

Department of Business and Management

Major in Marketing – market relationship and customer engagement

Chair of Web Analytics and Marketing

**From selling products to selling cities:
who is the right influencer to promote my
destination?**

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Introduction

The travel industry has been significantly influenced by the rise and spread of the online social networks (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). There is no doubt that rise of internet, especially the shared use of social media by generation Y and Z, has changed the way consumers plan and book a travel. In order to adapt to the challenges presented by these two new generations of travellers, tourism marketers have focused on increasing their digital strategies. In particular, in order to market and manage the promotion of destinations, industry professionals have focused on improving their communication strategies through the use of social media with the aim of influencing future traveller's destination choices (OECD Tourism trends and policies, 2018). Moreover, social media influencers have been recognized as an effective strategic marketing tool which has aroused the interest of both marketers and investors (XuXu & Pratt, 2018). Specifically, this has been confirmed with regard to the travel domain as well since the Axon 2019 report "Influencers as promoters of tourism" has revealed that 82% of tourism service users between the age of 18-35 follow travel bloggers and lifestyle influencer and 80% has stated that social media influencers have affected their choice of a holiday destination.

Although a large amount of research has been conducted on traditional celebrity endorsement for tourism, there is a lack of research focusing on the employment of social media influencers for the promotion of travel destinations. The aim of this research is to study whether those validated model for the selection of a celebrity endorser in tourism advertising can be directly applied to social media influencer selection; due to their academic relevance, the "source credibility" model and the "match – up hypothesis" will be object of the study. In particular, the current research will analyze their effectiveness in creating an interest toward the destination promoted for the Italian Generation Y and Z. Chapter one of this study describes the relevance of these two generations for the travel industry, how their digital travel habits have created new challenges as well as new opportunities for the destination marketers and therefore why they have been chosen as the target for the current study. Moreover, the chapter will provide with a definition of "influencer marketing" and "influencers" and will explain why and in what way they have become key strategic tools to promote and advertise destinations. The end of the chapter is dedicated to the Covid – 19 sanitary emergency with a focus on its repercussions on the future travel and tourism trends in Italy and on its impact on the future of travel influencers. Chapter two provides with a literature review of the celebrity endorsement strategies and models in advertising, outlining the benefits and risks associated with them and, more specifically, describes how the topic of celebrity endorsement in travel advertising has been studied in academic literature. Also, it reports how destination marketing and destination marketing organizations have been defined by researchers. On the basis of the described literature, at end of the chapter the two hypotheses object of

the study are proposed. The description of the experiment together with the theoretical framework, the methodology used to carry on the analysis and the statistical results are all presented in Chapter 3. In the end, the discussion of the obtained results, the academic and managerial implications and the research limitations and suggestion for future studies are discussed in Chapter 4. Academic publications, online journal articles, official data and private organizations reports have been consulted as sources in order to propose the final hypotheses. They have all been personally reworked and commented together with the tables and graphs included in the text in order to summarize and graphically represent the most prominent data and findings.

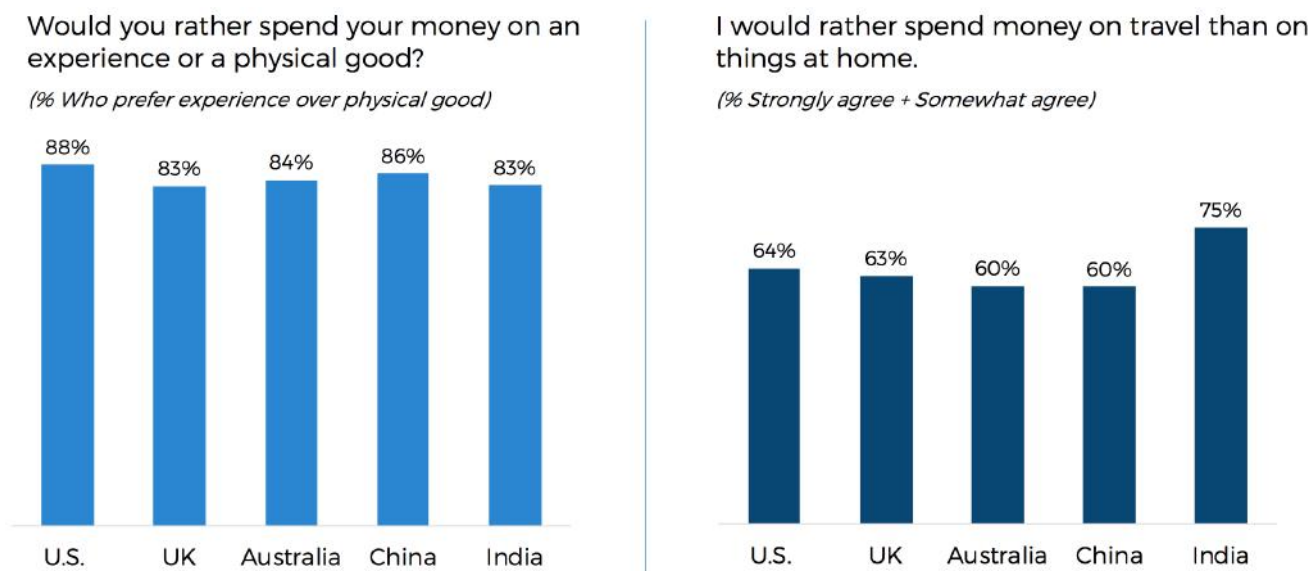
1. Chapter 1: “Research background”

1.1 “Gen Y” and “Gen Z”: the new generations of travellers

According to the 2020 UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, 2019 marked the 10th year of growth of the tourism sector with 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals recorded globally. This represents an increase of 4% compared to the numbers of 2018 and the World Tourism Organization forecasts a further increase of 3% - 4% in 2020, confirming tourism as one of the leading and always growing economic sectors. During these years there have been and there will continue to be changes in the travel trends mostly due to the different needs and behaviors of the new generation of travellers with which Destination Marketing Organizations (i.e. organizations which promote a location as an attractive travel destination) and tourism marketers and managers must keep up in order to assure a continuous growth of the sector. As shown by a 2018 report of Travelport, people belonging to the “Generation Y” (born between 1980 and 1995), the so-called “Millennials”, are the ones driving the growth in the travel industry, followed by “Generation Z” (born between 1996 and 2010). Confirming this, the report also revealed that more than half of US Millennials (56%) were planning on travelling more than they did in the previous year, a trend that was not fully shared by the older generations: only 35% of people belonging to “Generation X” (born between 1965 - 1979) and 22% of “Baby Boomers” (born between 1946 and 1964) stated the same. Also, 39% of people belonging to Generation Z worldwide plan to have visited at least three different continents in the next ten years (Booking.com, 2019). These young generations have different needs with respect to the ones that preceded them, in particular in the context of tourism and travels (Glover, 2010). Because of that, apart from the major opportunities presented by the constant growth in the tourism sector, this different, recent group of young travellers represents new challenges for the industry, first among all the transformation of tourism services linked with the emerging technologies and the spreading digitalization of the economy (OECD Tourism trends and policies, 2018). In fact, Millennials are the first generation that was born and grew up with computers and the internet, which is why they are also referred to as “digital natives”. Technology and the internet are integral parts of their daily lives. Unlike previous generations, Millennials are also experts at using smartphones to communicate and consume, including tourism products (CBI, 2020). A research conducted by Booking.com in 2019 reported that 66% of surveyed belonging to “Generation Z” stated that in the next five years they plan on spending their money on travelling and seeing the world and 60% thinks that travels are always worth investing in. Also, when questioned on how they would spend their money between travels and material possessions such as clothes, furniture and tech gadget, “travels” was always the answer picked by more than half of the respondents. A 2019 research conducted by Skift on Millennials and Generation Z worldwide confirmed the same trend, as shown more in details in figure 1.1: on average 65% of

them strongly agrees with the statement “I would rather spend money on travel than on things at home”, 84% prefers to spend money on experiences rather than on physical goods.

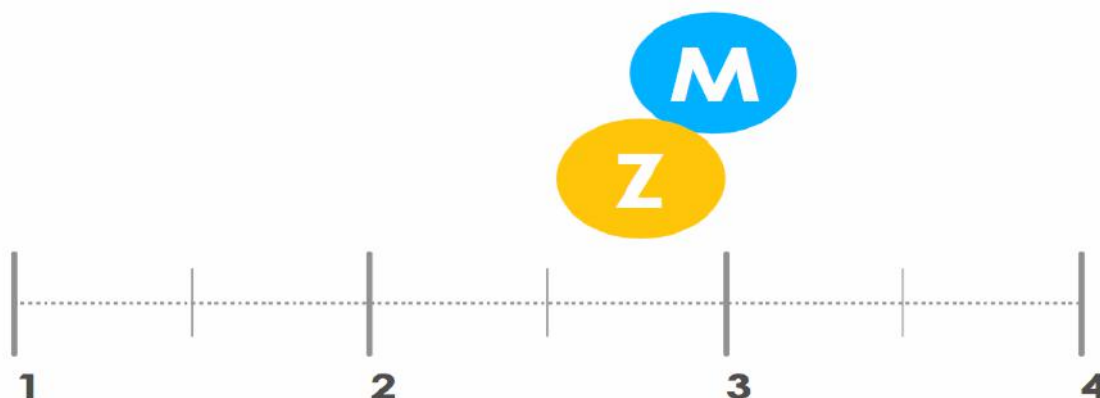
Figure 1.1: Views on spending priorities of Millennials and Generation Z worldwide



(Source: Skift Research, “Millennials and Generation Z Traveler Survey 2019: a multi-country comparison report”, 2019).

Even if younger and less financially independent, a 2018 report by Expedia Media Solutions revealed that “Generation Z” took almost as many trips as Millennials (as shown in figure 1.2), confirming the two as the new generation of travellers to consider when promoting a destination.

Figure 1.2: Number of trips taken per year by Millennials and Generation Z



(Source: Expedia Group Media Solutions, “Gen Z Travel Trends Study”, 2018)

Data extracted from The United Nations World Tourism Organization and World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation's 2016 Global Report on The Power of Youth Travel, revealed that Generation Z comprises about 30% of the global population and accounts for 29 million international travellers around the world. It also refers to them as "the-internet-in-its-pocket-generation", a feature that sets them apart from the older generations such as the Baby Boomers and even, on some levels, Generation Y who was born and grew up before the internet was widely available (WYSE, 2016). There is no doubt that Generation Y is digital and was raised during the technology revolution and the invention of The World Wide Web, but Gen Z is born into an era of smartphones and most of them cannot imagine or even remember a life without social media (KPMG, 2017). In fact, when analyzing the smartphone usage of the two generations, the resulting numbers are very high: 68% of generation Z and 61% of generation Y stated they use mobile in the travel inspiration phase. In particular, social media have a large influence. As identified by Google, the travel journey can be divided into five moments: dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing, sharing. Customers get inspired for their travel during the "dreaming" phase, which is at the starting point of the funnel; at this stage, an intrinsic or extrinsic process – such as social media content - generates the need for a new travel experience. 84% of Generation Z and 77% of Millennials are influenced by travel pictures and travel videos made by friends or experts and 40% of Generation Z ranks Instagram as the top source when seeking travel inspiration (Booking.com, 2019). While Baby Boomers are influenced by informative content and reviews, appealing imagery in advertising has resulted to be extremely effective for Millennials and Gen Z (Expedia Group Media Solutions 2018). Moreover, additional important data resulting from the report need to be highlighted: almost two thirds of the young travellers (Gen Y and Gen Z) stated they are usually undecided on a destination when initially planning on where to travel and more that 70% reported to be open to outside inspirations and suggestions. Also, they are interested in discovering new places and visit areas not traditionally frequented by tourists (UNTWO 2016; WYSE, 2016). In light of this, as Generation Z in particular strongly cares for the environment, this choice could be due to wanting to avoid "overtourism"- a recent phenomenon defined by the World Tourism Organization as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way" - and its bad consequences on the environment. This trend is also visible in Generation Z's travel choices and travel experiences: a Booking.com 2019 survey reported that 54% say that the environmental impact travelling has on a destination is an important factor when planning where to travel; 52% will visit less known destination over more popular ones if it means a reduced impact on the environment. This tendency does not expire in the travel planning stage but rather continues also during the travel itself: 56% would want to stay in green or eco-friendly accommodation and 60% of them plans to use more environmental friendly means of transport once they have arrived at their destination. More in general, almost all (85%) of Millennials and Generation Z worldwide surveyed in 2019 by Skift Research

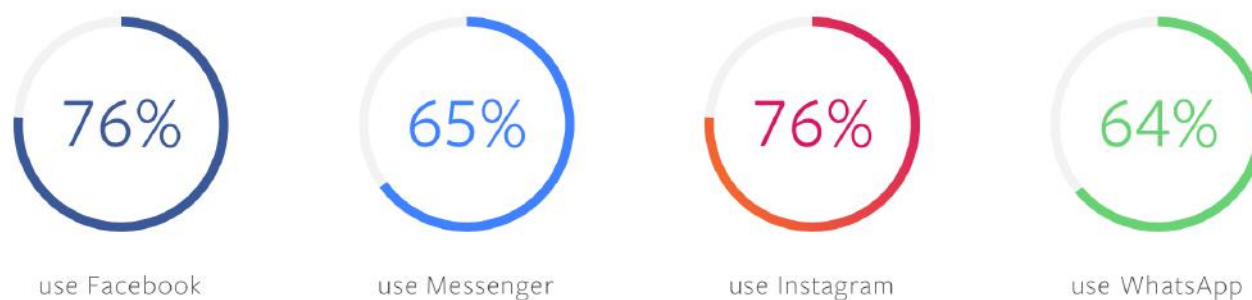
stated that they would rather travel to new destinations than going back to places they have already visited. Hence, considering all the data explained above, this means that by using correct promotion strategies, also less common holiday destinations and local facilities (such as restaurants, hotels and bars) could have a huge power in shaping travellers' interest in visiting them. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has recognized that marketing for tourism has focused on some specific approaches in order to adapt to the new challenges presented by the rise of the new generation of travellers, among which: an increasing focus on digital strategies, with digital platforms opening new partnership opportunities and routes. Moreover, one area in which digitalization is having a profound impact on actions aimed at managing and marketing destinations is the process of communicating with tourists including the use of social media in influencing choice and sharing experiences through personal and commercial channels (OECD Tourism trends and policies, 2018). Focusing on a digital approach has been recognized as an effective strategy by almost all the latest research on the tourism and travels sector. In a 2020 study conducted by CBI on the potential of Generation Y in the tourism market, the following tips on how to target these young travellers can be found: "Be tech-savvy. Make sure you have a strong online presence. Improve your online presence by inviting professionals to write reviews for you, such as travel bloggers, social media influencers or reviewers from field related magazine" and "invite online influencers for a free stay and then promote their experience to their followers in an appealing way". When studying a digital marketing strategy, it is important to correctly target the consumer with the right content at each stage of his consumer journey.

1.2 Social Media as the new travel guides

Considering travels, at the trip planning stage - during which Google reported that consumers will visit around 15 different websites comparing a few selected alternatives - social media are rapidly becoming the top source for inspiration and information search: a 2019 research by Stackla found that 86% of consumers are influenced by photos and videos posted by friends, family and peers on social media and that 52% made decisions of visiting a specific destination after seeing them. Also, 36% of surveyed people aged 18-34 will search potential holiday destinations on social media before visiting, 37% of Millennials have had their holiday destination influenced by social media and 34% have actually booked a holiday because of content seen on social media (WeSwap, 2018). Social media are not exclusively a source of inspiration for young travelers, rather they actually weight in deciding whether to visit a place or not, where to eat and where to sleep: "over a quarter of global travellers surveyed in 2018 has admitted that staying in attractive properties that they can photograph and use on their social media accounts is something that they think about when choosing where to stay" (Booking.com, 2018); moreover, 40% of UK Millennials consider the "*instagrammability*" – defined by urban dictionary as if whether a picture is worth or not posting on Instagram - of a location before

deciding if it deserves a visit or not (mdg advertising, 2018). Also, 45% of Millennials and Generation Z worldwide consider the “insta-worthiness” of a location as a top priority when planning a vacation and, indeed, 42% always posts pictures from their trips when they travel (Skift Research, 2019). As data explained above have shown that communicating (mostly Whatsapp and Messenger) and sharing pictures (mostly Instagram and Facebook) are vital components of the online customer journey of future young travellers, the result of a 2018 Facebook for business research on how many leisure travellers use the facebook family of apps for travel related activities are not surprising: facebook and instagram are used by 76% of respondents, while messenger and whatsapp by the 64%, as shown in figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3: How many leisure travelers use the facebook family of apps for travel – related activities



(Source: Facebook for Business, “Understanding the journey of the connected consumer in leisure travel, 2018)

There is no doubt that rise of internet, especially the shared use of social media by generation Y and Z, has changed the way consumers plan and book a travel, presenting new challenges for tourism marketers. Digitalization, online presence and social media are now keywords in planning an effective marketing strategy aimed at targeting these two generations of travellers. Social media are becoming more and more sources to get destination inspiration and to gather destination information, Instagram and facebook being the most used ones for these purposes. This is not surprising due to the intrinsic nature of the two platforms; the results of a survey shared among Swedish people belonging to Generation Y reported that *“picture with a short descriptive text”* is the preferred type of travel information: *“short and concise information. I do not manage to read a lot of text about something I have not decided upon yet. It may sound strange but I prefer pictures with some text like it is on Instagram”* stated a swedish man born in 1987 when asked what his preferred type of travel information was. This answer was not unique, rather almost all the respondents expressed the same. In light of what stated above, tourism marketers should consider that as many travellers spend daily time

on social media, a catching picture of their destination could easily draw attention to and create interest to visit it. In this sense, the instagram format of content (picture with short description) may work as a bait to address people's attention toward what you are promoting as many respondents have reported that they want access to longer, more detailed information text only once their attention has been already caught: *"if I am not looking for specific information, I would love to get inspired by images or text"* was indeed one common statement of the interviewees (Aldevinge, 2016). Hence, "user generated content" - content generated by users rather than brands on social media such as reviews, videos and pictures - has been found to be key in influencing travellers choice of destination. Moreover, data show that people have a tendency to create content online: 80% of Millennials and Generation Z have left an online review for a product or service purchased and 72% have done so for a travel-related purchase (Skift Research, 2019).

