

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND DIGITAL INFLUENCERS: THEIR ROLE IN CUSTOMER DECISION JOURNEY IN TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Several studies have shown the impact of social media on tourism and the role of digital influencers. However, the relationship between social media, digital influencers, and the customer decision journey has not been much studied. To help fill this gap, the present study examines the role of digital influencers during each phase of the customer decision journey using an online survey. The findings from 244 social media users show that the majority use social networks when planning a trip, however, sharing the experiences of other travellers is not a relevant aspect. While, overall, digital influencers have no significant impact, their followers tend to value their content, visit the sites they suggest, and share their own experiences, mostly through Instagram.

Keywords: eWOM, Digital Influencers, User Generated Content, Customer Decision Journey.

JEL Classification: M31

1. INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0, and the resulting digital revolution, provided the conditions for individuals to connect, communicate, and interact across social media platforms. Users have the power to co-create potentially engaging and therefore strongly influential content (Rinka & Pratt, 2018). Ordinary citizens can even become recognized opinion leaders (Rinka & Pratt, 2018).

The popularity of online social networks (OSN) has led to the emergence of social media influencers, also known as Internet celebrities. The rapid change in the way we communicate, along with the creation of content by users, has brought a new dynamic in marketing communication in various business areas, namely tourism (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009).

In this new scenario, tourists use OSN to share experiences, emotions and comments, research, and acquire information about destinations and tourism products (Cox, et al., 2009; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Howison, Finger, & Hauschka, 2014; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018; Rinka & Pratt, 2018). The social dynamics that emerge in social networks give rise to informal influence relationships within which digital influencers emerge. They are opinion leaders, recognized by the following audiences as experts. Through the content generated by their activities on social networks, digital influencers can shape the behaviours and attitudes of consumers who tend to be loyal to them (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014; Createasphere, 2018; Magno & Cassia, 2018).

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The attention the subject has been receiving, both by professionals and academics, justifies the interest of research in this area. The impact of digital influencers, specifically through the mechanisms underlying the role of eWom and eUGC associated with spontaneous and disinterested reviews and ratings posted by tourists, has caught scholars' attention (Cox, et al., 2009; Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014; Alic, Pestek, & Sadinlija, 2017). The reasons and motivations that justify the influence of eWoM, and the role of digital influencers in the holiday destination decision making process, remain poorly understood (Cox et al. 2009; Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law, 2012; Gohil, 2015; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Due to the relevance of social networks/digital influencers in tourism and its implications on the marketing strategy of tourism organizations and destinations, this study, which is exploratory in nature, investigates the following research question: do informal influence relationships within social media actively impact “the journey” consumers make from need or desire to post-purchase experience?

Regarding the purpose of the research, it was employed an online survey. To ensure the operationalization of the study, the snowball method was chosen. This data collection strategy was considered suitable given that the study population is users of social networks that use them as a source of inspiration to support travel decisions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Electronic word of mouth and consumer reviews in tourism

Word-of-mouth (WoM) is a term dating back to sixty years ago that is still current and referred to in new studies (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014; Chen, Nguyen, Klaus, & Wu, 2015) WoM refers to personal and non-commercial content, generated and shared by citizens regarding their own consumer experiences (Arndt, 1967). Such content must be informal, interpersonal, and spontaneous, occurring outside the business environment; it is selfless by nature and should not have compensation; it can be positive or negative depending on whether the reported experience was satisfactory (Dichter, 1996; Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014). The author of the message shared on social networks refers to a product, brand, or experience with their consumer group followers (Dichter, 1996). This is a widely known and recognized reality for tourism and hospitality professionals (Fine, Girona, & Petrescu, 2017).

The spread of the World Wide Web and the use of accessible communication technologies (like smartphones, and social networks) has enabled consumers—ordinary citizens—to share their opinions on products and services, positive and negative travel experiences, through online channels that allow them to reach significantly larger audiences (Liljander & Gummerus, 2015) and impact consumers' purchasing decisions (Chen et al., 2015). When shared over digital channels, word-of-mouth is called electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) (Chen, et al., 2015).

In this new reality, the concept of prosumer is born to refer to how consumers have become more influential thanks to their ability to share their consumer experiences quickly, easily, and openly with an increasing number of people (Fine et al., 2017). Since content generated on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest) and review platforms (TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck) derive from content posted by its members, they become “cocreators” or “producer-consumers” (i.e. prosumers) (Fine et al., 2017). Members of a community, while generating content (cocreators), also support their decisions as consumers in the content generated by others, thus fully assuming the role of prosumer.

