

# **The Role of Different Brand Collaborations on Influencers' Trustworthiness in the Tourism Industry**

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Bachelor Thesis for Obtaining the Degree

Bachelor of Business Administration

Tourism and Hospitality Management

Submitted to Dr. Marion Garaus

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## Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Bachelor's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

The thesis was not submitted in the same or in a substantially similar version, not even partially, to another examination board and was not published elsewhere.

1<sup>th</sup> June 2021

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Date

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## **Abstract**

Over the last few years, influencers have become the most rising and trending marketing method. All different kinds of industries, including the tourism and hospitality industry, have taken advantage of influencers' ability to spread awareness, to sell their products and services. All involved parties - influencers, brands, and followers - create a triangle and can benefit but also suffer from each other. Hence, careful consideration before accepting a collaboration is a crucial aspect to find suitable partners that lead to success. Both, brand as well as endorser, must share similar values and matching characteristics to be seen as reliable by potential customers. Previous researchers concluded that influencers' secret to success is connected to perceived honesty and trustworthiness, as they try to attract their followers on a more personal level compared to traditional marketing tools. This thesis, therefore, aims to answer whether travel influencers are perceived more/less trustworthy when they are collaborating with many different destinations. Additionally, it is intended to identify the impact of expertise on the level of trustworthiness of travel influencers.

By using a laboratory experiment it was possible to explore the role of three important constructs of this thesis (trustworthiness, expertise, and attitude), to test all hypotheses and answer the research questions. According to the outcomes, there are strong correlations between expertise and trustworthiness as well as attitude, trust, and booking intention. However, followers perceive travel influencers as more trustworthy if they promote destinations from different regions (e.g. Rome and New York) instead of focusing on one region. Hence, a variety of well-selected cooperation partners can lead to a higher level of trust among followers, as travel influencers seem to be more experienced and expertise.

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## 1. Introduction

Ever since humans exist, people have been influenced by others, including family and friends, well-known and strange people as well as celebrities, which increased in the last decade through the rising importance of media (Gretzel, 2018). Frequently, the social media industry tried to use this information and invented influencers as marketing instruments (Gretzel, 2018). Social media influencers are able to affect people's opinion, by giving advice compared with offering entertainment (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). Besides sharing information, knowledge, and feelings, influencers are mostly collaborating with different companies, in order to distribute their products and services (Gretzel, 2018). Compared to other marketing tools, influencer marketing offers new and unique opportunities to a brand image (Jilkova, 2019). This can be explained by the reason, that influencers seem to be more trustworthy, as they behave as "friends" (Stoldt et. al., 2019). The exact explanation for this phenomenon will be discussed in the following chapters of this thesis.

After seeing the success of social media marketing with influencers in different areas, also the tourism industry decided to distribute their advertisement content on platforms such as Instagram (Chryssoula, 2017). Destinations and tourism suppliers have a new opportunity to promote themselves, as tourists have an easier way of finding new places and information about them, then some years ago (Parsons, 2017). Statistics showed that nowadays online blogs became one of the most important sources during the decision-making process of ongoing travelers, as they want to get some impressions, suggestions and helpful information about the destinations they are interested in (Gretzel, 2018). However, influencers tend to collaborate with many different companies and this research paper claims that this has an effect on the trustworthiness of their audience. This research will give deeper insights into influencer marketing and its strategies. Furthermore, the use of influencer marketing and the current trends in the tourism industry will be analyzed. The two research questions asked in this thesis are:

*Q1: How do collaborations with many different destinations influence the perceived trustworthiness of travel influencers?*

*Q2: How does expertise influence the trustworthiness of travel influencers?*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definitions of Influencer Marketing

For the last decades, Influencer Marketing developed and has been part of some people's everyday lives. Before focusing on influencers as a marketing strategy, it is necessary to provide a common understanding about the term influencers (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). In general, an influencer is a person who impacts someone's opinion (= opinion leader) (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). Influencers can be persons of one's acquaintance, such as friends and family, or strangers, such as celebrities (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). This thesis deals with opinion leaders on social media platforms. Influencers can affect people's opinions, by giving advice combined with offering entertainment, which helps companies to spread awareness about their products and services (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). Social media users do not see influencers as a marketing strategy but rather as an information source (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). Influencer marketing can be seen as a hybrid of old and new marketing strategies, as it combines traditional celebrity endorsement with modern content-oriented marketing (Gilbert, Childers & Boatwright, 2020). There are different definitions of influencer marketing (Tapinfluence, 2017). According to the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, influencer marketing focuses on identifying target groups and then finding suitable opinion leaders (Tapinfluence, 2017). Those opinion leaders can only be seen as suitable if they succeed in their mission, which is influencing the buying decisions of their followers, by mentioning products of cooperation partners (Tapinfluence, 2017). This describes the main intention of today's Influencer Marketing well, but it is not the only definition (Tapinfluence, 2017). Influencer Marketing can also be seen as a strategy conducted on social media which uses people with a certain range of followers to spread awareness of brands to the larger market (Tapinfluence, 2017). The mentioned influencers have collaborations with different companies and get products, cash, or both in return from the company (Tapinfluence, 2017).

### 2.1.1. Different Types of Influencers

Influencers can be divided into six different groups, which refer to their range, cooperation partners, and other variables:

#### 1. The Mega-Influencer

The word mega relies on the number of followers and fans the influencer has (Brown, 2019). Mega Influencers are the ones with the widest range (Brown, 2019). Kylie Jenner, who has about 140 million followers on Instagram, is seen as a Mega Influencer (Brown, 2019). Companies which decide to collaborate with Mega Influencers are typically successful and large enterprises with a high budget (Ho, 2020). Although Mega Influencers are the most expensive group, they are not necessarily very effective, as they are more seen as celebrities and therefore, generate just low engagement among customers (Ho, 2020).

#### 2. The Macro-Influencer

The following group is Macro-Influencers, which normally entertain between 100,000 and 1 million followers (Brown, 2019). They mostly are YouTubers, podcasters, or bloggers (Brown, 2019). Macro-Influencers can be perfectly used for spreading awareness for brands as they reach many different people (Ho, 2020). However, this diverse audience is not likely to actually buy promoted products (Ho, 2020).

#### 3. The Micro- and Nano-Influencer

The last group related to the range of followers are Micro- and Nano-Influencers, whose audience size lays between 1,000 and 100,000 followers (Brown, 2019). Even though they reach the lowest amount of people, they are the most successful ones in terms of marketing, as they are seen as more trustworthy (Brown, 2019). This can be explained by the fact that the followers of smaller influencers are normally targeted (Ho, 2020). Additionally, Micro- and Nano-Influencers are seen as experts in their chosen field (Ho, 2020). Due to that knowledge and expertise they are seen as a reliable source, which helps them to build a loyal and trusting community (Ho, 2020).

#### 4. The Advocate

The Advocate Influencers mainly consist of Micro-Influencers (Brown, 2019). They spread awareness of brands through word-of-mouth marketing and help to build brand visibility (Nane, 2020). These people can be identified by the fact that they only speak positively about products (Brown, 2019).



## 5. The Referrer

Referrer-Influencers normally focus on one brand they are cooperating with (Brown, 2019). They also only give qualitative recommendations to their followers, which leads to the fact that they are the most trusted influencers (Brown, 2019). One of the most important characteristic of referrals is knowledge and expertise in their niche (Nane, 2020).

## 6. The Loyalist

Influencers, who supported companies from the very beginning, are called Loyalists (Brown, 2019). Loyalists support brands in good as well as bad times, by sharing brand awareness (Nane, 2020).