1.2.1 e –WoM

By creating content, users spread word of mouth online, a phenomenon referred to as "e-WOM" (electronic word of mouth). Differently from brand content – content created by the brand/product owner – user generated content cannot be controlled by the brand. "UGC" highly impacts consumers perceptions and the way they look at a product as 70% of consumers trust reviews written by other customers above professionally written marketing content and Millennials have been found to trust "UGC" 50% times more than brand content (Ipsos MediaCT, Crowdtap, Social Media Advertising Consortium, 2014). On one hand, content created by social media users is beneficial to brand owners as it gives them free advertising, helps spreading a positive image and cuts down the costs of time and money spent on content creation and advertising. On the other hand, the spread of user generated content presents new challenges for brands as it needs constant monitoring since users could share negative comments or pictures, creating a negative image that could reach numerous probable future customers. With respect to traditional word of mouth, e-WOM cuts the boundaries of known relationships as the source of the message can easily reach unknown people as well, increasing its coverage. Specifically, travels fall under the category of experience goods, i.e. goods with features and characteristics which are difficult to observe in advance of purchase but are easily observable upon use or consumption (Dacko, 2008); therefore, when selling an experience good, a positive word-of-mouth is extremely valuable. Moreover, Chang (2010) states that e-WOM significantly influences travel intentions and decisions and that because of that, e-WoM on social media is a powerful marketing tool for DMOs to encourage traveler's interest toward their promoted destination. Clearly, positive e-WOM is something necessary and of which tourism marketers should take fully advantage since 92% of consumers worldwide said they trust word of mouth more than advertising (Marketing Land, 2014). However, content created by companies is still relevant in the context of a digital marketing strategy:

No & Kim (2015) reported that company websites are considered reliable, as the enormous amount of content spread on social media does not pass any “security check” before being shared. Still, within the realm of social media players, Destination Marketing Organizations are among the weakest as the majority of travellers do not follow their official social account or actively looks for them while searching for destination inspiration. Moreover, the overall amount of content uploaded on social platforms is huge, as 95 millions of photos on Instagram and 500 millions stories on Facebook are shared daily. In light of this, since social media are overcrowded with information, it is difficult to draw attention to a destination. However, Kiral’ova and Pauliceka (2015) found that some action could work better than others, among which: novelty, uniqueness, unexpectedness, interesting graphic design and celebrity involvement. Therefore, to reach more people, DMOs should consider engaging with external partners: to stand out of competition, tourism organization could partner with social media influencer to further attract the population segment of Generation Y and Z (Serra and Gretzel, 2020).

1.3 Influencer marketing relevance in travels and tourism

Marketers have long used endorsers such as traditional celebrities for promoting their destinations, but research have shown that nowadays, the rise of social media influencers has shifted the concept of “celebrity” and that partnering with influencers to promote a product or a brand is more effective. Influencer marketing hub defines influencer marketing as being nowadays a well-established form of online marketing; it takes the idea of celebrity endorsement and places it into a modern-day content-driven marketing campaign. Mainly, it involves a brand collaborating with an influencer to promote a product or service. More in details, Influencer Intelligence (2020) identifies a distinction between “influencer marketing” and “influencer advertising”: while the former concerns engaging with influencer for long-term creative partnership rooted in authenticity and storytelling to improve consumer’s sentiment, awareness and loyalty towards a brand over time, the latter centers on individuals whose power relies in their large followers base, using these one-time partnerships to quickly increase a product’s sales. In particular, it is this last form that receives the majority of critiques as sponsorships are not perceived as authentic and credible but rather only lead by monetary compensation. While influencers are seen as regular people who have gained millions of followers and visibility on social media thanks to the sharing of their authentic passion, celebrities do not own their fame and fortune to social media and this creates a sense of distance between them and their fans that look at them as disconnected, high-status people; of course their loyal fans idolize them, but they cannot really relate to them. Since communication is at the basis of social media usage, influencers have created interpersonal relationships with their audience, narrowing the gap between them and their followers so that they can easily identify themselves with them and perceive them as normal people with a passion for fashion, food or travels, trusting them more. In fact, as Think with Google 2016

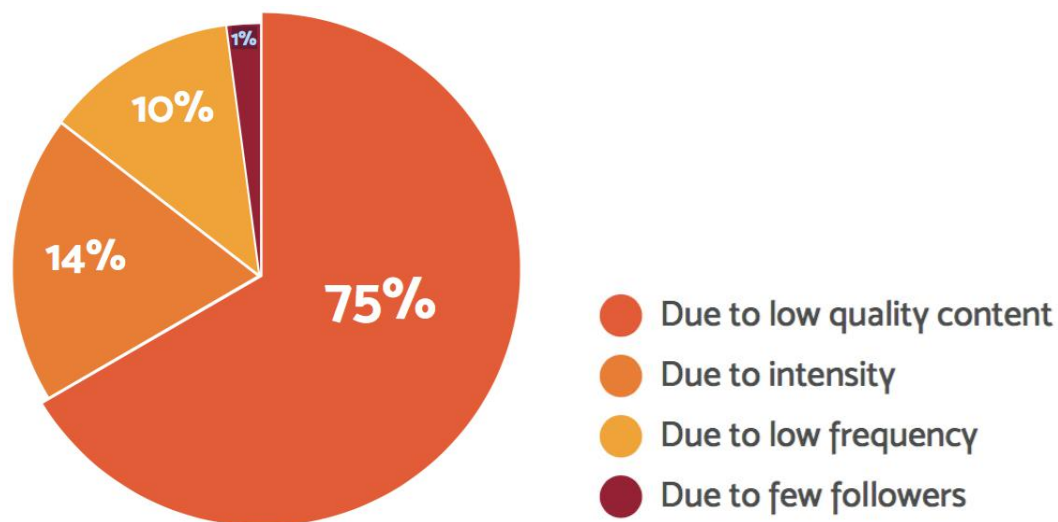
research has reported, while the “older” social media users tend to follow traditional celebrities, younger users follow mostly social media creators: 70% of teens trust influencers more than regular celebrities, meaning that the influence celebrities used to have is diminishing and their words are becoming less valuable for young people. Traditional celebrities do not enjoy the power in shaping cultures that they once had as online blogs and reviews are becoming more influential since they are considered more authentic and accessible (Wiley, 2014). This is happening mostly because influencers are perceived by the social audience as more “authentic” and authenticity is highly valued by Millennials and Gen Z. As outlined by the “Influencer Marketing 2020 Report” of Influencer Intelligence and Econsultancy, 61% of consumers prefer influencers who create authentic, engaging content. Influencers generally promote products in authentic, real-life settings and they are seen as “real” people compared to celebrities as followers can have access through pictures and stories also to those sides of their personal lives which are less “fancy” and “formal”. At the same time, the need of authenticity has been acknowledged by marketers as 90% of them say that “providing authenticity is critical to the future of influencer marketing”. In fact, by 2019, 42% of organizations and companies in tourism have allocated around 20% of their annual budget on influencer marketing as ROI in influencer marketing is eleven times greater than in traditional marketing methods because it is more authentic and engaging (Axon, 2019). In addition, 41% of Millennials agree that travel bloggers and social media influencers inspire their holiday destinations (WeSwap, 2018). Axon 2019 report “Influencers as promoters of tourism” has revealed data that confirm the power of influencers in travels and tourism: 82% of tourism service users between the age of 18-35 follow travel bloggers and lifestyle influencer and 80% has stated that social media influencers have affected their choice of tourist destination.

“Before choosing my last holiday, I remember seeing lots of pictures of my favorite travel bloggers at the waterfalls in Croatia’s Krka National Park. I hadn’t really considered Croatia as a holiday destination prior to seeing these images and seeing the great pictures people were taking there definitely influenced my decision to plan a holiday to Split with my friends. I think it’s great that social media has opened up the opportunities for people to travel to beautiful and incredible places. These are places that I wouldn’t have known about and wouldn’t even have thought to research had I not seen images of them online”. @Olivia

“Social media allows us to keep up with travel bloggers that have similar interests to us and get ideas for our next holiday that allow us to have experiences, taste food and see sights that might not have been suggested on our online searches or in travel magazines”. @Marcus

These two quotes are extracted from the social media accounts of two travellers and social media users belonging to Generation Y and are a clear example of the strength that the messages and pictures shared by social media influencers have in shaping people's interest to visit a destination. Moreover, influencer marketing seems a perfect fit for the visual nature of tourism as it mainly relies on the sharing of appealing content in the format of pictures, videos and stories on social media platforms. What the marketers of the tourism sector should be well aware of is that at the heart of the success of an influencer marketing campaign lies the proper choice of the influencer. In fact, the choice of which influencer to select to promote a brand can bring a digital marketing campaign to extreme success or to complete failure; 68% of marketers consider that finding the right influencer is their biggest challenge (influencer Marketing Hub infographic, 2019). The Axon 2019 report stated that organizations for tourism mainly choose influencers on the basis of: representation of the brand values (60%), their number of interactions (40%), number of followers (30%) and the frequency with which they post content on social media (23%), leaving the quality of the content shared aside. Paradoxically, this goes in contrast to the reasons outlined by the 75% of social media users which stated that they choose to follow an influencer because of the specialized content shared (travels, lifestyle, food, fashion etc.) and to unfollow because of the lack of quality of the content produced, as shown in figure 1.4; only a tiny portion of respondents (10% and 3%) stated they choose to unfollow an influencer because of not frequent publications or low number of followers.

Figure 1.4: Reasons why social media users would stop following an influencer



(Source: Axon, "Influencers as promoters of tourism", 2019)

Data reported above clearly show that if a marketer does not know the needs of his target audience, the choice of a wrong influencer could make a promotional campaign fail. In addition, as reported by Influencer Intelligence (2020), influencer marketing works best when partnering with those creators who have earned their fame thanks to their knowledge and skills in a specific sector rather than when

engaging those who only own a high number of followers. According to influencermarketinghub.com, there exist different ways to classify influencers. For the purpose of this study, two of those will be analyzed: by number of followers and by types of content.

By number of followers

- *Mega-Influencers*

Considering the number of followers, a common view is that mega-influencers have more than 1 million followers on at least one social platform. A lot of those considered mega-influencers are celebrities who have gained their fame off social media and the online environment such as television and movie stars, sportspeople and musicians. However, a part of mega-influencers has gained their followers through social activities as well. Working with them is usually very costly, up to \$1 million per post and in almost every case, mega-influencers will have agents working on their behalf to make any marketing deals.

- *Macro-Influencers*

People with a number of followers in the range between 40,000 and 1 million followers on a social network are considered to be macro-influencers; usually they are successful online experts and they can be excellent at raising awareness (which indicates the capability of consumers of recognizing a particular brand).

- *Micro-Influencers*

Micro-influencers are considered as having between 1,000 and 40,000 followers on a single social platform. They are ordinary everyday people who have become known for their knowledge about some specialist field. As such, they have usually gained a considerable social media following amongst people interested in that field. At the core of micro –influencer does not lie the number of followers, but rather the power of their influence is in the relationship and interaction they have managed to successfully create with their audience, becoming a reference point for them. When accepting to work with companies, micro-influencers highly value the relationship with their followers and they will not want to harm it by promoting "inappropriate" brand for their audience.

By Types of Content

Social media are the heart of influencer marketing, which revolves mostly around micro-influencers and blogging. Still, content produced online varies in the forms and platforms where it is shared.

- *Bloggers*

Bloggers and influencers in social media (predominantly micro-bloggers) have the most authentic and active relationships with their fans, which is becoming more and more recognized and valued by brands nowadays. Blogging has been connected to influencer marketing for some time now and there are many highly influential blogs on the internet; it is very likely that if a well known popular blogger mentions a product in a post or writes a positive review about it, the blog readers might want to try it out. Many bloggers are field-specific and have built up a considerable amount of followings, becoming a reference for that specific topic. Besides exploiting positive spontaneous written reviews written by bloggers, marketers can take advantage of the power of blogs in some other ways. For example, if a blog is large and influential enough, it may be possible to buy a sponsored post on the site. Of course, unlike a casual mention in a blogger's post, a payment will be required for a sponsored content and it will very likely be labeled as such, disclosing the monetary compensation behind the post.

- *YouTubers*

Blogs and pictures are not the only type of popular content on the internet, videos are very influential as well. In this scenario, YouTube creators are very powerful marketing tools to help connect with possible customers.

- *Podcasters*

Even if relatively new, podcasts are a form of online content that is rapidly growing in popularity. Because of that, of course the people behind the podcasts are making a name for themselves too, climbing the peak of social popularity.

- *Social Posts Only*

Of course, the three above mentioned categories of influencers very rarely rely only on their existing audiences to just visit their site hoping for new material. They all usually promote on their social media account their freshly uploaded new content, falling into the category of micro-influencers as well. In fact, it is social media where the majority of influencers manages to stand out from the crowd; in particular, even if influencers are present on all the leading social channels, the launching pad for social fame in recent years has been Instagram, where many creators post stunning images. Because of that, 93% of influencer marketing campaigns mainly use Instagram as their primary platform (Creator IQ, 2018).

From this short but exhaustive influencer classification and from the data analyzed in the above paragraphs, it can be argued that, for the aim of this study, regarding the type of content shared, because of the visual nature of tourism, Instagram influencers should be considered. An issue that needs to be kept in mind is that consumers should always trust the information disclaimed by the influencer in order for the campaign to be successful. Research on this topic seem to confirm the power of influencers as consumers in the Keller Fay Group & Experticity 2016 survey rated influencers as more impactful compared to an average person on the basis of the following characteristics: “more credible and believable”(94% vs 83%), “more knowledge” (94% vs 84%) and “better at explaining how product works or could be used” (92% vs 83%). Some may think that the existence and disclosure of a monetary compensation behind the partnerships between influencers and brands might alter the perception of authenticity of the sponsored object. However, research have found that this has not harmed the results for many firms that have sponsored posts on blogs. Moreover, Generation Z, seems to be immune to the sponsored tag, and as long as the product aligns with the blogger and the blog’s core audience, the sponsoring should not be a problem (influencermarketinghub.com): in 2016 a Keller Fay Group’s research found out that while 82% of respondents were very likely to follow the recommendation of an influencer, 67% stated that they would not have any type of negative reaction to sponsored influencer content and moreover, 37% reported that they if they perceived the content as authentic and of high quality, these two characteristics would negate the possible effects of the post being sponsored. The perception of authenticity and the trust in the influencer’s message are clearly two of the main determinants of an influencer marketing campaign’s success. Influencer marketing has been described as “the process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influencer over a specific target audience or medium, in order to be part of a brand’s campaign towards increased reach, sales or engagement” (De Veirman, 2017). In light of this definition, the large amount of existing influencers means, on the one hand, wider choice for marketers, but on the other, with such an amount of possible partners, making the appropriate choice is harder and the possibility of mistakes is very real. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate and test if those endorser’s characteristics that were used to determine the celebrity used for promotion of products would still work with influencers in the context of destination marketing, shaping traveller’s interest toward a particular destination.