Virtual communities (e.g. Lonely Planet), reviews (TripAdvisor), Blogs (Tumblr), social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn), media sharing tools (YouTube) and wikis (Wikipedia) are all

examples of formats in which co-created content can be shared by the user (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Perez-Aranda, Vallespin, & Molinillo, 2018). Previous studies (Hsu & Lin, 2008; Li, Zhou, Kashyap, & Yang, 2008; Chu & Kim, 2011; Shiau & Luo, 2013; Magno, 2017) have identified the topics of greatest interest by consumers on social networks: Travel & Tourist Destinations; Fashion & Beauty; Sport & Healthy Living; Culture & Art; Celebrities; Cooking; News and Other. Without financial or other counterpart involvement, consumer-generated content is perceived as reputable and highly credible (Liljander & Gummerus, 2015; Perez-Aranda, Soderlund, 2016; Vallespin, & Molinillo, 2018). New generations of consumers, especially millennials (Rinka & Pratt, 2018) are particularly receptive and susceptible to information shared by their membership and reference groups, acting simultaneously as active content generators. In this context, online advertising and sponsored publications tend to lose ground within this segment and consumer choices are increasingly based on information shared by other consumers through social networks (Carusona et al., 2017). In this new global village, the traditional recommendation of friends and family has been losing ground in view of the growing relevance of online sources to support consumer decision-making especially in travel and tourism (Chen et al., 2015).

This activity, due to the impact it has on decision-making processes and shaping the image of companies, brands, and tourist destinations, has attracted increasing interest from practitioners and academics alike (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017).

According to Gretzel and Yoo (2008) eUGC is a widely used practice by consumers in the tourism industry, notably the sharing information that can actively support decision making. The literature recognises that the experiential and intangible nature of tourism products (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007) enhances the role of UGC in shaping the image of tourist destinations, companies, and brands operating in the sector and in supporting consumer decision-making processes (Cox et al., 2009; Crotts, Mason, & Davis, 2009; Pietro, Virgilio, & Pantano, 2012; Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Boykin, 2015; Fine et al., 2017; Perez-Aranda et al., 2018).

The intangible nature of the tourist experience and the high perceived risk associated with shopping emphasizes the role prosumers play in tourism and hospitality (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Cox et al., 2009; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Howison et al., 2014; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018; Rinka & Pratt, 2018). In this industry, eWoM focusses especially on issues related to quality of service, destination image and reputation, experience sharing and mobility (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012) and is recognized as one of the most important communication tools in the form of online reviews (positive and negative) created and shared by customers themselves (Fine et al., 2017).

About 81% of consumers consider online reviews to be a major source of inspiration and support in their hotel selection process, of which 49% say they would not book a hotel without first knowing reviews from other consumers (Boykin, 2015).

2.2 Digital influencers and their roles

This evolution and prevalence of eWOM or eUGC through the active role of community members also raises another issue, which is the impact of different individuals on a given social network. In fact, influence is not equal across network members, and there is a very active primary group that collects and disseminates information, influencing all other levels of the social system (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014). Members of this primary group are generally referred to as opinion leaders (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018).

Research on the subject in the social sciences dates back to the middle of the last century with pioneering studies at Columbia University where Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet

(1944) identified the presence of opinion leaders, defined as individuals who exercise an almost invisible and certainly unconscious leadership, on a person-to-person, daily, close and informal manner (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006) and having the ability to influence others with regard to behaviour, opinions, and attitudes.

Opinion leaders, generally present in small and informal groups, exert their influence personally and directly. Leadership is involuntary, invisible, and unconscious, based on relationships of trust and credibility. Most studies have been conducted in the academic field, and particularly in the field of political science (Weimann, 1994). Keller and Berry (2003), in the early 21st century, popularized the term with a best seller called “The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy”.

With the emergence of the Internet and social networks, social influencers theory has gained momentum among professionals and academics, especially in the tourism industry (Halvorsen, Hoffman, Coste-Manière, & Stankeviciute, 2013).

And what is a digital influencer? A digital influencer is a brand advocate, an expert, a pioneer in his or her field, recognized by followers (Createasphere, 2018). Digital influencers are therefore opinion leaders who characterize themselves as a new independent type of endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of social networks through which they publish generated content (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014; Magno & Cassia, 2018).

This concept finds in the literature other expressions, namely *leader*, *informal leader*, *information leader*, *consumption leader*, *wielder of influence*, *influencer*, among others (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014).

For users with popular social media accounts (Nandagiri & Philip, 2018) it is common to find the expression *social media influencers* (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2010; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018).

Their role is to influence (endorse) the behaviour of their followers through posts on online social networks, often based on their own consumer experiences (Primetag, 2017; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018). These individuals influence the behaviour and decisions of other consumers through interpersonal communication, also becoming reference points for those to whom they are connected (Primetag, 2017).

