, these expectations are based on what is written in an article by Sokolova and Kefi (2020). According to the authors, Internet users often construct illusionary relationships with influencers on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Such relationships, which are also called para-social interactions (PSI), are self-established by the Internet users after subscribing to the influencers' channels or after following the influencers' posts. The main difference between normal relationships and para-social relationships is that normal relationships are symmetric and mutual, whereas para-social relationships are asymmetric and not mutual (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2016; Kelman, 1958). This means that, frequently, influencers themselves are unfamiliar with the Internet users and unconsciously take part in the unidirectional 'friendships'. From a business perspective, para-social interactions are beneficial for marketers and advertisers. By 'looking' at and talking to their followers through the camera, influencers are able to establish illusionary intimacy and emotional connections. These connections not only influence users' perceived source credibility, brand attitudes and purchase intentions, but also users' general behaviors. As stated by Sokoloca and Perez (2021), Internet users that feel an emotional connection with a particular influencer are more likely to get persuaded to do things. In reaction to this finding, the current study formulated the hypotheses 1a, 1b, 1c, 2a and 2b.

A concept that is closely connected to para-social interaction (PSI) is homophiliy. According to by Ladhari et al. (2020), homophily refers to the extent to which people who interact with each other are similar in terms of attitudes, values and morals, appearance and/or background. When it comes to social media, the homophily notion suggests that Internet users prefer to associate themselves with influencers who are similar in terms of norms and values (= reference groups). In general, users that perceive much similarity with a particular influencer are more likely to get attached (and thus to construct para-social relationships), to recommended the influencer to others and to buy or do things that the influencer shows. Again, this is particularly beneficial for marketers and advertisers, as it facilitates the persuasion of consumers (Ladhari et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 1a: *Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies.*

Hypothesis 1b: *Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors.*

Hypothesis 1c: *Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies to choose travel destinations.*

Hypothesis 2a: *Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content in their travel planning behaviors when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible.*

Hypothesis 2b: *Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content in their travel destination choices when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible.*

Another expectation of the current study is that perceived source credibility mediates the relationships between type of content (**1** = *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, **2** = *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, **3** = Instagram content made by travel agencies, and **4** = anonymous Instagram travel content) and young adults' travel planning behaviors and destination choices. This particular expectation is based on research conducted by Hovland et al. (1953). In their article, the authors state that whenever consumers are exposed to persuasive messages of marketers or influencers, their perceived source credibility affects their attitudes and behavioral intentions. The corresponding hypotheses for this expectation are:

Hypothesis 3a: *Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers in their travel planning behaviors, however, this effect is mediated by their perceived source credibility.*

Hypothesis 3b: *Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers to choose travel destinations, however, this effect is mediated by their perceived source credibility.*

2.3.3. Travel influencers' disclosure dilemma

As aforementioned, authenticity and credibility are two important concepts when it comes to the work travel influencers. In order to remain authentic, travel influencers have to develop credibility with both their followers and commercial brands (Wellman et al., 2020). This is generally a difficult task, as both stakeholders have different expectations about their connections with the influencers (Abidin & Ots, 2016). One way in which travel influencers

build credibility with their followers is by only working with commercial brands that they would use in their daily lives. Furthermore, another way in which travel influencers build credibility is by explicitly or implicitly disclosing their sponsored user-generated content (Lee & Kim, 2020). This particular disclosure is supposed to trigger followers' conceptual persuasion knowledge, which can be defined as the cognitive dimension that enables the recognition of advertising, its originator and its intended audience (Boerman et al., 2012).

However, even though the practice of disclosure fulfills the travel influencers' legal obligations, it usually has a negative influence on the economic success of the content (Janssen et al., 2016). Effective advertising disclosures that capture the attention of the audience enable the recognition of the content as paid and, subsequently, stimulate appropriate response strategies. As stated by scholars such as Campbell et al. (2013), followers who recognize the travel influencers' content as paid often response with negative emotions. The authors argue that sponsored user-generated content is generally less successful and persuasive when audiences recognize it as such (Campbell et al., 2013).

In reaction to these findings, the current study hypothesizes that advertisement recognition moderates the relationship between type of content (*sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers vs. *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel agencies) and young adults' perceived source credibility. This means that young adults are expected to perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as less credible when they recognize that the content contains sponsored elements. Once again, to better illustrate the expectation of this research, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 4: *Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible, however, this effect is weaker when they recognize that the content contains sponsored elements.*

2.4. Hypotheses & proposed conceptual model

In summary, this study aims to examine 8 hypotheses. At first, it strives to test the direct relationship between the different types of content (**1** = *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, **2** = *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, **3** = Instagram content made by travel agencies, and **4** = anonymous Instagram travel content) and young adults' perceived source credibility (H1a). The overall expectation is that young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies. Secondly, it aspires to investigate the direct relationships between the different types of content and young adults' travel planning behaviors (H1b) and destination choices (H1c). When it comes to these relationships, the current study expects to find that young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than

Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices. Thirdly, the investigation strives to examine the relationship between young adults' perceived source credibility and their travel planning behaviors (H2a) and destination choices (H2b). According to the assumptions of the researcher, young adults are more likely to use Instagram content while planning a holiday or choosing a travel destination when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible. And last, but not least, this research aims to analyze the indirect effects of young adults' perceived source credibility (H3) and advertisement recognition abilities (H4). While the former variable is expected to mediate the relationships between the different types of content and young adults' travel planning behaviors and destination choices, the latter variable is expected to moderate the relationship between the different types of content and young adults' perceived source credibility. For a clearer overview of the expected relationships, please look at table 2.1 and figure 2.4.

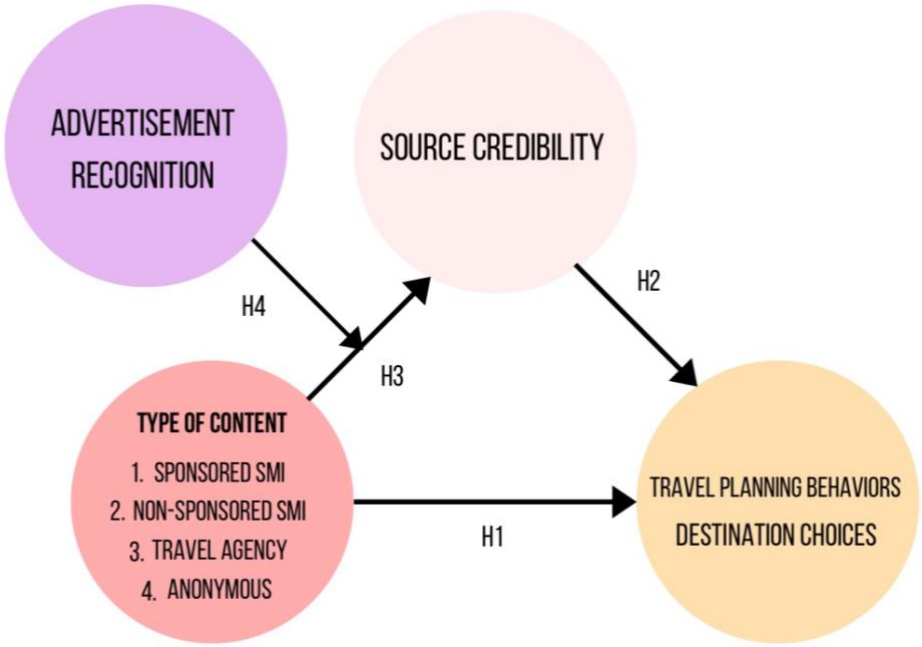
Table 2. 1

Proposed hypotheses

Number	Hypothesis
H1a	*Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies.*
H1b	*Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors.*
H1c	*Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies to choose travel destinations.*
H2a	*Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content in their travel planning behaviors when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible.*
H2b	*Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content in their travel destination choices when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible.*
H3a	*Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers in their travel planning behaviors, however, this effect is mediated by their perceived source credibility.*
H3b	*Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers to choose travel destinations, however, this effect is mediated by their perceived source credibility.*
H4	*Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible, however, this effect is weaker when they recognize that the content contains sponsored elements.*

Figure 2. 4

Proposed conceptual model



Note. This moderated mediation model is adapted from Hayes (2018)

3. Methodology

3.1. Research method

In order to investigate how travel content published on Instagram impacts young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices, a quantitative research was conducted. According to Sukamolson (2007), this research method generally refers to 'the numerical representation and manipulation of observations for the purpose of describing and explaining the phenomena that those observations reflect' (p. 2). Because quantitative research has a deductive approach, it uses existing theory to reach a conclusion about empirical data. Overall, quantitative research was very suitable for this investigation as it enabled the researcher to answer the following research question:

To what extent does travel content on Instagram (made by travel influencers vs. travel agencies) influence young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices?

3.2. Research design

3.2.1. Online experimental survey

The research question and the corresponding hypotheses of this investigation were examined through an online between-subjects experimental survey with four conditions (including one control condition). To be precise, this specific research design combined an online survey with some of the most crucial features of an experiment (e.g. the manipulation of variables). The researcher of this investigation chose this research design as it enabled her to accurately measure the causal relationships between the different variables at stake (Neuman, 2014). Besides, as also stated by Bellman (2017), this research design fulfilled all conditions of causality and guaranteed the researcher with a high degree of control and internal validity.

Furthermore, another reason for conducting an *online* experiment was because of COVID-19. Due to the global pandemic, real life encounters between the researcher and her respondents were not recommended. The Netherlands, the country in which the investigation took place, maintained severe restrictions to flatten the effects of the virus. Luckily, with the use of the online survey platform Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com), the researcher was still able to conduct the experiment in a professional and efficient manner. According to Bellman (2017), online experiments have some advantages over real-life experiments, as they facilitate the recruitment of a diverse sample. Besides, because online surveys allow respondents to take part from their own devices in their own homes, they lower the efforts to participate. All in all,

these advantages of online experimental surveys facilitated the search process of respondents and positively impacted the response rate (Bellman, 2017).

3.2.2. Experimental stimuli

The experimental stimuli of this particular investigation consisted of four types of Instagram travel content: (**1**) *sponsored* Instagram content made by a travel influencer, (**2**) *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by a travel influencer, (**3**) Instagram content made by a travel agency, and (**4**) anonymous Instagram travel content. Which experimental stimuli respondents got exposed to was dependent on which condition they were in. While respondents in condition 1 got exposed to *sponsored* Instagram content made by the travel influencer Jack Morris *(@doyoutravel*), respondents in condition 2 got exposed to *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by the same travel influencer. Furthermore, respondents in condition 3 got exposed to Instagram content made by the travel agency called Booking.com *(@bookingcom*), while respondents in condition 4 (control group) got exposed to anonymous Instagram travel content. Table 3.1 provides a systematic overview of the experimental stimuli per condition.

Table 3. 1

Experimental stimuli per condition

Condition	Experimental stimulus
1	Sponsored Instagram content made by the travel influencer Jack Morris
2	Non-sponsored Instagram content made by the travel influencer Jack Morris
3	Instagram content made by the travel agency Booking.com
4	Anonymous Instagram travel content (no source)

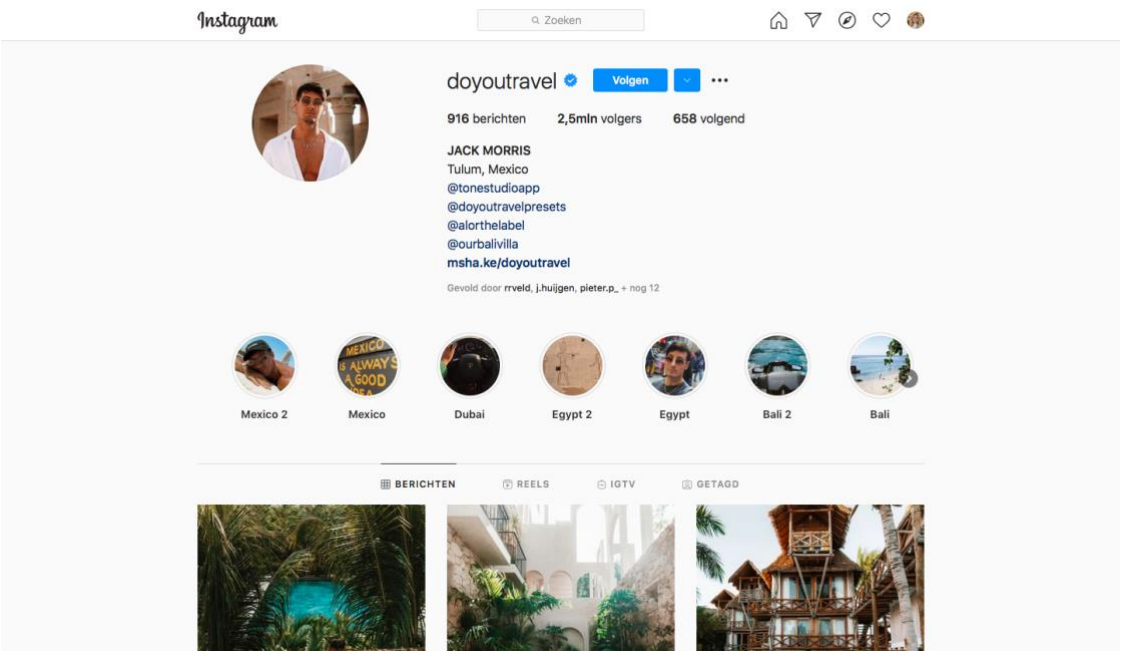
As aforementioned, respondents in condition 1 and 2 got exposed to Instagram content made by the travel influencer Jack Morris (**2 levels:** sponsored vs. non-sponsored). Jack Morris, who is currently 30 years old, originally comes from Manchester, England (Cosmopolitan, 2018). Around 8 years ago, he started travelling to escape from his job as a 9 to 5 carpet cleaner. His first intercontinental trip brought him to Thailand and was supposed to take 2 months. However, with the use of the social media platform Instagram, Jack could extend this stay on the island. By posting dreamy photographs of the most scenic places on his Instagram page *(@doyoutravel*), Jack managed to make a little bit of money. This allowed him to stay on the road a little longer. Nowadays, the 30-years-old Englishman is one of the most popular travel influencers in the world. He currently lives in Bali, has more than 2.5 million followers on Instagram and earns around $9,000 per sponsored post (Cosmopolitan, 2018).