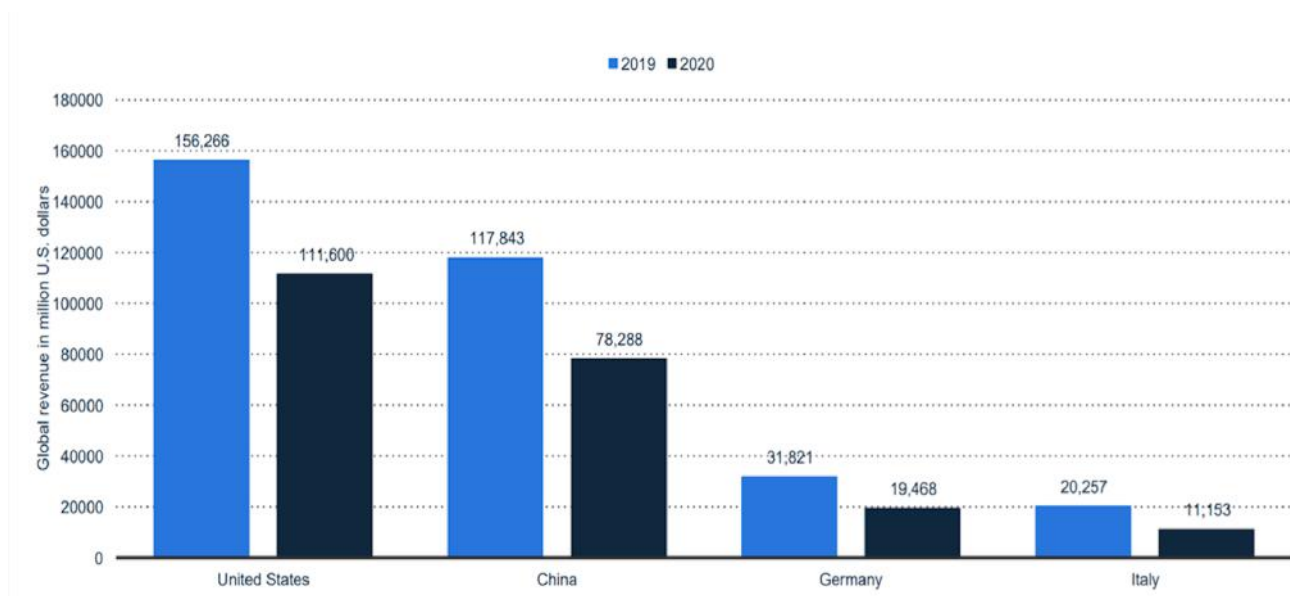
1.4 COVID – 19

In December 2019, the first cases of Covid – 19 (also knowk as “*coronavirus*”) where identified in Whuan, China. On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization declared it to be a pandemic: by June 2020, more that 7.81 million cases in over 188 countries were reported (CSSE at Johns Hopkins University). With a focus on Italy , the first cases of Covid- 19 were confirmed on 31 January in Rome

as reported by the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera”; by the beginning of March, the numbers provided by the Italian “Protezione Civile” confirmed that the virus had reached every Italian region. To avoid the further spread of the virus, governments have resorted to hard preventing measures focused around social isolation among which there were: travel restrictions and lockdowns. Globally, measures were taken differently; some countries imposed entry bans or quarantines for citizens of or for recent travellers of the most affected territories and others have prevented their citizens from travelling outside the country. In particular, on 31 January 2020, Italy closed all flights with China and declared the state of emergency with the duration of six months. From 9 March 2020, all Italy was under quarantine and movement between regions were stopped until 18 May 2020. On June 3rd, Italy re-opened its borders to people arriving from the countries belonging to the European Union and the countries within the Schengen Zone, plus the United Kingdom, Andorra, Monaco, San Marino and the Vatican, with no quarantine period required (all measures were adopted by the Italian Prime Minister through eight DPCMs from the 9th of March until the 17th of May). Other than representing a sanitary emergency, the coronavirus pandemic had and will have dramatic social and economic consequences at a global level. In the “Statista Covid-19: Economic downturn and recovery” dossiers, the economic recovery from the pandemic is estimated to be in 2021. However, for some countries such as USA, Germany and Italy, the economic recovery might proceed at a slower pace. Together with the healthcare system, travel and tourism is one of the sectors which most suffered and will suffer from the pandemic’s effects, as it has underwent a standstill period from the half of March until the end of June due to the travel bans described above. As an impact of the coronavirus pandemic, at a global level, the travel and tourism markets are predicted to see a loss of 100.8 million jobs; unemployment in the sector could reach nearly 25 million job losses. After the Asia Pacific Region, where it is predicted a loss of -63.4 million jobs in the travel and tourism field, Europe will be the second country expected to undergo a loss of tourism and travel related jobs, with a predicted drop of 13 million (Lock, 2020). Also, it is estimated that the market of travel and tourism will suffer a decrease of 34.7%, which will translate into a global revenue reduction from \$685.1 billions in 2019 to \$447.4 billions in 2020. Moreover, compared to the forecasts of 2020 made before the Covid-19 outbreak, the new predictions foresee that the markets of travel and tourism will generate \$396.370 million less, a drop of 42%. In particular, Europe is the country expected to have the largest difficulties, with a revenue loss of -41.4% (Covid-19: Statista Mobility Market Outlook, 2020).

As explained in figure 1.5 below, “The Mobility Market Outlook on Covid-19” predicts that, among the most covid-19 affected countries, Italy’s revenues of the travel and tourism sector will be the ones suffering the most, decreasing from \$20.3 million in 2019 to about \$11.2 million in 2020.

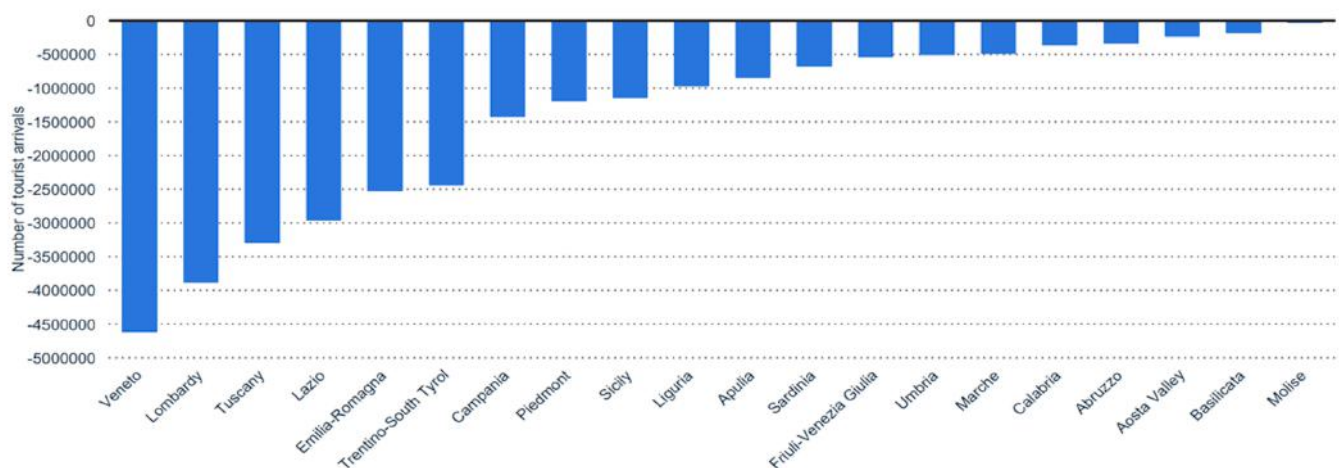
Figure 1.5: Global change in travel and tourism revenue due to Covid-19 by country 2019-2020



(Source: Statista, *Covid-19: Statista Mobility Market Outlook –Trend Whitepaper, 2020*)

In Italy, the accommodations sector is predicted to suffer a loss of \$13 billion, the catering sector of \$7 billions, the tourism transport of \$6.7 billions and the shopping tourism of \$6 billions (Statista,2020). Compared to 2019, Italy is expected to register a decrease of almost 28.5 million tourists arrivals for 2020. More in details, as shown by figure 1.6, the regions predicted to see a bigger loss of tourists are Veneto (with an expected decrease of 4.6 million arrivals) and Lombardy (with an expected decrease of 3.87 million arrivals).

Figure 1.6: Impact of coronavirus (Covid-19) on tourist arrivals in Italy 2020, by regions



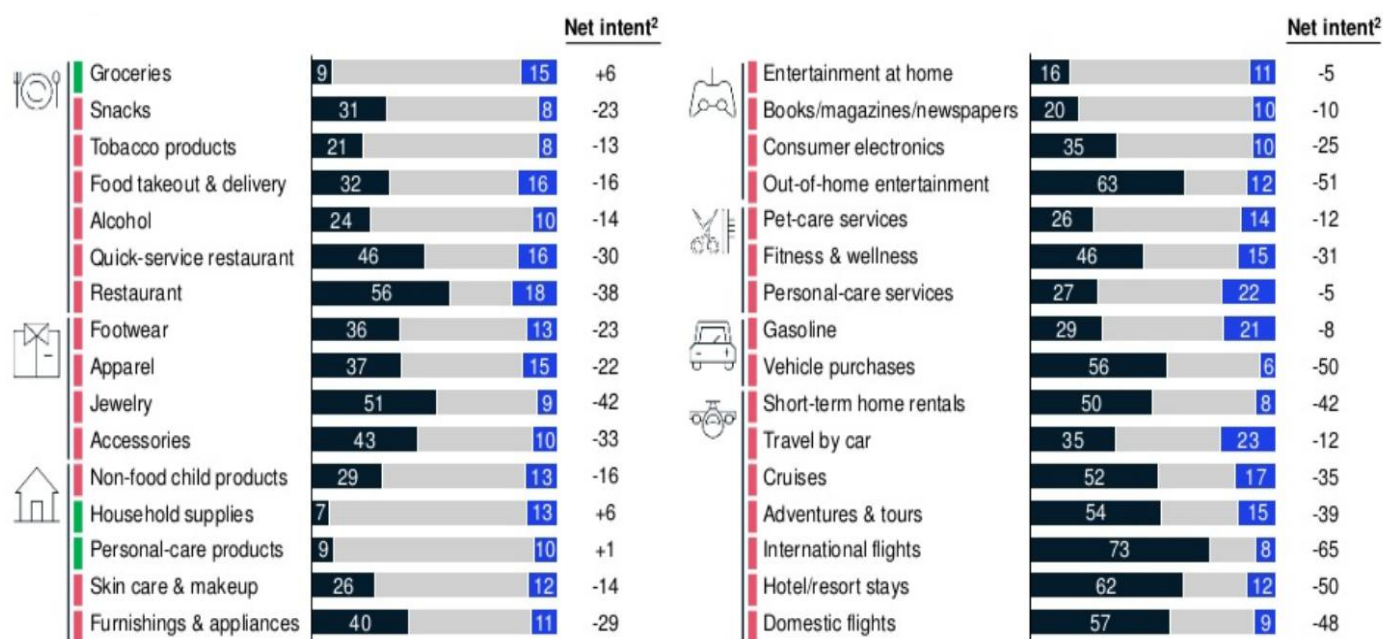
(Source: Statista, *Covid-19: Statista Mobility Market Outlook –Trend Whitepaper, 2020*)

The economic and social damages and the health concerns caused by the coronavirus pandemic have certainly influenced people's attitude towards travelling. Longwoods International Travel Sentiment

Study of march 2020 reported that, when questioned about whether covid-19 had impacted their decision to travel for the next six months, 58% of respondents stated that the virus greatly impacted it and only the travel decision of a 6% were not impacted at all. 2020 will face a general reduction in people's willingness to travel. Destination Analyst collected data in June 2020 about in which months, if any, travellers might have any trip intentions: 31% of surveyed stated "*I have no plans to travel in 2020*", 20% selected "*September*" and "*October*" while the summer months, June, July and August received a smaller share of answers: 7%, 15% and 18%. Another trend that was highlighted by a number of different research is that in 2020 people will mostly travel domestically and by car rather than overseas by plane. In fact, 78% of travelers who has trip plans for the summer has changed them due to the pandemic; more in details, 18% changed destination to one where they could travel to as opposed to fly and 14% changed the trip destination from international to domestic (Longwoods, 2020). Confirming that car and road trips will be the preferred travel choice for 2020, to the question "in what month do you expect you will take your next trip on a commercial airline?", the answer most reported was "sometimes later in 2021 May-December" (22.5%) and only a cumulative 17% stated to expect to travel by plane in the summer months. On the other hand, when questioned "in what month do you expect you will take your next road trip (travelling in a personal automobile)?", most of respondents selected June (14%), July (15%) and August (13%) and 5% stated they will not take any road trip at all (Destination Analysts, 2020).

With a specific focus on Italy, McKinsey & Company conducted a survey in May 2020, "Italian consumer sentiment during the covid-19 crisis", from which resulted important insights on what will be the post-coronavirus future for Italy's tourism and Italian travellers. 76% of Italians strongly agree that what most concerns them about the covid -19 situation is the Italian economy. In fact, 80% of them agrees with the statement "given my current economic situation, I am delaying some purchases that I had planned to make". Except for the categories of groceries, household supplies and personal care products, Italian consumers are reducing their spending and this strongly reflects on the tourism and travelling sector; in fact, 37% of them are very concerned that the covid-19 will impact their upcoming travel plans. As shown in figure 1.7, the majority of Italian travellers plan to spend less than usual on "international flights", "hotel and resort stays", "cruises" and "domestic flights". Only for "travel by car" more people (42%) stated they will spend the same with respect to those who plan to spend less (35%). International flights is the category who saw the largest decrease of people willing to spend on (73%), confirming the above explained trend of domestic car trips in 2020.

Figure 1.7: Italian consumers expected spending for category compared to usual (% of respondents)



(Source: McKinsey&Company, Italian consumer sentiment during the covid-19 crisis, 2020)

In addition, what came out from McKinsey's research is that this travel trends will not change once the covid-situation will start to disappear. In fact, the answers to the question "once the covid-19 situation has subsided, which of the following do you think you will do more or less compared to before the coronavirus situation started?" show that international travels will likely face a decrease of almost 50% while domestic travels only of 25% with 21% respondents stating the will increase the domestic trips and 54% that they will take as many as they did before the coronavirus outbreak with 39% saying the same for international travels. Without any doubt, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic damaged the global tourism sector and the managers and marketers will need to quickly and efficiently adapt to this new scenario presenting ahead of them: safety measures, overall less and more domestic costumers. In this context, how can travel influencers help in creating digital destination marketing campaigns?

1.4.1 Influencers after Covid – 19

With flights, events and trips canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic, travel influencers have not only lost their primary source of income but they have also found themselves without the possibility of creating the content their audience follows them for: no travel, no pictures. Moreover, as data presented in the paragraph above have shown, some people will not take any trips in the following

months and as the coronavirus has caused a shift away from the demand for glamorous and luxurious lifestyle, if this will reflect in an increased reduction of interest in travelling due to health and economic concerns, this could translate in a further loss of jobs and income for the niche of travel influencers. Launch Metrics has analyzed the different ways in which influencers have tried to cope with the difficulties of content creation and it has found out that while the more criticized were the ones who have kept posting fancy travel pictures without any mention to the sanitary emergency whatsoever, the ones that saw more success were those who showed their transition and adaptation from the “globetrotter” lifestyle to the new “stay at home” life.

“Covid-19 has decimated any in-negotiation partnerships I had brewing. The travel industry has obviously taken a huge hit, so direct marketing organizations, tourism boards, and leisure tourism across the board are struggling and therefore affecting my business too, just as their recovery will affect my recovery. In terms of content, everything I do now acknowledges in some way that we are living in the time of Covid-19. Anything else would be completely tone-deaf. So, I still talk about my travels—past travels, why travel is important to me, how I think travel will change after all of this—but I approach it in a way that is sensitive and understanding to the time. And now, more than ever, I make sure that any content I produce is positive and optimistic. The world is so full of anxiety, sudden changes, fear, and pointing fingers right now. It’s important to me that my platform is a place that people can leave feeling better than when they come.” Stated travel influencer and creator of “Packs Light”, Gabby Beckford.

Without any doubts, the influencer-niche hit the hardest by the coronavirus pandemic is the travel influencers, as with non-essential travels canceled, their possibility to create fresh, appealing content has been almost completely shut down (Influencer Intelligence, 2020). However, the world of influencers could actually seize some opportunities from the social changes generated from the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, Facebook and Instagram’s usage has seen an increase of 40% since the Covid-19 begin in mid March and nearly 80% of influencers reported higher engagement from their followers (Travel Mindset, 2020).

Jade Broadus is the Vice President of Travel Mindset’s - one of the largest influencer marketing agency that connects influencers with travel brands to create campaigns and contents – and she has stated that on the basis of data analyzed, *“people now are on their phones more than ever – anxious, bored, looking for reassurance and inspiration – influencers may have something of an opportunity.”* Struggling to create content to interact with their audience, some influencers have “re-invented” themselves, focusing on promoting local business and attraction as opposed to the usual appealing overseas adventures. The pause period that travels and tourism are undergoing could be exploited by

the professionals of the sector to re-think about their marketing strategies and be ready to target efficiently the customers who firstly will visit their destination. Data predict that the recovery of the tourism sector will be local and that it will be important to target the drive market (defined as “potential travellers within driving distance of a city, port or attraction”): 46% of travellers will take more regional trips near their home this year and 38% more road trips (Destination Analysts, 2020). Travel Mindset’s Webinar “The three stage of recovery: how to use influencer marketing after Covid-19” suggests that in light of the above explained insights provided by research on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the travel market, engaging with influencers who are followed by the right target audience could be a useful and effecting marketing tool for promoting destinations, as their follower base looks at them for reassurance and inspiration. The Webinar highlights the importance of collaboration over competition: as road trips will likely be the most preferred holiday choice, destinations need not to see nearby attraction as a threat but rather as allies: by collaborating, they could benefit by cutting down advertising costs. In this sense, influencers could be used to create and spread possible road trip itineraries within and among cities which will show how they are reopening in safety and will include all the collaborating destinations, increasing awareness of them as a great addition into travellers’ holiday plans.