A community that “listens” to a particular influencer tends to be loyal to him or her, and the content produced by the influencer ultimately impacts some of their consumer choices (Alic et al., 2017). This trend is increasingly evident in brand communication, as the advertising overload users are faced with on a daily basis make traditional techniques less effective (Halvorsen et al., 2013; Primetag, 2017), leading marketers taking advantage of new opportunities created by technology developments, finding new and less intrusive methods to reach consumers, including through blogs (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Therefore, due to their recognized influence on followers, companies eagerly recruit social influencers to endorse their brands (Belagatti, 2017).

Content creation and its sharing on social networks has become a critical aspect of tourism, widely recognized and valued by industry professionals, by marketing experts (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). The proliferation of social media platforms available to citizens has significantly changed the way individuals search, evaluate, rank, buy and consume products and services in this sector (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Hudson & Thal, 2013).

In general, social networks have contributed to alter the decision-making process by the consumer. Especially over the last decade, it has been witnessing the emergence of a more sophisticated view of how consumers relate to brands. The ways of communicating that social networks provide actively impact “the journey” that consumers make from need or

desire to actual purchase (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Chen et al., 2015; Nguyen, Klaus, & Wu, 2015).

2.3 Customer decision journey in tourism

Since the 1960s, several authors in the marketing field (e.g. Howard & Sheth, 1969), have been studying the purchase decision process in order to assist companies on “how to design and manage the entire process the customer goes through” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Overall, proposed models explore the consumer’s path from recognizing need to finding information based on which he evaluates existing offers, decides purchase and finally evaluates experience after consumption. In the scope of the customer experience literature, it is reassigned as “customer decision journey” or “customer purchase journey” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer decision journey comprises a set of four stages through which the consumer draws a pathway from 1) consideration of existing offers (awareness), 2) evaluation, 3) purchase, 4) post purchase experience (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Vazquez et al., 2014).

In general, user-generated content shared in social media influence the consumers’ decision-making process, or the customer decision journey, in the tourism sector. Some scholars point out that this influence can occur before, during and after the trip (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Chen et al. (2015: 962) found that “the consumers’ decision-making process in the context of online holiday purchases consists of three stages: information search, evaluation, and purchase”.

During the first stage of this journey (pre-purchase), consumers first contact the product, organization, or brand. The formation of the desire for purchasing is underpinned by information conveyed through a variety of offline or online communication sources and techniques, and campaigns through social networks intended to generate traffic (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). At this stage information search occurs, which will then be subject to comparative evaluation (stage 2) and the influence of shared content, in particular by credible digital influencers, is widely reported in the literature (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015; Alic et al., 2017). Travel blogs, review platforms, and online brand communities play a relevant role at the evaluation of the travel and tourism buying decision process (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Chen et al., 2015). Chen et al. (2015) found that people tend to use online reviews prior to purchase searching for recommended activities to be engaged in once at the place. The awareness and the evaluation stages make part of the prepurchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In purchase stage consumers decide about what to choose, how to order, and payment (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In tourism, buying often occurs through online channels. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, tourism accounted for about one third of global e-commerce activities (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

The post-purchase phase refers to the consumption experience in which the critical touchpoint is the contact with the product or service itself (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this stage, consumers use social networks to share their personal consumer experiences (Kang & Schuett, 2013) through content that can be positive or negative. Negative reviews affect brand credibility and reputation and impact consumer decisions about replacing one brand with another (Ruiz-Mafe, Aldas-Manzano, & Veloutsou, 2016). Companies here can mitigate negative reviews and comments. In Europe, according to Rinka and Pratt (2018), the preferred social networks for sharing experiences are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, and personal blogs. The role of digital influencers in tourism has been widely recognized and— as Magno and Cassia (2018) point out—followers’ intentions

to adopt the suggestions made by bloggers is manifest in particular when the credibility (trustworthiness) and quality of the information they share is recognized.

Source credibility is a key quality impacting follower behaviour with effective consequences for buying decisions and brand attitudes (Liljander & Gummerus, 2015; Magno & Cassia, 2018). This is a characteristic strongly associated with situational factors (Rieh & Danielson, 2007; Francke, Sundin, & Limberg, 2011). Therefore, a digital influencer (or blogger) needs to be recognized as credible for his or her recommendations to be considered by their followers (Liljander & Gummerus, 2015; Magno & Cassia, 2018). Trust is therefore an essential component of credibility (Rieh & Danielson, 2007; Francke et al., 2011; Liljander & Gummerus, 2015). Source credibility and trust placed in the blogger affect the perceived quality of information shared on social networks (Magno, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018).

