

Running head: INSTAGRAM TRAVEL INFLUENCERS

EXAMINING HOW INSTAGRAM TRAVEL INFLUENCERS SHAPE
TRAVEL DECISIONS

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Abstract

An increasing number of people are relying on information from social media platforms to inform their travel decisions. In particular, social media influencers have grown in popularity and reach, making it important to understand how such influencers shape travel decisions.

Specifically, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven Instagram users to understand how Instagram travel influencers shape travel decisions. Five themes emerged from this study: Types of photographs shared with follows, Humorous personality, Aesthetics of overall Instagram profile, Source similarity, and Instagram's affordances as a research tool. Implications of study findings are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a powerful tool in everyday decision making and actions. It can help people decide where to eat, travel, what activities to do, brands to purchase, and much more. Instagram is one of the most popular visual social media platforms in the world (Laestadius, 2017, p. 574). Sharing images online through Instagram is a common practice (Zappavigna, 2016). Instagram has grown to a community of 800 million with 500 million using it every day (Systrom, 2017). Users of Instagram engage with multimedia content by “commenting” and / or “liking” on other users’ photos or videos that are being shared with users. Social media employs mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermken, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

The “Social media influencer” is a new up and coming marketing strategy. A social media influencer has access to large audiences and can persuade others with their authenticity and reach. (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). They are mainly seen on the social media platform, Instagram. People are becoming increasingly reliant on social media sources for travel information (Chung & Koo, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, little research has explicitly examined how Instagram influencers shape travel decisions. To further understand Instagram and social media influencers, this study aims to analyze how Instagram shapes people’s travel decision making.

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CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses research conducted on Instagram and social media influencers, as well as existing communication and media effects theories that can explain how Instagram shapes travel decisions. Specifically, this chapter discusses the unique affordances of Instagram and how it can be seen as a way of persuasion along with social media influencers. Also, this study argues that social media influencers can be regarded as an up and coming way of marketing. The conclusion of this chapter describes guiding theoretical frameworks that are relevant to this study's context, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the MAIN model.

Instagram As a Photo Sharing Platform

Instagram has a highly visual culture that frequently conveys meaning through photographs, with text and hashtags used as needed for context (Laestadius, 2017). Instagram is seen as a social photography application designed for smartphones, and is one in which users can make visual and textual content (Laestadius, 2017). As compared with other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, people primarily use Instagram for its photo and video sharing capabilities. Although Facebook represents another major platform that combines visual and textual elements, it functions primarily as a platform for existing friends to maintain their social connections with one another (Barthel, 2015).

Statistics show that engagement rates are higher on Instagram than other social networking sites (Casalo, Flavian, & Sanchez, 2017). Engagement rates are defined as the number of responses and interactions that content on social media generates from users (Jaakonmaki, Muller & Vom Brocke, 2017). Various indicators of engagement include factors such as the volume of likes and comments, and other indicators such as 'pauses' on images,

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tapping on hashtags, or visitors to a user's account (Carah & Shaul, 2016). On Instagram, 20 billion images are shared each day (Zappavigna, 2016). Since Instagram's inception, the platform has attracted more than 150 million users with an average of 55 million pictures uploaded per day (Manikonda, Hu & Kambhampati, 2014). Instagram's user base is younger than Twitter's, with an estimate of 90 percent of users under the age of 35. (Laestadius, 2017). The visual nature of Instagram allows its users to combine visual imagery with captions, hashtags, and comments (Laestadius, 2017). When posting photos on Instagram, users can "comment" and/or "like" on other users' photos. Imagery is a useful tool for examining the representation of a place. Instagram being a social networking application, is a vehicle for photo distribution and the images are prime examples of spreadable media which are media messages shared by audiences for their own purposes within participatory cultures (Zappavigna, 2016). Visual elements, such as photography, are a significant part of projecting a strong destination image (Paül I Agustí, 2018). Destination image theory continues to stand as one of the basic modes of inquiry in tourism research (Paül I Agustí, 2018). It can be defined as the "sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Paül I Agustí, 2018). An image can summarize the complexity of a city, which in turn can give the user an accessible feeling towards the city. Research has consistently shown that visuals exert considerable influence on people's judgments across a wide variety of contexts such as purchase intentions, museum visits, judging partner attractiveness, or attitudes toward campaign messaging (Thommes & Hubner, 2018). Given these persuasive characteristics of visuals and Instagram's aforementioned qualities as a visual platform, it is likely that people will depend on Instagram as a key source for travel decisions.

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Social Media Influencers

Many opinion leaders who are seen as influential users of online communities have been a source of advice for other users (Casalo, Cisneros, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2009). Opinion leaders can be defined as individuals who have a great amount of influence on the decision making of people and their attitudes and behavior (Casalo et al., 2017). These people are also called "Social Media Influencers" and have grown in popularity across various social media platforms. Social media influencers have made a way in the online community. They have become opinion leaders and wield considerable influence in shaping product attitudes and potential customers' decisions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Unlike regular Instagram users, social media influencers are seen as popular by other users and have mastered the art of "self-branding" (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Self-branding involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and cultural capital (Khamis et al., 2017). It is also the idea that individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of the target audience (Khamis et al., 2017).