Furthermore, influencers can also be divided into different groups according to their main topics on social media accounts (Kim et.al., 2020). The eight major influencer categories are: fashion, beauty, fitness, family, pet, food, interior, and travel (Kim et.al., 2020). The benefit of segmenting influencers into niches might ease the process of reaching the desired target market (Troesch, 2020). Fashion influencers are mainly active on Instagram and YouTube and/or have their own blogs (Troesch, 2020). Their main characteristic is showing of the newest fashion trends, by collaborating with clothing brands and retailers (Troesch, 2020). Related to fashion influencers are beauty influencers, whose main platforms are also Instagram and YouTube (Troesch, 2020). Beauty influencers are famous for showing their followers hacks and makeup techniques in form of tutorials (Troesch, 2020). Fitness influencers are known for providing workout videos and sharing their diets with their followers (Troesch, 2020). On the accounts of pet and family influencers not the profile owners are the stars but rather their pets and children (Loran, 2020). Those types of influencers are likely to share cute pictures and everyday stories (Loran, 2020). Also, food influencers are not trying to be the center of attention (Product Lead, 2019). They collaborate with local restaurants, by writing recommendations compared with posting delicious photos on Instagram (Alexandrov, 2019). Influencers who are specified on interior are mainly professional or hobby interior designers who love to share inspiration on their social media channels (Flaunter, 2017). The last group consists of passionate travelers. Travel influencers have the possibility to discover the world and collaborating with tourism products, such as hotels and airlines (Stainton, 2020). In return to enjoying several tourist services, they share their experience on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok or their own blogs (Stainton, 2020). This thesis will focus on influencers operating in the tourism industry.

### **2.1.2. Benefits of influencer Marketing**

Compared to other marketing tools, influencer marketing offers new and unique opportunities to brand image development (Jilkova, 2019). A study showed that the majority of brands (80%) uses influencer marketing already and 89% think that the investment in influencer marketing is the same or even better compared to other tools, as influencer marketing produced higher returns (Nazare, 2019). More than half of these companies are planning to increase their budget on influencer marketing (Nazare, 2019). Especially, brands with new innovations, which do not have certain popularity yet, can benefit from influencer marketing (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020) First of all, marketing through influencers and bloggers is seen as more trustworthy than other practices (Jilkova, 2019). In fact, 92% of consumers trust influencers more than the brand they are advertising (Nazare, 2019). Customers experience influencers as more loyal compared to for example TV spots, as they feel to be advised in unique ways (Jilkova, 2019). Additionally, they do not see influencers as advertisement, but rather as friends who share their recommendations and opinions of products (Jilkova, 2019). However, this is only correct if the customers have a positive attitude towards the influencing brand (Jilkova, 2019).

Moreover, influencers, depending on their number of followers, have a high social reach, as they reach up to millions of people every day with their posts (Papp-Vary, Szolnoki & Beres, 2020). In general, people only follow other social media users if they are interested in the content communicated on the account, which makes it much easier to reach the target market (Nazare, 2019). This leads to a faster purchase action as the decision-making process can be shortened (Nazare, 2019). Furthermore, influencer marketing offers potential customers easy and direct access to the company's website, which also contributes to a fast and unproblematic purchase experience as well as an increase in brand awareness (Nazare, 2019). Another positive aspect of influencer marketing is the possibility of two-way communication (Glucksman, 2017). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, allow followers and potential customers to share their opinion through the comment function and direct messages (Glucksman, 2017). Influencers can react and respond to their followers, which offers the marketing strategy a new dimension and provides personal advice as well as suggestions about products and services (Glucksman, 2017). This personal communication can create a special feeling by getting recognition, which therefore might convince the followers to buy the promoted product (Glucksman, 2017). Furthermore, research showed that customers

whose purchase activity was affected by influencer marketing, tend to buy more products (Nielsen & Tapinfluence, 2016). This can be explained by the fact that customers can choose advertisement on social media more actively as they decide whom they want to follow (Nielsen & Tapinfluence, 2016). In comparison, regular online marketing, such as Google Ads, is often not even noticed by potential customers, as people go to websites for different reasons (Nielsen & Tapinfluence, 2016). Another benefit of influencer marketing is that the followers receive more information about products, as they are normally better explained, compared to traditional marketing, like for example TV spots (Berger & The Keller Fay Group, 2016). This makes influencers more credible and believable (Berger & The Keller Fay Group, 2016), which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.3.

### **2.1.3. Challenges of Influencer Marketing**

Despite the numerous benefits, there are also downsides to influencer marketing (Larsen, 2008). Influencers often have the opportunity to visit the most beautiful destinations, live in the most expensive accommodations, and make the most special activities, and while they are doing that, they are earning extra money (Larsen, 2008). All this does not appeal to ordinary tourists and therefore possibly not attract many people as their budget is not sufficient to enjoy a similar voyage as demonstrated on Instagram (Larsen, 2008). In addition, as already mentioned, influencer marketing is a rising marketing strategy, which will lead to an increase in costs (Nazare, 2019). This can be explained by the fact, that in the near future, almost all companies will switch to social media marketing, and therefore, deals with influencers need to be more attractive (Nazare, 2019). Besides that, as competitiveness will rise, marketers will be forced to develop strong creative and unique strategies in order to stand out (Nazare, 2019). Trends will change constantly which requires to stay up to date if the goal is to be relevant among other brands (Nazare, 2019). As the whole brand image lays in the hand of the influencers, companies need to select them carefully by assuring to find influencers with sharing the same ideas and objectives (Nazare, 2019). This will create brand safety and avoid risking the company's image (Nazare, 2019).

Another common problem of social media marketing is follower fraud, in form of fake followers (Anand & Mukherjee, 2018). Since the demand for influencers is higher than ever before, some people decide to buy followers with a specific application, to become attractive to companies (Nazare, 2019). When looking for potential influencers, brands, therefore, need to consider persons carefully in order to spot fake followers (Nazare, 2019). Follower fraud

can be avoided by analyzing the influencer’s account in detail, by comparing the number of likes and comments per picture with number of followers (Anand & Mukherjee, 2018) .

### 2.1.4. Content Creation

In general, influencers impact the appearance of brands by writing blog posts, provide information on their own social media platforms, and/or write reviews on the company’s website (Ranga & Sharma, 2014). An important aspect of being a successful influencer is to be confident in oneself, in order to have the possibility to work with brands and earn money through product placements (Glucksman, 2017). For companies, it is important that their representatives transfer a feeling of confidence to their followers, as it also affects the brand’s image (Glucksman, 2017). In order to get a certain range of followers, content creation plays a major role (Talkwalker, 2018).

#### 2.1.4.1. Hybrid Textuality, Post Captions and Comments

To create certain feelings, influencers normally use a form of hybrid textuality, which is in other words a combination of visual as well as verbal elements (Borelli, 2017). Typical Instagram posts are the perfect example of hybrid textuality (Borelli, 2017). Instagram is famous for offering the possibility of sharing primarily photos but also videos with one’s followers, which is, in other words, visual content (Borelli, 2017). The verbal content already starts with a little description of oneself in the biography of social media accounts (Kim et.al., 2020). The main topics of the account must be clearly communicated, as it creates the first impression and represents the influencer (Kim et.al., 2020). Figure 1 demonstrates an example of an informative biography of an Instagram user.



Figure 1: Example for informative biography of an Instagram user

Below posted photos users can normally also find a short description, a little quote, recommendations, or just random questions (Borelli, 2017). Especially the latter one plays a

major role in successful influencers (Bijen, 2017). These questions generate engagement and courage followers to write comments instead of just passively occupying one's daily Instagram feed (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017). To be perceived as a good influencer it is necessary to interact with one's community in form of dialogs, which can be used for information exchange (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017).

Furthermore, comments which share the opinion of a follower are beneficial for social media influencers (Bijen, 2017). Especially positive comments help increasing one's follower range, as it can be seen as e-WOM (electronic world-of-mouth) Marketing for influencers (Bijen, 2017). Moreover, a study showed, that comments can also lead to a higher booking intention, as the influencer seems to be liked and trusted (Bijen, 2017). Besides that, also negative comments, which can be seen as positive criticism can help influencers to improve (Bijen, 2017). Nevertheless, in general, negative comments have a negative effect on followers' impressions, as influencers seem less trustworthy (Bijen, 2017). The follower's attitude towards the booking intention and brand trust can suffer under negative comments (Bijen, 2017). Normally, it can be said that people tend to be most influenced by the opinion with the majority of supporters, but in the social media industry, this is not the case (Bijen, 2017). In fact, researchers found out, that negative comments are more dominant compared to positive ones (Bijen, 2017). This means that negative opinions are more influential when it comes to the decision-making process, as the riskiness of buying a product appears to be higher (Bijen, 2017).