2. Chapter 2 “Literature review”

2.1 Celebrity endorsement in advertising

Celebrities have been used as endorsers for products since the end of the 19th century (Erdogan, 1999). Already in 1979, one in every six commercials displayed a celebrity and that percentage grew of 25% in 2001 (Erdogan et. Al, 2001). As provided by McCracken (1989), one of the most cited definitions of a celebrity endorser is “any person who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition to endorse consumer goods or services by appearing with it in an advertisement”. Moreover, he defines celebrity endorsement as a promotional tool whereby celebrities give their opinions, act as spokespersons or simply are associated with a product/brand. When consumers make a purchase, their decisions on what to buy are usually, on some levels, influenced by the so called opinion leaders. In the words of Godey (2016), opinion leaders can be defined as individuals who have a great amount of influence over other people’s decision making processes, attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, the people who look for information or advices from those considered opinion leaders are called “opinion seekers” (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1990) and they also help the spreading of the obtained information to other costumers (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). According to Leal, Hur – Meyll & de Paula Pessoa (2014) opinion leaders should have at least one of these characteristics:

- be considered as an expert on a product or service;
- be an active member of an online community;
- participate with high frequency and make substantial contributions;
- be regarded by other users as having good taste in relation to purchase decisions;

Goldenberg, Lehmann, Smidlowksi & Barak (2006) summarized the concept of opinion leader as a person that could either have a wide knowledge on a particular topic (“expert”) or who has many connections with others (“social connector”). On a global level, marketers have long turned to celebrities as opinion leaders. Celebrities are considered effective opinion leaders as they have a large share of followers and huge influence over them (Fong & Yazdanifard, 2014). Opinion leadership plays a key role in new product adoption and diffusion of related information (Wu, 2013) so it is has been recognized as an essential element in marketing communications (Tsang & Zhou, 2005). Mostly, literature on celebrity endorsement in advertising has focused on:

- a) The impact of celebrity endorsement and the threats and benefits that could derive from it;
- b) Celebrity endorser selection strategies

Research have identified a number of both benefits and risks which are summarized in figure 2.1 and figure 2.2 below.

From an analysis of the academic literature on the topic, there is general agreement among scholars on the benefits provided by celebrity endorsement (Yang, 2018). They have been summarized by Glover (2009) as capturing an audience's attention, adding credibility, increasing ad recall, achieving synergies between the product brand and the personal brand of the celebrity and increasing brand recognition.

Figure 2.1: Benefits of a celebrity endorsement strategy

Benefits	References
Increased attention to advertisements and higher recall rate	Atkin and Block (1983), Erdogan and Baker (2000), Friedman and Friedman (1979), Hunter (2009), Kamins <i>et al.</i> (1989), O'Mahony and Meenaghan (1997), Seno and Lukas (2007)
Favorable attitudinal responses such as attitude toward the advertisement and attitude toward the product/brand	Amos <i>et al.</i> (2008), Atkin and Block (1983), Choi and Rifon (2012), Freiden (1984), Kamins <i>et al.</i> (1989)
Stronger emotional ties between consumers and the endorsed brand	Doss (2011), Friedman and Friedman (1979)
Favorable behavioral responses, including purchase intentions and actual purchase behaviors	Atkin and Block (1983), Friedman and Friedman (1979), Malik and Guptha (2014)
Salient personality and appeal of the product/brand transferred from the celebrity endorser	Dickenson (1996)
Global market expansion	Erdogan (1999)
Higher stock price and other financial benefits	Agrawal and Kamakura (1995), Farrell <i>et al.</i> (2000), Mathur <i>et al.</i> (1997), Russell <i>et al.</i> (2005)

(Source: Yang, “Star Power: the evolution of celebrity endorsement research”, 2018)

Concerning the risks associated with celebrity endorsement in advertising, empirical evidence show that negative information about the celebrity endorser can lead consumers to create negative perceptions of the endorsed brand and also decreased sales or market value (Knittel & Stango, 2014). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that such a risk could hit more new or unfamiliar brand than well-established ones because for new brands, the primary attribute on which consumers form their attitudes and evaluations of the brand is the celebrity endorser's image as they use it to form an associative memory link between the endorser and the brand (Yang, 2018). Another major threat identified is the so called “vampire effect”: when a celebrity's image and the endorsed product do not match, finding it difficult to associate the meaning of the product with the celebrity endorser, consumer's attention is directed to the celebrity rather than the advertised product/brand (Erdogan & Baker, 2000)

Figure 2.2: Risks of a celebrity endorsement strategy

Risks	References
Celebrity image change, waning popularity, public controversy/scandal	Klebba and Unger (1983), Knittel and Stango (2014), Till and Shimp (1998), Ziegel (1983)
Vampire effect (i.e. the celebrity overshadows the endorsed product/brand)	Erdogan (1999), Erdogan and Baker (2000), Evans (1988), Rossiter and Percy (1987)
Over-endorsement/over-exposure	Cooper (1984), Graham (1989), Kim and Sung (2013), Mowen and Brown (1981), Tripp <i>et al.</i> (1994)
Changes in consumer tastes or resistance to celebrity endorsement	Armbruster (2006), Biswas <i>et al.</i> (2006), Doss (2011)

(Source: Yang, “Star Power: the evolution of celebrity endorsement research”, 2018)

Considering the above mentioned risks, still the majority of academics and marketers believe in celebrity endorsement as an effective communication strategy to promote a product/brand and influence consumers’ buying decisions if appropriately used. The key issue is deciding which celebrity to employ (Erdogan & Baker, 2000). The literature dealing with celebrity advertising selection identifies five models that describe celebrity endorsement which are focused on clarifying the relationship between the product endorsed and the celebrity endorser (Karasiewicz & Kowalczyk, 2014). They are the followings:

1. The source credibility model;
2. The match – up model;
3. The meaning transfer model;
4. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM);
5. The Dual Entertainment Path Model

2.1.1 The source credibility model

The focus of “*the source credibility*” model is on the celebrity endorser as the source of a message, claiming that the communication source has an important influence on message receptivity (Erdogan, 1999): this model asserts that the effectiveness of a message depends on consumer’s perceived level of *expertise* of an endorser (Solomon 1996). In fact, Goldsmith (2002) defines “credibility” as “the extent to which the source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject”. “*Expertise*” refers to a celebrity endorser’s perceived level of knowledge, experience or skills related to the endorsed product/brand (Erdogan, 1999). It must be highlighted that even if a celebrity is not a real expert on the endorsed product, if

he/she is perceived to be a valid source of information, the endorsement message will be more persuasive and will generate more favorable reactions (e.g. favorable attitudes toward the product and higher purchase intentions) (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1990); the expertise level depends on the target audience's perceptions (Ohanian, 1990). The source credibility model has been applied in different research over the years and the results have all confirmed the model as a reliable determinant of advertising effectiveness: Speck, Schumann and Thompson (1988) found out that expert celebrities produce a higher recall of the displayed product information compared to non-expert celebrities endorsers; Ohanian (1991) stated that the "perceived expertise" of the celebrity endorser was a significant factor in explaining the consumer's intention to purchase the endorsed product.

2.1.2 The match – up model

The match-up model - also known as the "Product Match-up Hypothesis"- is based on the hypothesis that the effects of using a celebrity in marketing communications depends on the degree of perceived fit between the brand and image of the endorser celebrity; it states that for effective advertising, there should be congruency between the celebrity image and the product endorsed by him/her (Kamins 1990). In other words, consumers should perceive a 'fit' between the brand (brand name, attributes) and celebrity image for effective campaign results (Misra & Beatty 1990). Moreover, research report that on the consumer side, a match between the celebrity endorsers and products being endorsed is expected (O'Mahony & Meenaghan 1997). In the case of lack of it, consumers may believe that the celebrity has been somehow "bought" in the sense that has received large amount of money to be the endorser of the product or service (Erdogan, 1999). Another negative effect that can result from the absence of this connection was identified by Evans (1988) who claimed that if celebrities do not have a distinct relationship to the product they are endorsing, this could produce the so called "vampire effect" which refers to when the audience remembers the celebrity, but not the product or service. Compared to the other four, this model has received the largest amount of applications in academic research with the measurement of communication effects rather than financial gains as its main purpose. They have all reported Empirical evidence confirming that high congruency between a product and a celebrity results in more effective advertising in the sense of favorable attitudes toward the product/brand, higher purchase intentions and willingness to pay higher prices (Erdogan, 1999; Kalra & Goodstein, 1998; Misra & Beatty, 1990; Still & Busler, 1998).

2.1.3 The meaning transfer model

The meaning transfer model was developed by McCracken (1989): it consists of three stages, namely "culture", "endorsement" and "consumption". At the first stage – "culture" - a celebrity is defined by all characteristics that correspond to his/her image in the media through work performed, statements, roles played, etc. At the second stage – "endorsement" – different associations with the celebrity

endorser are transferred to the endorsed product (brand); here the main issue is to select a celebrity which shares those properties of the brand that are to be strengthened or created through advertising activities. At the third stage – “consumption” – the chosen meanings linked to a celebrity are transferred from the product to the consumer (McCracken, 1989). In this model, the choice of celebrity to advertise a brand should take into account the link between the celebrity’s image and the chosen attributes of the brand. In a way, this model is a significant extension of the match-up model as it emphasizes not only the celebrity-brand match-up but also the choice of meanings to be transferred from the celebrity to the advertised brand (Karasiewicz & Kowalczyk, 2014). Fowles (1996) stated that the rationale behind advertisers' choice of hiring celebrities as endorsers is that people consume images of celebrities and thus they hope that people will also consume products associated with celebrities. Necessary conditions for this model to produce effective advertising results include long-term cooperation between the celebrity and the company and the respect of the “exclusivity rule”: the chosen celebrity must advertise that one brand only (Karasiewicz & Kowalczyk, 2014).

2.1.4 The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is based on the assumption that recipients' responses to an advertising message (including use of a celebrity) vary in different ways depending on situational factors such as the type of purchasing decisions, the medium, the message reception time, etc. (Hung, 2014). Specifically, two situations related to the advertising message reception can be identified: high and low involvement. In the “high involvement” case, the advertising message is received in an elaborate and systematic way, probably leading to a permanent change in the recipient’s attitudes because recipients actually pay attention to the content of the advertising message. Thus, here, it is key that the endorser should be an expert on the given topic and that the message shared should contain arguments of quality (Petty, Cacioppo, Goldman, 1981). In the “low involvement” case, the consumer receives the message peripherally, which diminishes its influence power on attitudes. Since recipients with low involvement focus on superficial characteristics of the message, an important element is the attractiveness of the celebrity endorser (Karasiewicz & Kowalczyk, 2014).

2.1.5 The Dual Entertainment Path Model

Similarly to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, in the Dual Entertainment Path Model two situations can be distinguished: high and low involvement of the recipient. In the first situation, aspirational motives are the key: the consumer has strong aspirational motives; he/she wants to be as the celebrity and live by his or her lifestyle. Thus in this situation, a strong parasocial bond with the celebrity appears, which is determined by emotional investment. The “low involvement” scenario is linked with playful motives and less strong parasocial bonds with the celebrity; here, the key for creating and attracting the recipient’s attention is to avoid boring them and create a way for escaping from real life through

imagination and dreams (Hung, 2014). Hence, unlike the ELM model, which is based on a cognitive approach, the Dual Path Model revolves around the recipient's experience. Moreover, when analyzing the recipients, it should be taken into account that while the celebrity's fans are driven by both aspirational and playful motives to engage in celebrity sponsored experience, non fans are mostly driven by only playful reasons (Hung, 2014).

2.2 Celebrity endorsement in tourism advertising

Unlike in the general marketing literature, scholars started investigating celebrity endorsement in tourism relatively late (from 2000s) and did not pay much attention to it. Most researchers have used or adapted one or more of the five above explained endorser selection models and focused on testing their efficacy on the tourism and hospitality fields instead of conceptualizing a unique model in order to capture all the specific characteristics of this sectors. Specifically, the models more largely applied were the "*Source Credibility*" model and the "*Match-up*" model (Yang, 2018). In light of this, as tourism differs from tangible, material products due to its intangible nature, the problem arises as it is not clear whether those findings and principles revealed in the general marketing literature can be directly applied to the hospitality and tourism context. Moreover, as Friedman and Friedman (1979) showed in their study, different products should be advertised by different types of endorsers for the message to reach recipients in accordance with the intended purpose. Jolly (2016) research results showed that celebrity endorsement may help consumers to reduce choices from the many destinations they have in mind to visit. Therefore, a celebrity endorser helps to create awareness but this does not mean that this awareness is directly translated into a visit to the destination. In fact, as the study explains, the people surveyed do not fully agree with the statement that they will for sure visit a destination if it is endorsed by a celebrity. However, it has been found that if a celebrity is the endorser of a tourism advertising, consumers will quickly recall and recognize the endorsed destination and its features. Different studies on the topic explained the benefits provided by celebrity endorsement in the travel and tourism industry: Van Der Veen and Song (2010) studied the effects of celebrities endorsements in tourism printing advertising and found that the use of influential people to promote a destination by DMOs was done mostly to "differentiate a destination from its competitors and to direct awareness towards its unique selling proposition". Aronson, Wilson and Akert (1999) outlined that if a travel program is presented by a celebrity this would result in a high degree of receptiveness to that travel destination. Moreover, Glover (2009) confirmed that celebrity involvement is an effective method in stimulating tourists visits to a destination and - on the same research topic trend – Lee, Scott and Kim (2008) study showed that celebrity involvement may act as a "catalyst" for traveler's desire to visit a destination. After doing an extensive review of literature, the determinants of the selection of a celebrity endorsement for a tourist destination were brought under eight heads (Jolly, 2016): expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, transfer of meaning, familiarity, likability, match between

celebrity and product and physical attractiveness.

2.2.1 Expertise

According to Erdogan (1999), expertise refers to the degree to which a communicator is perceived as a source of valid assertions. A source's expertise derives from the knowledge and experience of the spokesperson in the related field. Till (2004) stated that for an endorsement to be effective, the celebrity endorser must have an acceptable level of expertise; it may include competence or qualification of the celebrity. Pornpitakpan (2003) affirms that perceived expertise is created by many factors; first among them is the celebrity experience. The importance of expertise is clearly true in the case of tourism and hospitality endorsements because consumers are unaware of the services provided, so an additional opinion of an expert helps them to make a buying decision. In fact, according to Van der Veen (2008), a celebrity endorsement strategy is most effective when the endorsed products or services are high in social/psychological risk for the consumer.

2.2.2 Trustworthiness

Erdogan (2000) provides a definition of trustworthiness as "honesty, integrity, and believability of an endorser as perceived by the target audience. Trustworthiness can be the confidence and the acceptance the listener has towards the celebrity and the message in the advertisement". Hence, consumer consumption experience on some level depends on consumers' perception of how trustworthy the endorser celebrity is, as trustworthiness is built on consumer's association with the endorsed brand (Silvera & Benedikte 2003). Trustworthiness is very much needed in tourism destination endorsements as the transactions in this sector mostly depend on the quality of the experience provided. Hence, as the quality of an experience can be assessed not before, but only during or after consumption, a celebrity endorsing the tourist destination will help in building reliability for the destination even if the consumer has not visited the destination yet (Jolly, 2016).

2.2.3 Similarity

According to McGuire (1985), similarity is described as "a supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver of the message". In other words, it refers to the degree to which an endorser matches an audience in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, etc. It should be taken into account that people tend to prefer individuals who share common features and characteristics with them (Shimp 2010): people tend to be more easily influenced by an endorser similar to them. In light of this, destination marketers should use celebrity endorsers similar to the target audience. In fact, as Erdogan (1999) states, if the celebrity and the consumer have common factors such as shared interests or lifestyles, a better cohesiveness is created. Celebrities are also used by companies to try to create empathy, as empathy

might result in a bond between the celebrity and the consumer. Also, similarity between the endorser and the consumer increases the level of persuasiveness of the advertisement message (Belch & Belch, 2001).

2.2.4 Transfer of meaning

On the basis of the “Transfer of Meaning” model developed by McCracken (1989) and described in paragraph 2.1, the concept of transfer of meaning is based on the idea that celebrity endorsers bring their own figurative meaning to the endorsed product and the endorsement process. He further argues that it is through advertising that the meanings of the personality of the celebrity endorser are transferred to the products endorsed.

2.2.5 Familiarity

As described by Erdogan (1999), familiarity is the knowledge that a celebrity endorser obtained through exposure. The more familiar the consumer is with the celebrity, the more positive the effect of the endorsement will be because of “the mere exposure effect”: consumers, who are more familiar with a celebrity and are more exposed to him/her, will like the celebrity more (Zajonc, 1968). Therefore, companies should be careful in the choice of their endorser as they need to consider the extent to which consumers are familiar with the celebrity chosen.

2.2.6 Likability

The concept of likeability was investigated by McGuire (1985). He defines it as being the “affection for the source as a result of the source’s physical appearance and behavior” and states that when people like the celebrity they will also like the accompanying brand. Therefore, brands should select celebrities who are liked by a large share of their target consumers for commercials and advertisements.