In the past, there were a limited number of traditional media sources and high barriers for access to the public dissemination of information (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Credible information sources were characterized as those holding formal positions indicating training and education or relevant experience (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). However, with the growing popularity of networked information-sharing tools, the notion of a 'credible source' has evolved radically. There is an increasing reliance by individuals on user-generated content from social media influencers (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Social Media influencers at times give their own opinion about a product, brand, restaurant, service, and others (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). The

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potential for peer-to-peer credibility assessment can be seen in numerous web-based applications, ranging from "credentialing" activities present on eBay or Amazon to microblogging activities on Twitter to topical discussion forums in which individuals provide firsthand experiences and opinions on host topics (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

A social media influencer typically has a large number of 'followers', enabling them to have access to a large audience (De Veirman et al., 2017). Their followers see them for being trusted tastemakers in one or several niches and they can persuade others by the value of their authenticity and reach (De Veirman et al., 2017). According to Hurley (2019), female social media influencers provide an overview of strategies for maintaining and extending celebrity and microcelebrity (p.3). Bloggers become social media influencers when they have established credibility in a specific industry such as health and fitness, fashion and beauty, food, or travel (De Veirman et al., 2017). Businesses are making more of an effort to increasingly persuade these influencers to endorse their products in the presence of their followers (De Veirman et al., 2017).

An experiment found that influencers with a large following were more likable, partly because they were considered more popular (De Veirman et al., 2017). The number of 'followers' serves as a heuristic regarding the influencer's popularity and clout as an opinion influencer (De Veirman et al., 2017). Also, a recent study on Instagram fashion influencers showed that perceived enjoyment and usefulness of an influencer's account had indirect positive effects on users' intentions to follow and recommend the influencer's posts (Casalo et al., 2017).

Another online survey was conducted among French social media users to examine how credibility and para-social interaction are related to the consumer purchase intention and the

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indirect relationship of attitude, physical and social attractiveness with the purchase of intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Results of this study showed both credibility and para-social interaction with influencers impact the purchase intention of followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

Theoretical Frameworks

The Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) can help explain how characteristics of social media influencers persuade consumers (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It contends that consumers process persuasive messages by taking either the central or peripheral routes of persuasion. People who take the central route of persuasion are motivated and able to engage in information processing, therefore, they pay attention to cues that are germane to the message itself such as argument quality (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). By contrast, people who take the peripheral route to persuasion have neither motivation nor ability to engage in message processing. They use cues that are irrelevant to the message itself such as the source's physical appearance, or bandwagon cues in their decision making (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). A meta-analysis of research on the Elaboration Likelihood Model identified source credibility and source attractiveness as key characteristics of persuasive social media message sources (Teng, Khong, & Goh 2014). Relatedly, consumers place a lot of emphasis on traits such as source attractiveness when evaluating the persuasiveness of social media influencers (Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017).

Persuasion is one of the most extensively researched areas in communication. According to the ELM, humor might persuade in two ways (Schnurr & Chan, 2011). One way is by creating positive affect. Humorous advertisements bring people relaxed and happy feelings, and people might associate these positive feelings with the product/brand and change their attitude towards

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it (Schnurr & Chan, 2011). According to ELM, people who are in a good mood are less likely to disagree with a persuasive message and more likely to rely on peripheral cues. A study found that humor has a positive impact on attention with regard to the persuasive effect of humor in advertising (Chan, 2011). Specifically, 254 students were recruited to watch five television commercials and answer some close-ended survey questions thereafter. The results showed that humor undermines message processing but persuades when need for cognition is low (Chan, 2011).

In addition, ELM research has shown that source characteristics can be identified as trustworthiness, expertise, and likeability (comprising similarity and attractiveness) are relevant for consumer decision-making (Pentina, Bailey, & Zhang, 2018). A study investigates the impact of message, source, and receiver characteristics on user attitudes toward Yelp reviews, with the subsequent impact of these attitudinal evaluations on review persuasiveness. Specifically, it examines the roles of review valence (positive/negative) and sidelines (one-sided/two-sided), as well as perceived similarity with the reviewer, on user perceptions of helpfulness, trustworthiness, and credibility of the review (Pentina et al., 2018). The study also tests moderating effects of perceived source similarity and user regulatory focus on the relationships among message characteristics (Pentina et al., 2018). In terms of source characteristics, perceived similarity with the reviewer positively affected attitudes toward the review (Pentina et al., 2018). In sum, the findings showed the importance of exposing consumers to reviews written by those who are similar to the consumer. However, though these previous ELM studies might have identified traits such as source credibility or attractiveness as characteristics of persuasive

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social media message sources, these studies have not gone further to understand *what* exactly makes a social media travel influencer persuasive.

MAIN Model

This study also draws from Shyam Sundar's MAIN model. The MAIN model describes four categories of cues, Modality, Agency, Interactivity, and Navigability. Cues in a persuasion context can lead message receivers to make loose associations between the cue and the message (Sundar, 2008, p. 74). The MAIN model is primarily concerned with the aspects of digital media that can influence credibility judgements. The starting point of the model is an affordance offered by the device, which means a particular capability possessed by the medium can affect judgments and evaluations (Sundar, 2008, p. 74).