#### 2.1.4.2. *Photos vs. Videos*

Besides two-way communication, like comments, there are also other factors an influencer has to fulfill in order to be successful (Tam Sing, 2020). As mentioned above, social media users can share photographs as well as videos on most platforms (Tam Sing, 2020). However, a conducted survey came to the result, that people prefer to look at photos on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook and rather watch videos on YouTube (Tam Sing, 2020). The captions below the posts are most interesting to the majority if they include important information or recommendations (Tam Sing, 2020). It is not possible to generalize the type of photos, as opinions differ, and everyone has a different taste (Tam Sing, 2020). Some people say they prefer pictures of food or landscapes whereas others adore selfies and outfit photos (Tam Sing, 2020). This also refers to the overall aesthetic of the influencer's profiles: some users love to

look at a colorful variety of pictures while to others' Instagram pages with a clear color scheme appeal most to (Tam Sing, 2020). Figure 2 demonstrates two different Instagram feeds.

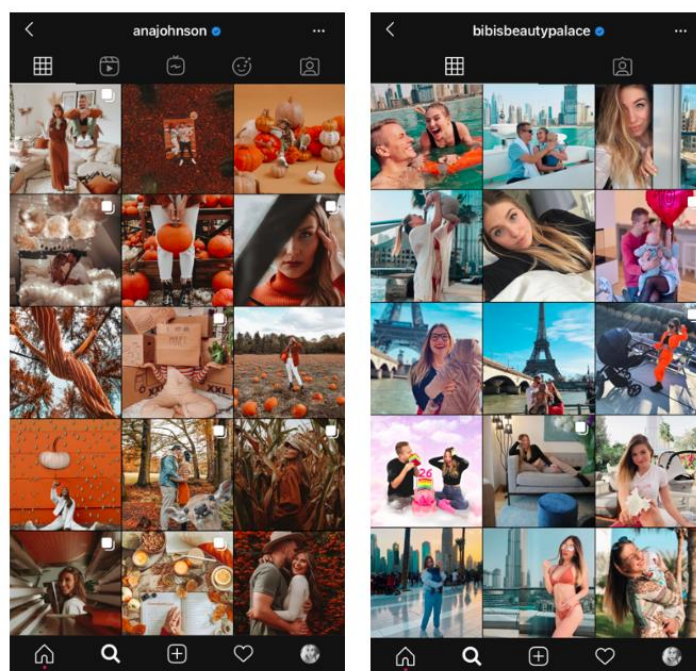


Figure 2: Comparison between Instagram page with one color scheme and colorful Instagram page

## 2.2. Influencer Marketing in the Tourism Industry

While influencers were mainly used in the beauty industry, also the tourism industry has started to cooperate with influencers (Parsons, 2017). Destinations and tourism suppliers have today a new opportunity to promote themselves, as the way of finding new places and information facilitated for tourists (Parsons, 2017). Social media in the tourism industry are used in different sectors, such as activities (e.g. museums), destination images, tourism services (e.g. airlines), and general travel information (Chryssoul, 2017). There are already many examples of companies, such as airlines, using influencers to get a larger audience and attract new target groups (Shuqair et al., 2017). It was found out that social media is the most effective source of providing useful information for tourists (Gretzel, 2018).

Social media has become the new universal media source for younger generations (Shuqair et al., 2017). Whereas newspapers are still existing and used by many people, millennials take most of their needed information from the internet (Shuqair et al., 2017). Also older generations are starting to use online platforms as their main information source when it comes to traveling (Shuqair et al., 2017). While millennials prefer to use Instagram, older generations tend to be the main readers of posts on interactive travel websites, such as TripAdvisor (Shuqair et al., 2017). This leads to the assumption that electronic word of mouth impacts travel decisions for



almost all generations (Shuqair et al., 2017). In general, surveys showed that websites with reviews on travel products and services gained more interest than professional travel guides and agencies, as reviews seem to be real opinions of former travelers and therefore are more credible (Akehurst, 2008). A study of PhoCusWright, for example, confirms the success of influencer marketing in the tourism industry, as it showed that 80% of (leisure) traveler's booking decision is influenced by social media and other user generated content (Lalangan, 2020). 40% of people with the willingness to travel got their inspiration from social media and say that influencers are a useful travel research tool during the decision-making process (Lalangan, 2020).

### **2.2.1. Benefits of Social Media for Travel Enterprises**

Social media offers travel enterprises two major beneficial opportunities: to understand and identify their target groups as well as offering extra and personal advice to interested travelers (Parsons, 2017). Social media allows travel companies to easily find out who their potential customers are and what the current trends are, by analyzing comments, likes, and abonnements of social media users (Parsons, 2017). Furthermore, they can directly answer open questions of tourists, which likely leads to customer loyalty as they perceive to be well treated (Parsons, 2017). These two procedures can tourist companies either do on their own by creating an official social media account or with the help of influencers (Parsons, 2017). Influencers already have a certain number of followers, which is advantageous to spread awareness about brands (Parsons, 2017). Especially millennials can be perfectly reached by influencers (Parsons, 2017). Besides identifying their target groups, destinations can also use social media as a research source, for easily analyzing the marketing strategies of competitors (Akehurst, 2008). Another benefit of influencer marketing for tourism companies is the price, as it is assumed to be cheaper than regular advertisement (Akehurst, 2008).

Tourism products are intangible, which means it is not an option to try the product, and if it is not the right choice, to return it (Lalangan, 2020). Therefore, planning a trip can be defined as risky and requires normally longer consideration and trust (Lalangan, 2020). Since personal resources of reviews and recommendations are seen as more credible than a traditional advertisement, influencers can be very successful in the tourism industry, which automatically also leads to more success of the advertising travel companies (Lalangan, 2020). A study showed that customers perceive social media sides of tourism products trustworthy if it includes personal recommendations for influencers (Lalangan, 2020).

### **2.2.2. Influencer Marketing compared with Traditional Marketing Tools**

In the last few years, influencer marketing started replacing traditional marketing tools, such as TV and radio commercials as well as journalistic articles (Stoldt et.al., 2019). The main argument of that phenomenon is that influencers are more trustworthy and therefore, more successful (Stoldt et.al., 2019).

Today's society, apparently, identifies a difference between travel influencers and travel journalists, as the latter one lost credibility (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Journalists, who are supposed to write an article about a certain destination, are generally invited by the local DMO to spend some days at the destination (Stoldt et.al., 2019). A cooperation with an influencer can include the same preconditions, but the majority of trips done by an influencer are private (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Normally, influencers try to get their own impression of the destination, by exploring it as real tourists, whereas journalists are guided through the whole trip by the local organization (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Influencers are more flexible during a trip while journalists have to stick to a certain program (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Therefore, content produced by influencers seems to be more natural for viewers as they also have to plan their activities without the help of a local (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Furthermore, being a journalist is a world-wide recognized job, which means that everyone who reads an article knows that it's author got paid for writing it (Stoldt et.al., 2019). This may result in the perception, that the destination only got a positive review because someone offers money in exchange (Stoldt et.al., 2019).

On the other hand, influencing is not fully accepted as a job and is more seen as a hobby, which lets recommendations appear more truthful (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Furthermore, influencers can have direct communication with their followers, through comments or direct messages, which gives the marketing strategy a personal aspect (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Many people see influencers as a kind of friend, whereas journalists are just information producers (Stoldt et.al., 2019). Summarized it can be said that influencers appear, due to certain facts, much more trustworthy than other marketing tools (Stoldt et.al., 2019).



### 2.2.3. The Intention to Travel and the Travel Journey

Also, the intention to travel affects the likelihood of being influenced by social media personalities (Suciati et al., 2018). Generally, the intention to travel means to have the desire to visit a destination in the near future. However, there are different reasons for traveling to another country, for example, business, leisure, and religious traveling (Suciati et al., 2018). All three have the common factor to visit a destination but the intention differs (Suciati et al., 2018). Business travelers will not be influenced by social media as they normally cannot choose the places they are visiting (Suciati et al., 2018). Similar to that are people who travel due to religious reasons (Suciati et al., 2018). In contrast, leisure travelers can freely choose where they want to go and be therefore the target group of influencer marketing (Suciati et al., 2018).