Given the active role that co-created and shared content on social networks plays in consumer behaviour, marketers should consider how best to intervene and through which means to intervene at each stage of customer decision-making journey. Considering the influential character that opinion leaders hold through social networks (Liljander & Gummerus, 2015; Magno, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018), knowledge about the role that digital influencers play in the process of choosing the vacation destination will help support the decision making by marketers in tourist organizations and destinations. Studies in areas other than tourism, such as fashion (Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Langner, 2012; Esteban-Santos et al., 2018) and culture (Magno, 2017) highlight the importance of digital influencers and the mechanisms by which they affect attitude formation and behaviour of their followers (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015; Alic et al., 2017; Pestek & Alic, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018; Rinka & Pratt, 2018). They act as mediators as they compile information and then share it with a large community of followers.

Digital influencers and bloggers' impact on consumer destination choice is recognized as a new type of endorser with the ability to shape audience attitudes through social networks (Pestek & Alic, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018). Rinka and Pratt (2018) point to digital influencers as spokespersons of a tourist destination, a marketing strategy that encourages the decision to choose a vacation destination because it contributes to elevating the image of the place.

In this context, organizations benefit from digital influencers endorsement, as they represent an important channel for reaching larger or smaller audiences and influencing their behaviours at various stages of the consumer journey (Magno, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research question and study objectives

In line with the research question, the main objective of this study is to investigate the role of social networks/digital influencers throughout the customer decision journey regarding the choice of holiday destination. Thus, the following specific objectives were defined:

- To characterize the use of social networks;
- To analyse the impact of social networks/digital influencers on travel behaviour, according to the Customer Decision Journey model;
- To identify the socio-demographic profile of respondents.

3.2 Questionnaire design

The data collection instrument consists of four main sections, namely: (a) use of social networks, (b) travel; c) Customer Decision Journey; d) attributes and profile of digital influencers; e) socio-demographic.

The first part of the questionnaire includes questions to characterise the use of social networks in terms of time spent, preferred social networks, and the main topics of interest. Next, we intend to know the behaviour of the audience in terms of travel planning and its relationship with the use of social networks, content sharing in the context of travel and the preferred social networks for this purpose.

The third part of the questionnaire covered the relationship of respondents with digital influencers in the process of travel inspiration and planning, their perceptions about shared content, and the role they play in travel decisions. Finally, a set of questions addressed socio-demographic information.

Table 1 shows the variables, their items and authors used in the study.

Table 1. Measurement scales and literature sources

Use of social networks	
Average time you spend on social media: Less than 1 hour; Between 1 and 3 hours; Between 3 and 5 hours; More than 5 hours.	(Magno, 2017)
Which social network you use the most: Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Snapchat; Pinterest; LinkedIn; Other	(Rinka & Pratt, 2018)
Which thematic do you frequently follow on social media? Travel & Destinations; Fashion & Beauty; Sports & Healthy Lifestyle; Culture & Art; Celebrities; Culinary; News; Other	(Magno, 2017)
Customer Decision Journey	
Pre-purchase	
I research on social media when I am planning a trip.	(Kang & Schuett, 2013)
I research online by reading about other traveller's experiences via social media.	(Kang & Schuett, 2013)
I am likely to visit the places reviewed by digital influencers.	(Magno & Cassia, 2018)
When I have to make travel-related decisions, I will take suggestions from digital influencers;	(Magno & Cassia, 2018)
I am likely to consider digital influencer's travel experiences when making my travel decisions.	(Magno & Cassia, 2018)
Most used social networks when searching for inspiration and information about travel and destinations:-Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Snapchat; Pinterest; LinkedIn; Specialized Blogs; Other	(Rinka & Pratt, 2018)
Purchase decision	
I am likely to visit the places reviewed by digital influencers;	(Magno & Cassia, 2018)
Post-purchase	
Do you share travel experiences from your most recent trip on online social networking websites, photo sharing websites, travel review websites, personal blogs, and/or websites?	(Kang & Schuett, 2013)
In which social networks do you share your travel experiences? Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Snapchat; Pinterest; Personal; Blog; Other	(Rinka & Pratt, 2018)
Attributes and profile of digital influencers	
My perception of the digital influencer is that he/she should...be trustworthy; be sincere; inspires trust	(Magno & Cassia, 2018)
Content quality: I am likely to follow digital influencers who provide accurate information; Updated information; High quality content.	(Magno & Cassia, 2018)
Sociodemographic profile	
Age; Gender; Marital Status; Complete Education Degree; Professional Situation; City.	(Magno, 2017) (SanMiguel & Sádaba, 2017)

Source: Own Elaboration

3.3 Pre-test and questionnaire administration

The questionnaire pre-test was applied to social network users that turn to social networking web sites for inspiration and to support their consumption decisions. The pre-test of the questionnaire took place on August 7 and 8, 2019. A link to access the data collection instrument was sent via Messenger and WhatsApp to a selected group of 7 people with different profiles and who had made at least one trip the previous year. As a result, the wording and sequence of some questions has been changed.

The final version of the questionnaire, designed on the Google forms platform, was published on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. This research makes use of the voluntary selection method and the freedom for users to share with their contacts. The publication was disseminated through a link to facilitate its access and sharing.