Modality is the concept closely allied with the concept of medium because, media differed according to their modality, with print being broadly textual, radio being aural, and television being audiovisual (Sundar, 2008). Text as a symbol system requires controlled processing whereas audiovisual modality is probably processed more easily because the depiction is more life-like and needs little decoding or translation (Sundar, 2008). According to Sundar (2008), researchers have pointed out that audio is an important characteristic for promoting realism, defined as the transparency between human-human and human-computer interaction, when it comes to the application of social rules. Therefore, the realism heuristic would predict that people are more likely to trust audiovisual modes of content delivery because such content has a higher resemblance to the real world (p.80). Basically, we tend to trust those things that we can see over those that we merely read about. This also underlies people's general

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belief that pictures cannot lie and their consequent trust in pictures over textual descriptions (Sundar, 2008).

A study guided by the MAIN model and the heuristic systematic model explains mechanisms by which a variation in screen size such as large vs. small and presentation mode such as video vs. text contribute to user perceptions. The research consists of four conditions representing two levels of screen (large vs. small) and two types of presentation mode (video vs. text). Participants watched an advertisement, then completed an online survey.

Participants who used the large-screen smartphone and watched the video advertisement engaged in a significantly higher amount of heuristic processing than did those who used the small-screen smartphone and read text mode (Kim & Sundar, 2016). The research showed that large screen size would lead to 67% more heuristic processing than small screen size, and video mode would lead to 49% more heuristic processing than text mode (Kim & Sundar, 2016). Results also showed participants who used small-screen smartphones and read text advertisements engaged in more comprehensive, analytic information processing than those who used the larger-screen smartphone and watched the video advertisement (Kim & Sundar, 2016). Overall, the study revealed that participants showed higher tendency to engage in heuristic processing when they were exposed to large screens and video mode (Kim & Sundar, 2016). According to the MAIN model, these two modality cues triggered the “being-there heuristic” and “realism heuristic”, and played a critical role in determining the depth of information processing (Kim & Sundar, 2016).

Agency is the second aspect of the MAIN model. Online platforms often communicate the identity of the source to the receiver (Sundar, 2008). Often, the agent itself is the source and particularly when there is no other attributed source, for a given piece of information (Sundar,

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2008). Results from a study by Sundar and Nass showed that the psychological favorite among all sources was “other users” (Sundar, 2008). When other users were attributed as the source of online news, participants favored the stories more and perceived them to be of higher quality than when news editors were identified as sources (Sundar, 2008). Also, the study showed that stories were rated as most newsworthy when other users selected the stories. Agency cues can trigger certain source attributions, and collective source cues such as online ratings can prime mental shortcuts such as the bandwagon heuristic (Sundar, 2008).

A study explored the effects of three interface cues conveying source attributes on the credibility of health messages on Twitter (Lee & Sundar, 2013). Authority cues, bandwagon cues, and source proximity cues were examined. According to Lee and Sundar (2013), authority cues convey information about the source’s expertise and legitimacy to give opinions on the subject matter (p. 511). Bandwagon cues are collective endorsements of online content and can take the form of the number of retweets on Twitter (Lee & Sundar, 2013). Lastly, source proximity cues are difficult to pinpoint due to multiple source layers in online information. Lee and Sundar (2013) looked at three types of selecting sources: “visible sources, technology sources (media technology delivery content), and receiver sources (referring to individual receivers who choose content for consumption)” (p. 511). The study showed that one particular cue is not superior to other cues, therefore, individuals seem to use all cues simultaneously for information judgement (Lee & Sundar, 2013). Also, results showed that when a professional source with many followers tweets a story, users tend to perceive the content to be more credible compared to users with few followers, but if a non-expert source with many followers tweets,

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people tend to perceive such content to be less credible compared to a non-expert user with few followers (Lee and Sundar, 2013).

Interactivity cues are the most distinctive affordance of digital media, with most traditional analog media and some digital media possessing more of it than others (Sundar, 2008). Interactivity cues can trigger heuristics such as the ‘activity’ heuristic. The valence of the activity heuristic could be positive or negative depending on the user and situational factors. As per mood management theory, if the user is bored and is seeking out to digital medium for excitement, the activity heuristic might indeed be a positive force in this case (Sundar, 2008). Most of everything being consumed online is a product of interaction with the medium. For example, the typical menu bar in any interactive device, especially if displayed in the form of tabs or as a pull-down list, is likely to cue the choice heuristic (Sundar, 2008). Interactivity is an integral component of systems that are designed for human-human interactions, the so-called computer-mediated communication applications such as e-mail, instant messaging, chatrooms, bulletin-boards, and social networking sites (Sundar, 2008). The real value of interactivity is that it gives the user the ability to serve as a source, and not just a receiver, of communication, (Sundar, 2008).

Lastly, navigability is last on the MAIN model. Navigability refers to interface features that suggest transportation from one location to another, in keeping with the space metaphors such as “site” and “cyberspace” as applied to digital media. Devices and sites feature navigational aids to orient users to the mediated environment and lead them through particular paths for maximizing the efficiency of their experience (Sundar, 2008). Greater visualization in general has beneficial effect on performance, with users giving positive ratings to orienting

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features such as the ability to mark user-defined locations in a virtual environment (Sundar, 2008). The navigability affordance of digital media serves to cue a variety of heuristics that operate at different levels. While the browsing and the play heuristics incline users to view the navigational structure in terms of variety-seeking and psychological immersion, which are particularly salient and prevalent among today's youth, the elaboration and scaffolding heuristics promote a more collectively intense stance toward the digital medium (Sundar, 2008). Instagram helps users navigate through specific content by hashtags, geotags, and the explore page. This helps the user to search for information that is collectively organized.