According to himself, it is mainly the authenticity of his photos that attracts the audience. In an interview with MediaKix (2017), he said: 'I think the way I do my photos has quite a real approach to it. It is a dreamy kind of life but at the same time it is real and organic. I feel like a lot of people can relate to it, or at least aspire to do what I do' (para.15)

The Instagram posts of Jack Morris were chosen by the researcher for two specific reasons. Firstly, they were chosen because of their ability to appeal to both males and females. This is because most of Jack's Instagram pictures depict both him and his (ex-)girlfriend Lauren Bullen *(@gypsea_lust*). During their relationship from 2016 to 2020, the couple traveled to more that 20 countries together. 'A lot of people, I think, prefer to see a couple. The dream, I guess, is to travel with your partner and not so much on your own', said Jack in the aforementioned interview (Mediakix, 2017, para.16). Furthermore, the Instagram posts of Jack Morris were chosen because of their popularity. According to Beganovich (2021), Jack Morris himself currently belongs to the 5 most popular and influential travel influencers in the world.

Figure 3. 1

Instagram page of Jack Morris (@doyoutravel)

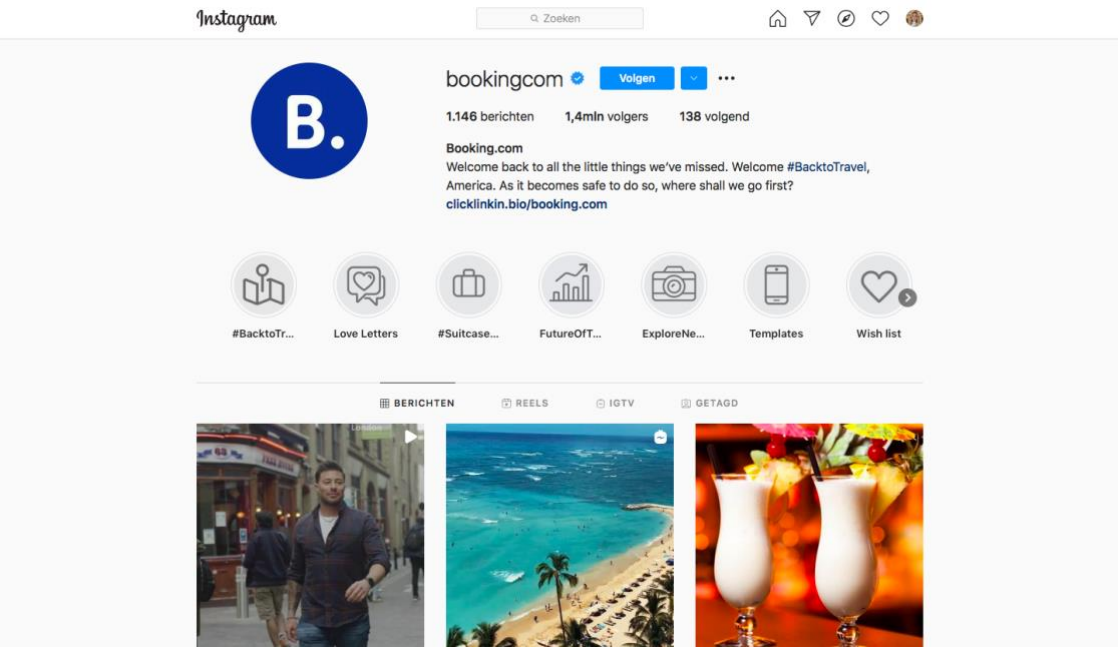


Respondents in condition 3 got exposed to Instagram content made by Booking.com. Overall, Booking.com can be described as an online travel agency that provides travelers with reservation services (www.booking.com). In general, the company acts as an intermediary agent between guests who want to make accommodation reservations and hotels, properties or temporary rentals. Originally, Booking.com was founded as Booking.nl in 1996. The founder

of the company, Geert-Jan Bruinsma, created the website for people in or visiting The Netherlands to book a hotel room online. Currently, the company can be described as one of the best-known online travel agencies in the world (next to e.g. Airbnb and TripAdvisor). It is available in 43 different languages and offers its customers around 1.07 million overnight stays. On its Instagram page (*@bookingcom*; 1.4 million followers), users can find a variety of posts: from user-generated content made by travel influencers to content made by the company itself. In this particular research, the main focus was on travel content made by Booking.com itself. In his way, the researcher was able to investigate the differences between the influence of Instagram content made by travel influencers and the influence of Instagram content made by travel agencies.

Figure 3. 2

Instagram page of Booking.com (@bookingcom)



To be precise, every condition contained 4 Instagram travel posts. This means that, in total, the experimental survey consisted of 16 experimental stimuli (4x4). It is of crucial importance to mention that all Instagram travel posts were consistent in terms of images, composition and fonts. Besides, all Instagram pictures depicted the same destinations: Italy, Turkey, Finland and Bali. In this way, the researcher made sure that potential confounding variables were avoided and that all posts were measuring the same underlying variables. In terms of sources, however, the Instagram posts slightly differed. As aforementioned, the Instagram posts in condition 1 and 2 were published by the travel influencer Jack Morris, while

the Instagram posts in condition 3 were published by the travel agency Booking.com. Moreover, the Instagram posts in control group 4 were published by an anonymous source. This means that respondents in control group 4 only saw the travel pictures, without any usernames and/or captions. The researcher carefully manipulated the content with the use of the graphic design platform Canva Pro (www.canva.com).

Another difference between the Instagram travel posts were the captions. While the captions of the sponsored Instagram posts clearly mentioned brand names (e.g. '@Hertz') and partnerships ('sponsored content') to make it look sponsored and to facilitate advertisement recognition, the captions of the non-sponsored travel posts did not. Furthermore, while the captions of the travel influencer Jack Morris were written in the first person for the sake of storytelling, the captions of the travel agency Booking.com were not. Some examples of the Instagram travel posts used in this research are depicted below. For a full overview of the experimental stimuli, please go to page 75.

It is important to mention that the researcher of this investigation aimed to create experimental stimuli that were both realistic and simple (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017). The realistic touch was given to the stimuli by using existing content creators, namely: Jack Morris and Booking.com. Furthermore, to enhance the simplicity of the stimuli, the researcher decided to remove the comment sections from the Instagram posts. In this way, it was made sure that the attention of the respondents was only attracted by the images and the captions of the travel content.

Figure 3. 3

Example of sponsored Instagram post made by Jack Morris (@doyoutravel)

Figure 3. 4

Example of non-sponsored Instagram post made by Jack Morris (@doyoutravel)

Figure 3. 5

Example of Instagram post made by Booking.com (@bookingcom)

Figure 3. 6

Example of anonymous Instagram travel post

3.2.3. Procedure

Young adults between the age of 18 and 24 were invited to take part in the experimental survey through the (social media) platforms WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and SurveySwap. After clicking on an anonymous web link in one of the recruitment messages of the researcher, potential respondents were sent to Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). The introduction of the experimental survey familiarized the respondents with the topic of the study and the corresponding objectives. After informed consent was given, the respondents were asked to fill in their age. It is important to mention that respondents who indicated to be younger than 18 were sent to the end of the survey. This is because under aged respondents were not allowed in this research.

Subsequently, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: condition 1, condition 2, condition 3 or control group 4. While the respondents in condition 1 and 2 got exposed to Instagram content made by the travel influencer Jack Morris (**2 levels:** sponsored vs. not sponsored), the respondents in condition 3 got exposed to Instagram content made by the travel agency Booking.com. Moreover, the respondents in the control group were exposed to anonymous Instagram travel content (no source). After the respondents had seen and studied the content, they were sent to the next part of the experimental survey. This part consisted of questions about the respondents' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices (= dependent variables). Furthermore, this part tested the respondents' advertisement - and source recognition abilities (= manipulation checks).

The last part of the survey, which consisted of demographic questions, aimed to collect information related to the respondents' gender, nationality, level of education, social media usage and general travel motivations. When the respondents reached the very end of the survey, they were thanked for their participation and exposed to the real purpose of the experiment. Besides, because the researcher used deception throughout the experiment, the end of the survey also contained a small disclaimer (Neuman, 2014). This means that the respondents were informed about the fact that some of the content they had seen was fictional.

3.3. Sampling

3.3.1. Sampling technique

According to Babbie (2011), the units of analysis are 'the what or whom being studied' (p.101). In this particular study, the unit of analysis were English-speaking young adults between the age of 18 and 24 who were familiar with Instagram and social media influencers. As described by Setiawan et al. (2018), this particular age group (also known as generation Z) is predicted to be tourism's main target audience in the next five to ten years.

The non-probability sampling technique called snowball sampling was used by the researcher to find respondents of this generation. This particular sampling technique was suitable for this investigation as it was cost-efficient and relatively simple to carry out (Babbie, 2011). On the (social networking) sites WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and SurveySwap, the researcher posted several recruitment messages in which she called for respondents. Through liking, sharing and commenting on the recruitment messages, located respondents (in)directly recommended other possible respondents. It is important to mention that the researcher avoided recruiting direct friends and family, since their responses could lead to bias results. In total, the researcher sought to find *at least* 120 respondents, which means 30 respondents per condition (30 x 4).

3.3.2. Total sample description

Overall, *N* = 205 respondents filled in the experimental survey (*N* = 51 in condition 1; *N* = 51 in condition 2; *N* = 52 in condition 3; *N* = 51 in control group 4). However, respondents that did not meet the age requirements, or failed to answer most of the survey questions, were excluded from the data analysis. This means that, eventually, a total of *N* = 134 responses was used to answer the research question of this study (*N* = 34 in condition 1; *N* = 33 in condition 2; *N* = 33 in condition 3; *N* = 34 in control group 4). When looking at the number of respondents per condition, it is safe to state that every condition had a similar number of drop-outs.

The average age of the respondents was *M* = 21.60 years (*N* = 134, *SD* = 1.40). In terms of gender, 40.3% of the respondents was male (*N* = 54) and 59.7% of the respondents was female (*N* = 80). Furthermore, 56.0% of the respondents (which is the majority) indicated to have obtained a Bachelor's degree in college. Besides, the sample of this research was relatively international, as the respondents indicated to have 11 different nationalities. While most respondents came from The Netherlands (*N* = 118), there were also respondents from Afghanistan (*N* = 1), Austria (*N* = 2), Belgium (*N* = 2), Burkina Faso (*N* = 1), China (*N* = 1), France (*N* = 1), Italy (*N* = 1), Sierra Leone (*N* = 1), The USA (*N* = 2), and Vietnam (*N* = 1). In total, 78.4% of the respondents (*N* = 105) indicated to be a student. The other 21.6% of the respondents (*N* = 29) expressed to be employed for wages, self-employed or out of work and looking for work.

The sample of this particular investigation can also be described in terms of Instagram usage and general travel motivations. Firstly, 97.0% of the respondents (*N* = 130) indicated to use the photo- and video-sharing platform Instagram. On average, these respondents spend *M* = 3.22 (*SD* = 3.45) hours on this Social Networking Site (SNS) on a daily basis. Secondly, 92.5% of the respondents (*N* = 124) signified to usually make trips for tourism. The other 7.5%

of the respondents (*N* = 10) indicated to usually make trips for business, study or visiting acquaintances.

3.3.3. Sample description per condition

In condition 1, the average age of the respondents was *M* = 21.79 years (*N* = 34, *SD* = 1.32). Furthermore, 41.2% of the respondents in this condition was male (*N* = 14) and 58.8% was female (*N* = 20). The most frequently obtained degree in this condition was a Bachelor's degree in college. This is because 61.8% of the respondents (*N* = 21) indicated to have obtained this degree. In terms of Instagram usage, 91.2% of the respondents (*N* = 31) signified to use the photo- and video-sharing application. On average, these respondents spend *M* = 4.97 (*SD* = 4.93) hours on the platform on a daily basis. While most respondents in this condition came from The Netherlands (*N* = 28), there were also respondents from Austria (*N* = 1), Belgium (*N* = 1), Burkina Faso (*N* = 1), Sierra Leone (*N* = 1) and The USA (*N* = 1). In total, 79.4% of the respondents in this condition (*N* = 27) indicated to be a student.

The average age of the respondents in condition 2 was *M* = 21.85 (*N* = 33, *SD* = 1.18). Furthermore, in this condition, gender was distributed as follows: 48.5% of the respondents was male (*N* = 16) and 51.5% of the respondents was female (*N* = 17). Just like in condition 1, the most frequently obtained degree in this condition was a Bachelor's degree in college (*N* = 20). Besides, all respondents in this condition (*N* = 33) indicated to use the social media platform Instagram for approximately *M* = 4.34 (*SD* = 3.87) hours per day. While 87.9% of the respondents from this group indicated to have a Dutch nationality (*N* = 29), there were also respondents with a Belgian nationality (*N* = 1) and a Chinese nationality (*N* = 1). In total, 78.8% of the respondents in this condition (*N* = 26) indicated to be a student.

The respondents in condition 3 were, on average, *M* = 21.24 years old (*N* = 33, *SD* = 1.37). In terms of gender, 39.4% of the respondents in this condition was male (*N* = 13) and 60.6% was female (*N* = 20). Although quite a few respondents in this group indicated to be high school graduates (*N* = 9), the most frequently obtained degree was still a Bachelor's degree in college (*N* = 18). Again, all respondents in this condition expressed to use the social media platform Instagram on a daily basis (*N* = 33), however, a little less often than the respondents in condition 2 (*M* = 4.05, *SD* = 3.25). Furthermore, 90.9% of the respondents in this condition came from The Netherlands (*N* = 30). The other 9.1% of the respondents indicated to come from France (*N* = 1), The USA (*N* = 1) and Vietnam (*N* = 1). In total, 75.8% of the respondents in this condition (*N* = 25) signified to be a student.

And last, but not least, the average age of the respondents in control group 4 was *M* = 21.53 (*SD* = 1.32). In this group, the male/female ratio was as follows: while only 32.4% of the respondents was male (*N* = 11), 67.6% of the respondents was female (*N* = 23). Furthermore, from the *N* = 34 respondents in this group, *N* =16 indicated to have obtained a Bachelor's

degree in college. When it came to social media usage, *N* = 33 of the respondents signified to use the social media platform Instagram. On average, they spend *M* = 2,74 (*SD* = 3.38) hours per day on the aforementioned application. Again, although most respondents in this group came from The Netherlands (*N* = 31), there were also foreign respondents from Afghanistan (*N* = 1), Austria (*N* = 1), and Italy (*N* = 1). In total, 79.4% of the respondents in this group (*N* = 27) claimed to be a student. Table 3.3 provides a detailed overview of the conditions and its respondents.