3.4 Population and sample

Given the stated objectives, this study is based on a quantitative survey using a questionnaire as a data collection strategy aimed at social network users that turn to social networking web sites for inspiration and to support their consumption decisions.

A non-probabilistic method was chosen and snowball sampling techniques were used (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018), which consist of identifying members of the study population and asking them to share the questionnaire thus growing the sample (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). According to the authors, this method is recommended when it is difficult to identify the desired population. It is generally possible to obtain a significant number of responses thanks to the action of the respondents themselves. Data collection took place from August 8 to August 29, 2019. 244 responses were collected.

3.5 Data analysis methods

Google forms makes it possible to automatically transfer respondents' responses to the Microsoft Office Excel program and then transfer the data directly to the IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). However, this transfer entails some problems, as regards the qualitative variables, requiring some recoding work. Once the database was organized, descriptive statistics techniques were used, such as constructing frequency distributions, contingency tables and calculating measures of location (mean, median, and mode) and dispersion (standard deviation). In addition to the descriptive procedures, some statistical tests were performed (t tests for dependent and independent samples, Chi-square test), all of them performed at a significance level of 5%.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Sociodemographic profile

The sociodemographic profile of the 244 respondents is shown in Table 2. The average age is 35 years, being 27 the most frequent age. Regarding gender, the participants were mostly female (74,6%).

Most respondents have completed university education (70.5%) and work for others (68%). Regarding marital status, 54.9% of respondents are single and 42.6% are married. The cities most indicated by the respondents as their city of residence were Quarteira (22.5%), Lisbon (18.9%), and Faro (17.7%). Places in North and South America are also mentioned.

Table 2. Sociodemographic profile

Age	Minimum	Maximum	Mode	Median	Mean	Stand-deviation
	17	76	27	32	34,63	11,303
Gender			Frequency		%	
Female			182		74,6%	
Male			62		25,4%	
Marital status			Frequency		%	
Married			104		42,6%	
Divorced			6		2,5%	
Not Married			134		54,9%	
Complete education degree			Frequency		%	
Basic School			8		3,3%	
Secondary School			56		23%	
University Degree			172		70,5%	
Professional qualification			8		3,3%	
Employment status			Frequency		%	
Student			21		8,6%	
Retired			6		2,5%	
Employee			166		68%	
Self-employed			42		17,2	
Searching for a job			9		3,7%	
City			Frequency		%	
Algarve Region Cities			154		63,1%	
Lisbon Region Cities			55		22,5%	
Other Portuguese Cities			9		3,6%	
European Cities			19		7,6%	
Northern & Southern American and African Cities			5		2%	

Source: Own Elaboration

4.2 Use of social networks

Most respondents report spending less than 1 hour daily on social networking (61.1%), researching topics related to Travel and Tourist Destinations (57.8%), Fashion and Beauty (40.6%), Sports and Healthy Living (36.9%) and Culture and Art (33.6%), and mostly using Instagram (57.0%), specialized blogs (49.2%) and Facebook (37.3%) (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Time spent on social networking sites per day

	Frequency	%
For less than 1 hour	150	61,5
1 to 3 hours	46	18,9
3 to 5 hours	7	2,9
More than 5 hours	41	16,8
Total	244	100,0

Source: Own Elaboration

Table 4. Main topics in social networks

	Responses		Cases %
	N	%	
Main topics			
Travel and Tourist Destinations	141	25.0	57.8
Fashion and Beauty	99	17.5	40.6
Sports and Healthy Living	90	15.9	36.9
Culture and Art	82	14.5	33.6
Celebrities	28	5.0	11.5
Food	43	7.6	17.6
News	62	11.0	25.4
Other	20	3.5	8.2
Total (n=244)	565	100.0	231.6
Social media networks			
Facebook	91	22.2	37.3
Instagram	139	34.0	57.0
Twitter	3	0.7	1.2
Snapchat	2	0.5	0.8
Pinterest	27	6.6	11.1
LinkedIn	2	0.5	0,8
Specialized Blogs	120	29.3	49,2
Other	25	6.1	10,2
Total (n=244)	409	100,0	167.6

Source: Own Elaboration

4.3 Impact of social networks/digital influencers on Customer Decision Journey

As mentioned above, this section intends to analyse the behaviour of users throughout the travel choice process—according to the stages of the Customer Decision Journey—to identify the impact of social networks and digital influencers on the Awareness of existing products or services (awareness), evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase experience

Stage 1: Pre-Purchase

Awareness of existing products or services (*awareness*)

To identify the role of social networks in this early stage of the process, the statements regarding travel planning (variables Q6 and Q7) were analysed. The percentage of respondents searching social networks (60.3%) and those who base their search on experiences shared by other travellers (60%) is similar. Although the first statement has a slightly higher mean level of agreement, the Student t-test for dependent samples indicates that this difference is not statistically significant ($t = 0.33$; $p = 0.74$). This suggests that experiences shared by other travellers are not a major factor in travel planning research (Table 5).