Other platforms such as Twitter enable users to navigate rapidly across various types of content with functions such as @replies, retweets, direct messages, and hashtags (Potts & Jones, 2011). More specifically, Twitter is navigable by hashtags that enable one to focus conversations on specific ideas. A campaign on Twitter called #MeToo, created a space of debate and contestation over the multiple and complex meaning of patriarchal ideology in order to dislodge the harmful dominant explanations or justifications of sexual violence (Hansen, 2000). With using the #MeToo, it was easy for users to circulate information in the mainstream media. People were able to explain and share their own personal story (Hansen, 2000). Therefore, navigating this campaign was accessible and clear with using the #MeToo. Various cues embedded in the four classes of affordances discussed thus far is/are likely to be triggered when people use digital mediums (Sundar, 2008). Taken together, the MAIN model suggests that modality, agency, interactivity, or navigability cues on Instagram might shape travel decisions.

Thus far, most research has focused on the types of travel information people search for across social media platforms (Chung & Koo, 2015; Xiang & Gretel, 2010). Although research

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has examined how social media influencers' image congruity with travel destinations influences visitation intentions, such work was carried out within the context of social media platforms, broadly speaking (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Little research has specifically examined how qualities or characteristics of Instagram influencers shape travel decisions. Given Instagram's growing popularity as a source of information for potential travelers, this study seeks to address this research gap by conducting a series of exploratory, qualitative in-depth interviews to examine how characteristics of Instagram influencers shape travel decisions. This study poses the following research question:

RQ: How do Instagram travel influencers shape peoples' travel decisions?

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CHAPTER 3: METHOD

To uncover how social media shapes people's travel decisions, I conducted qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with a total of 11 participants. Given my study's exploratory nature, qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews it is well suited for uncovering as many qualities of the Instagram travel influencers as possible. These interviews helped to provide detailed explanations as to how Instagram travel influencers help shape travel decisions. Conducting interviews via open-ended questions allow for an excerpt of rich detail from the participants' own experiences.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were users of Instagram, who followed Instagram travel influencers, and who use Instagram for travel decisions. To determine eligibility, I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques for recruitment. First, I interviewed my participants in my online group community and asked them to recommend any of their contacts who use Instagram to make travel decisions. I tried to interview a diverse range of demographic backgrounds, such as age and gender, to gain a deeper understanding of how Instagram shapes travel decisions. These interviews were conducted either in a public, relaxing setting such as coffee shops, public parks, or on Skype. Specifically, these participants had Instagram accounts and use the platform to look at travel-related posts.

All names of the participants were changed to protect participant confidentiality. Overall, most of these participants were aged between 20-40 years old and performed professional, managerial, or administrative work (refer to Table 1 below for more information)

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Table 1: Participant Demographics

NAME	AGE	GENDER	OCCUPATION
Sarah	28 – 33	Female	Account Manager
John	22 – 27	Male	Business Services
Royce	28 – 33	Male	Account Auditor
Julie	22 – 27	Female	University Student
Mel	34 – 39	Female	School Teacher
Chantel	22 – 27	Female	University Student
Lauren	22 – 27	Female	Admin Assistant
Amber	34 – 39	Female	General Manager
Brad	34 – 39	Male	Banker
Heather	28 – 33	Female	Client Consultant
Keith	34 – 39	Male	Technician

Interview Questions. The interview questions were developed based on the collective literature and frameworks mentioned in the literature review. For qualitative research, all questions that were asked to all interviewees were open-ended. This means that respondents have the flexibility to give a broad range of responses. For example, in the introduction section, I asked: "How active are you on Instagram?" For main questions, I asked questions such as "In what ways have Instagram travel influencers shaped your travel decisions?", and for a concluding question I asked, "Do you have any concluding remarks, additions or clarifications?" Questions such as "Why do you like to follow Instagram travel influencers?" and "Can you tell

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me about the photos, videos, and text that the influencer post?” were asked to better understand in detail the participants' answers. (Refer to Appendix A for the full list of interview questions).

Selected participant interviews were conducted via face-to-face and Skype. Once the appointment was set up, participants were given a fabricated name. At the time of the interview, before the interview could be conducted, participants were given a consent form, which they were required to fill out. Participants were given a copy of the consent form for their records. Before the interview began, participants were reminded that the interview was recorded and would be transcribed. They were also informed that once the interview was completed, they would no longer be contacted unless they expressed interest in getting the results of the study. On average, interviews lasted 30 minutes.

Issues with reflexivity. My role was to conduct in-depth interviews for this study. I look at Instagram for Travel decisions, places to eat, brands to purchase, and inspiration. On the one hand, my familiarity with Instagram helped me to connect better with my interviewees and enabled me to ask thought-provoking questions about the qualities of persuasive travel influencers. On the other hand, my personal experience with this platform might have caused me to ask leading questions that bias my interviewees' responses. As such, I had to make conscious attempts to refrain from asking leading questions.