If someone has the intention and the motivation to travel, the travel journey, consisting of five different phases, begins (Justianto & Morley, 2020). The start of the journey is the so-called “*pre-trip*” (Lalangan, 2020). This phase includes everything between having the idea of taking a trip and making the final decision of booking a trip (Lalangan, 2020). The “*pre-trip*” can be again divided into three different stages: information search, comparative evaluation, and purchase (Guerreiro, Viegas & Guerreiro, 2019). Especially, when the information search occurs, influencers can have a major impact on getting inspiration and then finding further information about destinations that appeal to one’s personal preferences (Guerreiro, Viegas & Guerreiro, 2019). Potential travelers can easily find information, by looking for people who shared their experiences and opinions online (e.g. travel influencers) (Lalangan, 2020). The amount of time-consuming social media will increase, as the analysis of the influencer’s content needs to be done carefully, in order to imagine oneself at certain destinations (Justianto & Morley, 2020). However, also the second stage (comparative evaluation) of the consumer decision-making process is influenced by internet personalities (Guerreiro, Viegas & Guerreiro, 2019). At this moment, the ongoing travelers will try to find advantages and disadvantages of the most interesting destinations, in order to make a decision (Guerreiro, Viegas & Guerreiro, 2019). Again, influencers might be used as a research tool for further information, if they appear credible and truthful (Guerreiro, Viegas & Guerreiro, 2019). The purchase stage happens after gaining sufficient information and being fully convinced and confident about the selected destination (Guerreiro, Viegas & Guerreiro, 2019).

After taking the purchase action, the “*travel to site*” phase starts, which describes the transportation to the destination (Lalangan, 2020). With the moment of arriving at the

accommodation, the “*on-site activities*” phase begins and includes also all activities done during the trip (Lalangan, 2020).

Similar to the second phase is the “*return trip*”, as it describes the way back home (Lalangan, 2020). Although, the travelers already made the decision of the destination, accommodation, ..., influencers can still be used as a research tool during the trip, in order to find, for example, specific places, activities, or restaurants (Lalangan, 2020).

The last step of a trip is the “*post-trip*” (Lalangan, 2020). This includes the reflection of the total experience (Lalangan, 2020). In this phase social media does not impact the traveler anymore but rather tourism products and future tourists, as travelers are likely to share their opinion online after a trip (Kheiri & Nasihatkon, 2015). In order to receive positive feedback, it is important that the last phase results in the overall satisfaction of the traveler (Lalangan, 2020). However, the overall satisfaction consists not only of deriving pleasure from a destination and its culture as well as good tourism services (e.g. hotel and flight) but also of influencer’s shared content (Lalangan, 2020). If the presentation of the destination on the influencer’s profile was not similar to the traveler’s experience, satisfaction will probably not be generated and will lead to a bad reputation for the trip (Lalangan, 2020). Therefore, qualitative influencer marketing content is crucial in order to receive (e-)WOM marketing and profit from travelers (Lalangan, 2020).

Summarized, it can be said that influencer marketing has the highest impacts during the pre-trip, as it facilitates the decision-making process for the traveler, and the post-trip, which mainly acts as a review phase and therefore, possibly builds the opinion of future tourists (Kheire & Nasihatkon, 2015).

#### 2.2.4. Influence on Destination's Image

Influencer marketing is now a days a common marketing strategy and basically consists of reviews and recommendations (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). In particular, the possibility of sharing one's opinion can change a destination's image either positively or negatively (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). If an influencer with, for example, over 100 thousand followers post a picture of a destination with a positive reputation as a caption, the destination will automatically get the recognition of a lot of people (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). Besides the recognition, the destination's image will most likely improve for most of the followers, as they can see a beautiful location, a happy influencer, and some positive feedback (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). Figure 3 demonstrates a post which influences a brand image.



Figure 3: Example for an Instagram post which influences a destination's image

In the caption she says: “This must be the place” and on top of the picture the destination's name is mentioned (Instagram, 2020). Although the followers cannot be sure, if the water is really that blue in real life or if the influencer just demonstrated her photoshop skills, the majority of viewers is probably impressed and has a very positive perception of Mexico (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020).

However, it is a fact that humans are rather skeptical towards unknown people, depending on the level of risk they take by trusting them (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). Therefore, negative feedback might have a greater effect than positive recommendations on the destination's images (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). Due to that reason, influencers need to be very careful when

promoting a destination, as every little detail can be decisive for the viewer's perception (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020). Figure 4 gives an example of a misleading Instagram post.



*Figure 4: Example for a misleading Instagram post*

Even though the main message of the picture's caption is very flattering for the destination, the influencer makes the mistake to complain about the mosquitos, which are apparently very unwelcome (Instagram, 2020). If the post was supposed to promote the Cenotes, it would have been better to leave it at the positive words. However, if the photo should just create content for her followers, it could be beneficial to share an honest opinion, as she will be seen as more trustworthy.

## 2.2.5. Implementing Influencer Marketing in Destination Management

### Organizations

As discussed in the previous section, influencers offer a great opportunity to promote destinations. Also, DMOs started seeing the potential of marketing via social media personalities and are using it ever since then (Kantamaa, 2020). In 2015 the majority began to develop collaborations with influencers more strategically, in order to reach a higher scale (Kantamaa, 2020). Nowadays, influencer marketing is fully adapted into most DMO's and sometimes even completely replaced traditional marketing tools, such as TV spots (Kantamaa, 2020). The main benefits of influencer marketing are (Glucksman, 2017):

- **Increasing awareness**  
Especially, destinations that are rather unknown can benefit from influencers as they already have a certain range in the form of followers.
- **Strengthening tourism brands**  
Local tourism brands, such as airlines or hotels, can be pushed and supported by getting recognized via social media.
- **Increasing e-WOM**  
People, who get influenced on social media, are also more likely to share content on their own accounts, which would automatically increase the e-WOM.
- **Reaching new target groups**  
Other than traditional marketing tools, influencer marketing mainly attracts younger generations.

It is not possible to generalize the main objective of DMOs when it comes to influencer marketing, as the objective strongly varies (Kantamaa, 2020). There are countries that want to use their social media reach to point out the importance of sustainability as well as to highlight local sustainable lifestyles (Kantamaa, 2020). Some of them even want to avoid over-tourism by sharing their values (Kantamaa, 2020). Furthermore, social media are often used by DMOs to update information, such as new regulations and policies (Jucan, Jucan & Rotariu, 2013). Additionally, online platforms offer DMOs the possibility to be transparent, by sharing future campaigns and ideas (Jucan, Jucan & Rotariu, 2013). Other destinations try to engage local citizens, rather than foreign, tourists to visit the unknown places of their home countries (Kantamaa, 2020). However, especially unpopular places, want to use influencers, in order to demonstrate to people the beauty of their destinations and to increase their visits (Kantamaa, 2020). DMO's are supposed to use influencers not only to promote the destination as a whole,

but also partner tourism companies, such as national airlines or hotels (Jucan, Jucan & Rotariu, 2013).

The type of collaboration, however, varies among the organizations (Kantamaa, 2020). Some DMO's invited foreign influencers on trips, to promote the cultural and natural resources of the region, whereas other DMOs worked with influencers only to highlight specific events of the destination (Kantamaa, 2020). There are also DMOs, which only collaborate with domestic influencers, to establish social media profiles and build up their online appearances (Kantamaa, 2020). Some organizations said that they do not have an optimal strategy yet, but still perceive influencers as a strong marketing tool (Kantamaa, 2020).