Table 5. Use of social networks in travel planning

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about how often you use social media to help you plan your travels?		Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither agree/disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Mean	Standard deviation
I do social media research when I'm planning a trip	%	9.6	13.8	16.3	35.6	24.7	3.52	1.266
I do social media research based on other travellers' experiences shared on social media	%	7.0	13.0	20.0	45.5	14.5	3.48	1.107

Source: Own Elaboration

To identify significant differences in travel planning as a function of time spent on social networking, respondents were grouped into soft (less than 3 hours daily) and hard (3 hours daily or more) users. Significant differences were only found for the first statement, indicating that users who spend less time daily on social networks are, however, the ones who use them the most when it comes to planning a trip. Table 6 shows the Student's t-test results for independent samples.

Table 6. Travel Planning/Use of Social Media Networks

Using social media networks	< 3h per day		≥ 3 h per day		t Student	p value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
I do social media research when I'm planning a trip	3.63	1.267	3.06	1.169	2.787	.006

Source: Own Elaboration

The same analysis, performed according to gender, also indicates that it is women who most resort to this type of research (Table 7).

Table 7. Travel Planning/Gender

Gender	Female		Male		t Student	p value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
I do social media research when I'm planning a trip	3.66	1.240	3.11	1.266	2.934	.004

Source: Own Elaboration

The analysis of the trip planning according to the most used social networks allows us to conclude that it is only for Instagram that there are significant differences (Table 8),

suggesting that users of this network tend to do more research in the preparation of their trips than those who do not use it.

Table 8. Travel Planning/Social Media Networks

Instagram	Users		Non-Users		t Student	p value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
I do social media research when I'm planning a trip	3.82	1.224	3.13	1.218	-4.323	.000

Source: Own Elaboration

This result is consistent with the previous one because, being the women who most use social networks for travel planning, it is also in this segment that there is a majority of Instagram users (Table 9).

Table 9. Gender*Instagram

		Instagram		Total	
		No	Yes		
Gender	Female	Frequency	70	112	182
		% Gender	38.5%	61.5%	100,0%
	Male	Frequency	35	27	62
		% Gender	56.5%	43.5%	100,0%

($\chi^2 = 6.105$; $p = .013$)

Source: Own Elaboration

Evaluation of alternatives (*evaluation*)

According to the results presented in Table 10, the opinion of digital influencers does not have a great impact on the evaluation of travel alternatives because, in both statements, the mean value is between disagreement and indifferent. The t-test for dependent samples confirms the absence of statistically significant differences ($t = -.373$; $p = 0.71$) which, like the initial consideration, suggests that shared experiences are not a predominant factor in deciding between alternatives.

Table 10. Digital influencers websites

To what extent do you agree with the following information regarding how you track travel reports by digital experts/celebrities?		Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither agree/disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
I search digital influencers posts when I must make travel decisions	%	18.5	24.3	28.4	25.9	2.9	2.70	1.129
I tend to consider the travel experiences of digital influencers when I make my travel decisions	%	18.9	21.3	31.6	25.0	3.3	2.73	1.131

Source: Own Elaboration

By comparing the mean values between those who do not closely follow a digital expert/celebrity on travel topics and those who do (Table 11), the latter are more likely to refer to the digital influencers' suggestions, as well as to value their shared travel experiences.

Table 11. Influencers' social media/ Digital influencers' followers

Digital Influencer/Celebrity	Follow (49,2%)		Don't follow (50,8%)		t Student	p value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Stand deviation		
I search digital influencers posts when I must make travel decisions	3.24	.947	2.19	1.047	-8.252	.000
I tend to consider the travel experiences of digital influencers when I make my travel decisions	3.31	.951	2.16	.999	-9.181	.000

Source: Own Elaboration

Stage 2: Buying decision (purchase)

As for the buying decision, the results are similar: the mean value is between disagreement and indifference, with the opinion of digital influencers being more relevant to those who closely follow a digital expert/celebrity regarding travel topics (Table 12).

Table 12. Buying decision/Digital influencers' followers

Digital Influencer/Celebrity		Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither agree/ disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Mean	Standard deviation
		I tend to visit places I've seen on influencers' social media	%	17.2	21.7	29.1		
		Follow		Don't follow			t Student	p
		Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation			
		3.34	.983	2.28	1.064		-8.074	.000

Source: Own Elaboration

By grouping respondents into those whose buying decision is not influenced by digital influencers' social media and those who say they tend to visit the places mentioned therein, it was found that the latter attach greater importance to attributes of credibility, sincerity, and trustworthiness (Table 13).