Data Analysis Approach

I recorded and transcribed the audio from the interviews. Once the transcriptions were completed, I engaged in thematic coding using the grounded theory approach. The grounded theory approach is an inductive method of data analysis that involves identifying and defining as many themes as possible from my data (Saldana, 2013). Thematic coding involves themes that

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ascribe meaning to the data set. They describe and organize possible observations (Saldana, 2013). This process was concluded when theoretical saturation was reached. All interview transcripts were reviewed and then coding of the transcripts lead to a further consolidation of codes and development of several themes. I coded the answers provided for patterns, to analyze and the relationship between personalization and likelihood of Instagram travel influencers.

After the first round of coding, the codes were revisited and edited based on the emergent data. They were analyzed to identify themes and to pull the data together in a more coherent and meaningful manner. The second-cycle of coding-related all the information to the theoretical framework and research question.

After two rounds of recoding and consolidation, a total of five themes emerged from the data set. The following themes include Types of photographs shared with followers, influencers' Personalities, Aesthetics of overall Instagram profile, Source similarity, and Research source.

Types Of Photographs Shared With Followers

Look at the first theme that emerged. Instagram's main function is to share photographs with other users. Most participants described Instagram as a place to share beautiful photography and participants expressed how certain types of photographs captured their attention. Participants also shared reasons why they follow a particular influencer. This helped to provide context for answering the proposed research question surrounding Instagram travel influencers. Often the deciding factor of which place to go, activities to do, or where to eat were dependent on what the participants see on Instagram by influencers.

Sarah: "I prefer to look at photos over watching videos. [...] I like to look at food and landscape photos. I don't read the captions much unless there is information about a place or recommendation. But what captures me first is the photos."

Amber: "Tara Milktea, Murad Osmann, and Izkiz; all post gorgeous scenic shots that create a story. Most are showing the actual view of a location, with few shots of food/drinks. The pictures always have a lot of colors, mostly beautiful clothing, and a lot of cheesy poses that I love to absorb."

Heather: "I love to look at photos on Instagram. One influencer that I like to follow and she is a local influencer is The Aloha Babe. [...] she recently went to New Zealand and now I want to go. [...] She something called Glamping. The photos she posted about it

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looked like camping but not. It was a little more upscale camping and being that I am not huge with the outdoors, that seems like an alternative for me."

Most participants prefer photos over watching videos that they see posted on Instagram.

They also preferred specific types of photos such as food, landscapes/scenery, and activities.

Also, most participants conclude that what makes the photos appealing is that the photos have been taken outside making the photos bright and show nice landscapes or scenic views.

Chantel: "It's primarily just the photos that I love. The photos are aesthetically appealing which makes it nice to look at. Also, because the photos look appealing it makes me want to go there and take the same photo."

John: "The type of photos I like to see are landscape photos. I was seeing lots of photos of Iceland and I never thought of Iceland of a place to travel to until I saw posts from different influencers. They would post photos of green mountains and waterfalls which is crazy because it's Iceland, so you would think the opposite. But because of those photos, I looked into Iceland more and I made it a stop to visit on the way back home when I traveled to Europe."

Other participants talked about how they can imagine themselves where these travel influencers travel by looking at the photos that they post. When influencers post photos of themselves at their destination with a nice scenic background or doing a fun activity, it is easy to imagine being there and doing the same thing or taking the same photo. These photos somewhat create a feeling that what these influencers do is achievable.

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Mel: “[...] what makes the photos appealing to me is that the influencer is always in the photo, so when I look at the photo it’s easy for me to picture myself at that spot. It makes it feel realistic and achievable in traveling to that place.”

Julie: “[...] seeing photos of the view in Santorini, Greece makes me want to go there and see how beautiful it is in person. In photographs, it's a stunning city that I can only imagine what it would look like in person.”

Other participants were more into photographs of different cuisines from around the world. For Brandon and John, the photos they loved the most are photos of food.

John: “[...] it's pictures of food that they post that I will look at and see if they tagged the place or gave the name of the location, so I can do more research. [...] I go back to past posts I have seen and write down the places I have to eat at when I travel.”

Brad: "Food photos is what captures me. One of my favorite go-to influencers is Chubby Chinese Girl Eats. She is based out of New York City and she travels a lot. But she loves food. [...] I remembered some of her posts about places to eat in New York, the “must try” places, so I went back and looked at them. If I had any questions, I messaged her and she was very helpful and gave honest recommendations.”

Overall, all participants enjoy the photos that influencers post. From food, activities, landscapes, and views, the photography that is being shared by Instagram travel influencers is significant to the participants. All participants preferred to see photos, of different places, from around the world to get inspired by them.

Humorous Presentation Style

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A few participants like to follow influencers due to their sense of humor. Specifically, these participants were persuaded by certain influencers who convey their content with various types of humor such as funny sarcasm, mimicry of other people and being brutally honest in a hilarious way. John and Sarah like to follow influencers who are funny, in their eyes. For John, he likes it when the influencers show a different side of them, not always being about their travels or lifestyle and as for Sarah, she likes comedy, so when influencers post videos and jokes, she's drawn to them.

John: [...] “like when they make fun at themselves or laugh at themselves because of something they did. It’s funny too when they mock other people. For example, people like to mock other people’s accents and when they try to talk in other people’s accents, I find it funny.”

Sarah: "I love Bretman Rock. He's not much of a travel influencer but more of a beauty influencer though he does travel to L.A and New York a lot. But I love how funny he is. He says what is on his mind and he's very theatrical when he explains something. He loves to experiment and give his honest opinion but when he does that it's funny because he's not talking conversationally. He's talking very dramatic and signing and also mocking the local language (moke). [...] I just find him funny.”