2.2.7 Match between celebrity and the product

The match-up between an endorser and an endorsed product consists of two dimensions: the perceived fit and the image of the celebrity (Misra, 1990). As Kotler (1997) study found out, advertising through a celebrity who has a considerable high congruent image with the product endorsed leads to greater advertiser and celebrity believability compared to a less congruent product/celebrity image: when a celebrity has a good image and fit to the product and company, this will lead to greater believability of the message spread. Also, the presence of the match will result in a better recall of the commercial and brand information (Rockney & Green, 1979). As the match – up has been found of major importance, this model has been applied in the context of destinations: in Jolly (2016) research, the results have shown that the match between the destination and the celebrity in an advertising makes

consumer perceive the advertisement as more appealing and authentic. In that case it was found that as the destination to be promoted was Bangalore, it was better to select an endorser who is a native of there.

2.2.8 Physical attractiveness

Different studies (Caballero & Pride, 1984; Chaiken 1979; Kahle & Homer, 1985) have reported the existence of a link between a celebrity's physical attractiveness and a consumers' attitude change. Viewers have been found more able to easily recall and recognize celebrities based on their attractiveness. Attractiveness does not only refer to physical appearance but also refers to concepts such as intellectual skills, personality properties, way of living, athletic performances and skills of endorsers (Erdogan, 1999). Considering physical attractiveness, Cohen & Golden (1972) suggests that a celebrity's appearance determines the effectiveness of the advertisement as consumers want to look like the endorser and identify themselves with him/her. Jolly (2016) study reported that physical appearance has little or no impact on the decision – making process and that when selecting an endorser, brands should take into consideration that when a match between brand and celebrity is present, the attractiveness factor becomes less important. Therefore, companies should not invest on celebrities only because of their physical beauty.

It needs to be highlighted that in the recent years the celebrity culture has changed as it occurs on different channels like social networks and photo and video sharing platforms (Singh, 2016). Therefore, compared to the times when social media did not occupy such a prevalent role in daily people's lives and celebrities were just paid to star in advertising campaigns or television commercials, nowadays the concept of celebrity endorsement needs to be extended to social media as well (Williams, 2013).

2.3 Destination Marketing

Wahab, Crampon and Rothfield (1976) offered one of the first definitions of tourism destination marketing: *“the management process through which the National Tourist Organisations and/or tourist enterprises identify their selected tourists, actual and potential, communicate with them to ascertain and influence their wishes, needs, motivations, likes and dislikes, on local, regional, national and international levels, and to formulate and adapt their tourist products accordingly in view of achieving optimal tourist satisfaction thereby fulfilling their objectives”*.

As reported by the UNWTO (2011), Destination marketing is nowadays recognized as a pillar of the future growth and sustainability of tourism destinations in an increasingly competitive market for tourists on a global scale. From the first conference held in 1990, eleven other academic conferences have focused on destination marketing. Of these, the importance of WTO's 2002 think tank on destination competitiveness lies in the fact that this was the first time practitioners and scholars had met in a WTO forum on destination management (WTO, 2002). Following that, the WTO has organized other five international conferences about destination marketing. Also, in 2012 was launched the “Journal of Destination Marketing and Management”, which was the first journal completely dedicated to the topic. However, before that, four articles in the 2011 Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management special issue (Volume 20, Issue 7) were concerned with DMOs, as were most of the papers in the Journal of Travel Research (Volume 38, Issue 1) (Pike & Page, 2014). Within the broader area of tourism marketing, the growing number of published research concerning destination marketing represents the acknowledgment of a significant field which has evolved into a distinct paradigm (Bowen, Fidgeon & Page, 2014). Its academic and practical relevance is reinforced by four key propositions associated with global tourism: first, almost all aspects of tourism take place at destinations (Leiper, 1979); second, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2002) stated that destinations were “the fundamental unit of analysis in tourism”; third, destinations have come out as the biggest brands in the travel industry (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2002), and fourth, a large number of nations, states and cities have funded a Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) in order to compete and attract visitors to their location. Therefore, the concepts of “destination” and “destination marketing” have been acknowledged as a focal issue of tourism research (Fyall, Garrod & Wang 2012), and the latter is commonly linked with the operational activities undertaken in the business of attracting visitors to destinations. However, there is not a popularly accepted definition of the term “destination”. Leiper (1979) model's contribution is acknowledged by most scholars: in his words, “a destination is a place where the consumer travels to temporarily, from the region they reside in, creating a tourism flow (demand) in both time and space.” Starting from this definition, the subsequent approaches to the destination concept have deepened the study and expanded the

distinction between the demand and supply in the tourism context, identifying in DMOs a critical player with the aim of promoting the destination and better connecting the supply and demand sides of tourism to maximize the use of destination resources (Pike, 2008). Moreover, the meaning of “destination” might be assessed quite differently whether it is seen from the supply (DMOs) or demand (travelers) perspective: for DMOs, a destination is determined by a political boundary, ranging from a continent, a country, a state, to a city or town (Pike & Page, 2014). For travelers, a destination might be intended as a geographical area in which there are some specific tourism resources (Ryan, 1991). In light of this, as Dredge (1999) suggested, any attempt to conceptualize “destination” must be flexible and adaptable as it needs to suit different locations and markets. According to Middleton and Clarke (2001), the tourism offering can be seen as a “series of experiences” and thus a destination can be defined as a “provider of experiences”; overall the tourism offering might be divided into five main components: destination attractions; destination facilities and services; accessibility of the destination (including transport); images, brands and perceptions; price to the visitor (Soteriades, 2012). Therefore, destination marketing involves different stakeholders and a complex product offer (Machlouzarides, 2010); because of that, destinations are among the most difficult entities to manage and market (Pike, 2004). In light of this, in the words of Soteriades (2012) “destination marketing represents the systematic, coherent and consistent effort of DMOs to develop, formulate, and implement their strategies in order to achieve their main goal: making their tourism offering an unforgettable experience for their visitors”. Mostly, the destination marketing literature has to date been concerned with justification of theories adapted from the wider literature in the fields of psychology, management, economics, marketing, geography, and sociology, with few attempts aimed at the development of a theory more concerned on the issue and in line with the earlier evolution of tourism research (Pike & Page, 2014). As an example of this, the traditional marketing concept of the four P’s, “product”, “price”, “promotion” and “place” - which was developed by Harvard University Professor Neil Borden (1964) - has been adapted in tourism marketing to the 7 Ps or 8 Ps which in addition included “partnerships”, “people”, “programming” and “packaging” (Morrison 2010). While destination marketers might have an active research interest in each of the Ps, DMOs actually have limited influence over them, exception made for “promotion”; indeed, promotion of the destination by DMOs is in practice the only field where destination marketers have control. However, there are a number of studies such as Ashworth and Voogd (1990) and Richard and Palmer (2010) which argued that because of the uniqueness of destinations, destination marketing could not be treated simply as the process of translating conventional marketing theories and practice derived from the marketing of goods and services. It needs to be considered that since the destination marketing literature research begun (in the early 1970s), many transformations have occurred within the tourism sector. Among these there are: the introduction of jet aircraft, privatization and the outsourcing of government services, global recognition of sustainability issues, explosion in media channels, globalization,

information communications technologies (ICT) and social media networking, the rise of independent travellers and travel packages, the rise of short breaks and emergence of low cost carriers and last minute discount pricing, and resurgence of cruising, backpackers, adventure travellers and ecotourism, dark tourism and medical tourism; and the rise of terrorism and ensuing security measures, all of which have stimulated new research directions on the implications for destinations (Pike & Page, 2014).

2.3.1 Destination Marketing Organizations

A Destination Marketing Organization is an organization responsible for the marketing of an identifiable tourism destination with an explicit geopolitical boundary. In fact the distinction between what the core function of DMOs are requires a fundamental rethink and focus on the underlying principles of marketing and how these are applied at a destination level (Pike & Page, 2014). When put into practice, the tourism destination marketing definition of Wahab, Crampon & Rothfield (1976) has shown to be idealistic: from a managerial point of view, DMOs are limited in what they can do and achieve, destination marketers operate within the following confines as they:

- cannot change the official name or geographic boundary of the place they represent;
- have little if any control over the quality of the actual visitor experience relative to the promise made in marketing communications, including traffic congestion, graffiti, litter and crime;
- have little if any contact with visitors, to enable continued meaningful engagement in the pursuit of repeat patronage and are reliant upon survey feedback and the feedback from social media;
- have little control over the host community's acceptance of, and attitude towards visitors, particularly the role of tourism and civic pride as a mechanism to create a tourism-friendly environment;
- have little control over access issues such as bilateral airline agreements and development of airport, port, rail and road transport infrastructure;
- have little influence over the management of the natural environment and development/maintenance of land use zoning, infrastructure and superstructure;
- have no control over stakeholders' product development, pricing or marketing communications apart from when joint promotions are undertaken;
- are reliant on a small set of powerful intermediaries for packaging and distribution;

- arguably most importantly, are at the mercy of political masters and stakeholders for continuity of funding.

(Pike & Page, 2014)

In light of this, the destination management issues are not under the responsibility of DMOS but under the jurisdiction of government departments and ministries, conservation groups, developers, and private sector umbrella lobbying organizations (Pike & Page, 2014). Rather, the actual role of DMOs is related to those key concepts founded in the definition of Marketing: “a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need through creating and exchanging products and value with others (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 1999). Hence, the focus of DMO activities revolves around the development of marketing communication strategies aimed at match internal (destination) resources with the opportunities presented by the market (Pike and Page, 2014). It needs to be highlighted that while the first DMOs was established around one hundred years before the beginning of the academic field of destination marketing research, the first journal article on the topic was written by Matejka in 1973, the first published destination marketing text was by Wahab, Crampon and Rothfield only in 1976, while the first comprehensive review was by Pike (2008). For what concerns the development of DMOs, it is generally recognized that the first destination travel guides were printed in France in the 16th century (Sigaux, 1966). The first formal promotion agencies were born at a local level. After that, in 1901, the world’s first national tourism office (NTO) was established in New Zealand (McClure 2004), and in 1903 the first state tourism office (STO) was launched in Hawaii (Choy, 1993). The post – war period saw a considerable growth of the number of DMOs; many of those established their marketing role in the 1960s and 1970s due the rise of different phenomena such as the package holiday, the introduction of jet aircraft and the rise of the holiday brochure (Laws, 1997). Moreover, during 1980s and 1990s the number of new DMOs kept growing as more and more locations recognized the strength of a coordinated approach to destination promotion. Nowadays the exact number of DMOs globally is unknown, however in 2008 McKercher estimated that they were more than 10,000 (Pike, 2008). Pike (2004) reports that the rationale behind the establishment of a DMO was usually to enhance a destination competitiveness. In fact, it has been recognized that one of the reasons for which there is a need for DMOs is that the majority of tourism businesses are small and family- owned, employing less than ten people (Thomas et al 2011). All of these businesses are competing with each other and against bigger product brands that have budgets larger than any DMO. Hence, an external coordinator helps gathering all the destination resources in order to create a bigger collective impact in the market. As consumer have an enormous number of destination choices available, DMOs have the mission to increase a destination competitiveness and enable the local and non-local stakeholders to prosper: as it has been stated, the focus of DMO activities is designing and implementing marketing communication strategies that match destination

resources with market opportunities (Pike and Page, 2014). For “destination resource” it is meant, in the words of Spotts (1997) “anything that plays a major role in attracting visitors to a destination”. According to Barney’s (1996) resource-based theory of competitive advantage, to be considered a source of comparative advantage a resource must be:

- ‘valuable’ in terms of either reducing costs or increasing revenue;
- ‘rare’, relative to rivals in the competitive set for a given travel situation;
- It should not be ‘imitatable’ by rivals;
- the firm must be ‘organised’ to maximise marketplace impact;

However, research have shown that in the field of destination marketing there is still a lack of studies aimed at developing a unique model to monitor the extent to which destination marketing by DMOs actually works. Generally, three themes are: i) visitor metrics, ii) marketing communication effectiveness, and iii) branding performance (Pike & Page, 2014).

2.4 Determinants of influencers selection in destination marketing

The rise of social media has contributed to the emergence of the so called “Social Media Influencers” (SMIs) who, as reported by Kaplan and Haenlein (2012), are also referred to as “Internet Celebrities”: they enjoy a high level of social presence and thus have a strong influence on their audience’s behaviors. By creating and sharing their original content on their social media accounts, they influence and shape people’s attitudes (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011). Even if a relatively young phenomenon, Influencer Marketing could be considered as a well-established part of travel brand’s marketing strategies worldwide. Peltier (2018) reports that the tourism industry is the eight biggest spender sector on influencer marketing. As with traditional celebrities, consumers pay attention to and trust the opinion of SMIs, making them online opinion leaders in many cases and in different fields (Pratt, 2018). Moreover, as today’s interactions happen not only offline but also and mostly online, the power of opinion leaders might be even greater (Turcotte, 2015). In the context of tourism and travels, influencer marketing builds on the importance of word – of – mouth online, specifically “electronic word – of – mouth” (Litving, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). In fact, as blogs rapidly became important sources for information seeking, tourism marketers started working with bloggers as they recognized their value as powerful marketing tools (Lin & Huang, 2006). As reported by Glover (2009), when applied to tourism, influential individuals can be effective tools in attracting more or

different types of visitors to a given destination. In addition, he argues that compared to direct endorsement of destinations by DMOs, influencer marketing has brought more positive results in this industry. Confirming these findings, Unzuñdglu and Misci (2014) argue that the use of social media influencers has been proven to be more effective than traditional advertising in this field. The recent findings of Fermentia – Serra and Gretzel (2020) reveal that influencer marketing applied in tourism and travel context provides DMOs with an opportunity to gain back control over branding and promoting a destination while fully taking advantage of the power of e-WoM spread on social media. Influencer Marketing is a key marketing tool for destinations as it helps create positive e-WoM around their unique offerings and increase the target demographic travel interest because, as explained in chapter one, the age group which travels the most – Generations Y and Z – are strongly affected by social media influencers (Xu & Pratt, 2018). However, Gretzel (2018) reported that in the travel and tourism industry influencer marketing has been mostly applied by international firms while its use by DMOs – even if it has seen an increase – is still far behind. Moreover, the travel domain lacks research regarding influencer marketing (Gretzel, 2018): specifically, what is needed is a comprehensive portrayal of how decisions related to the selection and employment of influencers are made (Carter, 2016) as few studies have focused on the determinants affecting influencer marketing choices in destination marketing (Choi, 2015). Therefore, this study aims at filling this gap by testing whether some of those selected determinants for celebrity endorsement in travel domain would still be influencing people's travel intention when applied to social media influencer selection.

As the literature reviewed has shown, when selecting an endorser for a campaign, it is key that the source is perceived as credible and credibility mostly depends on expertise and trust (Hovland et al., 1953). With regard to expertise, it is important that the celebrity is really an expert in the field and that consumers think and believe a celebrity has expertise (Ohanian, 1990). As research has shown, the level of celebrity expertise will determine its effectiveness (Amos, Holmes & Strutton, 2008). On the basis of these findings, this research aims at deepening the knowledge of the influence of the source expertise factor on consumer destination interest, testing whether the findings related to traditional celebrity endorsement can be applied to influencers as well. Moreover, as a consistent part of the success of influencers is due to them establishing a career in a particular field of interest in which they created their own expert profession (Erz and Christensen, 2018), the expertise factor might be even more relevant for influencers endorsement compared to traditional celebrities. As the domain of the research is travel and tourism, it will test how choosing a travel-related influencer to promote a destination will impact consumer's travel intention. From this:

H1: choosing a travel – related influencer has a positive effect on consumers interest toward the destination.

Taking into account the validated “product match-up hypothesis”, furthermore Van der Veen & Song (2010) stress that native celebrities endorsed, compared to non-natives, perform better in generating positive attitudes to the advertising. Moreover, he argues that the relationship between the local-born celebrity and the destination is unique and cannot be replicated by other destination and that a link between the destination and the chosen testimonial personality can be beneficial in the promotion of that destination. Also Kwon and Vogt (2010) outline the power of this unique link as it can help destinations in creating a unique selling proposition. A study conducted by Pratt in 2018 proved that a high degree of congruence between the social media influencer chosen as endorser’s perceived images and the endorsed destinations’ images will positively influence interest toward the endorsed destination. Therefore, Chan and Lee (2018) suggest that destination marketers should consider native celebrities instead of non-natives for promoting and increasing the destination attractiveness. Therefore, on the basis of these previous research, this study will test whether the choice of a local born influencer will strengthen the relationship between the expertise and interest toward the destination

H2: choosing a local-born influencer will strengthen the effect of expertise on consumer’s interest toward the destination.