Table 13. Digital influencers' attributes/Purchase decision

Tendency to visit places seen on influencers' social media	Yes (45.1%)		No (54-9%)		t Student	p
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
DI: trustworthy	4.62	.564	3.92	1.235	-4.932	.000
DI: sincere	4.64	.602	3.94	1.245	-4.864	.000
DI: inspires trust	4.54	.697	3.87	1.214	-4.509	.000

Source: Own Elaboration

On the other hand, being these attributes more valued by those who decide to visit the places indicated and having the digital influencers great influence on the decision of their followers, it is not surprising that they also consider of great importance the considered attributes (Table 14).

Table 14. Digital influencers' attributes/Followers

Digital influencer/Celebrity	Follow		Don't follow		t Student	p value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
DI: trustworthy	4.40	.920	3.95	1.168	-3.337	.001
DI: Sincere	4.43	.923	3.95	1.200	-3.515	.001
DI: inspires trust	4.37	.925	3.84	1.219	-3.818	.000

Source: Own Elaboration

Stage 3: Post-purchase experience

Most respondents use social networks to share their travel experiences. Based on the results presented in Table 15 we can conclude that this segment shows a greater involvement in the previous stages of the purchase process referred by Hudson and Thal (2013).

Table 15. Customer Decision Journey/Share

Share	Yes (68.9%)		No (31.1%)		t	P
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
Stage 1: Awareness						
I do social media research when I'm planning a trip	3.68	1.291	3.16	1.139	-3.01	.003
Stage 2: Evaluation						
I search digital influencers posts when I must make travel decisions	2.88	1.068	2.32	1.176	-3.63	.000
I tend to consider the travel experiences of digital influencers when I make my travel decisions	2.92	1.080	2.30	1.132	-4.05	.000
Stage 3: Purchase						
I tend to visit places I've seen on influencers social media	2.97	1.129	2.43	1.124	-3.44	.001

Source: Own Elaboration

It is also noted that the consumer involved in the last step of the customer decision journey (post purchase experience) is the one that most values the personal attributes and profile of digital influencers' posts (Table 16).

Table 16. Attributes and profile of digital influencers' posts/share

Posts	Yes		No		t Student	P value
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
DI: trustworthy	4.32	1.050	3.86	1.067	-3.154	.002
DI: sincere	4.33	1.061	3.88	1.119	-2.998	.003
DI: inspires trust	4.23	1.109	3.82	1.080	-2.699	.007
I tend to follow Digital Influencers profiles that share accurate information	3.58	1.011	2.89	1.228	-4.275	.000
I tend to follow Digital Influencers profiles that share updated information	3.60	1.062	3.05	1.199	-3.547	.000
I tend to follow Digital Influencers profiles that share visual content of high quality	4.11	1.360	3.47	1.536	-3.265	.001

Source: Own Elaboration

As for the relationship between posts and the most used social networks (Table 17), we identified that posting is most prevalent in Instagram, with most respondents referring they post about their travel experiences using this social network.

Table 17. Posts * Instagram

		Instagram		Total	
		No	Yes		
Do you post about travel experiences from your most recent trip on online social networking websites, photo sharing websites, travel review websites, personal blogs, and/or websites?	No	Frequency	48	28	76
		%	63.2%	36.8%	100.0%
	Yes	Frequency	57	111	168
		%	33.9%	66.1%	100.0%

($\chi^2=18.237$; $p= .000$)

Source: Own Elaboration

It is also noted that among respondents who Post content from their travel experiences on social networks, most of them follow a digital influencer (Table 18).

Table 18. Posts * Closely follows a Digital Influencer/Celebrity

		Followers		Total
		Don't follow	Follow	
Share travel experiences from your most recent trip on online social networking	No	56	20	76
		73.7%	26.3%	100.0%
	Yes	68	100	168
		40.5%	59.5%	100.0%

($\chi^2=23.089$; $p= .000$)

Source: Own Elaboration

5. CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand the informal relationships of influence that social networks provide, namely regarding the impact on the various stages of Customer Decision Journey from awareness or desire to post-purchase experience in holiday destination choice contexts (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). More specifically, we intended to investigate the behaviour of choice of holiday destinations, in its relationship with digital influencers and use of social networks. Data collection was done through an online questionnaire survey using a non-probability sampling method. The data collection instrument was shared through social networks with users who use them as a source of inspiration for their travel decisions.

In the first stage of Customer Decision Journey (Pre-purchase) survey participants were asked about their use of social networks when planning their trips. The results showed that most respondents do their research on social networks to plan their trips, which meets the results found in previous studies (Fotis et al., 2012; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). However, experiences shared by other travellers are not considered relevant in trip planning.