In order to increase external validity of the measurements used in this study, the researcher randomly assigned the survey respondents to one of the four conditions. To test if the random assignment of respondents was successful, two randomization checks were conducted. The results of a chi-square test for independence showed that *gender* did not significantly differ among the experimental conditions, X^2 (3, *N* = 134) = 1.83, *p* = .608. Furthermore, the results of an one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that *age* did not significantly differ among the experimental conditions, *F* (3, 130) = 1.30, *p* = .270. This means that the respondents were evenly distributed among the conditions during the experiment. The random assignment was successful and, therewith, provided a base for valid comparisons between respondents from different conditions. Tables 3.3 and 3.4 provide a clear overview of the results of the randomization checks.

Table 3. 2

Summary of experimental conditions

	Sponsored SMI	Non-sponsored SMI	Travel agency	Anonymous
N	34	33	33	34
Age*	21.79	21.85	21.24	21.53
Male	14	16	13	11
Female	20	17	20	23
Degree**	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
Employment status**	Student	Student	Student	Student
Nationality**	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands
Instagram users	31	33	33	33
H on Instagram*	4.97	4.34	4.05	2.74
Travel motivation**	Tourism	Tourism	Tourism	Tourism

***Average** ** Most common

Table 3. 3

Distribution of gender per condition

	Sponsored SMI	Non-sponsored SMI	Travel agency	Anonymous	Total
Male	14	16	13	11	54
Female	20	17	20	23	80
Total	34	33	33	34	134

Table 3. 4

Average age per condition

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Sponsored SMI	34	21.79	1.321	19	24
Non-sponsored SMI	33	21.85	1.176	20	24
Travel agency	33	21.24	1.370	18	24
Anonymous	34	21.53	1.674	18	24
Total	134	21.60	1.404	18	24

3.4. Operationalization

3.4.1. Independent variable type of content

As shown in the proposed conceptual model (see figure 2.4), *type of content* served as the independent variable in this research (= predictor variable). This means that the researcher expected to find significant relationships between this variable and the dependent variables of this study (Babbie, 2011). At first, the researcher expected to uncover that young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies (H1a). Secondly, the researcher expected to uncover that young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices* (H1b & H1c). Furthermore, the former relationship was expected to be moderated by young adults' *advertisement recognition* abilities (H4), while the latter relationship was expected to be mediated by young adults' *perceived source credibility* (H3). More information about the other variables of this research can be found in the paragraphs below.

In this particular investigation, *type of content* was operationalized as a categorical variable with 4 categories: (**1**) sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer, (**2**) non-sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer, (**3**) Instagram content made by

a travel agency, and (**4**) anonymous Instagram travel content. In the online experimental survey, the categorical variable was not directly measured but served as the experimental stimuli that respondents got exposed to (= experimental conditions). In the survey flow of the experimental survey (p. 82), respondents' exposure to the experimental stimuli occurred after the introductory questions and before the measurement of the dependent variables. As aforementioned, the respondents of the experimental survey were randomly assigned to one of the conditions after answering questions regarding their participation in this research and their age.

3.4.2. Dependent variable travel planning behaviors

One of the two dependent variables in this research was *travel planning behaviors* (= outcome variable). In the experimental survey, this continuous variable measured the extent to which young adults use Instagram travel content when planning a vacation. As aforementioned, the researcher expected to find that young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their *travel planning behaviors* (H1b). Moreover, the researcher also expected to find that this relationship is mediated by young adults' *perceived source credibility* (H3a).

According to Neuman (2014), researchers are recommended to use pre-existing, reliable scales to measure the different variables at stake. For this reason, in order to measure respondents' travel planning behaviors, the researcher used the Travel Planning Behavior scale of Tsiakali (2018). This particular scale can be described as a 5-point Likert scale with 4 dimensions and 11 different items. As also shown in table 3.5., the 4 dimensions of this scale are: travel need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase decision. Furthermore, examples of items that make up this scale are ***(1)*** *pictures like the ones I just saw inspire me to travel* and ***(2)*** *pictures like the ones I just saw influence what to do/see and destinations*. The answer options of this scale have an anchor of 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*. According to a reliability test conducted in IBM SPSS, this particular scale was highly reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

3.4.3. Dependent variable destination choices

The second dependent variable in this investigation was *destination choices.* Similar to *travel planning behaviors, destination choices* served as a continuous variable in this research. The researcher expected to find significant relationships between *type of content* and this particular variable. As formulated in hypothesis 1c, young adults were expected to be more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by

travel agencies to choose travel destinations. As formulated in hypothesis 3b, furthermore, this relationship was assumed to be mediated by young adults' *perceived source credibility*.

The researcher used another 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents' *destination choices*. This pre-existing scale from Kneesel et al. (2010) consists of 2 different items: ***(1)*** *to what extent would you recommend the destinations shown in the pictures to your friends and family?, and (**2**) to what extent would you consider visiting, or revisiting, the destinations shown in the pictures?*. In this particular study, the answer options of the first item had an anchor of 1 being *not recommend at all* and 5 being *definitely recommend*. Furthermore, the answer options of the second item had an anchor of 1 being *not consider at all* and 5 being *definitely consider.* Another reliability test conducted in IBM SPSS showed that this particular scale was reliable (Cronbach's α = .77).

3.4.4. Mediating variable source credibility

This particular study included one mediating variable. According to MacKinnon (2015), mediating variables explain the relationships between the independent variable(s) and the dependent variable(s) of an investigation. In this particular research, *source credibility* was not only perceived as a dependent variable (H1a). As also shown in figure 2.4., *source credibility* was also perceived as a mediating variable that explained the relationships between *type of content*, *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices* (H3).

In order to measure how respondents perceived the source of the Instagram content (travel influencer vs. travel agency), the researcher used the Celebrity Endorsement scale of Ohanian (1990). Originally, this 7-point semantic differential scale consists of three dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. However, for the purpose of this particular study, the researcher only measured the former two dimensions. The first dimension, trustworthiness, was made up out of the following 5 items: ***(1)*** *undependable – dependable, (**2**) dishonest – honest, (**3**) unreliable – reliable, (**4**) insincere – sincere, and (**5**) untrustworthy – trustworthy*. The second dimension, expertise, was made up out of 5 other items: (**1**) *not an expert – an expert, (**2**) inexperienced – experienced, (**3**) unknowledgeable – knowledgeable, (**4**) unqualified – qualified, (**5**) unskilled – skilled.* A reliability test showed that the scale was highly reliable (Cronbach's α = .85).

3.4.5. Moderating variable advertisement recognition

Next to one mediating variable, this study also included one moderating variable. Moderating variables moderate the relationship between the independent variable(s) on the dependent variable(s) of a study, such that the influence is present for one group (i.e., males) but not for another (i.e., females) (MacKinnon, 2011). As shown in the proposed conceptual

model of this research (figure 2.4), *advertisement recognition* was expected to moderate the relationship between *type of content* and *perceived source credibility*.

During the experimental survey, the variable *advertisement recognition* was measured by using a multiple-choice question with two answer options. The question was formulated as follows: '*Do you agree or disagree that the pictures you just saw contain sponsored elements?' (***1*** = agree and ***2*** = disagree). It is important to mention, however, that this particular question also served as one of the manipulation checks of the experiment. The other manipulation check, which measured *source recognition*, consisted of the multiple-choice question '*Do you remember who created this content?'* (**1** = a travel influencer and **2** = a travel agency),

Moreover, the moderating variable also took a different form. As aforementioned, the respondents of the online experimental survey were randomly exposed to one of the 4 experimental stimuli. E.g. while the respondents in condition 1 were exposed to sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer, the respondents in condition 3 were exposed to non-sponsored Instagram content made by a travel agency. When analyzing the respondents' answers in the computer program IBM SPSS, a new variable was computed. By using the values 1 to 4, this new variable showed the researcher which respondent was exposed to which experimental stimuli.

3.4.6. Control variables

Other important variables in quantitative research are control variables. According to Babbie (2011), control variables refer to extraneous variables that could potentially influence or explain the answers given by the respondents. Furthermore, they are assumed to have a confounding role, which means that they could lead to distortion in the expected relationships (Spector & Brannick, 2011). In this particular study, there were several control variables that might have impacted the answers given by the target audience: gender, level of education, employment status, nationality, Instagram usage and travel behavior. By including these variables into the study, the researcher enabled herself to present a more accurate analysis of the data. Besides, these variables helped the researcher to check if the random assignment of respondents was successful (see section 3.3.3)

Table 3. 5

Constructs, dimensions & scales

Constructs	Dimensions	Scales
Source credibility (Ohanian, 1990)	Trustworthiness	7-point semantic differential scale *5 items*
	Expertise	7-point semantic differential scale *5 items*
Travel planning behaviors (Tsiakali, 2018)	Travel need recognition	5-point Likert scale *2 items*
	Information search	5-point Likert scale *3 items*
	Evaluation of alternatives	5-point Likert scale *3 items*
	Purchase decision	5-point Likert scale *3 items*
Destination choices (Kneesel et al., 2010)	*Two what extent would you recommend the destinations shown in the pictures to your friends and family?*	5-point Likert scale
	To what extent would you consider visiting, or revisiting, the destinations shown in the pictures?	5-point Likert scale
Advertisement recognition (Boerman et al., 2012)	*Do you agree or disagree that the pictures you just saw contain sponsored elements?*	Multiple-choice question *2 answer options*
Source recognition *No source*	*Do you remember who created this content?*	Multiple-choice question *2 answer options*

3.4.7. Exploratory factor analyses

Multiple exploratory factor analyses and reliability checks were carried out by the researcher in order to double check the reliability of the measurements used in this research. The first factor analysis was conducted to test the Celebrity Endorsement scale of Ohanian (1990). Prior to performing the analysis, the suitability of the data was assessed. The researcher concluded that the scale met all the *a priori* requirements, as it was continuous, normally distributed and consisted of more than three items (Pallant, 2016). Inspection of the exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation showed that the scale also met all the *a posteriori* requirements. The correlation matrix revealed, for example, the presence of many coefficients of .3 and above. Besides, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .87, exceeding the recommended value of .6. Furthermore, the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $p < .001$. The exploratory factor analysis further revealed the presence of two components with Eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 49,7% and 18,3% of the variance, X^2 (N = 134, 45) = 727.61. This means that the 10 items that make up the original Celebrity Endorsement scale could be clustered into two components: ***(1)*** *expertise* and ***(2)*** *trustworthiness*. This is in line with the findings of Ohanian himself (1990).

The first component of the Celebrity Endorsement scale, expertise, included the following five items: ***(1)*** *unskilled - skilled*, ***(2)*** *unexperienced - experienced*, ***(3)*** *unknowledgeable - knowledgeable*, ***(4)*** *not an expert - expert*, and ***(5)*** *unqualified – qualified*. A reliability check showed that this subscale was highly reliable with a Cronbach's α of .88. The second component of the scale, trustworthiness, also included five items: (***1)*** *dishonest – honest, (**2**) unreliable – reliable, (**3**) untrustworthy – trustworthy, (**4**) insincere – sincere,* and *(5) undependable – dependable.* Another reliability check showed that this subscale was highly reliable (Cronbach's α = .86). Table 3.6 represents the factor loadings of the two components found.

Table 3. 6

Factor and reliability test for source credibility scale (N = 134)

Item	Expertise	Trustworthiness
In my opinion, the travel influencer/travel agency/ content creator can be described as…		
Skilled	.88	
Experienced	.86	
Knowledgeable	.81	
An expert	.80	
Qualified	.76	
Honest		.91
Reliable		.88
Trustworthy		.88
Sincere		.82
Dependable		.43
R^2	.50	.18
Cronbach's α	.88	.86

Another exploratory factor analysis was conducted to test the Travel Planning Behaviors scale of Tsiakali (2018). Again, prior to performing the analysis, the suitability of the data was assessed. After inspection of the correlation matrix, the researcher found that most coefficients had a value of .3 or higher. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .86 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $p < .001$, X^2 (N = 134, 55) = 533.97. The results of the exploratory factor analysis using the Principal Components extraction with Direct Oblimin rotation showed that the items of the travel planning behaviors scale could be clustered into four components. Table 3.7 shows the factor loadings of the four components found.

The first component of the Travel Planning Behaviors scale, travel need recognition, included the following two items: ***(1)*** *inspire me to travel* and ***(2)*** *make me seriously consider to go on a vacation even though I had no intention before*. According to a reliability check, this subscale was reliable with a Cronbach's α of .74. The second component of the scale, information search, included three items. These were: ***(1)*** *help me find travel information when I need it,* ***(2)*** *reduce my effort to find travel information, and* ***(3)*** *increase the quality of travel information.* Another reliability check showed that this subscale was reliable with a Cronbach's α of .72. The third component of the Travel Planning Behaviors scale was called evaluation of alternatives. The results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed that this component

consisted of the following three items: ***(1)*** *help me evaluate/compare travel destinations/services/suppliers, (**2**) lead me to expand my consideration set, and (**3**) help me to reconfirm my travel selections*. And lastly, the fourth component of the scale, purchase decision, was made up out of the three items ***(1)*** *help me to book travel services/suppliers, (**2**) influence what to do/see at destinations,* and ***(3)*** *help me purchase complementary destinations/services/suppliers to enrich my tourist experience.* Two other reliability checks confirmed the reliability of the two subscales (respectively Cronbach's α = .73; Cronbach's α = .80). In the end, the entire scale was combined into a single variable: *travel planning behaviors*.

Table 3. 7

Factor and reliability test for travel planning behavior scale (N = 134)

Item	Need	Info	Evaluation	Purchase
In my opinion, pictures like the ones I just saw...				
Inspire me to travel	.85			
Make me seriously consider to go on a vacation even though I had no intention before	.82			
Help me find travel information when I need it		.73		
Reduce my effort to find travel information		.87		
Increase the quality of travel information		.61		
Help me evaluate/compare travel destinations/services/suppliers			.53	
Lead me to expand my consideration set			.74	
Help me to reconfirm my travel selections			.77	
Help me to book travel services/suppliers				.56
Influence what to do/see at destinations				.70
Help me purchase complementary destinations/services/suppliers to enrich my tourist experience				.87
R^2	.16	.18	.21	.18
Cronbach's α	.74	.72	.73	.80

3.5. Validity & reliability

3.5.1. Pre-testing

Validity can be described as the extent to which a concept is accurately measured in a quantitative study (Heale & Twycross, 2015), In general, there are two main types of validity: (**1**) internal validity and (**2**) external validity. While the former type of validity refers to the structure of a study and its variables, the latter type of validity refers to how generalizable the results of the study are (Neuman, 2014). Attention was paid to both of these notions during the conceptualisation of this online experimental survey.