Aesthetic of Overall Instagram Profile

The overall look of an Instagram travel influencer's profile might endear them to their followers. Seeing all their posts together in a cohesive manner can make an impact on its followers. The overall aesthetics of an Instagram profile can provide an idea of what the influencer’s style is like and lend a sneak peek of the type of photos the influencer likes to post.

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For example, the aesthetics of travel influencers' Instagram profiles have favorably shaped travel decisions among some participants:

Sarah: [...] looking at the overall Instagram profile gives me a sense of what type of photos the influencers like to post and their style. [...] style meaning the look of their profile such as the colors of their photos. Some influencers tend to have colorful profiles by posting lots of outdoor photos with flowers, plants, or the clothing they wear." [...] it's like some of the photos coordinates with the scene."

Julie: "I like to see the overall Instagram page because it's appealing when all the photos are nicely curated by ensuring each photo is sticking with the overall color scheme of the page."

Other participants Lauren and Mel, like to look at the overall look of the Instagram profile but it's not something they do all the time. Some participants such as John mentioned they would click on the influencer's profile to look at past posts. However, these participants are not necessarily persuaded by such overall aesthetics.

John: "I only click on the overall profile when I want to go back and look at the specific post but the overall look of the profile page doesn't determine if I will follow the influencer or not."

Source Similarity

Next theme, "Source Similarity". Collectively, participants found the influencers to be relatable because of similar life experiences, being the same age, or sharing the same passion. Such perceived relatability of an Instagram travel influencer is a key factor in shaping travel decisions. The participants expressed that following influencers who they can relate to feels like

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a long-distance friend and the traveling that they are doing make it feel like an obtainable goal.

Meaning, it is possible to travel and experiencing what the world has to offer.

Mel: "I follow the Bucket List Family. I think they would be considered a family influencer? But I have been following them for years and I have seen their growth. But what I love is that it's a family, mom, and dad of two kids. The mom is white like me and she has two kids that are around the same age as my kids. When I see this family travel around the world together, it makes it feel possible for me to do the same."

Before Mel had kids, she used every vacation time she had to travel. Since she was a young girl, she always dreamt of traveling the world. When she got married and now has two kids, she feels that traveling is now on the back burner for her but ever since following The Bucket List Family, she found inspiration and planned a few trips.

Mel: [...] ever since I started following The Bucket List Family, I now get inspired to travel with my kids. I often think to myself that it would be a great experience for my kids to learn through the world."

Sarah: "Now that I think about the influencers that I follow; they are around my age. Which makes me feel like I can relate to them and do the same stuff they are doing."

Royce: "Most influencers that I follow are travel and photographers. Traveling is something I am passionate about and photography is something I am trying to get better at, so it is important to me to have a common interest with the influencers otherwise why would I follow them?"

Julie shares a strong passion for free diving and started following influencer Chelsea Kauai for over a year now.

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Julie: "Freediving is what I love to do in my free time and is a passion of mine. Chelsea Kauai travels all around the world and discovers places to free dive and now that put a spark in me wanting to go to these places. I get a lot of inspiration from her. So, now on my bucket list is Coron, Philippines because of her."

Other participants mentioned similar reasoning as to why they follow specific influencers. John and Brad have a passion for food, so they like to follow food influencers who experience different types of cuisines. Heather and Chantel like to follow influencers who have similar interests like fashion and beauty.

Heather: "[...] I actually started following The Aloha Babe because she posts a lot about fashion and give fashion advice on different outfits and how to wear a specific clothing item. She now has been traveling and I noticed she has incorporated her travels with her outfits."

Brad: "Food is one of my main passion and I love when travel influencers post about the different cuisines from the places they travel to."

Instagram as a Research Tool

Participants mentioned how they use Instagram as a research tool at times. They like to research by using the hashtag, GEO tag, Instagram handles, and the explore page on the platform. These tools have been used to plan a trip, find places to eat, things to do, and provide the best routes, among other unique things, when traveling.

Royce: "Influencers are like the central hub or like a point of contact when it comes to gathering information. They are the ones who are very active in traveling, so why not get all your information from someone who specializes in travel." [...] some of them go into details about their trip like how much it costs and the best routes to take. For example,

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traveling to Japan I did not know to take a taxi will cost a fortune until it happened to this influencer called Find Us Lost mentioned it because they experienced it at first hand." "I also like when they tag the place that they are eating at or the company, they booked their activity with. All of these are helpful information and it gives me confidence when I plan a trip."

Participant Julie also does similar research on Instagram.

Julie: "I always search the hashtag and look to see what other people are posting. I also always go to the Instagram page that is being tagged in the post. I also like to look at the explore page because it shows accounts that I am interested in due to the algorithm."

Other participants also had similar answers. They mentioned going back to look at past Instagram posts, to get information, or referring to specific Instagram pages that an influencer had suggested. Participants referred to past posts because that specific post had useful information about a place. Most participants mentioned, when they hear of a new restaurant or a store, the first place they look at is Instagram and search the restaurants Instagram handle. These responses show how Instagram users can gather knowledge on where to eat, what to do and to help plan a trip.

In answering the research question, regarding how do Instagram travel influencers shape travel decisions, the qualitative results overall show that the participants specifically follow travel influencers to get ideas on different places around the world.