According to DMO's research, the best way to promote destinations with influencers is by letting them share visual content, in the form of photography and videography (Parsons, 2017). It is scientifically proven that images are required to convince potential customers, as it is easier to imagine the destination (Parsons, 2017). This also explains the fact that tourists find travel content most attractive on Instagram (Parsons, 2017). Instagram offers the opportunity to share pictures and videos as well as quick snapshots for 24 hours with the story function (Parsons, 2017). About 47% of Instagram users got at least one time influenced by their friends and/or professional influencers to visit a destination, which definitely speaks to the potential for influencer marketing in the tourism industry (Parsons, 2017). However, pictures on Instagram might not be the most reliable source, as users tend to post only representative content (Parsons, 2017).

When it comes to choosing influencers, DMOs often try to find travel influencers, whose social media content consists mainly of travel and culture content (Cavagnaro, Staffieri & Postma, 2018). With their topics, they normally want to inspire other people to visit certain destinations, which is a good condition for collaborating with marketers (Cavagnaro, Staffieri & Postma, 2018). Furthermore, compared to lifestyle influencers who like to share various themes on their platforms, travel influencers appear to have more expertise which is crucial for credibility, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

## 2.3. Trustworthiness and Credibility of Influencers

### 2.3.1. Definition of Credibility

In general, credibility is an important aspect of marketing (Rubin & Liddy, 2006). It means that the transferred information is believable, which can be created through two factors: trustworthiness and expertise (Rubin & Liddy, 2006). Trustworthiness is related to morality and should be well-intentioned, objective, and truthful (Rubin & Liddy, 2006). Characteristic of trustworthiness are: integrity, believability and honesty (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020).

In order to be seen as trustworthy trust is a crucial component (Metzger et al., 2003). Trust can be defined as relying on another in a risky situation or during a decision-making process which is also combined with risk (Metzger et al., 2003). Trusting people means being confident and having positive expectations about their motives (Metzger et al., 2003). The trust process consist of three stages: mental state of trust, intention of trust, and act of trusting (Muller, Vercouter & Boissier, 2019). If someone overcomes the mental state of trust, which means having a first feeling to trust in someone else, the intention to trust starts (Muller, Vercouter & Boissier, 2019). However, due to uncontrollable reasons, such as emotions, it is possible that the trust chain is interrupted and therefore, the actual act of trusting will not happen (Muller, Vercouter & Boissier, 2019). In order to avoid complications during the trust process, building trustworthiness is crucial (Muller, Vercouter & Boissier, 2019). If influencers generate trustworthiness their overall performance will improve, as followers are more likely to listen to influencers' advices and recommendations. This leads to the following hypothesis:

***H1: Higher trust and attitude towards an influencer lead to an increase in booking intention.***

Expertise (the second component of credibility) mainly consists of knowledge (Rubin & Liddy, 2006). However, skills and experience also contribute to generating expertise (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020). The expertise of an influencer equals the perceived level of knowledge, skills, and experience to promote a product or service (Abdullah et al., 2020). Influencers often appeal to have more expertise, because they promote products/services by actively using or consuming them in a natural setup (Abdullah et al., 2020). Compared to created spokespersons, such as actors, influencers seem to have more experience with the promoted brand, because their advertisements tend to be well-integrated into their daily routine (Abdullah et al., 2020). Followers, therefore, perceive influencers as convinced consumers of



a product/service, that want to share their experiences and recommendations (Abdullah et al., 2020).

Trustworthiness and expertise might also be correlated. People are more trusted if they have evidence or enough knowledge to judge something (Javits, 2019). For instance, a person who is sick believes a doctor, even if he/she is unknown, rather than a random person, because he has a lot of expertise and knowledge in the field of medicine (Javits, 2019). This also refers to influencer marketing, as customers have more trust in someone if they are “specialists” of the field of product, which they are promoting (Javits, 2019). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H2: Travel influencers are trustworthy because of their expertise and knowledge.*

### **2.3.2. Credibility as a Success Factor for Influencer Marketing**

For influencers the self-generated image (social media profiles) and the communicated content is essential to build credibility (Rubin & Liddy, 2006). The main reason why influencer marketing is so successful, even though it contains sponsored content and aims at generating more sales, is because of consumer’s trust, which is probably the most important factor of this marketing strategy (Goldsmith, Lafferty & Newell, 2000). Credibility is not only important for the growth of the influencers themselves but also the effectiveness of the promotion of a product/service (Abidin & Ots, 2015). Research showed that costumer’s perceptions towards brand images are definitely influenced by the credibility of the advertising source (Lim et al., 2017). In other words, if consumers perceive influencers as unreliable collaborating companies will automatically lose credibility (Lim et al., 2017). Therefore, companies need to select influencers carefully by focusing on trustworthy personalities in order to retain or even improve the brand image (Lim et al., 2017). As mentioned before, it is crucial to be honest with one’s followers, by providing complete, unbiased, and appropriate information about products (Rubin & Liddy, 2006). Furthermore, credibility is also be based on intimacy as influencers are known for sharing private moments and personal thoughts (Lim et al., 2017). Credibility can be generated through certain factors which will be discussed in the following chapters.



### 2.3.2.1. *Content of Influencer's Social Media Platform*

Social media users are interested in creative and unique content, but also in “real” humans. It is important to offer followers the possibility to identify with the influencer, which can be reached by showing parts of the private life and demonstrating a mix of positive but also negative moments of one's daily life (Talkwalker, 2018). Therefore, the content and its mission are important (Tam Sing, 2020). In a survey, most people said they follow people who offer entertainment and have a similar sense of humor (Tam Sing, 2020). It is important to not only show one's professional side, that tries to convince people to buy certain products and services, but also the actual private personality, that shares funny moments (Tam Sing, 2020). Especially the story function on Instagram, which allows people to share small snippets with one's audience, is the perfect tool to give an insight into the everyday life (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017). If the parts of the backstage life align with the personality on the rest of the profile, it may contribute to a natural and authentic appearance (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017). This, in return, generates trust and therefore leads to being seen as credible among one's followers (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017).

In addition, an uncontrollable but still important factor is sharing similar interests with one's followers (Tam Sing, 2020). Social media users only follow influencers if they are interested in the same topics (Tam Sing, 2020). Similarity refers to the fact, that people are more likely to believe information of influencers if they share similar demographic and ideological factors, as it is easier to identify with them (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This corresponds to the target group of influencers (millennials), as most of the influencers themselves are normally between 15 and 30 years old (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Besides age, also gender seems to be important to some social media users, as women tend to follow female bloggers and men are more likely to follow male influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, this might be more related to shared interests than the ability to trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Someone who is not interested in beauty and fashion but rather in traveling will probably try to find a likable travel influencer for inspiration (Tam Sing, 2020). Furthermore, naturally, also attractiveness is important to receive credibility, as humans tend to believe information rather from liked persons than disliked ones (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

If the advertisement is supposed to be successful, sponsored content has to be properly integrated into the social media page (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017). For followers, paid cooperation should appear as natural as possible and, therefore, not obvious (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2017). Influencers that collaborate with many brands and advertise a lot of different

products/services are often seen as “fake” and dishonest (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). In such cases, influencers’ promotion of products/services seem to have different intentions than sharing authentic experiences and opinions, such as sponsorship (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Followers rather perceive the recommendations as biased, resulting in a decrease in the influencer’s trustworthiness (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Therefore, it can also be assumed that travel influencers whose content only consists of one region are more trustworthy than people promoting various destinations. This leads to the following hypothesis:

***H3: Travel influencers are perceived as more trustworthy when they are focusing on promoting one region (instead of many regions).***

#### 2.3.2.2. *Amount of Followers*

The number of followers might also affect the perception of influencers (Javits, 2019). Although influencers with a high number of followers may appear as the most successful, in terms of influencing people, as they have an impressive audience range, research showed that micro-influencers are more trusted (Javits, 2019). This can be explained by the fact that recommendations from influencers with smaller communities seem to be more private and real than bigger influencers who already reached the status of celebrities (Javits, 2019).