One way in which this study increased the internal validity of its measurements was by incorporating the feedback of respondents who pre-tested the online experimental survey (Ruel et al., 2019). In general, pre-testing can be described as the stage in between finalizing the design of the survey and collecting actual data. In this particular stage, the survey is tested by a representative and diverse subsample of respondents and critically assessed. According to Ruel et al. (2019), researchers are highly recommended to pre-test their surveys, as failing to do so can lead to invalid results. Besides, pre-tests provide researchers with an accurate estimation of the time that it takes to complete the survey. Overall, when pre-testing surveys, researchers should carefully examine the comprehensibility and unambiguity of the questions, the order of the questions, and – if necessary – the clarity of the experimental stimuli (Neuman, 2014; Reul et al., 2019).

In total, a subsample of $N = 7$ respondents pre-tested the questionnaire of this particular investigation. Through short interviews with the respondents afterwards, the researcher gained in-depth understanding of their experience with the different questions and experimental stimuli (Neuman, 2014). Based on the respondents' feedback, a number of changes had to be made to the survey. One of these changes included a more detailed description of the content creator and a change in the overall structure of the survey. To avoid the word *source* throughout the questions and statements (e.g. in my opinion, the source can be described as…), the researcher created three different survey branches; one for each type of content. Instead of the word *source*, each branch now used the label of the respective content creator. All respondents who were assigned to condition 1, for instance, followed a personalised branch of the survey and encountered statements like 'in my opinion, this *travel influencer* can be described as …'.

3.5.2. Manipulation checks

Another way in which this investigation verified the internal validity of its measurements was by including two manipulation checks. According to Hoewe (2017), manipulation checks are important as they *check* if the respondents perceived the experimental manipulations as

intended. At first, respondents in the first three conditions of this investigation were asked to indicate whether they thought the content they had seen contained sponsored elements ('*do you agree or disagree that the pictures you just saw contain sponsored elements?*'). This specific question is formulated by Boerman et al. (2012) and consists of two different answer options: ***(1)** agree* and ***(2)** disagree.* Secondly, the same respondents were asked to recall the creator of the content they had seen: ***(1)** a travel influencer* or ***(2)** a travel agency.* By using the computer program IBM SPSS, the researcher was able to see how the respondents answered these specific questions.

In terms of source recognition, most respondents were able to recall the creator of the content they got exposed to. In condition 1, 94.1% of the respondents (N = 32) was able to remember that the content they had seen was made by a travel influencer. In condition 2, this percentage was even higher, namely 97.0% (N = 32). When it came to condition 3, 90.9% of the respondents (N = 30) was able to remember that the content they got exposed to was made by a travel agency. Overall, these findings are in line with the intended manipulations.

In terms of advertisement recognition, however, not all respondents were able to recall the nature of the content. As intended, 94.1% of the respondents in condition 1 (N = 32) was able to recognize that the content they had seen contained sponsored elements. Nevertheless, 78.8% of the respondents in condition 2 (N = 26) also thought that the content they got exposed to included advertising. This finding is interesting and not in line with the intended manipulation, as the content in condition 2 was non-sponsored. Besides, 81.8% of the respondents in condition 3 (N = 27) thought that the content they had seen contained sponsored elements as well. This finding is also not in line with the intended manipulation, as the content in condition 3 was again non-sponsored. All in all, it can be concluded that 50% of the manipulation was perceived as intended by the respondents. The discussion part of this thesis further elaborates on the consequences and possible causes of this finding.

3.6. Data analysis

To analyse the data of the online experimental survey, the computer program IBM SPSS was used. In order to test whether *type of content* had an influence on the respondents' *perceived source credibility*, *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices* (= hypothesis 1), this study conducted multiple one-way between-group analyses of variance (ANOVAs). These tests were chosen because they enabled the researcher to efficiently compare the mean scores of the different experimental conditions in this study (Pallant, 2016).

Furthermore, in order to test the mediating role of *perceived source credibility* (= hypotheses 2), this study conducted two mediation analyses by using model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS Macro test with 5.000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2009). These mediation analyses conducted multiple regression analyses at once, which provided the researcher with

systematic overviews of all direct and indirect effects of the independent variable *type of content* on the dependent variables *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices.* By creating a dummy variable for the independent variable *type of content*, the researcher was able to conduct the mediation analyses with a multicategorical independent variable.

Thirdly, a multiple linear regression analysis with perceived source credibility as criterion was conducted to test the extent to which the variable *advertisement recognition* moderated the effect of *type of content* on *perceived source credibility*. In general, a multiple linear regression analysis is based on correlation, and thus allows a more sophisticated exploration of the interrelationship among a set of variables (Pallant, 2016).

4. Results

As aforementioned, the computer program IBM SPSS is used to gain insights into the validity of the four hypotheses of this study. The different analyses conducted by the researcher are five one-way between-groups analyses of variance (ANOVA), three one sample t-tests, two PROCESS Macro mediation analyses and eight regression analyses. In the following sections of this chapter, the results of the analyses are reported and explained.

4.1. The influence of type of content

4.1.1. The relationship between type of content and source credibility

Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 provide a systematic overview of the descriptive statistics of the variables *source credibility*, *expertise* and *trustworthiness*. The mean scores of the different experimental conditions are assigned to one of the following categories: either *low*, *medium* or *high*. These categories are made by the researcher based on the values of the corresponding scales (in this case: 7-point semantic differential scales).

Table 4. 1

Source credibility means (7-point semantic differential scale)

Source Credibility	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
	***M* = 1.00 – 2.99**	***M* = 3.00 – 4.99**	***M* = 5.00 – 7.00**
Sponsored SMI		4.41	
Non-sponsored SMI		4.64	
Travel agency			5.22
Anonymous		4.81	

Table 4. 2

Expertise means (7-point semantic differential scale)

Expertise	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
	***M* = 1.00 – 2.99**	***M* = 3.00 – 4.99**	***M* = 5.00 – 7.00**
Sponsored SMI		4.68	
Non-sponsored SMI		4.98	
Travel agency			5.56
Anonymous			5.38

Table 4. 3

Trustworthiness means (7-point semantic differential scale)

Trustworthiness	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
	***M* = 1.00 – 2.99**	***M* = 3.00 – 4.99**	***M* = 5.00 – 7.00**
Sponsored SMI		4.15	
Non-sponsored SMI		4.30	
Travel agency		4.87	
Anonymous		4.24	

This particular research expects to find that young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies. In order to test this hypothesis, a one-way between-groups ANOVA is conducted in the computer program IBM SPSS. By using the Tukey HSD test, post-hoc comparisons are made between the conditions of the predictor variable *type of content*. To clarify, the conditions that are entered into the analysis are: condition 1 (= sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer), condition 2 (= non-sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer) condition 3 (= Instagram content made by a travel agency) and condition 4 (= anonymous Instagram travel content). According to a preliminary analysis, the homogeneity of variance assumption is not violated.

As determined by the one-way between-groups ANOVA, there is a statistically significant relationship between *type of content* and young adults' *perceived source credibility*, F (3, 129) = 4.50, p = .005. Post-hoc comparisons from the Tukey HSD test indicate that two conditions significantly differ from each other when it comes to their *source credibility* scores, namely *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (M = 4.41, SD = 1.10) and Instagram content made by travel agencies (M = 5.22, SD = .84), p = .003. From the significantly different means can be concluded that young adults generally perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible than *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers. This finding is in contradiction to the expectation of the researcher, which means that hypothesis 1a cannot be confirmed.

It is important to mention, however, that this statistically significant difference is only present when the Instagram content made by travel influencers contains sponsored elements. Namely, the same results show that there is no statistical significant difference between young adults' perception of *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (M = 4.64, SD = .88) and young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies (M = 5.22, SD = .84), p = .060. Again, this finding is not in line with the expectation of the researcher, which means that hypothesis 1a cannot be confirmed.

To get an in-depth understanding of these contradictory findings, the researcher conducts two more one-way between-groups ANOVAs; one to test the outcome variable *expertise* and one to test the outcome variable *trustworthiness* (these outcome variables both make up the scale *source credibility*). The first analysis, which treats *expertise* as the outcome variable, shows that there is a statistically significant relationship between *type of content* and young adults' *perceived expertise, F* (3, 130) = 5.08, *p* = .002. Post-hoc comparisons from the Tukey HSD test indicate that one of the conditions significantly differs from two other conditions when it comes to its *expertise* scores. To be precise, young adults' perception of *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (*M* = 4.68, *SD* = 1.07) significantly differs from young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies (*M* = 5.56, *SD* = .91, *p* = .003) and young adults' perception of anonymous Instagram travel content (*M* = 5.38, *SD* = 1.00, *p* = .029). From the means found in this analysis can be concluded that young adults generally perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies and/or anonymous sources as more informed than *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers. Nevertheless, this is again only the case when the Instagram content made by travel influencers contains sponsored elements. The same post-hoc comparisons show that, when it comes to *expertise*, there is no statistically significant difference between young adults' perception of *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (*M* = 4.98, *SD* = 1.08) and young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies (*M* = 5.56, *SD* = .91), *p* = .094.

The second analysis, which treats *trustworthiness* as the outcome variable, reveals that there is also a statistically significant relationship between *type of content* and young adults' *perceived trustworthiness, F* (3,129) = 2.77, *p* = .045. New post-hoc comparisons from the Tukey HSD test indicate that two conditions significantly differ from each other when it comes to their *trustworthiness* scores, namely *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (*M* = 4.15, *SD* = 1.43) and Instagram content made by travel agencies (*M* = 4.87, *SD* = .99), *p* = .049. From the significant different means can be concluded that young adults generally perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more trustworthy than *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers. Once again, it is important to mention that this conclusion can only be made when the Instagram content made by travel influencers contains sponsored elements. This is because the same post-hoc comparisons show that, when it comes to *trustworthiness*, there is no statistically significant difference between young adults' perception of *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (*M* = 4.30, *SD* = 1.02) and young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies (*M* = 4.87, *SD* = .99), *p* = .184.

A one sample t-test is conducted to compare the source credibility means of the different experimental conditions to the midpoint of the source credibility scale. Because the

source credibility scale is a 7-point semantic differential scale, its midpoint is 4. According to the results of the one sample t-test, the source credibility means of the different experimental conditions are significantly higher than the midpoint (M = 4.77), t (132) = 9.21, p < .001. From this finding can be concluded that all types of Instagram travel content are perceived as credible sources of travel information, however, the one slightly more than the other.

4.1.2. The relationship between type of content, travel planning behaviors & destination choices

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 provide a systematic overview of the descriptive statistics of the variables *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices.* The mean scores of the different experimental conditions are again assigned to one of the following categories: either *low*, *medium* or *high*. These categories are made by the researcher based on the values of the corresponding scales (in this case: 5-point Likert scales).

Table 4. 4

Travel planning behaviors means (5-point Likert scale)

Travel Planning Behavior	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
	***M* = 1.00 – 2.33**	***M* = 2.34 – 3.67**	***M* = 3.68 – 5.00**
Sponsored SMI		2.95	
Non-sponsored SMI		3.14	
Travel agency		3.28	
Anonymous		3.24	

Table 4. 5

Destination choices means (5-point Likert scale)

Destination Choices	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
	***M* = 1.00 – 2.33**	***M* = 2.34 – 3.67**	***M* = 3.68 – 5.00**
Sponsored SMI		3.47	
Non-sponsored SMI		3.62	
Travel agency			3.76
Anonymous			3.91

The current study also expects to find that young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices*. By conducting two new one-way between-

groups ANOVAs, these hypotheses are examined. Again, post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test are made between the conditions of the predictor variable *type of content*. To clarify once more, the conditions that are entered into the analyses are: condition 1 (= sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer), condition 2 (= non-sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer) condition 3 (= Instagram content made by a travel agency) and condition 4 (= anonymous Instagram travel content). It is important to mention that the homogeneity of variance assumptions are not violated according to the results of preliminary analyses.

From the first one-way between-groups ANOVA, which considers *travel planning behaviors* as the outcome variable, can be concluded that there is no statistically significant relationship between *type of content* and young adults' *travel planning behaviors*, F (3, 130) = 1.55, p = .205. As determined by the post-hoc comparisons of the Tukey HSD test, no conditions significantly differ from each other when it comes to their *travel planning behaviors* scores. The means of the different conditions are: M = 2.95 (SD = .71) for *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, M = 3.14 (SD = .73) for *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, M = 3.28 (SD = .50) for Instagram content made by travel agencies, and M = 3.24 (SD = .78) for anonymous Instagram travel content. In contradiction to the expectation of the researcher, this finding suggests that young adults do not prefer to use (sponsored) Instagram content made by travel influencers over Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors. Because this suggestion is not in line with the researcher's assumption, hypothesis 1b cannot be confirmed.

From the second one-way between-groups ANOVA, which considers *destination choices* as the outcome variable, can be concluded that there is also no statistically significant relationship between *type of content* and young adults' *destination choices, F* (3, 130) = 1.84, p = .144. According to the post-hoc comparisons of the Tukey HSD test, no conditions significantly differ from each other when it comes to their *destination choices* scores. Respectively, the means of the different conditions are: M = 3.47 (SD = .79) for *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, M = 3.62 (SD = .87) for *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers, M = 3.76 (SD = .85) for Instagram content made by travel agencies, and M = 3.91 (SD = .73) for anonymous Instagram travel content. Again, this finding is in contradiction to what the researcher expects to find, as it suggests that young adults do not prefer to use (sponsored) Instagram content made by travel influencers over Instagram content made by travel agencies when making travel destination choices. In order to accept this suggestion, the researcher has to reject hypothesis 1c.

Another one sample t-test is conducted to compare the travel planning behaviors means of the different experimental conditions to the midpoint of the travel planning behaviors scale. Because the travel planning behaviors scale is a 5-point Likert scale, its midpoint is 3.

From the results of the one sample t-test can be concluded that the travel planning behaviors means of the different experimental conditions are significantly higher than the midpoint (*M* = 3.15*)*, *t* (133) = 2.47, *p* = .015.