In particular, one theme that emerged from the data was that photography plays a significant part in capturing users' attention. All participants show that photos are very important and it is the first thing they look at before doing more research. The first theme to emerge is 'Type of photographs shared with followers'. Looking at the MAIN model, the theme 'Type of photographs shared with followers' is consistent with the 'Modality' aspect of the MAIN model, indicating that the mode of presenting information on Instagram (photo vs. video) played a key role in shaping travel decisions. Visual social media applications and smartphones enable non-professionals to generate pictures that invoke feelings of authenticity (Thelander & Cassinger, 2017). According to Zulli (2018), still images enable people to take their time to linger on the subject or object and look for depth within the visual field (p. 138). Zulli (2018) states that "to gaze is to be intentional about looking and to consciously stare at an individual or object (p.138). In sum, Zulli (2018) points out that the 'gaze' as theorized on Instagram has the potential to reinvigorate and complicate discussions of labor exploitation in the digital economy and second, still images enable people to give short, fleeting looks that glide from surface to surface as the dominant mode of seeing (Zulli, 2018). Furthermore, photos more so than videos invoke the idea of 'you could be here with me' in which photographers include part of themselves in the image and invite the viewer to imagine themselves into the frame (Zappavigna, 2016).

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A surprising theme that emerged was discovering that an influencer's sense of humor played a role in persuading people. The theme 'Humorous Presentation Style' from this study aligns with previous research showing that humor influences persuasion and also aligns with research on Elaboration Likelihood Model showing that humor plays a role in persuasion. A study found that humor has a positive impact on attention with regard to the persuasive effect of humor in advertising (Chan, 2011). A few participants expressed that they like to follow influencers who have a sense of humor. It showed a different side of them, on the platform, and did not always clutter advertisement. The effectiveness of humor as a persuasive message strategy has received considerable attention, particularly in the area of advertising (Skalski, Tamborini, Glazer, & Smith, 2009). This finding is consistent with the meta-analysis done by Eisend (2009) who found that humor in advertising significantly enhances positive affect and attention. Another research on the effects of humor persuasion showed the use of humor increases positive emotions and increases perceived credibility (Skalski, Tamborini, Glazer, & Smith, 2009).

In addition, some interviewees said that the aesthetics of the overall Instagram profile mattered in shaping their travel decisions. This theme aligns with previous research showing that visual aesthetics is one of the strongest determinants of perceived credibility, especially during the users' first contact or visit to the profile (Lindgaard, Dudek, Sen, Sumegi, & Nooan, 2011). A user's stream of images is an unfolding construal of identity in which the particular photographed are a presentation of personal style, and images appear as unfolding feed of content in reverse chronological order on their homepage within the site (Zappavigna, 2016).

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Such presentation aesthetics on Instagram can serve as a strategic tactic to attract followers, and enable the influencer to exert their unique, overall brand identities (Hurley, 2019).

It is easy to connect with a person of similar interest. The theme, ‘source similarity’, showed that participants liked to follow influencers who share the same passion, hobby, or have a similar lifestyle. This theme aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model research showing that source similarity plays an important role in persuasion under low levels of involvement and it also aligns with the agency aspect of the MAIN model which emphasizes that agency (source) cues on online platforms help to shape evaluations. Collectively, the participants prefer to follow influencers whom they can relate to. Similarity can be referred to as the degree to which two persons are alike concerning certain attributes that have been hounded to be an important dimension in persuasion (Lu, 2013). A study that was done on blogs with a narrative about healthy behavior compared to nonnarrative blogs showed that readers with health-related similarities were more persuasive than blogs not having many similarities with the reader (Lu, 2013). This shows that source similarity has a strong persuasive effect and that source similarity allows readers to connect with the source on another level. However, the findings in this study differ from previous studies (e.g., Hurley, 2019), which have shown that *perceived dissimilarity* with influencers shape decisions. For example, a study showed that young women living in the Gulf-Arab region trusted influencers who led diametrically different lifestyles from their own. These study subjects regarded the influencers as aspirational role models instead of relatable personas (Hurley, 2019).

Lastly, the emerging theme that was popular with the participants is using Instagram as a research tool. This theme ‘Instagram as a research tool’ aligns with the navigability component

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of the MAIN model. Most participants looked at places that were tagged in photos, searched user Instagram handles and searched hashtags to look at other relating posts. Again, research showed that adding at least one hashtag to a post increases your reach by 12.6% (Erz, Marder, Osadchaya, 2018). Participants expressed that they like to look at hashtags to see what are other users are posting on that specific hashtag topic.

Practical Implications

Based on this study's findings, Instagram travel influencers should use more photos than videos to persuade their followers or people who happen to stumble upon their profile. Influencers should focus on designing and maintaining aesthetically pleasing profiles that have consistent color schemes across photosets. Furthermore, people are likely to be persuaded by humorous Instagram travel influencers. Participants liked when influencers show another side of themselves like being funny because it shows their authentic personality and not always posting about a brand, product, or place. Therefore, Instagram travel influencers should attempt to persuade by showing that they relatable or similar to their followers. Finally, Instagram travel influencers should use certain features like hashtags or Geotags to help guide travel decisions.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

This study was meant to explore Instagram travel influencers and how they shape travel decisions. Although this study provided in-depth, exploratory data into how Instagram shapes travel decisions, it was not without its limitations. First, this study's participants were on the younger side, largely work in administrative and professional jobs, and are well educated. Future studies should include a diverse recruitment pool of participants from various demographic groups or professional careers. This may provide a different picture of how other users use

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Instagram to make travel decisions. Second, in-depth interviews cannot be used to make generalizations about larger population trends. Future research can consider conducting quantitative research such as experiments that manipulate various characteristics of Instagram travel influencers and gauge how these characteristics affect travel decisions. Third, this study only focused on the persuasive characteristics of Instagram travel influencers. Future studies can be conducted to see if this study's findings will be observed in other brands or product contexts such as fashion or technology. Research should also be conducted to gauge if similar themes emerge in the context of other types of social media platforms such as Twitter, Tiktok or Snapchat.