2.4.1 Familiarity

Familiarity has been considered one of the eight determinants of celebrity endorsement in tourism (Jolly, 2016) because, as explained by “the mere exposure effect”, consumers who are more exposed and more familiar to a celebrity tend to like her/him more (Zajonc, 1968). Hoekman (2013) stated that the more consumers are familiar with and endorser, the more the positive effect. Following these research, choosing a popular, well-known influencer should lead the campaign to success. Also, Atkin and Block (1983) and Petty (1983) states that celebrity endorsers lead to higher purchase intention than non-celebrity ones. However, a question should be raised on to what extent popularity of the endorser is an important variable in explaining endorser effectiveness. In Schouten, Janessen and Verspaget (2019) study on celebrity versus influencer endorsement advertising, well-known influencers with a large follower base were used, but their results showed that influencers who are relatively less popular may be even more effective endorsers because, compared to more popular influencers, ‘micro-influencers’ may be perceived as more experts in a relatively small field (De Veirman et al, 2017). Hence, in a field-specific domain such as travels, popularity might not be the first criteria to follow when selecting an influencer. On the basis of the previous academic literature, “familiarity” will be considered as a covariate in the main study to see if it may or may not have any significant effect as it might enhance the positive effects on interest toward the destination generated by the other two endorser features.

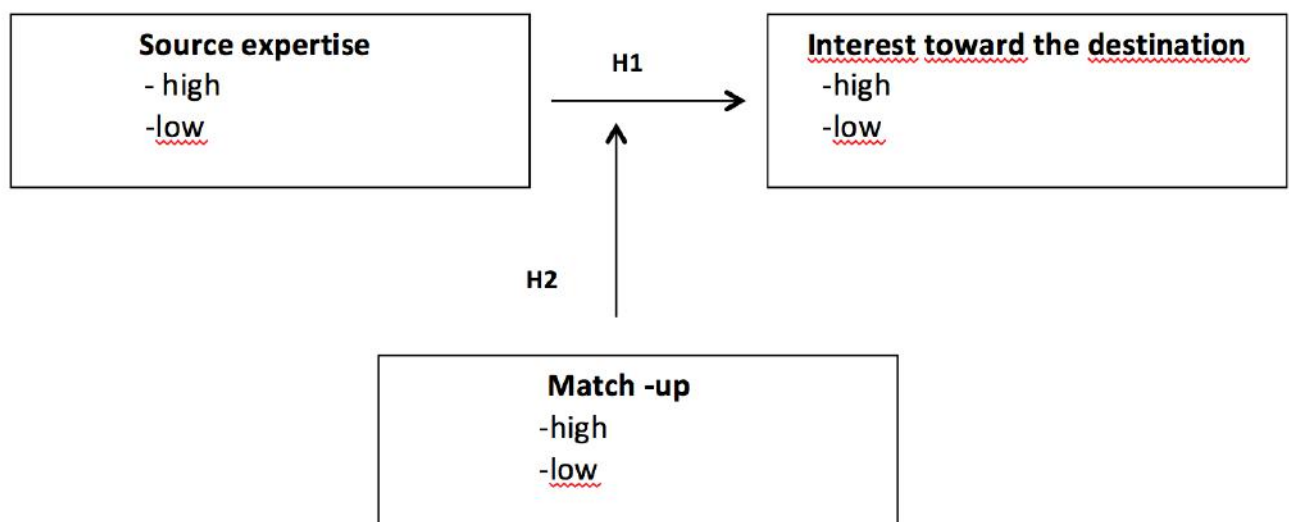
3. Research Methodology

3.1 The Experiment

The aim of the current study is to investigate whether those characteristics which are usually looked for in celebrities when they are selected as endorsers for a product are still applicable to influencers in the context of destination marketing. In particular, because different academics confirmed their importance, “source expertise” and “match – up with the product” are the dimensions under investigation.

To study the topic, an online survey was spread online. The experiment’s conceptual model has a 2 (expertise present; expertise not present) by 2 (match –up present; match –up not present) design, resulting in four experimental conditions. The experiment has a between-subject design where each respondent is randomly exposed to one out of the four scenarios before answering a series of questions. As shown in figure 3.1, for the purpose of this quantitative research two relations are studied: the first investigates whether choosing an expert vs non –expert influencer has a positive effect on consumer’s interest toward the sponsored destination. The second is a moderation relation, where moderation is said to be occurring when a third variable affects the strength of the relationship between two variables (Preacher et al. 2007). In this case, it is studied whether the presence of a match – up between the influencer and the destination (if the influencer is born in the sponsored destination or not) moderates the main relation.

Figure 3.1: Theoretical framework



3.2 Questionnaire description

The questionnaire was created using Qualtrics and was spread among respondents through three main social media platforms: whatsapp, instagram and facebook. All the survey answers were forced in order to avoid the issue of missing values.

After a short presentation of the research topic, respondents were asked to pay attention to the picture that was going to be shown to them, to read the short descriptive text carefully and to take them into consideration when answering the questions that would follow.

Four scenarios are displayed in the survey: each respondent was randomly exposed to only one of them. Above each scenario was written a short descriptive text including the name of the influencer, her topic of influence (travels or fitness) her number of followers, her place of birth (Paris or Madrid) and the place where she is in the picture (Paris or Madrid). The two influencers were chosen through the platform www.starnpage.com which allows to find influencers on the basis of their number of followers and topic of influence. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the travel blogger @detailsofperrine and the fitness blogger @ladyfinisher were selected.

After exposing the participants to the scenarios, in the first part of the survey, 7 –point Likert scales are used to measure how much the respondents perceive the influencer as being an “expert”, how much they perceive there is a match –up between the influencer and the sponsored destination (“please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored destination, 1= not at all; 7=a lot ”) and how much they are familiar with her (“please indicate how familiar you are with the influencer, 1= strongly unfamiliar; 7= strongly familiar”).

After that, in order to measure the effect of the independent (“expertise”) and moderating (“match-up”) variables on the dependent variable “interest toward the destination”, respondents are asked to evaluate whether they agree or not with three statements on a 7 – points Likert scale.

In the last part of the survey, participants are asked to select how they usually look for travel information among the following options: “instagram”, “facebook”, “paper travel guides”, “family and friends”, “travel agencies”, “internet”, “websites”.

The end of the questionnaire includes the demographic questions: “Age”(“1980 – 1995”, “1996 – 2010”, “other”) ; “Nationality”; “Gender” (“male”, “female”, “other”); “Level of education”(“high school”, “Bachelor’s degree”, “Master’s degree”, “Ph.D Or higher”); “Employment” (“employed full - time”, “employed part –time”, “self –employed”, “student”, “unemployed”).

3.2.1 Scales

Expertise

Ohanian's (1990) tri – component celebrity endorser credibility scale was used to measure the survey participant's perceived source expertise. The scale assumes that the source credibility is bound with consumer's evaluations of three endorser's dimensions: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise (Erdogan, 1999). In particular, for the purpose of this study, the “expertise” component of the scale was selected. It was asked to the respondents to evaluate on a five items 7 – points Likert scale (1= low; 7=high) how much they perceived the influencer in the shown scenario as “non expert – expert” ; “non experienced – experienced”; “unknowledgeable – knowledgeable”; “non qualified – qualified”; “unskilled – skilled”. Although already previously validated by literature, as the scale was adapted for this study, its reliability was calculated again through the Cronbach alpha coefficient which resulted in $\alpha = 0.868$, indicating high level of reliability.

Interest toward the destination

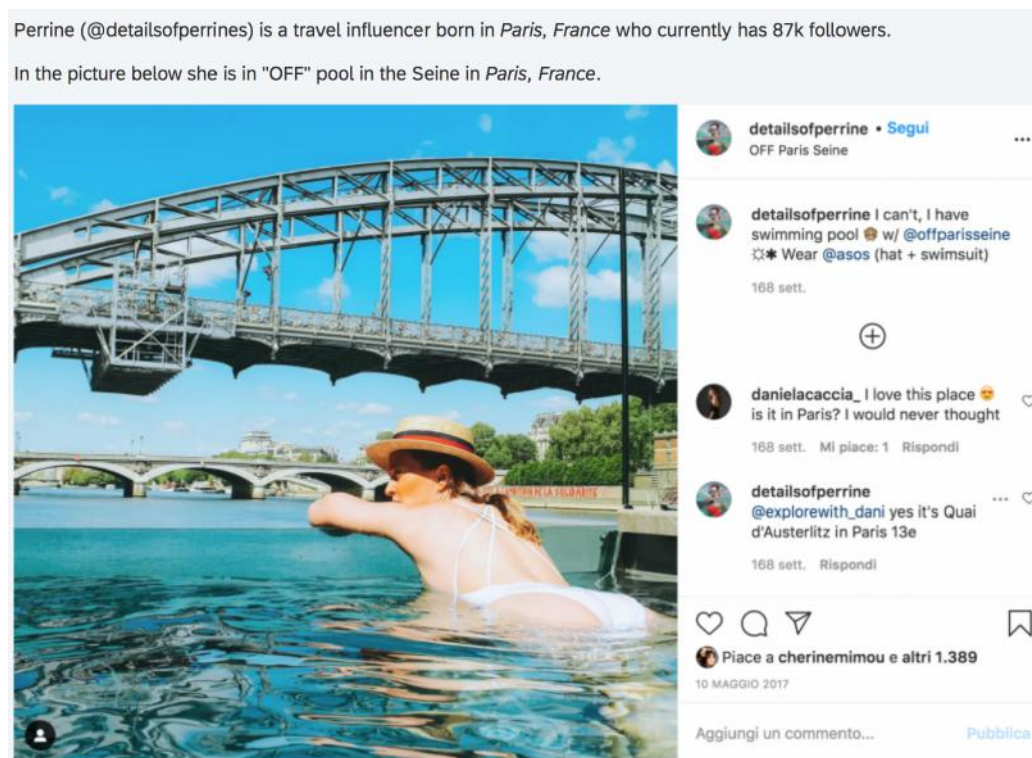
To calculate the dependent variable “interest toward the destination”, a three items 7 –points Likert scale was used. The selected scale was created and validated by Machleit, Madden and Allen (1990) in the context of brand interest and adapted to destinations as it is the focus of this research. The scale appears to properly fit the research topic as the three items were developed with the aim of capturing consumer's curiosity about the brand and their willingness to know more about it after being exposed to three different television advertisements (Machleit, Madden, Allen, 1990). Respondents of the current research questionnaire were asked to evaluate on a 7 – points Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) how much they agree with the following statements: “I am a little curios about this destination”; “I would liked to know more about this destination”; “Learning more about this destination would be useless”.

3.2.2 Scenarios

In the four scenarios the type of influencer (travel blogger or fitness blogger) and the destination (native place of the influencer or not) were manipulated. The conditions were so formulated as to study whether the influencer characteristic “match –up” with the destination (if the blogger is a native or not) and “expertise” (if the blogger is a travel blogger or not) have a significant positive effect on the interest towards the two destinations, Madrid and Paris.

In the first scenario (figure 3.2), the travel blogger @detailsofperrine, who is born in Paris, is in the OFF pool in the Seine. Here both the independent and moderating variables “expertise” and “match – up” are present as the picture shows the travel blogger enjoying a pool day in her place of birth. On spss it was labelled as “matchexp”.

Figure 3.2: survey scenario number one



The second scenario (figure 3.3) is an instagram post of the fitness influencer Laura Lopez (@ladyfinisher), who is born in Madrid, at the Gran Via. In this picture only the moderating variable “match – up” is present as she is in her place of birth, while the independent variable “expertise” is absent as she is not a travel blogger.

On spss, it was labelled as “match_nonexp”.

Figure 3.3: survey scenario number two



The third scenario (figure 3.4) is an instagram post of @detailsofperrine at the Parque del Retiro in Madrid. In this scenario only the variable “expertise” is present as she is a travel blogger but since she is not in her place of birth, but in @ladyfinisher’s, the moderating variable “match –up” is absent. On spss it was labelled as “nonmatch_exp”.

Figure 3.4: survey scenario number three

Perrine (@detailsofperrines) is a travel influencer born in *Paris, France* who currently has 87k followers.

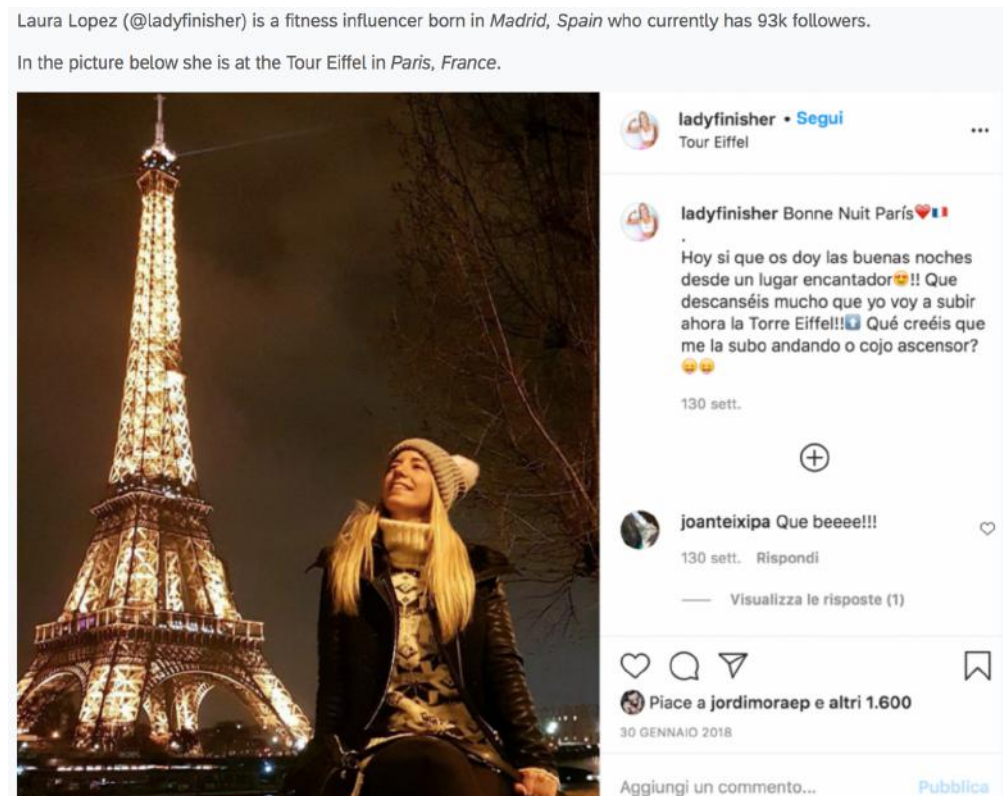
In the picture below she is at Parque Del Retiro in *Madrid, Spain*.



The fourth scenario (figure 3.5) displays @ladyfinisher under the Tour Eiffel in Paris. Here, neither the “match-up” nor the “expertise” variables are present as the influencer is not in her place of birth, rather in Perrine’s, and her topic of social influence is fitness, not travels.

On spss it was labelled as “none”.

Figure 3.5: survey scenario number four



3.3 Data preparation

For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire was distributed among italians belonging to either generation “Y”– the so called “Millennials” – or “Z”.

Out of 243 collected answers, 42 needed to be eliminated because the respondents did not finish completing the survey. As answers were forced, there was no problem of missing values. The variable “nationality” was checked since the answers of non italians needed to be eliminated. However, there were no foreign respondent so the variable only needed to be recoded because different answers such as “italian”, “italiano” “italiana” and “Italy” were given: all of them were recoded as “ita”.

In the end, 201 valid answers were collected.

Also, before proceeding with the analysis, in order to create the variable “destinationinterest” which includes the sum of the means of the three items composing the 7-points Likert scale, the item “Learning more about this destination would be useless” needed to be reversed as it was negative and was recoded as “travel3_reversed”.

3.4 Sample description

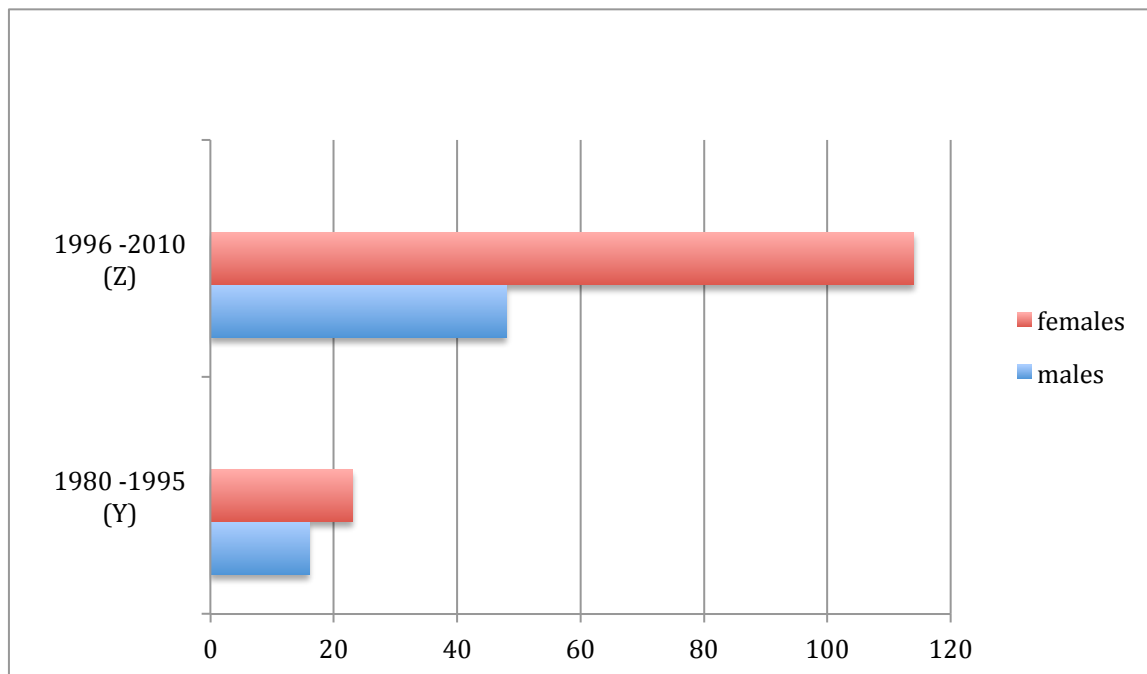
In details, the analyzed sample is composed by 80% (N=162) respondents belonging to “Generation Z” and 20% (N=39) of “Millennials”; 137 females and 64 males.