#### 2.3.2.3. *Importance of Brand Awareness*

In order to attract new target groups and improve the sales performance, marketing campaigns on social media platforms need to include as much information about the product or service as possible (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Nevertheless, the entertainment factor should not be forgotten as only theoretical facts will not attract customers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Therefore, influencer marketing offers a great opportunity to combine the necessary information with entertainment (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Mainly through online videos, followers are able to see practical applications of products and the use of services by influencers, who act to be regular consumers, on a regular basis (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This will provide on one hand informative and on the other hand enjoyable content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, if the influencers do not manage to share the right awareness of a brand, it can negatively affect the company's image (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In general, many people are still very skeptical about influencers, because they assume that they do not share their real opinion about products and services, but only give positive feedback in order to earn money (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This means that if a company starts using influencer marketing it could lose customers as they hold negative beliefs about influencers in general (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Therefore, traditional word-of-mouth marketing is perceived as the most trustworthy source (Akehurst, 2008).

### 3. Methodology

The main mission of this chapter is to answer the theoretically developed hypotheses by conducting an online experiment. This section is targeted to describe all different steps during the research process, such as developing and conducting the research, collecting and analyzing data as well as elaborating the findings and results.

#### 3.1. Research Design

There are different methods for collecting primary data (McLeod, 2019). The two most important forms are qualitative and quantitative research (McLeod, 2019). Qualitative research focuses on natural and unstructured data (McLeod, 2019). It is an empirical research method that does not deal with numerical but rather with open-ended data (McLeod, 2019). Typical examples of the qualitative approach are in-depth interviews, focus groups, and case study research (McLeod, 2019). In comparison, quantitative research gathers data in the form of numbers and puts them into different categories, units, or ranks (McLeod, 2019). For example, experiments, surveys, and questionnaires are likely to create quantitative data (McLeod, 2019). The major advantage of doing an online survey is the unlimited population access (Schmidt, 1997). Everyone who can use the internet can participate in internet surveys, which is beneficial for researchers, as higher audiences are more reliable and trustworthy (Schmidt, 1997). Different to other methods, online surveys are not very time consuming, as it is just necessary to create the questions and then evaluate the answers, but all steps between, such as the actual data collection, are done without required supervision (Schmidt, 1997). Another benefit of web surveys is the financial aspect because the costs are very low compared to our approaches (Schmidt, 1997). However, it is important to create a survey with interesting and interactive questions, to receive complete surveys (Schmidt, 1997). Also, the required time to fill out the questions is essential, as it should not exceed five minutes (Schmidt, 1997).

After identifying the target audience, it was decided to use the quantitative research method in order to collect data in this thesis. As the topic focuses on marketing via the internet, especially on social media platforms, an experiment was conducted. The questions include established scales to measure the focal constructs of this research, such as expertise, trustworthiness as well as attitude towards the influencer. As the target of this thesis is to find out whether influencers are more trustworthy when they promote destinations from one region, a one-factor between-subjects quasi-experimental design was chosen. This means that the participants of the survey are randomly allocated to two groups. About 50% of all respondents can see six

Instagram posts of destinations in Italy including Rome, Venice, Capri, Tuscany, Trentino as well as the Amalfi Coast (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Experiment Group one: Same Region

The other group were exposed to six different destinations: Paris, New York, Santorini, Iceland, Capri and the Maldives (Figure 6).

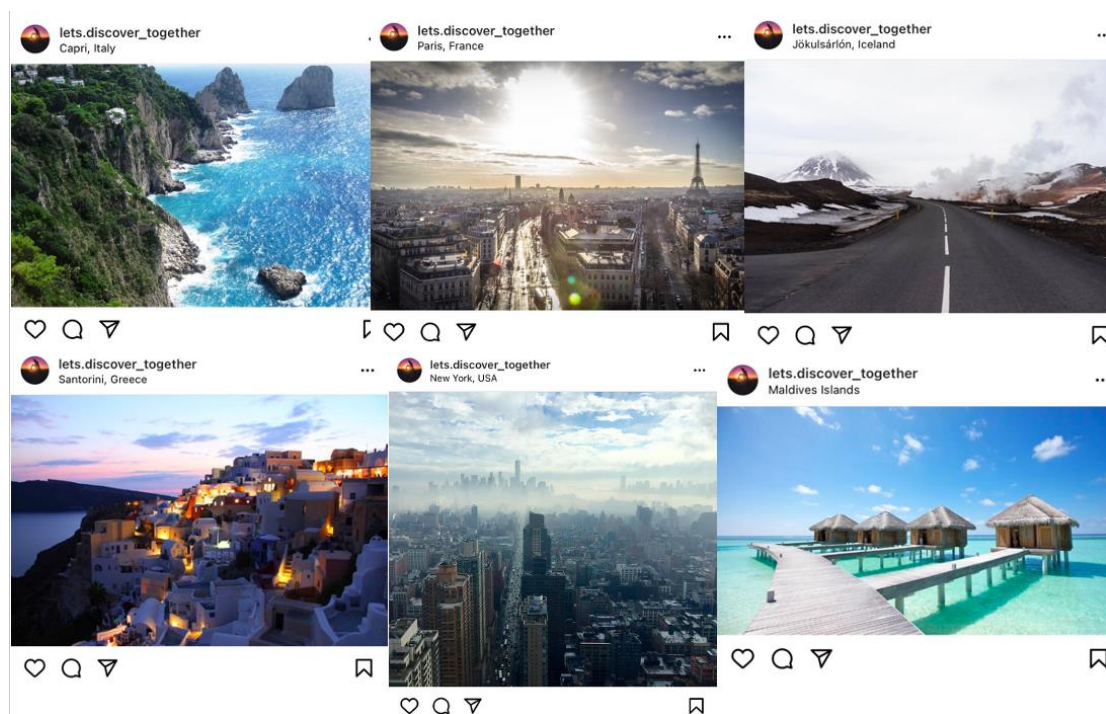


Figure 6: Experiment Group two: Different Regions



After the participants are assigned to one of the above mentioned groups, they need to review the pictures carefully (minimum 25 seconds) and form their opinion in order to being able to fill out the questionnaire.

The main purpose of this online survey was to analyze if the respondents were convinced to book a trip based on the before seen influencer-posts of either group 1 (same region) or group 2 (different regions). Based on this answer, the following questions were aimed to find out the motivation of the participants decisions. The respondents were asked to evaluate their perceptions about the influencer's trustworthiness, attitude as well as expertise in order to identify the importance of these characteristics. For all questions that described the respondent's perception towards the influencer, semantic differential scales were applied. In primary research, the use of semantic differential scales is the most reliable way to identify interviewees' emotional feeling, opinion, and attitude towards products, services, or any other kind of topic (Talikota, 2017). A major advantage of this type of scale is that it is easily understandable for respondents, which reduces the risk of errors caused by misunderstandings during the questionnaire (Talikota, 2017). Additionally, if the participants do not have an opinion about a certain topic, they are free to select the neutral answer point. This option adds more value to the survey as it allows respondents to be completely honest and sincere about their feelings.

In order to collect data successfully, all survey questions need to be chosen carefully and a target group has to be identified. The only criteria of participating in the questionnaire was to have access to WIFI, be regularly active on Instagram and follow at least one influencer. The fact that the survey was posted on various social media channels, such as Facebook groups or Instagram stories, facilitated the process of finding qualified participants. The target group therefore consists of mainly Millennials or Generation Z aged persons, as they are more likely to fulfill the requirements.

The survey was built up on Sosci Survey, which allows students to use the service of creating an online questionnaire for free. The main language of the survey was English, in order to reach a large range of international people. However, all questions were also translated into German, as the majority of participants was Austrian.

### **3.2. Procedure and Measurement**

Divided into different parts, the questionnaire consists of 13 questions. The participants were asked to review the stimulus, which contains six Instagram posts from the same influencer. Depending on the group they were either allocated to posts of destinations in the same region (e.g. Italy) or posts of destinations in different regions (e.g. Paris and New York), to evaluate the influencer afterward. During the second part of the survey, which is aimed to measure the study variables, the respondents rate their perception regarding the influencer's trustworthiness, expertise as well as attitude. All three variables were rated by using five seven-point semantic differential scales. The variables trustworthiness and expertise included items ranging from undependable to dependable, dishonest to honest, unreliable to reliable, insincere to sincere, untrustworthy to trustworthy, not an expert to expert, inexperienced to experienced, unknowledgeable to knowledgeable, unqualified to qualified and unskilled to skilled (Ohanian, 1990). Attitude could be measured by using scales ranging from unappealing to appealing, bad to good, unpleasant to pleasant, unfavorable to favorable, and unlikable to likable (Spears & Singh, 2004). Furthermore, the participants were asked how much they are likely to book a trip just based on the recommendation of the before seen influencer, to measure the booking intention by using a seven-point scale ranging from very unlikely to very likely.