Conclusion

Overall, I conducted an exploratory study on Instagram travel influencers. As Instagram continues to grow, future studies should focus on the persuasiveness of Instagram influencers. In sum, findings from in-depth interviews suggest that Instagram photos are more persuasive than videos, personality traits such as humor can help persuade, and aesthetically pleasing Instagram profiles might shape travel decisions. This research is one of many that will help to bring this understanding to a new level.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions.

1. Introductory/Warm up Questions

- a. What is your name?
- b. How many social media accounts do you belong to?
- c. How active are you on Instagram?
- d. How do you like Instagram?
- e. When was the last trip you have been on?
Possible probe: Ask interviewee to describe any Holidays or special events around the time the participant traveled, if the participant does not remember the time they have traveled.
- f. How did you decide where to travel for your last trip?

2. Main Questions

Now I want you to think about travel related Instagram content:

- a. What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'Instagram travel influencer'?
Probe: Why do you like to follow Instagram travel influencers?
- b. Do you follow any accounts of Instagram influencers? Briefly tell me more about the types of content these Instagram influencers post.
Probe: Can you explain the photos, videos, or text that the influencer post?
- c. In what ways have Instagram travel influencers shaped your travel decisions?
Probe: Can you name and show me a public profile of an Instagram travel influencer whom you like? Explain to me what exactly about the travel influencer is so persuasive.
- d. How do you use Instagram to plan your trip?

Probes: Can you think of a time when you thought about going on a trip because of something you saw on Instagram? What other things influence you to go on a trip? What have you seen recently on Instagram about a location that you were thinking of going to?

3. Concluding Questions

Do you have any concluding remarks, additions or to clarifications?

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Appendix B (IRB materials)

Informed Consent Form



University of Hawai'i
Consent to Participate in a Research Project
Theresa Tam Sing, Co-Principal Investigator

Project title: Examining how Instagram shapes travel decisions.

Aloha! My name is Theresa Tam Sing and you are invited to take part in a research study. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in the Department of Communication. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am doing a research project.

What am I being asked to do?

If you participate in this project, I will either meet with you in person for an interview at a location and time convenient for you or have a skype interview with you.

Taking part in this study is your choice.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop being in the study, there will be no penalty or loss to you.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of my project is examining how Instagram shapes travel decisions. I am asking you to participate because you are an adult aged 18 and above and have used Instagram to look for travel information.

What will happen if I decide to take part in this study?

The interview will consist of 10-15 open ended questions. It will take 45 minutes to an hour. The interview questions will include questions like, "In what ways have Instagram shaped your travel decisions?" "Can you think of a time when you thought about going on a trip because of something you saw on Instagram?"

Only you and I will be present during the interview. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview so that I can later transcribe the interview and analyze the responses. You will be one of about 15 people I will interview for this study.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

I believe there is little risk to you for participating in this research project. You may become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview. If you do become stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question or take a break. You can also stop the interview or you can withdraw from the project altogether.

There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this interview. The results of this project may help improve our understanding of how Instagram shapes travel decisions.

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Privacy and Confidentiality:

I will keep all study data secure in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office/encrypted on a password protected computer. Only my University of Hawai'i advisor and I will have access to the information. Other agencies that have legal permission have the right to review research records. The University of Hawai'i Human Studies Program has the right to review research records for this study.

After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio-recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personal identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for your time and effort in participating in this research project.

Future Research Studies:

Even after removing identifiers, the data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study, please email me at tamsing@hawaii.edu . You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Rachel Neo, at 808-956-3332 & rneo@hawaii.edu. You may contact the UH School of Communication at 808.956.8881 or sc@hawaii.edu. to discuss problems, concerns and questions; obtain information; or offer input with an informed individual who is unaffiliated with the specific research protocol. Please visit <http://go.hawaii.edu/jRd> for more information on your rights as a research participant.

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If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date this signature page and return it to Theresa Tam Sing.

Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Signature(s) for Consent:

I give permission to join the research project entitled, "*How Instagram Travel Influencers shape Travel decisions.*"

Please initial next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

Yes No I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview portion of this research.

Name of Participant (Print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Mahalo!

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Sample of the Recruitment Flyer for a Communication Study

The University of Hawai`i is conducting a study:

Do you use social media platform Instagram for travel decisions?

If the answer is **YES**...

Theresa Tam Sing would like to invite you to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this study is to have a better understanding of how Instagram shape people's travel decisions.

- Study will take place at a location and time convenient for you.
- A summary of the results of certain answers performed during the study will be available to study volunteer.

**To learn more about the study,
please contact Theresa Tam Sing at tamsing@hawaii.edu**