Moreover, as shown in figure 3.6, “Generation Y” is composed by 16 males and 23 females, while 48 males and 114 females belong to “Generation Z”.

Overall, 74% (N= 149) possesses either a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree and 25% (N = 51) graduated from high school; confirming this, 76% of the sample is a student and 20% is either self – employed, employed part-time or employed full-time.

Moreover, when asked how they usually collect travel information, the most selected answers were “internet” (173 times), “instagram” (74 times) and “family and friends” (74 times) while “paper travel guides”, “facebook” and “travel agencies” were respectively chosen only 32, 12 and 7 times. From these data, it can be inferred that the sample characteristics reflect those generational trends outlined in Chapter 1.

Figure 3.6: Sample distribution by Gender and Age



3.5 Main Analysis

The following subparagraphs will report the analysis conducted in order to test the two hypotheses under investigation. As main analysis, a two – way ANCOVA has been carried out to compare the mean differences between the groups on the dependent variable. Also, as explained in Chapter 2, the role of “familiarity” is still under investigation in the field of the use of influencers in destination marketing. Hence, “familiarity” has been incorporated in the analysis as a covariate to possibly have deeper insights on the data. Also, two manipulations checks were performed in order to examine if the variables “expertise” and “match –up” were perceived differently by the four groups.

3.5.1 Two – way ANCOVA

As the study has a between - subject design, ANOVA’s assumption of the homogeneity of variances should be checked through Levene’s test. As the results are not significant ($p=0.241$), the assumption is met, meaning that the error variances of the dependent variable are equally spread.

The two - way ANCOVA was executed to test whether the presence (vs. absence) of the expertise of the influencer and the presence (vs. absence) of a match – up between the influencer and the sponsored destination had a significant influence on the interest toward the destination. Moreover, the covariate “familiarity” was added to the analysis. The results report that having an expert influencer sponsoring a destination has a significant effect on consumer’s interest toward that destination [$F(1)=24.25$; $p< 0.001$]. However, the presence of a match – up does not moderate this relation [$F(1)=0.062$; $p= 0.804$] and neither there is a direct effect of the moderator on the dependent variable [$F(1)=1.47$; $p= 0.227$]. Hence, no moderation is occurring. Also, the covariate “familiarity” shows no significant effect [$F(1)=0.708$; $p= 0.401$]. From the analysis, H1 is confirmed while H2 is rejected. These results will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

<i>Hypothesis 1</i> : choosing a travel – related influencer has a positive effect on consumers interest toward the destination	<i>Confirmed</i>
<i>Hypothesis 2</i> : choosing a local-born influencer will strengthen the effect of expertise on consumer’s interest toward the destination.	<i>Not Confirmed</i>

3.5.2 Manipulations check for expertise

As the study has a between - subject design, ANOVA's assumption of the homogeneity of variances should be checked through Levene's test. As the results are not significant ($p=0.812$), the assumption is met, meaning that the error variances of the dependent variable are equally spread.

The analysis was carried out to check how the expertise of the influencer was perceived by respondents across each scenario. When looking at the means, it appears that expertise was perceived higher in the scenarios displaying the travel blogger: $M_{nomatchnoexp}= 3,88$; $M_{nomatchexp}= 4,33$; $M_{matchnoexp}= 3,65$; $M_{matchexp}= 4,63$. The results of the ANOVA show that only the scenarios containing the variable "expertise" had a significant effect on the dependent variable [$F(1)=23.85$; $p< 0.001$], while those which displayed the match – up variable did not have a significant effect [$F(1)=0.058$; $p= 0.809$]. These results will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

3.5.3 Manipulations check for match –up

As the study has a between - subject design, ANOVA's assumption of the homogeneity of variances should be checked through Levene's test. As the results are not significant ($p=0.475$), the assumption is met, meaning that the error variances of the dependent variable are equally spread.

The analysis was carried out to check how the match - up was perceived by respondents across each scenario. When looking at the means, it appears that the match-up was perceived higher in the scenarios displaying the travel blogger: $M_{nomatchnoexp}= 3,81$; $M_{nomatchexp}= 4,40$; $M_{matchnoexp}= 4.13$; $M_{matchexp}= 5.21$. The results of the ANOVA show that both "match –up" [$F(1)=7.53$; $p= 0.007$] and "expertise" [$F(1)=16.07$; $p< 0.001$] had a significant effect on the dependent variable. These results will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

4. Discussion

4.1 Conclusion

This study wants to investigate whether those criteria used for the selection of celebrity endorsement for the advertising of products can also be applied to the selection of the influencers to sponsor a destination. Specifically, the aim of this research is to fill the literature gap on how decisions related to the selection and employment of influencers are made as only few studies have focused on the determinants affecting influencer marketing choices in destination marketing (Carter, 2016; Choi, 2015). Hence, it was tested whether some of those selected determinants for celebrity endorsement in travel domain could be adapted to social media influencer selection.

In particular, after an extensive revision of the literature, it has been chosen to test two endorser's characteristics, expertise and match – up, and their effectiveness in generating an interest toward the destination. The study focused on Italian Generation Y and Z and therefore the outputs cannot be generalized on a global level. From the results obtained from the analysis performed, it is possible to draw some important conclusions on the topic.

Firstly, after carrying out a manipulation check, it was confirmed that choosing a travel blogger creates in consumers the perception of an expert endorser compared to a non – travel related blogger. However, differently from what suggested by part of the literature (Van der Veen & Song, 2010; Kwon & Vogt, 2010; Jolly, 2016; Chan & Lee, 2018) the choice of a local – born influencer to endorse a destination does not create the perception of a match – up between the endorser and the endorsed; rather, in addition to the perceived expertise, the choice of a travel blogger created also the perception of a match – up. These non confirmatory results will be further discussed in paragraph 4.1.1.

Secondly, a two – way ANCOVA was performed in order to test the two main hypotheses. The first hypothesis was confirmed, showing that also for influencer selection in destination marketing it is key to select an influencer which is perceived as an expert by the audience in order to generate interest toward the destination; in this case, the choice of the travel blogger @detailsofperrine was successful as respondents who were exposed to the two experimental conditions displaying her showed the highest mean score for the interest toward the two destinations promoted, Paris and Madrid ($M_{expmatch} = 5.0$; $M_{expnomatch} = 4.86$). Moreover, the “expertise” variable - which was recoded as “independent” - showed significant effect on the dependent variable. From this, it can be inferred that the validity of “*the source credibility*” model can be expanded to the field of influencer marketing applied to destination marketing as the above discussed results confirm what the model asserts: also in the case of destination promotion through social media (in this case, an instagram post) the

effectiveness of a message depends on consumer's perceived level of expertise of an endorser (Solomon 1996). Also, as according to Van der Veen (2008), celebrity endorsement strategy are mostly effective when the endorsed products or services are high in social/psychological risk for consumers, this research further highlights the importance of the expertise factor in the case of tourism and hospitality endorsements due to their intangible dimensions.

The second hypothesis was rejected, as the choice of a local – born influencer showed neither a direct effects on consumer's interest toward the destination nor a moderating effect on the relationship between the expertise variable and respondent's interest toward the destination. However, these results provide interesting new insights which should not be ignored and for this they are deeper discussed in the next paragraph.

4.1.1 Discussion of H2

Differently from what expected on the basis of the literature, the hypothesis that “*choosing a local-born influencer will strengthen the effect of expertise on consumer's interest toward the destination*” was rejected. As suggested by Van der Veen & Song (2010), Kwon & Vogt (2010), Jolly (2016) and Chan & Lee (2018), it was chosen an influencer native of the sponsored destination to create a match – up between the endorsed and the endorser as it was believed to increase the level of a destination attractiveness compared to a non –native one. However, the rejection of this hypothesis is a result that needs to be further investigated.

From an empirical point of view, it could be that the descriptive texts above the instagram posts did not manage to highlight the match –up between the influencer and the destination sponsored, even if the native place of the influencer and the place she was in the picture were stated twice in the text. However, it is the topic of influence (travel vs. fitness) that was written at the beginning of the text and this could be the reason why it and not the match –up captured the attention of the respondents. Also, as the survey was distributed online and participants filled it with no supervision, it might have happened that they did not pay the necessary attention while completing it.

From a theoretical perspective, it should be taken into account that there are several fundamental differences between tangible products and the intangible dimensions of the tourism destinations and thus it should be questioned whether findings and principles revealed in the general marketing literature should be directly applied to the context of destination marketing or not (Yang, 2018). What Yang (2018) underlines, is that it happened that instead of conceptualizing a specific model of celebrity endorser selection to capture the unique features of the tourism industry, most researchers

have used or adapted one or more of the endorser selection models conceptualized for products or brands and focused on testing their impact in the hospitality and tourism industry. In addition, Yang (2018) states that even if both the models (source credibility models and the match-up hypothesis) have received empirical support in several academic studies, there seems to be a lack of agreement over which model is the most powerful and whether one could be more suitable than the other in different conditional situations.

Moreover, focusing on the match –up model, there is not a shared opinion on which should be the product/brand attributes and celebrity characteristics to match. In the studies of Kamins (1990), Hsu & McDonald (2002) and Huston (2003), different dimensions of a celebrity endorser have been examined such as gender, skin color, expertise, physical attractiveness and other relevant factors. Among these dimensions, highlighting the importance of the expertise factor, several researchers such as Till and Bulser (2000) found that when matching endorsers with brands, expertise is a more appropriate factor than physical attractiveness. Also, given the intangible nature of the hospitality services and the risk associated with the inability to try/taste the product before the purchase, source credibility and expertise can be more important than source attractiveness in selecting an endorser (Kim et al., 2014; Magnini et al., 2008; Van der Veen, 2008).

The results of the ANOVA performed on the perception of the presence of a match – up reported that, confirming what hypothesized on the basis of literature, highest match – up was perceived in the scenario displaying the travel blogger in her place of birth. However, in contrast to what was supposed, match –up was perceived higher in the scenario displaying the travel blogger not in her place of birth rather than in the scenario displaying the fitness blogger in her place of birth. From these it could be inferred that it is the choice of a travel blogger to sponsor a travel destination which created the perception of a match –up, no matter where she was born. However, this does not contrast with what affirmed in the literature, as the perception of match – up is still an important determinant for endorser selection; in fact, respondents exposed to the scenario with the highest score of match – up perception showed significant interest toward the destination.

Rather, these findings highlight that the place of birth of the influencer was not the variable that created the highest perception of a match – up, leading to the rejection of H2. This confirms what stated above about the importance of the expertise factor when selecting an endorser for a destination, showing that consumers perceive congruence between the image of the celebrity endorser and product type when celebrities possess expertise in that product category consistent with their general image (O'Mahony, Meenaghan1998) as in the case of a travel blogger endorsing a travel destination.

From these results it could be inferred that it is key to endorse a travel – related blogger to sponsor a destination, no matter where she is born, as this endorsement choice will create in consumers the perception of both expertise and match –up, confirming the validity of the match – up model also in the context of influencer marketing applied to destination promotion.

4.2 Academic Implications

Although the topic of celebrity endorsement has been well documented for a long time in the general marketing literature, the hospitality and tourism sectors have received less attention compared to the product – oriented businesses (Yang, 2018). Specifically, Gretzel (2018) recognized that there is a lack of sufficient amount of research regarding the topic of influencer marketing applied in the travel domain. The current study aims at implementing the existent literature on the issue of the influencer selection criteria to follow for destination promotion. Also, broader insights on the Italian Generation Y and Z are offered from the current findings since the two have been recognized as “the new generations of travellers”. From an academic perspective, this research sheds a light on an emerging, understudied topic whose academic and managerial importance is growing at a fast pace. The present findings are a first step in trying to enrich the literature on celebrity endorsement in the travel domain, by focusing on a specific type of “celebrity”: social media influencers. Due to the several differences between traditional celebrities and the social media influencers, it would be a mistake to take for granted the validity of the academic findings on celebrity endorsement in advertising for tourism and directly apply them to influencer marketing. The findings of this study try to help solving part of the above mentioned issue: one of the dimensions of the “source credibility model” was validated by the research results, as it was confirmed that also in the case of influencers endorsement for destination promotion it is key that the influencer is perceived as an expert on the topic by the audience. Following the same logic, the “match – up hypothesis” showed validity in its appliance to influencer selection as well. However, differently from what asserted in the celebrity endorsement literature (Van der Veen & Song, 2010; Kwon & Vogt, 2010; Jolly, 2016; Chan & Lee, 2018) choosing a native vs. a non – native influencer for promoting a destination did neither influence the perception of the presence of a match – up between the influencer and the destination, nor had any significant effect on future traveller’s interest toward the destination sponsored. Hence, this is a topic which should be further investigated by the literature in order to discover which are the dimensions that should be matched between the endorsed and the endorser in the case of influencer marketing.

4.3 Managerial Implications

Influencer endorsement in advertisements provides numerous benefits, but as these marketing strategies involve large sums of money, many risks are associated with them. Specifically, since 68% of marketers consider that finding the right influencer for their campaign is their biggest challenge (Influencer Marketing Hub infographic, 2019), this research aims at providing some insights that could help marketing professionals solving this issue as selecting the appropriate influencer is crucial to ensure the reaching of the desired campaign goal. The current research offers various guidelines for the marketers of the travel and tourism industry. In particular, compared to its use by international firms, influencer marketing is still not fully used up to its potential by Destination Marketing Organizations (Gretzel, 2018). Therefore, DMOs could benefit from the current findings as Fermentia – Serra and Gretzel (2020) stated that when applied to travels and tourism, influencer marketing strategies provide them with an opportunity to gain back control over the branding and promotion of destination while taking full advantage of the e – Word spread on social media. In terms of recommendations, when promoting a travel destination, destination marketers should consider an influencer which is perceived as an expert on the topic from their target audience. The current research's results show that people perceived the selected travel blogger, @detailsofperrine, as an expert and this influenced their interest toward the destination. Therefore, from this it could be inferred that selecting a travel blogger to sponsor a destination is a successful choice. Moreover, the validity of the match – up hypothesis was confirmed in the domain of influencer marketing campaigns in the travel context. However, the choice of a local influencer was proven not to have any influence on consumers' interest toward the destination. In fact, it was not the place of birth to create the perception of match – up between the endorser and the endorsed, but rather the fact that it was a travel – related blogger who was promoting the destination. Hence, as the process of influencer selection requires time and money and mistakes could result in a big loss of both of them, the discussed results provide marketers with precious suggestions to follow in order to avoid risky mistakes. The main managerial implication to draw from the current research is that, when selecting an influencer for a destination promotion campaign, it is key that people perceive the presence of a congruence between the endorser and the endorsed travel spot and that the selected influencer is considered an expert on the topic from the target audience. The choice of a travel blogger as destination endorser helps creating both these perceptions in consumers' minds and hence is an important starting point to create a successful destination marketing campaign.

4.4 Limitations and future research

The current study is characterized by several limitations which might offer suggestions for future research. First, as the analyzed sample was composed only of Italians belonging to Generation Y and Z, no inferences concerning the two generations on a global level can be drawn. Thus, future studies could focus on the same generations belonging to other nationalities in order to find differences and similarities between the different cultures.

Also, the way in which the survey has been distributed may have influenced the obtained results: it should be taken into account that some respondents may have been in a low –involvement status which might have altered the actual results. For example, some participants might have ignored part of the descriptive text or looked at the picture without the necessary attention and therefore not considered the highlighted variables when answering the questions.

What should be an hint for future investigation is that, contrary to what hypothesized on the basis of previous literature on celebrity endorsement, the place of birth of the influencer had no influence on consumers interest toward the destination; this could be explained by the fact that both the endorsers were Europeans natives of two of the most famous Europe's capital and hence people perceived no difference among them. However, this should be further studied by later research so to have a valid answer on the issue.

Moreover, only one type of experimental stimulus was used in this research, influencer's instagram post. Upcoming study should consider using other forms of media, such as videos, instagram reels or instagram stories as they may have different impacts on people's responses to the advertisement. These could be used singularly or together as a trial of a full influencer campaign which could provide a more exhaustive view of the effects generated. Also, the scenarios presented in the current research did not show any signs of monetary compensation behind the advertisement which, if present, could change the way people perceive the promotion so this topic should be deepened.

In addition, it should be considered that the research framework presented is not to be considered extensive as it does not take into account many other factors which could strengthen or weaken the relationships analyzed. In fact, the current research examines the effect of the two variables without evaluating other dimensions (i.e. level of product – involvement, number of followers of the influencers). Hence, subsequent studies should investigate further possible moderation and mediation relations between different factors as it could enlarge the number of academic results on the topic.