It is also possible to conclude according to the sample that the female audience is the most involved in travel planning, being also the segment that most researches the topic Travel and Tourist Destinations in social networks. Also, those who spend less time on these platforms reveal researching more about Travel and Tourist Destinations. Instagram has proved to be the most widely used social network for seeking inspiration and information

about travel and tourist destinations, which contrasts with the findings of Rinka and Pratt's (2018) study of the European context.

Contrary to other studies (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015; Alic et al., 2017; Pestek & Alic, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2018; Rinka & Pratt, 2018), the results of this research regarding the evaluation, show that the opinion of digital influencers has no significant impact on respondents' assessment of travel options and that, as in the early planning phase, their shared experiences are not a decisive factor in choosing between alternatives. However, users who indicate that they are following a digital influencer/celebrity closely regarding travel and tourist destinations bloggers are more likely to look at digital influencers' pages and to value their reported travel experiences. These results confirm the relevance of followers' loyalty to digital influencer reported by Alic et al. (2017). Although, overall, the opinion shared by digital influencers does not prove to have a major impact on the purchase decision phase, it appears that those who follow them closely tend to visit the places they suggest and they value their qualities in terms of credibility, sincerity, and trust.

Consistent with Kang and Schuett's (2013) findings, in the post purchase experience, the results showed that most respondents (68.9%) use social networks to share their travel experiences, most of which follow a digital influencer and uses Instagram for content sharing. This result contrasts with the data collected by Kang and Schuett (2013), where Facebook (65%) and MySpace (59%) were the preferred social networks for this purpose.

In line with Alic et al. (2017) the results of this work support the role of digital influencers, as followers tend to be loyal to them and are impacted on their consumption choices by generated and shared content. Although there is no significant impact of digital influencers, respondents who admitted relating to digital influencers tend to value their content, visit the sites they suggest, and share their own experiences, mostly through Instagram. These users are more involved with digital influencers throughout the Customer Decision Journey, which makes it possible to answer the research question initially posed affirmatively.

5.1 Implications for research

The technological revolution associated with Web 2.0 has produced remarkable transformations in the travel and tourism industry, specifically as regards the possibilities for sharing information generated by consumers themselves. Previous work has paid attention to the role of digital influencers in tourism (Cox, 2009; Freberg et al., 2010; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Liljander & Gummerus, 2015; Fine et al., 2017; Pestek & Alic, 2017; Rinka & Pratt, 2018) and, specifically, the impact of social networks on Customer Decision Journey (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

While acknowledging the relevance of shared content on social networks and the role of e-Wom, (Sahelices-Pinto & Rodríguez-Santos, 2014; Kapitan & Silvera, 2015; Nandagiri & Philip, 2018; Perez-Aranda et al., 2018), knowledge about the influence of opinion leaders on the Customer Decision Journey stages in travel and tourism contexts is limited (Magno, 2017).

This study makes a relevant contribution to the literature in the field of Marketing as it seeks to investigate the behaviour of choice of holiday destinations, their relationship with digital influencers and the use of social networks, thus considering a comprehensive and integrated approach to the issue.

5.2 Implications for practice

Findings of this research are of interest to tourism and travel organizations as well as to travel and tourism bloggers and celebrities. Overall, the relevance and role of digital marketing strategies are recognized, notably because of their potential to share information with a

narrow group of followers with whom emotionally based relationships can be developed. Traditional marketing communication techniques have been losing credibility compared to communication through social networks. The results obtained with this study reinforce the potential of digital influencing marketing strategy in travel and tourism organizations. So, it is essential to identify relevant key persons, or opinion leaders to endorse them to act as social influencers within specific segments of consumers. They will act as mediators who will be empowered to build long term relationships with their own community of followers. To be credible and trustworthy, opinion leaders should not be rewarded, they must be persuaded to recommend the brand, the destination or the company through personal eWom.

Regarding its impact the Customer Decision Journey, online reviews on social networks, especially those posted by recognized digital influencers, should be monitored and considered within the company's marketing strategy.

Since the travel and tourism industry is composed of a set of intangible products and experiences, it is critical to build on emotional bonds with audiences and social influencers can contribute to make the Customer Decision Journey a less complex process.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that could be improved in future studies in this field. It is suggested that future studies use a random sample rather than a snowball sample, which will allow a better representation of the population. In this study, digital influencers are mentioned in the overall meaning of the concept and no specific platforms, blogs or bloggers have been specified. Furthermore, only the user perspective was studied in order to generate knowledge about the role of digital influencers during Customer Decision Journey regarding the choice of vacation destination. Future studies should consider the perceptions of digital influencers and marketers in tourism and travel contexts.

Finally, an identical analysis could be applied to fields other than tourism as well as other geographic areas to generate a broader understanding of the role and influence mechanisms of digital influencers in Customer Decision Journey and the relationship of consumers in general with the social networks.

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