And lastly, a third one sample t-test is conducted to compare the destination choices means of the different experimental conditions to the midpoint of the destination choices scale. Just like the travel planning behaviors scale, the destination choices scale is a 5-point Likert scale which means that its midpoint is 3. According to the results of the one sample t-test, the destination choices means of the different experimental conditions are significantly higher than the midpoint (*M* = 3.70), t (133) = 9.77, p < .001. From these findings can be concluded that young adults use all types of Instagram content (either sponsored or non-sponsored; either made by travel influencers, travel agencies or anonymous sources) in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices.

4.2. The mediating role of source credibility

4.2.1. The relationship between type of content, source credibility & travel planning behaviors

In order to test whether *source credibility* mediates the effect of *type of content* on young adults' *travel planning behaviors*, a mediation analysis is conducted by using model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS Macro in IBM SPSS. During the analysis, the corresponding dummy coded variable of *type of content* serves as the predictor variable (**0** = made by anonymous source, **1** = made by a travel influencer, and **2** = made by a travel agency). Furthermore, *travel planning behaviors* serves as the outcome variable and *source credibility* serves as the mediating variable. It is important to mention that the analysis is conducted with 5.000 bootstrapped samples.

The first part of the output shows that no statistically significant relationships can be reported between the different *types of content* and young adults' *perceived source credibility*. While the overall model reveals to be significant (*F* (2, 130) = 6.26, *p* = .003, R^2 = .09), the distinct effects of the different *types of content* on *source credibility* reveal not to be significant. To be precise, neither the distinct effect of Instagram content made by travel influencers on *source credibility* is significant, a^1 = -.28, *t* (133) = -1.45, *p* = .149, nor the distinct effect of Instagram content made by travel agencies on *source credibility*, a^2 = .41, *t* (133) = 1.82, *p* = .070. It must be highlighted that the coefficients stated in these results refer to the effects of the different *types of content* when compared to the control condition as a reference category (= made by an anonymous source).

However, the second part of the output shows that there is a statistically significant relationship between young adults' *perceived source credibility* and their *travel planning behaviors*, b^1 = .35, *t* (133) = 6.02, *p* < .001. The corresponding regression analysis, in which

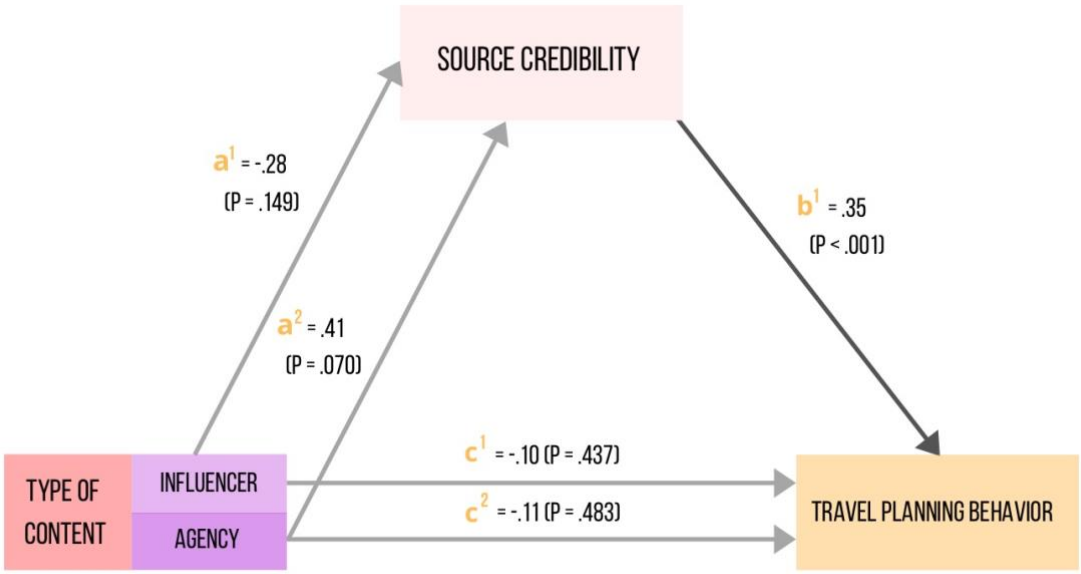
travel planning behaviors is treated as the outcome variable, shows that the overall model is significant, F (3, 129) = 13.53, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .24$. The distinct direct effects of the different *types of content* on *travel planning behaviors* are, nonetheless, insignificant (respectively c^1 = -.10, t (133) = -.78, $p = .437$; c^2 = -.11, t (133) = -.70, $p = .483$). This means that, as also described in detail in section 4.1.2, young adults are *not* more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors. Still, as aforementioned, the output does reveal a statistically significant effect of *perceived source credibility* on young adults' *travel planning behaviors*. From this finding, the researcher can conclude that young adults are more likely to use Instagram travel content in their travel planning behaviors when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible. This is in line with the expectation of the researcher, which means that hypothesis 2a can be confirmed.

To determine the occurrence of a mediating role, the researcher looks at the final part of the PROCESS Macro output. This part of the output provides information about the existence of indirect and conditional effects of the different *types of content* on young adults' *travel planning behaviors*. According to the first part of this output, *perceived source credibility* does not mediate the effect of Instagram content made by travel influencers on *travel planning behaviors*, $index^1$ = -.10, SE = .07, 95% CI [-.26; .03]. The indices stated in these results are not significant because zero (the null) falls between the lower and upper bound of the 95% confidence interval. According to the second part of this output, however, *perceived source credibility* does indeed mediate the effect of Instagram content made by travel agencies on *travel planning behaviors*, $index^2$ = .14, SE = .07, 95% CI [.00; .29]. The indices stated in these results reveal to be significant because the 95% confidence interval does not encompass zero (the null).

Still, these findings do not allow the researcher to confirm hypothesis 3a. Although the results of the PROCESS Macro demonstrate the existence of a mediator, they don't support the study's expectation. From the results found can be concluded that only the relationship between Instagram content made by travel agencies and *travel planning behaviors* is mediated by *perceived source credibility*. To be precise, this means that young adults perceive Instagram travel content made by travel agencies as more credible and that they are more likely to use credible Instagram content in their travel planning behaviors. Thus, perceived source credibility explains why young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors in comparison to Instagram travel content made by anonymous sources. Contradictory, when it comes to young adults' decisions to use Instagram content made by travel influencers in their travel planning behaviors, perceived source credibility has no influence.

Figure 4. 1

Mediation of source credibility (1)



4.2.2. The relationship between type of content, source credibility & destination choices

Another mediation analysis using model 4 of Hayes' PROCESS Macro is conducted to test hypothesis H3b. This particular hypothesis states that *source credibility* mediates the effect of *type of content* on young adults' *destination choices*. Again, during the analysis, the dummy coded variable of *type of content* serves as the predictor variable (**0** = made by travel an anonymous source, and **1** = made by a travel influencer, **2** = made by a travel agency) and *source credibility* as the mediating variable. This time, however, it is *destination choices* that serves as the outcome variable. It is important to mention that this test is also conducted with 5.000 bootstrapped samples.

The first part of the output shows, again, that the relationships between the different *types of content* and young adults' *perceived source credibility* are insignificant. Because these results fully correspond to (a part of) the results of the previous PROCESS Macro test, they are not described in detail in this section. The second part of the output shows the effects of the predictor - and the mediating variable on young adults' *destination choices*. From the corresponding regression analysis, in which *destination choices* is treated as the outcome variable, can be concluded that the overall model is significant, F (3, 129) = 13.18, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .24$. The distinct direct effects of the different types of content on young adults' *destination choices*, however, are not significant (respectively $c^1 = -.25$, t (133) = -1.64, $p = .103$; $c^2 = -.32$, t (133) = -1.77, $p = .079$). This means that, as also described in detail in section 4.1.2, young

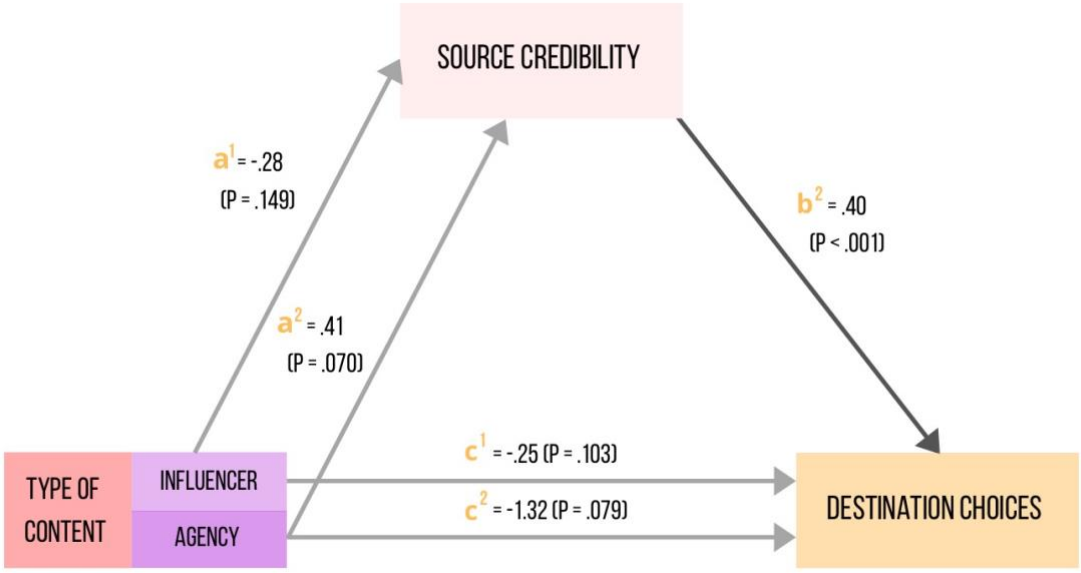
adults are *not* more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies when choosing travel destinations. In contrast, the distinct effect of *perceived source credibility* on young adults' *destination choices* does reveal to be significant, $b^2 = .40$, t (133) = 5.79, $p < .001$. From this finding, the researcher can conclude that young adults are more likely to use Instagram travel content in their travel destinations choices when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible. Because this is in line with the expectation of the researcher, hypothesis 2b can be confirmed.

Once again, to determine the occurrence of a mediating role, the researcher looks at the final part of the PROCESS Macro output. In this case, this part of the output provides information about the existence of indirect and conditional effects of the different types of content on young adults' *destination choices*. However, while the previous PROCESS model revealed some kind of mediation, this PROCESS model does not. According to the first part of the output, *perceived source credibility* does not mediate the effect of Instagram content made by travel influencers on *destination choices*, $index^1 = -.11$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [-.27; .04]. The indices stated in these results are not significant because zero (the null) falls between the lower and upper bound of the 95% confidence interval. The second part of the output, furthermore, shows that *perceived source credibility* also does not mediate the effect of Instagram content made by travel agencies on *destination choices*, $index^2 = .16$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [-.00; .35]. Equivalently, the indices stated in these results are insignificant because the 95% confidence interval encompasses zero (the null).

In reaction to these findings, the researcher cannot confirm hypothesis 3b. The results of the PROCESS Macro test clearly demonstrate the absence of a mediator. Although *perceived source credibility* does have a significant effect on *destination choices*, it does not have a significant indirect effect on the relationship between *type of content* and the aforementioned outcome variable. To be precise, this means that young adults are not more likely to use Instagram travel content (either made by travel influencers or by travel agencies) in their *destination choices* when they find the source(s) of the content credible. Possible explanations for this finding are highlighted in the discussion part of this thesis (see page 48).

Figure 4. 2

Mediation of source credibility (2)



4.3. The moderating effect of advertisement recognition

And last, but not least, this study expects to find that young adults' ability to recognize advertisements moderates the relationship between the predictor variable *type of content* and the outcome variable *source credibility*. To be precise, young adults are expected to perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible, but this effect is weaker when they recognize that the content contains sponsored elements.

According to the results of the very first one-way between-groups ANOVA (see page 39) there is a statistically significant difference between young adults' perception of *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (M = 4.41, SD = 1.10) and young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies (M = 5.22, SD = .84), F (3, 129) = 4.50, p = .005. From the significantly different means can be concluded that young adults generally perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible than *sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers. As aforementioned, however, this conclusion can only be made when the so-called Instagram content made by travel influencers contains sponsored elements. Namely, the results of the same one-way between-groups ANOVA also show that there is no statistically significant difference between young adults' perception of *non-sponsored* Instagram content made by travel influencers (M = 4.64, SD =

.88, *N* = 32) and young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies (*M* = 5.22, *SD* = .84, *N* = 33).

When looking at these findings, the researcher can conclude that there is some kind of moderating effect. Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as less credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies, but only if the Instagram content made by travel influencers contains advertising. Whenever the Instagram content made by travel influencers does not contain advertising, young adults do not perceive it differently than Instagram content made by travel agencies. Still, this finding does not allow the researcher to confirm hypothesis 4. This is because of two main reasons: (**1**) from the results of the one-way between-groups ANOVA can be concluded that young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible than (sponsored) Instagram content made by travel influencers, while actually the researcher expected the reserve, and (**2**) although there is some kind of moderating effect, it is not with the expected moderator. Instead of young adults' ability to recognize advertising in Instagram travel content (= *advertisement recognition)*, it is the nature of the Instagram travel content (= *sponsored label*) that moderates the relationship between *type of content* and *source credibility.*

In order to double check the presence of moderators, nevertheless, this study conducts two multiple linear regression analyses with *source credibility* as criterion. The first regression analysis is conducted to double check the moderating role of the predictor variable *sponsored label*. To be precise, *sponsored label* indicates whether or not the Instagram travel content that respondents got exposed to contained sponsored elements (= nature of the Instagram travel content). Its corresponding dummy variable has the values: **0** = non-sponsored Instagram travel content, and **1** = sponsored Instagram travel content. As aforementioned, the results of the very first one-way between-groups ANOVA (page 36) show that *sponsored label* indeed moderates the relationship between *type of content* and young adults' perceived *source credibility*. Young adults tend to perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible than Instagram content made by travel influencers, but only if the latter type of content contains sponsored elements. This multiple linear regression analysis with *source credibility* as criterion and *type of content* and *sponsored label* as predictors is conducted to double check this moderating effect. For *type of content*, the researcher uses a dummy coded variable with the values: **0** = made by a travel agency/anonymous source, and **1** = made by a travel influencer.

According to the output of preliminary analyses, the researcher does not violate the assumptions of multicollinearity, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Inspection of the correlations matrix reveals that the predictor variables *type of content* and *sponsored label* show at least some relationship with the outcome variable *source credibility*. Besides, the correlation between each of the predictor variables is not too high. Furthermore, from the

coefficients table can be concluded that there is no indication of multicollinearity. The VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) value is well below the cut-off of 10 (= 1.52) and the Tolerance value is not less than .10 (= .66). The Normal P-P Plot, which is presented at the end of the output, does not suggest major deviations from normality.