To identify the target group (regular Instagram users), the respondents were asked if they have an Instagram account, which they use at least one time per week, and if they follow influencers. Using a Dichotomous scale, the control items were measured by letting the interviewees choose between two answer possibilities ("yes" and "no"). The last sector of the questionnaire was intended to identify demographic characteristics of the respondents, including age, gender and educational background. The online version of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix. The following chapter includes the interpretation of the completed survey.

### **3.3. Data Analysis and Results**

The collected data was analyzed by using the computer program SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to test the three hypotheses. Before proceeding to the main analysis and hypothesis testing, it is necessary to review the sample characteristics, such as age, gender, education and Instagram usage habits.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

<b>Sample characteristics</b>		<b>N = 103</b>
Age	Mean age	23
Gender	Women	72
	Men	29
	Prefer not to say	0
	Other	2
Education	High school	54
	University	37
	Vocational school	5
	Apprenticeship	2
	Compulsory schooling	5
Instagram Account	Yes	103
	No	0
Use Instagram regularly	Yes	102
	No	1
Follow Influencer(s)	Yes	84
	No	19

Table 1 visualizes the sample characteristics of the experiment. A total of 103 respondents completed the survey. As expected, mainly Millennials and generation z aged people filled out the questionnaire as the mean age is 23. More than half of the participants are women (69.9%). The majority of people indicated to have a high school degree (52.4%), followed by university graduates (35.9%). As the survey was mainly distributed on social media, all respondents have



an Instagram account and 99% use it regularly. However, only 81.6% follow at least one influencer on Instagram.

Furthermore, the questionnaire included a manipulation check (after reviewing all six Instagram posts, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they saw photos from destinations in the same country or different countries), to assure receiving reliable results of the experiment. By using a Chi-Square test, a successful manipulation could be verified ( $\chi^2 (1, N=103) = 91.74, p < .001$ ).

Table 2: Scale Reliabilities

Scale Reliabilities	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items
Trustworthiness	0.97	5
Expertise	0.97	5
Attitude	0.94	5

Table 2 demonstrates the reliabilities of the three scales: trustworthiness, expertise, and attitude. All three scales have five items and according to the reliability test, the scales are almost equally reliable as all Cronbach's Alphas lay above 0.9.

Table 3: Regression Analysis: Trust, Attitude and Booking Intention

	B	SE B	$\beta$
<b>Constant</b>	-0.97	0.52	
<b>Trust</b>	0.58	0.08	.58
<b>Attitude</b>	0.26	0.09	.24

To prove the first hypothesis, which claims a positive relation between trust, attitude and booking intention, a simple linear regression was carried out. The booking intention could be predicted from trust ( $\beta = 0.58, p < .001$ ) and attitude ( $\beta = 0.24, p < 0.005$ ). The overall model fit was  $R^2 = 54.4\%$ . Hypothesis 1 can be verified. Higher trust and attitude towards an influencer increase booking intention.

Table 4: Regression Analysis: Expertise

	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	<b>β</b>
<b>Constant</b>	1.39	0.32	
<b>Expertise</b>	0.67	0.05	.79

Another regression analysis has been done to identify the impact of expertise on trustworthiness, to test the second hypothesis. The regression analysis investigated a significant relationship between trustworthiness and expertise ( $p < 0.001$ ). The perceived trustworthiness can be predicted by expertise by the following formula:  $\text{trustworthiness} = 1.39 + (0.67 \times \text{expertise})$ . The value  $R^2$  indicates that expertise explains trustworthiness for 63%. Hypothesis 2 can therefore be accepted. Influencers are trustworthy because of their expertise

Table 5: ANOVA: Trustworthiness

<b>ANOVA</b>	<b>SAME</b>		<b>DIFFERENT</b>		<b>F</b>	<b>p-value</b>
	<b>MEAN</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>MEAN</b>	<b>SD</b>		
<b>Trustworthiness</b>	5.07	1.86	5.57	1.73	1.93	<0.01

To test the hypothesized increase in trustworthiness of influencers when it comes to promoting destinations from one region (H3) an univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was estimated. In table 3 the descriptive statistics are displayed, including the means as well as standard deviations of the seven-point semantic differential scaled question related to trustworthiness. To provide an understandable interpretation, it needs to be mentioned that a higher level of agreement can be identified when a higher mean is reported. Comparing the outcomes of the same region to different regions, it can be seen that different regions got a higher mean ( $5.07 < 5.57$ ), with this difference being significant at  $p < 0.01$ . Hence, hypothesis 3 has to be rejected. Influencers are therefore perceived as more trustworthy when it comes to promoting destinations from multiple regions.

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis offered deeper insights into a rising form of marketing communication. Through secondary research, it was possible to examine the benefits but also challenges of influencer marketing for all involved parties, including promotion producers, advertised product/service, and the brand behind as well as content consumers. Moreover, influencer marketing could be put in direct comparison to traditional marketing tools.

The main focus of this work, however, was given to influencers operating in the tourism industry and the perceived trust of followers. The research of this thesis, hence, was intended to identify the effect of influencers that are communicating competing destinations of different regions on the trust of their followers. The aim was to compare influencers that cooperate with many different destinations (e.g. Rome and New York) with influencers that are loyally cooperating with one region (e.g. Rome and Venice). Additionally, this thesis questioned the connection between the expertise and trustworthiness of travel influencers. The existing literature does not provide sufficient information to answer the two research questions. Therefore, the outcomes of the quantitative research – an online experiment – can be seen as an extension of previous travel-influencer marketing research.

The results demonstrated that the assumption that travel influencers are perceived as more trustworthy when they are focusing on promoting one region cannot be confirmed. Secondary research has demonstrated, that followers are more likely to trust an influencer who is promoting many regions. However, the second prediction could be accepted: trustworthiness is strongly associated with the expertise of travel influencers. Besides, an increase in booking intention is mainly based on higher trust and attitude towards an influencer.

### 4.1. Managerial Implications

The most important and most interesting result of this research is that it is more beneficial to promote many different destinations, such as Paris, New York, and Santorini, instead of focusing on one region (e.g. Rome, Milan, and Venice). Influencers are perceived as more reliable and dependable if their Instagram account contains statements of opinion, including recommendations, on multiple destinations. A collection of different reviews contributes to a facilitated decision-making process for consumers because they can compare the (dis)advantages of multiple destinations. However, influencers can also maximize their trustworthiness. The increase in trustworthiness of an influencer that promotes multiple regions

might be explained by a higher level of expertise. The research showed that followers are more likely to trust influencers that give recommendations based on knowledge. Expertise mainly consists of experiences, which can be gained by visiting different destinations. Travel influencers promote themselves by claiming to be experts in the field of tourism and, therefore, must offer more than just theoretical facts to their followers to stay authentically. Sharing as much of their knowledge picked up on previous trips as possible is crucial to becoming reliable and trustworthy as an influencer.

Besides expertise, trust and attitude are the most important components to increase the booking intention of customers. Hence, it is not only necessary for influencers but also for cooperation partners, such as DMOs, to generate a trustworthy and appealing image of the influencer and brand among potential customers, to create a successful marketing campaign. Influencers are the ones who deliver information to their audience and are therefore instantly associated with the advertised product/service/brand. Therefore, the brand should match the feed of the content creator and both should share the same values. Before accepting a collaboration it should be ensured that previous promotions for competitors are compatible with the brand's image. Due to that reason, both parties – company and influencer – need to select their cooperation partners carefully, to turn followers into customers.