The output of the multiple linear regression analysis further shows that 7.1% of the variance in the outcome variable *source credibility* is explained by the model (which includes the predictor variables *type of content* and *sponsored label*), F (2, 130) = 5.01, p = .008. The results indicate that *type of content* does not make a statistically significant unique contribution to the prediction of *source credibility* (β = -.19, p = .065), nor does *sponsored label* (β = -.10, p = .324). In general, from these findings can be concluded that there is no moderating effect present. The results clearly show that both predictor variables *type of content* and *sponsored label* are not correlated with the outcome variable *source credibility.* Surprisingly, this is in contradiction to what is found by the very first one-way between-groups ANOVA.

The second regression analysis is conducted to examine the moderating effect of the predictor variable *advertisement recognition*. To be precise, *advertisement recognition* indicates whether or not the respondents recognized the Instagram travel content they got exposed to as sponsored. As explained in detail in the methodology of this thesis, *advertisement recognition* is originally expected to moderate the relationship between *type of content* and young adults' perceived *source credibility*. Young adults are expected to perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible, but this effect is weaker when they recognize that the content contains sponsored elements.

According to the results of one of the manipulation checks, most respondents were unable to correctly recall the nature of the Instagram travel content they got exposed to. As intended, 94.1% of the respondents in condition 1 (= sponsored Instagram travel content made by a travel influencer) was able to recognize that the content they had seen was sponsored. However, 78.8% of the respondents in condition 2 (= non-sponsored Instagram travel content made by a travel influencer) also thought that the content they got exposed to included sponsored elements. Besides, 81.8% of the respondents in condition 3 (= Instagram travel content made by a travel agency) thought that the content they had seen contained advertising as well. These last two findings are not in line with the intended manipulation, as the content in condition 2 and condition 3 was non-sponsored.

Still, the answers given by the respondents can be used to examine the moderating effect of the variable *advertisement recognition.* Even though most respondents incorrectly recalled the nature of the Instagram travel content that they got exposed to, their *perceived* nature still might have impacted their source credibility scores. To check this, a second multiple linear regression analysis with *source credibility* as criterion and three different predictors is conducted. The first predictor, which is a dummy coded variable for *type of content*, has the

values: **0** = made by a travel agency/anonymous source, and **1** = made by a travel influencer. The second predictor, which is a dummy coded variable for *advertisement recognition*, consists of the values: **0** = does not recognize the Instagram travel content as sponsored, and **1** = does recognize the Instagram travel content as sponsored. While the first category consists of 49 answers (including the answers of respondents in the control condition), the second category consists of 85 answers. The third and last predictor in this analysis, which is *type of content*advertisement recognition*, is the product of the two former variables.

According to the output of the preliminary analyses, the researcher does not violate the assumptions of multicollinearity, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. The output of the multiple linear regression analysis itself shows that 6.9% of the variance in the outcome variable *source credibility* is explained by the model (which includes the predictor variables *type of content, advertisement recognition* and *type of content*advertisement recognition*), F (3, 129) = 3.18, p = .026. According to the results, neither *type of content* makes a statistically significant unique contribution to the prediction of *source credibility* (β = -.13, p = .476), nor *advertisement recognition* (β = .03, p = .772) and *type of content*advertisement recognition* (β = -.16, p = .450). From these findings can be concluded that there is no moderating effect present. The results clearly show that none of the predictor variables correlates with the outcome variable *source credibility.* In reaction to this finding, hypothesis 4 cannot be confirmed.

4.4. The influence of the control variables

There is a possibility that demographic characteristics such as age, gender and level of education have influenced the answers given by the respondents. In order to test this, the researcher conducts a few more multiple linear regression analyses in IBM SPSS. Preliminary analyses are performed to ensure that no assumptions of multicollinearity, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity are violated. The analyses also account for *type of content* by including the corresponding dummy coded variable as one of the predictor variables in the regressions (**0** = made by a travel agency/anonymous source, and **1** = made by a travel influencer).

Two multiple linear regression analyses are conducted by the researcher in order to test the potential effects of *age* on young adults' *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices.* The results of the regression analyses show that both models are insignificant, with F (2, 131) = 2.57, p = .080, R^2 = .04 for the outcome variable *travel planning behaviors* and F (2, 131) = 2.37, p = .098, R^2 = .04 for the outcome variable *destination choices.* This means that *age* did not make a significant unique contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable *travel planning behaviors* (β = -.12, p = .186), nor to the prediction of the dependent variable *destination choices* (β = -.06, p = .528). Based on these findings, the researcher can conclude that *age* did not influence the answers given by the respondents.

Two more multiple linear regression analyses are carried out in this study to test whether gender has an effect on young adults' *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices.* Because gender is a categorical variable, the researcher uses a corresponding dummy coded variable as one of the predictor variables in the regressions (**0** = male, **1** = female). According to the results of the regression analyses, respondents' gender did not influence their answers given during the experimental survey. Both models reveal not to be significant, with F (2,131) = 1.85, p = .161, R^2 = .03 for the outcome variable *travel planning behaviors* and F (2,131) = 2.54, p = .083, R^2 = .04 for the outcome variable *destination choices*. Just like age, gender did not make a significant unique contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable *travel planning behaviors* (β = .05, p = .549), nor to the prediction of the dependent variable *destination choices* (β = .07, p = .395). In general, from this finding can be concluded that males and females do not perceive travel content on Instagram differently.

And last, but not least, the researcher conducts two more multiple linear regression analyses to check whether the respondents' levels of education had an effect on their *travel planning behaviors* and *destination choices*. Again, because level of education originally serves as a categorical variable, the researcher uses a dummy coded variable of level of education as one of the predictor variables in the regressions (**0** = low level of education, **1** = high level of education). From the results of the last regression analyses, the researcher can conclude that the answers given by the respondents were not influenced by their levels of education. Repeatedly, both models reveal to be insignificant, with F (2, 129) = 2.54, p = .083, R^2 = .04 for the outcome variable *travel planning behaviors* and F (2, 129) = 2.37, p = .098, R^2 = .04 for the outcome variable *destination choices*. This means that level of education did not make a significant unique contribution to the prediction of the dependent variable *travel planning behaviors* (β = -.12, p = .187), nor to the prediction of the dependent variable *destination choices* (β = -.06, p = .496).

4.5. Hypotheses & results

In reaction to the findings of the different analyses conducted in IBM SPSS, this study is able to confirm 2 out of the 10 hypotheses. For a clear overview of which hypotheses are confirmed and which are not, please go to the next page (table 4.6).

Table 4. 6

Hypotheses: confirmed or not confirmed?

Number	Hypothesis	Result
H1a	Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible than Instagram content made by travel agencies.	Not confirmed
H1b	Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors.	Not confirmed
H1c	Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers than Instagram content made by travel agencies to choose travel destinations.	Not confirmed
H2a	Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content in their travel planning behaviors when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible.	Confirmed
H2b	Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content in their travel destination choices when they perceive the source(s) of the content as credible.	Confirmed
H3a	Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers in their travel planning behaviors, however, this effect is mediated by their perceived source credibility.	Not confirmed
H3b	Young adults are more likely to use Instagram content made by travel influencers to choose travel destinations, however, this effect is mediated by their perceived source credibility.	Not confirmed
H4	Young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel influencers as more credible, however, this effect is weaker when they recognize that the content contains sponsored elements.	Not confirmed

5. Conclusion & discussion

5.1. Discussion

5.1.1. Summary of results

The outcomes of this study can be summarized as follows. According to the results of the first one-way between-groups ANOVA, there is a statistically significant difference between young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel influencers and young adults' perception of Instagram content made by travel agencies. In contradiction to the researcher's expectation, it appears that young adults generally perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible than Instagram content made by travel influencers. It is important to mention, however, that this is only the case when the Instagram content made by travel influencers contains sponsored elements. Whenever the Instagram content made by travel influencers does not contain sponsored elements, young adults do not perceive it differently than Instagram travel content made by travel agencies.

Nevertheless, it must be highlighted that the aforementioned findings do not suggest that sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers is not credible at all. The results of an one sample t-test show that all types of Instagram travel content (either anonymous, made by travel influencers or made by travel agencies) are perceived as credible, however, the one as slightly more than the other. To clarify, this conclusion can be made when looking at the source credibility means of the different experimental conditions. Because the conditions had a collective source credibility mean of significantly higher than $M = 4$ (the mid-point of the source credibility scale), the researcher can conclude that no types of Instagram travel content are perceived as not credible; not even Instagram travel content made by anonymous sources. For a systematic overview of the source credibility mean scores of the different experimental conditions, please look at tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3.

The aforementioned findings are in line with findings from previous studies, but only to a certain extent. Just like previous research (e.g. Litvin et al., 2007), this study has found that Instagram posts made by travel influencers are credible sources of travel information. Young adults generally identify the aforementioned Instagram content as both informed and trustworthy. However, this study has also found that Instagram posts made by travel agencies are even more credible sources of travel information. According to the results of multiple one-way between-groups ANOVAs, young adults perceive Instagram posts made by travel agencies as more informed and trustworthy than Instagram posts made by travel influencers. Particularly, this last finding contradicts to what is said in previous studies or by travel influencers themselves. Scholars such as Ye et al. (2011) stated that tourists perceive content created by fellow travelers as credible than information created by commercial sources such

as travel agencies. Besides, even according to travel influencers themselves, travel content made by them is often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional travel content. In an interview with MediaKix (2017), travel influencers Jack Morris and Lauren Bullen said: 'people follow us because they enjoy our content. So, when we post about a brand, a location, or whatever it is we are being paid for, our followers trust it more than when they see a random advertisement in a magazine' (para.11).

The results of this study further indicate statistically insignificant effects of type of content on young adults' travel planning behaviors and destination choices. Whether the respondents got exposed to Instagram content made by the travel influencer Jack Morris or Instagram content made by the travel agency Booking.com, their travel planning behaviors - and destination choices scores did not significantly differ. From these findings, it can be concluded that young adults do not prefer to use Instagram content made by travel influencers over Instagram content made by travel agencies when planning (international) trips or when choosing travel destinations. This is especially interesting because the aforementioned findings indicate that young adults perceive travel content made by travel agencies as generally more informed and trustworthy. According to previous research (e.g. Sokoloca and Perez, 2021), Internet users that perceive brands and/or influencers as credible are usually more likely to behave in a certain way, or to get persuaded to do or by things.

Again, the current findings do not suggest that young adults never use Instagram travel posts in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices. According to a second one sample t-test, the experimental conditions had a collective travel planning behaviors mean of higher than $M = 3$ (the mid-point of the travel planning behaviors scale). This means that young adults do use Instagram content made by travel influencers and travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors. Furthermore, according to another one sample t-test, the experimental conditions also had a collective destination choices mean of significantly higher than $M = 3$ (the mid-point of the destination choices scale). From this can be concluded that young adults use Instagram content made by travel influencers and travel agencies in their destination choices as well.

Furthermore, previous research discovered that whenever consumers are exposed to persuasive messages made by marketers or influencers, their perceived source credibility affects their attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g. Hovland et al., 1953). In reaction to this discovery, this particular study hypothesized that perceived source credibility mediates the relationship between type of content and young adults' travel planning behaviors. However, according to the results of the first PROCESS Macro test, source credibility only partly mediates the relationship between type of content and young adults' travel planning behaviors. Only in the case of Instagram content made by travel agencies (compared to anonymous Instagram travel content), perceived source credibility has an influence. This means that young

adults perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible and that they are more likely to use credible Instagram travel content in in their travel planning behaviors. In the case of Instagram content made by travel influencers, in contrast, perceived source credibility does not to have an influence. Overall, this finding is not in line with findings from previous research (e.g. Hovland et al., 1953), which means that the role of source credibility has slightly changed.

In reaction to the aforementioned discovery by Hovland et al. (1953), this particular study also hypothesized that perceived source credibility mediates the relationship between type of content and young adults' destination choices. Nevertheless, the results of the second PROCESS Macro test showed that perceived source credibility does not explain the relationships between the different types of content and young adults' destination choices; not even partly. Again, this finding is not in line with findings from previous research (e.g. Hovland et al., 1953), which means that the role of source credibility has slightly changed.

And last, but not least, the current study hypothesized that young adults' abilities to recognize sponsored elements in Instagram travel content (= advertisement recognition) moderates the effect of type of content on young adults' perceived source credibility (Campbell et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the results of the first one-way between-groups ANOVA indicate that instead of advertisement recognition, it is the nature of Instagram travel content (= sponsored label) that moderates the aforementioned effect. From the results can be concluded that respondents perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies such as Booking.com as more credible than Instagram content made by travel influencers such as Jack Morris. However, this difference in perception is only present when Instagram content made by travel influencers contains sponsored elements. Whenever Instagram content made by travel influencers does not contain sponsored elements, respondents do not perceive it differently than Instagram content made by travel agencies.

According to a multiple linear regression analysis, however, this moderating role of source credibility is not present. This contradictory finding can be explained as follows. While the one-way between-groups ANOVA tests the moderating role of source credibility by examining the statistically significant differences between each of the experimental conditions, the multiple linear regression analysis tests the moderating role of source credibility by examining the correlations between source credibility, sponsored label and all experimental conditions together. Because of this, the results of the former analysis do indicate the presence of a moderator, while the results of the latter analysis do not.

Still, the researcher conducted another multiple linear regression analysis to double check whether advertisement recognition also acted as a moderator. However, in contradiction to what is found in previous research (e.g. Campbell et al., 2013), the results of the analysis show that this is not the case. There are no significant correlations found between source

credibility, advertisement recognition and type of content. From this can be concluded that only sponsored label serves as a moderator between type of content and young adults' perceived source credibility.

5.1.2. Skepticism as possible explanation

In the last couple of years, advertisers have faced a multitude of challenges when it comes to targeting consumers (Childers et al., 2019). Examples of these challenges are the rise of social networking sites, the introduction of algorithms and the phenomenon of information overload. In response to these challenges, advertisers have turned to social media based influencer marketing (Phua et al., 2017). With the use of social media influencers, marketers nowadays try to influence consumers in more indirect and subtle ways. According to The Interactive Advertising Bureau (2018), social media influencers not only have the potential to create engagement and to drive conversations, but also to provide connectivity between their followers and certain brands. However, while social media influencers have been effective advertisers for a long time, they are now slowly losing their credibility.

Potentially, one of the reasons why social media influencers are slowly losing their credibility is because of growing skepticism among consumers. This skepticism is a result of the increasing transparency of the way in which social media influencers make money. As aforementioned, social media influencers have recently been obliged to fully disclose sponsored collaborations between them and companies or brands (Lee & Kim, 2020). Regulators and advertisers have developed this social media advertising guideline to protect consumers from being misled by commercial content on social media (Cain, 2011). In general, the principal task of sponsorship disclosures is to notify consumers that a particular message contains persuasive intentions and to thereby provoke consumers' previously acquired persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2017). According to Van Noort et al. (2012), sponsorship disclosures are especially important because consumers are less likely to recognize persuasive intentions in non-traditional advertisements than in traditional advertisements. Overall, sponsorships disclosures increase consumers' understanding that user-generated content can be advertising and that a company may have paid the corresponding content creator for promoting a certain product (Boerman et al., 2015).

According to the persuasion knowledge model of Friestad and Wright (1994), consumers develop persuasion knowledge throughout their entire life and use this knowledge when they are exposed to persuasion attempts from advertisements or sales messages. Whenever consumers realize that a particular message has a persuasive intention (e.g. when it tries to convince them to acquire something), they start using their persuasion knowledge to either accept or resist it (Friestad & Wright, 1994). As stated by scholars such as Petty and Cacioppo (1997), and Wei et al. (2008), consumers are more likely to resist a persuasive

message when they recognize it as such. Overall, this is because they want to maintain their freedom of choice and to avoid a feeling of being manipulated (Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

According to Lee and Koo (2012), and Lee and Ahn (2013), consumers' suspicions towards the credibility of a source are raised when they know or feel that a message has other intentions than providing authentic consumer experiences and recommendations. Particularly in situations when consumers are not familiar with the creator of a product/service recommendation, their perceived source credibility perceptions are formed based on message characteristics such as sponsorship disclosures (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). In this study, the sponsored Instagram posts made by the travel influencer Jack Morris contained explicit sponsorship disclosures (they stated "sponsored content"). These disclosures most likely activated the respondents' persuasion knowledge (i.e. the respondents' understanding that the post enclosed sponsored elements) and affected the way in which they reacted to the content. It is important to mention that only 23.8% of the respondents indicated to be familiar with the travel influencer Jack Morris at the time of the investigation. From this finding, the researcher can assume that the respondents mainly formed their source credibility perceptions based on the sponsorship disclosures and acted accordingly with increasing skepticism.

Nevertheless, the results of one of the manipulation checks showed that respondents in condition 2 (= non-sponsored Instagram travel content made by a travel influencer) and condition 3 (= Instagram travel content made by a travel agency) also thought that the content they got exposed to contained sponsored elements. This is an interesting finding and something that is of crucial importance to both travel influencers and travel agencies. Because of their increasing skepticism and the fact that some influencers neglect sponsorship disclosures, young adults currently perceive non-sponsored content as sponsored as well and react with e.g. decreased source credibility.

In order to attenuate the increase of consumers' skepticism, travel influencers (or social media influencers in general) are advised to implement *impartiality disclosure* (Stubb & Colliander (2019). While sponsorship disclosure refers to explicitly stating that certain content is sponsored, impartiality disclosure refers to explicitly stating that certain content is not sponsored. According to a study conducted by Stubb and Colliander (2019), impartiality disclosure is necessary to prevent that consumers suspect sponsorship when actually the influencer promotes a product or service without sponsorship. The authors state that impartiality product posts relatively generate higher source and message credibility, as they are less likely to be perceived as advertising in comparison to sponsored product posts or posts without sponsorship information.

5.2. Conclusion

5.2.1. Overall conclusion

The general aim of this study was to increase one's understanding of how Instagram travel content influences young adults' travel planning behaviors and destination choices. By conducting an online between-subjects experimental survey with four conditions, the researcher examined the following research question:

To what extent does travel content on Instagram (made by travel influencers vs. travel agencies) influence young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices?

The sample of the online experimental survey consisted of 134 respondents between the age of 18 and 24 and was recruited through online snowball sampling. Multiple statistical analyses in IBM SPSS, including Hayes' PROCESS Macro, were conducted to interpret the results of the experimental survey. While type of content served as a between-subjects variable in this research (**4 types:** sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers, non-sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers, Instagram content made by travel agencies, and anonymous Instagram content), advertisement recognition served as a moderating variable. Furthermore, perceived source credibility served as the mediating variable in this research.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the differences between the influence of Instagram content made by travel influencers and the influence of Instagram content made by travel agencies are small. Young adults do perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as more credible than Instagram content made by travel influencers, however, this is only the case when the latter type of Instagram content contains sponsored elements (= moderating effect). Besides, even though this difference in perception is present, young adults don't prefer one type of Instagram content over another when it comes to using it in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices. In general, this is because perceived source credibility only influences young adults' decisions to use Instagram content made by travel agencies in their travel planning behaviors. Whenever young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as credible, they are more likely to use it in their travel planning behaviors. Likewise, whenever young adults perceive Instagram content made by travel agencies as not credible, they are less likely to use it in their travel planning behaviors. Contradictory, when it comes to young adults' decisions to use Instagram content made by travel influencers in their travel planning behaviors, perceived source credibility does not have an influence. The same applies for young adults' decisions to use Instagram content made by travel agencies in their destination choices, and young adults' decisions to use Instagram content made by travel

influencers in their destination choices. These findings are interesting and worth being studied, especially because source credibility (regardless of the source) showed to be a predictor for travel planning behaviors and destination choices.

5.2.2. Implications

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the impact of Instagram travel content on young adults' perceived source credibility, travel planning behaviors and destination choices. Since the results of this study are expected to be generalizable, it is important to discuss their implications. As aforementioned, young adults become increasingly aware of travel influencers' advertising attempts on social media platforms like Instagram. They know or feel when travel influencers get paid by companies to recommend certain products or services to their followers (through sponsorship disclosures) and act accordingly with increasing skepticism. As the results of this study show, this skepticism leads to the fact that young adults perceive Instagram content made by brands themselves (in this case: travel agencies) as more credible than sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers. However, it is important to mention that this phenomenon does not yet lead to a preference of non-sponsored Instagram posts over sponsored Instagram posts. The results of this study also show that young adults are not more likely to use non-sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers or travel agencies than sponsored travel content made by travel influencers in their travel planning behaviors and destination choices.

Still, it is important that both travel influencers and travel agencies are aware of this growing skepticism among young adults. On the long term, this phenomenon could indeed lead to a preference of non-sponsored Instagram posts over sponsored Instagram posts. If that is the case, influencer marketing in tourism loses its popularity and its effectiveness when it comes to influencing consumers' travel planning behaviors and destination choices. In order to stay credible sources of information in the eyes of their followers, travel influencers are advised to implement impartiality disclosures (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). By also stating that particular content is not sponsored, instead of only stating that particular content is sponsored, the micro celebrities prevent that young adults get suspicious about their intentions and credibility. Furthermore, in order to execute effective (influencer) marketing strategies, travel agencies are recommended to keep an eye on future research about the impact of influencer marketing. If future research continues to show that sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers is effective, travel agencies can keep investing in influencer marketing. Likewise, if future research starts to show that sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers is ineffective, travel agencies might want to rethink their decision and go back to traditional content made by themselves.

5.2.3. Limitations & future research

The current study was conducted after carefully assessing theoretical relationships between the different variables under study. Besides, the researcher took into account a multitude of methodological considerations to construct a valid and reliable tool of measurement. Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance to mention that the current investigation is not without limitations. This means that its findings must be interpreted with the specific constraints of the study in mind. The next sections of this chapter provide an overview of the most significant limitations.

Firstly, as discussed before, some of the respondents misunderstood the nature of the experimental stimuli of this study. Because of this, it can be concluded that only 50% of the manipulations was perceived as intended. Certain respondents in condition 1 (= sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer) perceived the experimental stimuli as non-sponsored, while certain respondents in condition 2 (= non-sponsored Instagram content made by a travel influencer) and condition 3 (= Instagram content made by a travel agency) perceived the experimental stimuli as sponsored. Although all travel posts mentioned whether they were sponsored or not, it still might be possible that they were not clear enough in terms of type of content (sponsored vs. non-sponsored). To increase the internal validity of the investigation, future researchers are advised to use experimental stimuli that are more obviously manipulated. Besides, in order to learn more about consumers' increasing skepticism towards influencer marketing, future researchers are also advised to add an extra type of content to the experiment, namely: non-sponsored Instagram content made by travel influencers with impartiality disclosure.

Another limitation of this research has to do with the time in which it is conducted. At the time of the investigation, which was May 2021, respondents were not allowed to travel (internationally) because of a global pandemic called COVID-19. To curb the spread of this pandemic, many countries implemented severe travel regulations and restrictions. Even though the experimental survey clearly asked respondents not to take into account the disease and its consequences for tourism, this still might have happened unconsciously. For this reason, future researchers are advised to conduct this study again in times *without* COVID-19. In the current study, respondents might have reacted more negatively than usual to e.g. the credibility of one of the content creators, just because of contradictory thoughts related to the pandemic.

Furthermore, there are some general limitations when it comes to conducting experimental research designs. For instance, according to Babbie (2011), experimental research designs are known for being relatively higher in external invalidity. This means that there are bigger possibilities that the conclusions drawn from the experimental results are not generalizable to the 'real' world. In this particular investigation, there is some degree of external

validity with regards to the experimental stimuli. For example, respondents in condition 1 got exposed to multiple sponsored Instagram travel posts at once. In real life, this might not happen that often. When scrolling through Instagram, users normally also encounter sponsored posts about other products or services, non-sponsored travel posts and/or posts made by friends and family. Because of this, respondents' skepticism towards travel influencer marketing might be lower in real life than what is indicated in this study. In order to test this, future researchers are advised to also present 'normal' Instagram posts to their respondents during the experiment.

Lastly, the results of experimental research designs are often influenced by confounding variables. In general, confounding variables refer to influences from outside that change the effects of the independent variable(s) on the dependent variable(s) (Spector & Brannick, 2011). In this particular investigation, the confounding variables age, gender and level of education were not found to have an effect on the answers given by the participants. Still, it might be possible that other confounding variables such as source familiarity or COVID-19 awareness have influenced the respondents' answers.

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Appendix A: Experiment guide

Start of block: Introduction

Dear participant,

Thank you in advance for your participation in my research. For the master Media & Creative Industries at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, I aim to investigate travel content published on Instagram. In the next **5-10 minutes**, you will be asked to answer questions about this particular subject. I would like to ask you to read the questions thoroughly. It is important to mention that there are no correct or incorrect answers in this investigation. For this reason, please answer the questions as honestly as possible.

Your answers will be used anonymously and confidentially. This means that they will not be shared with any third parties. Furthermore, your participation in this study is completely voluntary, meaning that you can stop at any time or abstain from answering any questions you do not feel comfortable with. Should this occur, please know that your answers will not be included in the analysis of this experimental survey.

Please be aware that, for the purpose of this study, you have to be **between 18 and 24 years old.**

If you have any questions regarding the experimental survey, you can always email mediaresearchlm@gmail.com for clarification.

Thank you again for your participation.

With kind regards,
Lysanne Meijer

Q2. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. My answers will only be used for research purposes.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip to: End of survey if 'I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. My answers will only be used for research purposes' = No

End of block: Introduction

Start of block: Control question

Q3. How old are you?

.....

Skip to: End of survey if 'How old are you?' < 18

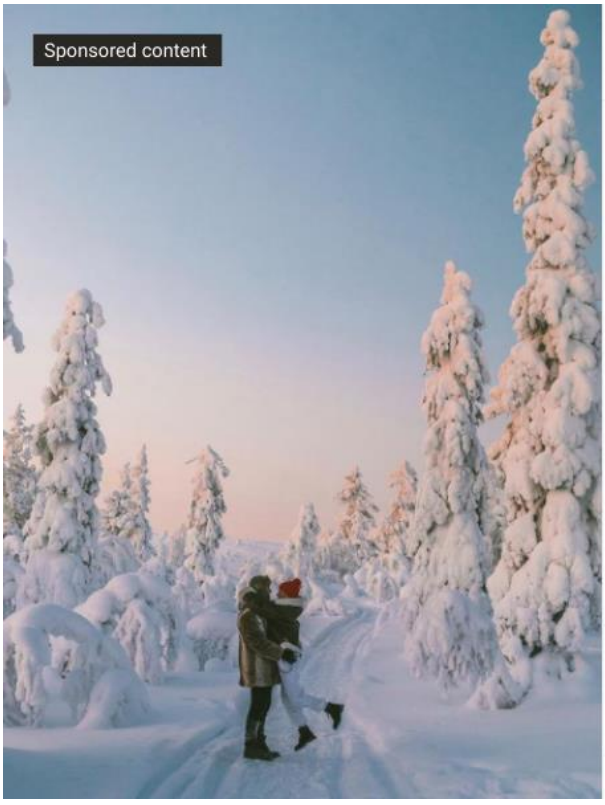
End of block: Control question

Start of block: Condition 1 – sponsored travel content made by SMI

Please look at the following content and read the text carefully.

doyoutravel • Volgen
Koza Cave Hotel

doyoutravel 3 years later we're back and still just as blown away as we were the first time. Whenever people ask me what my favourite country is I always mention Turkey mainly because of mornings like this in Cappadocia. Each morning hundreds of balloons set off as the sun rises over this ancient district. If you're fortunate enough to visit Cappadocia and want to witness this crazy view from the highest rooftop in town make sure you stay at @kozacavehotel! I had the most amazing time here, it's a family run boutique hotel with only 10 rooms built into the rocks! 🇹🇷 Swipe across for the drone video! 🎥 #cappadocia #doyoutravelpresets



doyoutravel • Volgen
Levi, Finland

doyoutravel Getting lost in winter wonderland ❄️
Stoked to be here for the next week with @levilapland X @ourfinland ⚡