## **4.2. Limitations**

Although this thesis generates new findings, it is also exposed to few limitations, that offer possibilities for further research. Since the experiment mainly addressed younger generations, such as Millennials and/or Gen Z aged people, this research hardly took data from people above 35 into consideration. However, it might also be interesting to see how other age groups would respond to different Instagram posts from influencers, even though they are not normally active on social media. Also, a different level of difficulty might be identified by trying to attract older generations. In particular, it might be helpful to find out what characteristics of influencers are accepted and rejected by older generations. The results of this research could contribute to finding a way of bringing more age variety to social media users, how to turn silent observers into active followers, as well as increasing the potential of social media and influencer marketing.

Additionally, this thesis showed that men respond less to influencers than women, which offers further research options. Furthermore, taking influencers' experiences and opinions into account helps to see social media marketing from a different point of view. Especially

companies that are currently working or planning to work with influencers might want to see the potential of the method from different angles. Regarding trust, it might be an option to analyze the perceived trustworthiness of influencers depending on their sizes, in terms of the number of followers and cooperation partners. As expertise plays a significant role in generating trust, further research on how education increases the level of trustworthiness of influencers can be conducted.

The demographics of the respondents showed that the data of this research primarily consists of women between 18-28. Using different research methods, such as in-depth interviews, might provide a more detailed understanding of how people with different demographics can be attracted by influencers.

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## 6. Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Measurement Scale

#### BI Booking Intention

Booking intention was measured with one item asking rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely) related to trust

#### TR Trust (Ohanian, 1990; $\alpha = 0.97$ )

Participants rated the influencer's trustworthiness on five 7-point semantic differential scales:

undependable (*unzuverlässig*) – dependable (*zuverlässig*)

dishonest (*unehrlich*) – honest (*ehrlich*)

unreliable (*unglaubwürdig*) – reliable (*glaubwürdig*)

insincere (*unaufrichtig*) – sincere (*aufrichtig*)

untrustworthy (*nicht vertrauenswürdig*) – trustworthy (*vertrauenswürdig*)

#### EX Expertise (Ohanian, 1990; $\alpha = 0.97$ )

Participants rated the influencer's expertise on five 7-point semantic differential scales:

not an expert (kein Experte) – expert (Experte)

inexperienced (unerfahren) – experienced (erfahren)

unknowledgeable (unkenntnisreich) – knowledgeable (kenntnisreich)

unqualified (unqualifiziert) – qualified (qualifiziert)

unskilled (ungeschickt) – skilled (geschickt)

#### AT Attitude (Spears & Singh, 2004; $\alpha = 0.94$ )

Participants rated the influencer's expertise on five 7-point semantic differential scales:

unappealing (*unattraktiv*) – appealing (*attraktiv*)

unpleasant (*unangenehm*) – pleasant (*angenehm*)

bad (*schlecht*) – good (*gut*)

unfavorable (*unvorteilhaft*) – favorable (*vorteilhaft*)

unlikable (*unsympathisch*) – likable (*sympathisch*)

## **MP Manipulation Check (self-constructed)**

### **Instagram Usage**

**Age**

**Education**

**Gender**

## Appendix 2 – Questionnaire

### Scales: Trustworthiness, Expertise, Attitude

Imagine you are planning an Italy trip next year. You cannot decide where you want to go exactly. Therefore, you try to find some inspiration on Instagram. During your research, you take notice of the following influencer. Please review the posts carefully and answer the following questions.

*Stellen Sie sich vor, Sie planen einen Italien Urlaub nächstes Jahr. Sie können sich nicht entscheiden wohin Sie genau reisen wollen. Deshalb suchen Sie nach Inspiration online und stoßen dabei auf den folgenden Influencer. Bitte betrachten Sie die Posts genau und beantworten Sie anschließend die darauffolgenden Fragen.*

1. Did you notice the name of the influencer? Please write the name of the influencer in the box below

*(Haben Sie den Namen des Influencers bemerkt? Bitte schreiben Sie den Namen des Influencers in die untenstehende Box)*

2. Did you notice the destinations promoted by the influencer? Please write the name of the destinations in the boxes below

*(Haben Sie die vom Influencer beworbenen Destinationen bemerkt? ? Bitte schreiben Sie den Namen der Destinationen in die untenstehenden Boxen)*

Destination 1:

Destination 2:

Destination 3:

Destination 4:

Destination 5:

Destination 6:

3. Do the six promoted destination refer to the same or to different countries? For instance, Vienna and Salzburg are both part of Austria.

*(Gehören die sechs beworbenen Destinationen zu demselben oder zu verschiedenen Ländern? Wien und Salzburg, zum Beispiel, gehören beide zu Österreich.)*

- Same country (*Dasselbe Land*)
- Different countries (*Verschiedene Länder*)



4. How much are you likely to book a trip just based on the recommendations of this influencer?

*(Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie eine Reise nur wegen der Empfehlung dieses Influencers buchen?)*

Very unlikely <i>(Sehr unwahrscheinlich)</i>	Very likely <i>(Sehr wahrscheinlich)</i>
1      2      3      4      5      6      7	

5. Participants rated the influencer's **trustworthiness** on five 7-point semantic differential scales:

Please rate the influencer based on the previously seen posts:

*(Bitte bewerten Sie den Influencer basierend auf den zuvor gesehenen Posts):*

undependable ( <i>unzuverlässig</i> )	dependable ( <i>zuverlässig</i> )
dishonest ( <i>unehrlich</i> )	honest ( <i>ehrlich</i> )
unreliable ( <i>unglaubwürdig</i> )	reliable ( <i>glaubwürdig</i> )
insincere ( <i>unaufrichtig</i> )	sincere ( <i>aufrichtig</i> )
untrustworthy ( <i>nicht vertrauenswürdig</i> )	trustworthy ( <i>vertrauenswürdig</i> )

6. Participants rated the influencer's **expertise** on five 7-point semantic differential scales:

Please rate the influencer based on the previously seen posts:

*(Bitte bewerten Sie den Influencer basierend auf den zuvor gesehenen Posts):*

not an expert ( <i>kein Experte</i> )	expert ( <i>Experte</i> )
inexperienced ( <i>unerfahren</i> )	experienced ( <i>erfahren</i> )
unknowledgeable ( <i>unkenntnisreich</i> )	knowledgeable ( <i>kenntnisreich</i> )
unqualified ( <i>unqualifiziert</i> )	qualified ( <i>qualifiziert</i> )
unskilled ( <i>ungeschickt</i> )	skilled ( <i>geschickt</i> )

7. Participants rated the influencer's **attitude** on five 7-point semantic differential scales:

Please rate the influencer based on the previously seen posts:

*(Bitte bewerten Sie den Influencer basierend auf den zuvor gesehenen Posts):*

unappealing ( <i>unattraktiv</i> )	appealing ( <i>attraktiv</i> )
unpleasant ( <i>unangenehm</i> )	pleasant ( <i>angenehm</i> )
bad ( <i>schlecht</i> )	good ( <i>gut</i> )

unfavorable (*unvorteilhaft*)

favorable (*unvorteilhaft*)

unlikable (*unsympathisch*)

likable (*sympathisch*)

8. Do you have an Instagram account?

(*Haben Sie einen Instagram account?*)

- Yes (*Ja*)
- No (*Nein*)

9. Do you use Instagram at least once per week?

(*Verwenden Sie Instagram mindestens einmal pro Woche?*)

- Yes (*Ja*)
- No (*Nein*)

10. Do you follow one or more social media influencer?

(*Folgen Sie einem oder mehreren Social Media Influencern?*)

- Yes (*Ja*)
- No (*Nein*)

11. Age (*Alter*): \_\_\_\_\_

12. Gender (*Geschlecht*)

- Male (*männlich*)
- Female (*weiblich*)
- Other (*andere*)
- Prefer not to say (*bevorzuge nicht zu sagen*)

13. Highest completed education (*Höchst abgeschlossene Ausbildung*)

- University (*Universität*)
- High school (*Gymnasium*)
- Vocational school (*Berufsschule*)
- Apprenticeship (*Lehre*)
- Compulsory schooling (*Pflichtschule*)