End of block: Condition 1 – sponsored travel content made by SMI

Start of block: Condition 2 – non-sponsored travel content made by SMI

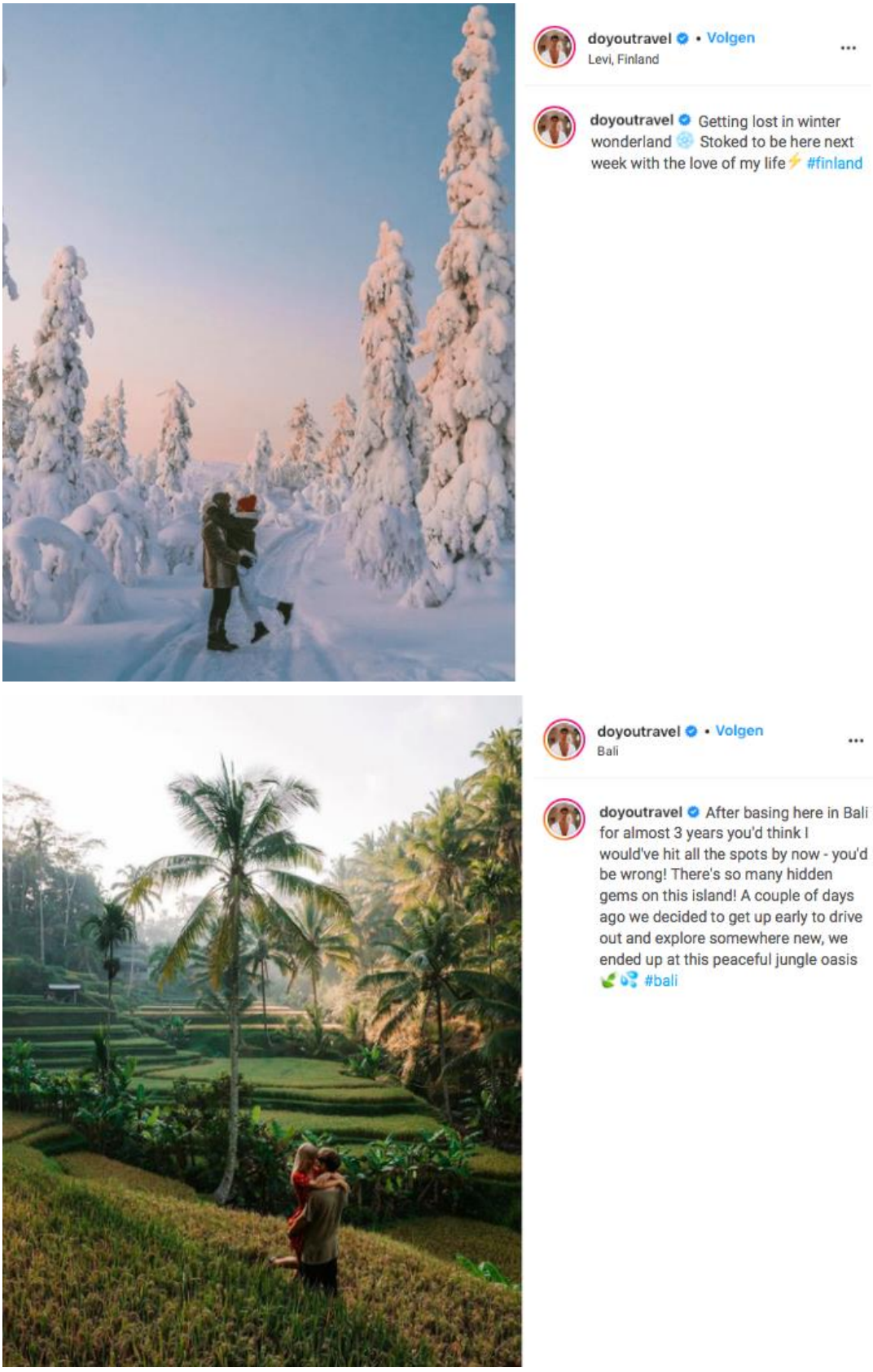
Please look at the following content and read the text carefully.

doyoutravel • Volgen
Amalfi, Italy

doyoutravel Ciao from Italy! 🇮🇹 Rolling to the beach in the vintage Fiat 500 🚗 These cars are so fun to cruise around in #amalficoast #amalfi #Italy

doyoutravel • Volgen
Turkey

doyoutravel Some snaps from our time in Turkey 🇹🇷 3 years later we're back and still just as blown away as we were the first time. Whenever people ask me what my favorite country is I always mention Turkey mainly because of mornings like this in Cappadocia. Each morning hundreds of balloons set off as the sun rises over this ancient district. Swipe across for the drone video! 🎥 #cappadocia



End of block: Condition 2 – non-sponsored travel content made by SMI

Start of block: Condition 3 – travel content made by travel agency

Please look at the following content and read the text carefully.

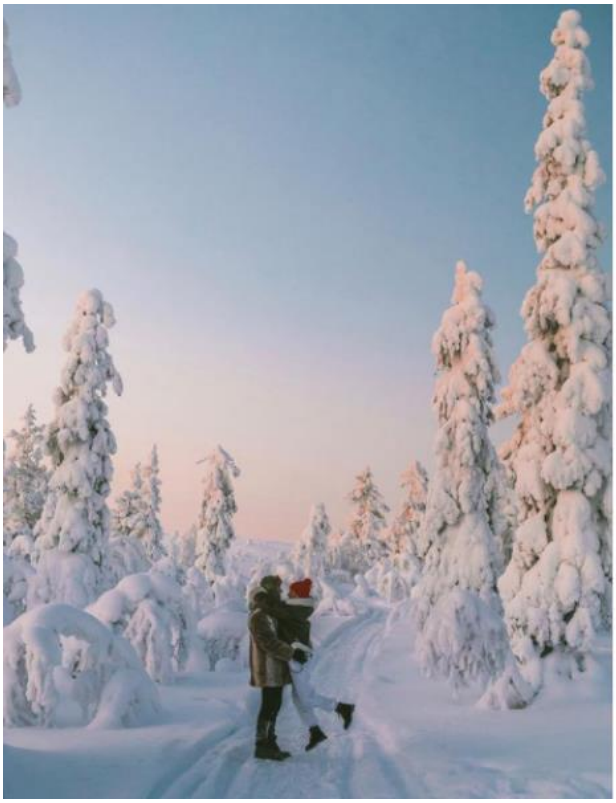
bookingcom • Volgen
Amalfi Coast

bookingcom The seasons may be changing but there's still time to get some sunshine in Italy. Head to the Amalfi Coast and explore cliffside towns and picturesque views, taking a dip in crystalline waters along the way – and don't forget to feast on the local food, too.

#LiveCurious #AmalfiCoast #Italy #TravelGram #Amalfi #

bookingcom • Volgen
Turkey

bookingcom Take to the skies in a colourful hot air balloon over Cappadocia, where the surreal, rocky landscape is best seen from a bird's eye perspective. List your property on booking.com to fund your next great adventure. Link in bio.



bookingcom • Volgen
Levi, Finland

bookingcom 'Tis the season! From perfect powder to mountaintop pampering, snow bunnies to adrenaline adventurers – whatever your good time looks like, we've got a ski vacation to match your vibe, group, and skill level. Click the link in bio to explore Europe's top 4 ski destinations.

bookingcom • Volgen
Bali

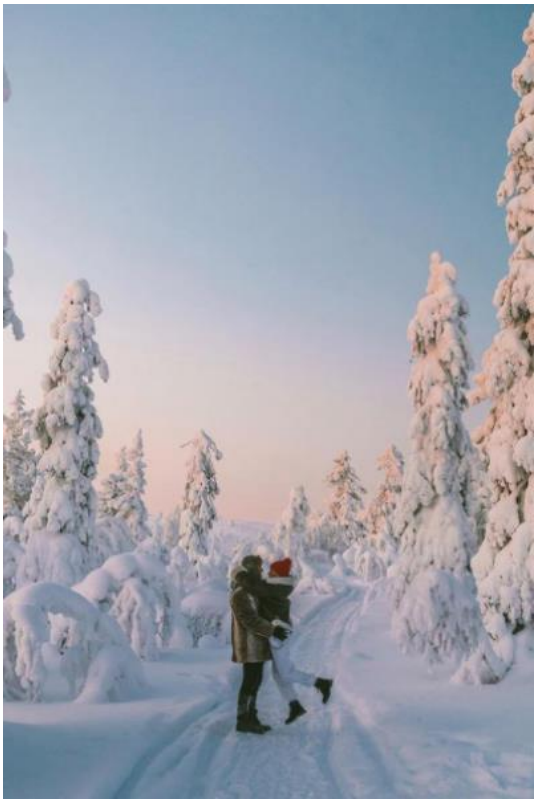
bookingcom Wake up to the sounds of nature In honour of International Day of Forests, we're trading in the hustle and bustle of the big city for an eco-friendly stay between the trees. Take in the lush surroundings from the treetop deck while the sounds of nature drown out the daily noise.

Which nature destination are you keen to explore once it's safe to travel again?

End of block: Condition 3 – travel content made by travel agency

Start of block: Condition 4 – anonymous travel content

Please look at the following content carefully.



End of block: Condition 4 – anonymous travel content

Start of block: Source credibility

NOTE: While answering the following questions, please do not take the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions into consideration.

Q25. In my opinion, this travel influencer/travel agency/content creator can be described as...

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Undependable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Dependable
Dishonest	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Honest
Unreliable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Reliable
Insincere	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Sincere
Untrustworthy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Trustworthy

Q26. In my opinion, this travel influencer/travel agency/content creator can be described as...

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Not an expert	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	An expert
Inexperienced	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Experienced
Unknowledgeable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Knowledgeable
Unqualified	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Qualified
Unskilled	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Skilled

Q27. In my opinion, the content I just saw can be described as...

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Unattractive	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Attractive
Not classy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Classy
Ugly	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Beautiful
Plain	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Elegant
Not sexy	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Sexy

End of block: Source credibility

Start of block: Travel planning behaviors

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

Q29. In my opinion, pictures like the ones I just saw…

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Inspire me to travel (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Make me seriously consider to go on a vacation even though I had no intention before (2)	○	○	○	○	○

Q30. In my opinion, pictures like the ones I just saw…

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Help me find travel information when I need it (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Reduce my effort to find travel information (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Increase the quality of travel information (3)	○	○	○	○	○

Q31. In my opinion, pictures like the ones I just saw…

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Help me evaluate/compare travel destinations/ services/suppliers (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Lead me to expand my consideration set (destination/ accommodation options) (2)	○	○	○	○	○

Help me to reconfirm my travel selections (3)	○	○	○	○	○

Q32. In my opinion, pictures like the ones I just saw…

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Help me to book travel services/suppliers (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Influence what to do/see at destinations (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Help me purchase complementary destinations/services/suppliers to enrich my tourist experience (3)	○	○	○	○	○

End of block: Travel planning behaviors

Start of block: Destination choices

Please answer the following question.

*1 represents ‘not recommend at all’ and 5 represents ‘definitely recommend’.

Q34. To what extent would you…

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)
Recommend the destinations shown in the pictures to your friends and family? (1)	○	○	○	○	○

Please answer the following question.

*1 represents ‘not consider at all’ and 5 represents ‘definitely consider’.

Q36. To what extent would you…

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)
Consider visiting, or revisiting, the destinations shown in the pictures? (1)	○	○	○	○	○

End of block: Destination choices

Start of block: Advertisement recognition

Display this question if condition = 1, condition = 2, or condition = 3

Please answer the following question.

Q38. Do you agree or disagree that the pictures you just saw contain sponsored elements?

- ○ Agree (1)
- ○ Disagree (2)

End of block: Advertisement recognition

Start of block: Source recognition

Display this question if condition = 1, condition = 2, or condition = 3

Please answer the following question.

Q40. Do you remember who created this content?

- A travel influencer (1)
- A travel agency (2)

End of block: Source recognition

Start of block: Source familiarity

Display this question if condition = 1, condition = 2, or condition = 3

Please answer the following question.

*1 represents ‘not familiar at all’ and 5 represents ‘very familiar’.

Q42. How familiar are you with...

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)
the creator of this content? (1)	○	○	○	○	○

End of block: Source familiarity

Start of block: Demographic questions

You are almost at the end of the survey! You have a few more questions to go.

Q44. What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other, namely (3): ……
- I prefer not to say (4)

Q45. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have obtained?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (2)
- Some college but no degree (3)
- Associate degree in college (4)
- Bachelor's degree in college (5)
- Master's degree (6)
- Doctoral degree (7)
- Professional degree (8)
- I prefer not to say (9)

Q46. What is your employment status currently?

- Employed for wages (1)
- Self-employed (2)
- Out of work and looking for work (3)
- A homemaker (4)
- A student (5)
- Military (6)
- Unable to work (7)
- Other, namely (8): …..
- I prefer not to say (9)

Q47. In which country do you currently reside?

▼ Afghanistan (1) … Zimbabwe (1357)

Q48. Do you use Instagram?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip to: Q50 if 'Do you use Instagram?' = No

Q49. On average, how many hours a day have you spent on Instagram over the past week? (please only use numbers)

…….

Q50. I usually make trips for…

- Tourism (1)
- Business (2)
- Study (3)
- Visiting acquaintances (4)
- Other, namely (5): …..

End of block: Demographic questions

Start of block: End of survey

Yeah! You have reached the end of this experimental survey. Thank you very much for your participation. Your answers are extremely valuable for my research into the differences between travel content made by social media influencers and travel content made by travel agencies.

If you have any further questions regarding the questionnaire, you can always send an email to mediaresearchlm@gmail.com for clarification. Besides, if you would like to read the final version of my master's thesis, please let me know after the 24th of June.

Please be aware that some of the content you saw in this experimental survey was **fictional**.

You can close this window now.

With kind regards,

Lysanne Meijer

End of block: End of survey

Appendix B: Experimental survey flow

Block: Introduction (1question)

Block: Control question (1 question)

Randomizer (evenly present elements)**:**

- → **Block:** Condition 1 – sponsored travel content made by SMI
  - *Embedded data:* Condition = 1
  - *Embedded data:* Source = travel influencer
- → **Block**: Condition 2 – non-sponsored travel content made by SMI
  - *Embedded data*: Condition = 2
  - *Embedded data*: Source = travel influencer
- → **Block**: Condition 3 – travel content made by travel agency
  - *Embedded data*: Condition = 3
  - *Embedded data*: Source = online travel agency
- → **Block**: Condition 4 – anonymous travel content
  - *Embedded data*: Condition = 4
  - *Embedded data*: Source = content creator

Block: Source credibility (3 questions)

Block: Travel planning behaviors (4 questions)

Block: Destination choices (2 questions)

Block: Advertisement recognition (1 question)

Block: Source recognition (1 question)

Block: Source familiarity (1 question)

Block: Demographic questions (7 questions)

Block: End of survey