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Appendix

1. DEMOGRAPHICS

a) Age

Please indicate your year of birth

		Frequenza	Percentuale	Percentuale valida	Percentuale cumulativa
Valido	1980 - 1995	39	19,4	19,4	19,4
	1996 - 2010	162	80,6	80,6	100,0
	Totale	201	100,0	100,0	

b) Nationality

Nationality

		Frequenza	Percentuale	Percentuale valida	Percentuale cumulativa
Valido	ita	201	100,0	100,0	100,0

c) Gender

gender

		Frequenza	Percentuale	Percentuale valida	Percentuale cumulativa
Valido	Male	64	31,8	31,8	31,8
	Female	137	68,2	68,2	100,0
	Totale	201	100,0	100,0	

d) Level of education

Level of education

		Frequenza	Percentuale	Percentuale valida	Percentuale cumulativa
Valido	High school	51	25,4	25,4	25,4
	Bachelor's degree	74	36,8	36,8	62,2
	Master's degree	75	37,3	37,3	99,5
	Ph.D or higher	1	,5	,5	100,0
	Totale	201	100,0	100,0	

e) Employment

Employment

		Frequenza	Percentuale	Percentuale valida	Percentuale cumulativa
Valido	Employed full-time	22	10,9	10,9	10,9
	Employed part-time	6	3,0	3,0	13,9
	Self - employed	13	6,5	6,5	20,4
	Student	152	75,6	75,6	96,0
	Unemployed	8	4,0	4,0	100,0
	Totale	201	100,0	100,0	

f) Travel information search

		How do you usually look for travel information? -Instagram	How do you usually look for travel information? -Facebook	How do you usually look for travel information? -Paper travel guides	How do you usually look for travel information? -Family and friends	How do you usually look for travel information? -Travel agencies	How do you usually look for travel information? -Internet
N	Valido	74	12	32	74	7	163
	Mancante	127	189	169	127	194	38
Media		1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Mediana		1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Deviazione std.		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
Minimo		1	1	1	1	1	1
Massimo		1	1	1	1	1	1

2. CRONBACH'S ALPHA "expertise"

Case processing summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	203	100,0
	Excluded ^a	0	,0
	Total	203	100,0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables
in the procedure

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N. of items
,868	5

Item – total Statistics

	Scale mean if item deleted	Scale variance if item deleted	Corrected item- total correlation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Please on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=low ; 7 = high) state how much you perceive the influencer as-non expert - expert	16,55	19,714	,746	,827
Please on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=low ; 7 = high) state how much you perceive the influencer as-non experienced - experienced	16,57	22,296	,482	,890
Please on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=low ; 7 = high) state how much you perceive the influencer as-unknowledgeable - knowledgeable	16,47	19,904	,761	,824
Please on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=low ; 7 = high) state how much you perceive the influencer as-non qualified - qualified	16,54	19,487	,744	,827
Please on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=low ; 7 = high) state how much you perceive the influencer as-unskilled - skilled	16,65	18,695	,745	,827

3. TWO – WAY ANCOVA

Between – Subjects Factors

		Value label	N
Independent	0	noexp	100
	1	exp	101
Moderator	0	Nomatch	96
	1	match	105

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: destinationinterest

Independent	Moderator	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
noexp	Nomatch	4,0347	1,10926	48
	match	4,2692	1,21902	52
	Total	4,1567	1,16771	100
exp	Nomatch	4,8611	,98651	48
	match	5,0189	1,22547	53
	Total	4,9439	1,11562	101
Total	Nomatch	4,4479	1,12372	96
	match	4,6476	1,27335	105
	Total	4,5522	1,20538	201

Levene's test of Equality of Error Variances

Dependent Variable: destinationinterest

F	gl1	gl2	Sig.
1,409	3	197	,241

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups^a

a. Design: Intercept + fam + Independent + Moderator + Independent * Moderator

Test of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent variable: destinationinterest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	34,066 ^a	4	8,517	6,507	,000
Intercept	1599,088	1	1599,088	1221,801	,000
fam	,926	1	,926	,708	,401
Independent	31,739	1	31,739	24,250	,000
Moderator	1,924	1	1,924	1,470	,227
Independent * Moderator	,081	1	,081	,062	,804
Error	256,524	196	1,309		
Total	4455,889	201			
Corrected total	290,590	200			

a. R-squared = ,117 (adjusted R-squared = ,099)

4. ANOVA dependent variable “*expertise*”

Between – Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Moderator	0	Nomatch	96
	1	match	105
Independent	0	noexp	100
	1	exp	101

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: expertise

Moderator	Independent	Mean	Std. Deviations	N
Nomatch	noexp	3,8833	,93430	48
	exp	4,3375	1,00395	48
	Total	4,1104	,99128	96
match	noexp	3,6577	1,09066	52
	exp	4,6340	1,09877	53
	Total	4,1505	1,19479	105
Total	noexp	3,7660	1,01983	100
	exp	4,4931	1,06002	101
	Total	4,1313	1,09976	201

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances^{a,b}

		Levene Statistic	gl1	gl2	Sig.
expertise	Based on mean	,318	3	197	,812
	Based on median	,299	3	197	,826
	Based on median and with adjusted df	,299	3	190,122	,826
	Based on trimmed mean	,305	3	197	,822

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups^{a, b}

a. Dependent variable: expertise

b. Design: Intercept + Moderator + Independent + Moderator * Independent

Test of Between – Subjects Effects

Dependent variable: expertise

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	30,048 ^a	3	10,016	9,314	,000
Intercept	3418,304	1	3418,304	3178,768	,000
Moderator	,063	1	,063	,058	,809
Independent	25,652	1	25,652	23,855	,000
Moderator * Independent	3,417	1	3,417	3,178	,076
Error	211,845	197	1,075		
Total	3672,560	201			
Corrected total	241,893	200			

a. R-squared = ,124 (adjusted R-squared = ,111)

5. ANOVA dependent variable “match –up”

Between – Subjects Factors

		Value label	N
Moderator	0	Nomatch	96
	1	match	105
Independent	0	noexp	100
	1	exp	101

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored des...

Moderator	Independent	Mean	Std. Deviations	N
Nomatch	noexp	3,81	1,394	48
	exp	4,40	1,395	48
	Total	4,10	1,418	96
match	noexp	4,13	1,681	52
	exp	5,21	1,350	53
	Total	4,68	1,608	105
Total	noexp	3,98	1,550	100
	exp	4,82	1,424	101
	Total	4,40	1,543	201

Test di Levene di eguaglianza delle varianze dell'errore^{a,b}

		Levene Statistics	gl1	gl2	Sig.
Please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored des...	Based on mean	,837	3	197	,475
	Based on median	,885	3	197	,450
	Based on median and with adjusted df	,885	3	185,070	,450
	Based on trimmed mean	,847	3	197	,469

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups^{a, b}

a. Dependent Variable: Please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored des...

b. Design: Intercept + Moderator + Independent + Moderator * Independent

Test of Between – Subjects Effects

Dependent variable: Please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored des...

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	54,792 ^a	3	18,264	8,535	,000
Intercept	3861,575	1	3861,575	1804,533	,000
Moderator	16,117	1	16,117	7,531	,007
Independent	34,391	1	34,391	16,071	,000
Moderator * Independent	3,005	1	3,005	1,404	,237
Error	421,566	197	2,140		
Total	4373,000	201			
Corrected total	476,358	200			

a. R-squared = ,115 (adjusted R-squared = ,102)

6. QUESTIONNAIRE

English ▾

Hello, I am a Marketing student from Luiss University and I am conducting a research about the determinants of people's travel intention for my Master thesis.

I need 5 minutes of your time to answer few questions.

Please read carefully before answering.

Your answers will be ANONYMOUS and will NOT be shared with any third party.

Thank you for your collaboration!



English ▾

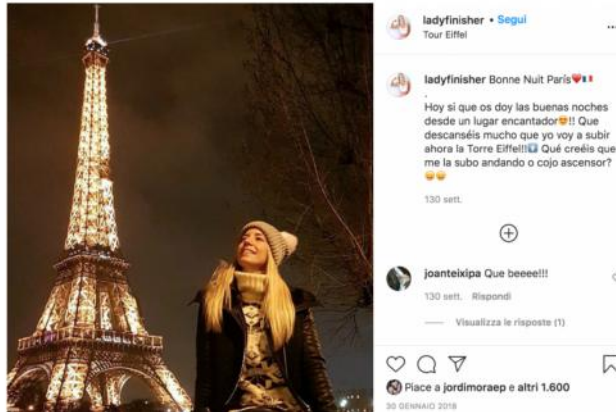
You will be shown a picture with a short descriptive text.

Please pay attention to them and keep them in mind when answering the questions.



Laura Lopez (@ladyfinisher) is a fitness influencer born in *Madrid, Spain* who currently has 93k followers.

In the picture below she is at the Tour Eiffel in *Paris, France*.



Perrine (@detailsofperrines) is a travel influencer born in *Paris, France* who currently has 87k followers.

In the picture below she is in "OFF" pool in the Seine in *Paris, France*.



Perrine (@detailsofperrines) is a travel influencer born in *Paris, France* who currently has 87k followers.

In the picture below she is at Parque Del Retiro in *Madrid, Spain*.



Laura Lopez (@ladyfinisher) is a fitness influencer born in *Madrid, Spain* who currently has 93k followers.

In the picture below she is at Gran Via in *Madrid, Spain*.



English ▾

Please on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=low ; 7 = high) state how much you perceive the influencer as

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
non expert - expert	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
non experienced - experienced	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
unknowledgeable - knowledgeable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
non qualified - qualified	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
unskilled - skilled	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



English ▾

Please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored destination (1= not at all ; 7= a lot)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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English ▾

Please indicate how familiar you are with the influencer (1= strongly unfamiliar ; 7= strongly familiar)

strongly unfamiliar	slightly unfamiliar	somewhat unfamiliar	neither familiar nor unfamiliar	somewhat familiar	slightly familiar	strongly familiar
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English ▾

Please, state how much you agree with the following statements (1= strongly disagree ; 7= strongly agree)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
I am a little curious about this destination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like to know more about this destination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning more about this destination would be useless	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



How do you usually look for travel information?

Instagram
Facebook
Paper travel guides
Family and friends
Travel agencies
Internet
Websites

Please indicate your year of birth

1980 - 1995
1996 - 2010
Other, please specify
<input type="text"/>

Nationality

<input type="text"/>

gender

Male
Female
Other

Level of education

High school
Bachelor's degree
Master's degree
Ph.D or higher

Employment

Employed full-time
Employed part-time
Self - employed
Student
Unemployed

Summary

According to the 2020 UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, 2019 marked the 10th year of growth of the tourism sector with 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals recorded globally and the World Tourism Organization forecasts a further increase of 3% - 4% in 2020, confirming tourism as one of the leading and always growing economic sectors. The travel industry has been significantly influenced by the rise and spread of the online social networks (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), especially by the shared use of social media by generation Y and Z which has changed the way consumers plan and book a travel. In order to adapt to the new challenges presented by these two new generations of travellers, tourism marketers have focused on increasing their digital strategies. In particular, social media influencers have been recognized as an effective strategic marketing tool in the travel domain, which has aroused the interest of both marketers and investors (XuXu & Pratt, 2018). However there is a lack of research focusing on the employment of social media influencers for the promotion of travel destinations. The aim of this research is to study whether those validated model for the selection of a celebrity endorser in tourism advertising can be directly applied to social media influencer selection; due to their academic relevance, the “source credibility” model and the “match –up hypothesis” will be object of the study. In particular, the current research will analyze their effectiveness in creating an interest toward the destination promoted for the Italian Generation Y and Z. Chapter one of this study describes the relevance of these two generations for the travel industry, how their digital travel habits have created new challenges as well as new opportunities for the destination marketers and therefore why they have been chosen as the target for the current study. Moreover, the chapter will provide with a definition of “influencer marketing” and “influencers” and will explain why and in what way they have become key strategic tools to promote and advertise destinations. The end of the chapter is dedicated to the Covid – 19 sanitary emergency with a focus on its repercussions on the future travel and tourism trends in Italy and on its impact on the future of travel influencers. Chapter two provides with a literature review of the celebrity endorsement strategies and models in advertising, outlining the benefits and risks associated with them and, more specifically, describes how the topic of celebrity endorsement in travel advertising has been studied in academic literature. Also, it reports how destination marketing and destination marketing organizations have been defined by researchers. On the basis of the described literature, at end of the chapter the two hypotheses object of the study are proposed. The description of the experiment together with the theoretical framework, the methodology used to carry on the analysis and the statistical results are all presented in Chapter 3. In the end, the discussion of the obtained results, the academic and managerial implications and the research limitations and suggestion for future studies are discussed in Chapter 4. Academic publications, online journal articles, official data and private organizations reports have been consulted as sources in order to propose the final hypotheses.

“Gen Y” and “Gen Z”: the new generations of travellers

As shown by a 2018 report of Travelport, people belonging to the “Generation Y” (born between 1980 and 1995), the so called “Millennials”, are the ones driving the growth in the travel industry, followed by “Generation Z” (born between 1996 and 2010). Confirming this, the report also revealed that more than half of US Millennials (56%) were planning on travelling more than they did in the previous year, a trend that was not fully shared by the older generations: only 35% of people belonging to “Generation X” (born between 1965 - 1979) and 22% of “Baby Boomers” (born between 1946 and 1964) stated the same. These young generations have different needs with respect to the ones that preceded them, in particular in the context of tourism and travels (Glover, 2010). Because of that, apart from the major opportunities presented by the constant growth in the tourism sector, this different, recent group of young travellers represents new challenges for the industry, first among all the transformation of tourism services linked with the emerging technologies and the spreading digitalization of the economy (OECD Tourism trends and policies, 2018). In fact, Millennials are the first generation that was born and grew up with computers and the internet, which is why they are also referred to as “digital natives”. A research conducted by Booking.com in 2019 reported that 66% of surveyed belonging to “Generation Z” stated that in the next five years they plan on spending their money on travelling and seeing the world and 60% thinks that travels are always worth investing in. Even if younger and less financially independent, a 2018 report by Expedia Media Solutions revealed that “Generation Z” took almost as many trips as Millennials, confirming the two as the new generation of travellers to consider when promoting a destination. Data extracted from The United Nations World Tourism Organization and World Youth Student & Educational Travel Confederation’s 2016 Global Report on The Power of Youth Travel, revealed that Generation Z comprises about 30% of the global population and accounts for 29 million international travellers around the world. Generation Y is digital and was raised during the technology revolution and the invention of The World Wide Web, but Gen Z is born into an era of smartphones and most of them cannot imagine or even remember a life without social media (KPMG, 2017). In particular, social media have a large influence: 84% of Generation Z and 77% of Millennials are influenced by travel pictures and travel videos made by friends or experts and 40% of Generation Z ranks Instagram as the top source when seeking for travel inspiration (Booking.com, 2019). In a 2020 study conducted by CBI on the potential of Generation Y in the tourism market, the following tips on how to target these young travellers can be found: “be tech-savvy. Make sure you have a strong online presence. Improve your online presence by inviting professionals to write reviews for you, such as travel bloggers, social media influencers or reviewers from field related magazine” and “invite online influencers for a free stay and then promote their experience to their followers in an appealing way”.

Social Media as the new travel guides

Social media are rapidly becoming the top source for travel inspiration and information search: a 2019 research by Stackla found that 86% of consumers are influenced by photos and videos posted by friends, family and peers on social media and that 52% made decisions of visiting a specific destination after seeing them. Also, 36% of surveyed people aged 18-34 will search potential holiday destinations on social media before visiting, 37% of Millennials have had their holiday destination influenced by social media and 34% have actually booked a holiday because of content seen on social media (WeSwap, 2018). The results of a survey shared among Swedish people belonging to Generation Y reported that *“picture with a short descriptive text”* is the preferred type of travel information: *“short and concise information. I do not manage to read a lot of text about something I have not decided upon yet. It may sound strange but I prefer pictures with some text like it is on Instagram”* stated a Swedish man born in 1987 when asked what his preferred type of travel information was. In light of what stated above, tourism marketers should consider that as many travellers spend daily time on social media, a catching picture of their destination could easily draw attention to and create interest to visit it. In this sense, the Instagram format of content (picture with short description) may work as a bait to address people’s attention toward what you are promoting as many respondents have reported that they want access to longer, more detailed information text only once their attention has been already caught (Aldevinge, 2016). Hence, “user generated content” - content generated by users rather than brands on social media such as reviews, videos and pictures - has been found to be key in influencing travellers choice of destination. Moreover, data show that people have a tendency to create content online: 80% of Millennials and Generation Z have left an online review for a product or service purchased and 72% have done so for a travel-related purchase (Skift Research, 2019). By creating content, users spread word of mouth online, a phenomenon referred to as “e-WOM” (electronic word of mouth). Differently from brand content – content created by the brand/product owner – user generated content cannot be controlled by the brand. “UGC” highly impacts consumers perceptions and the way they look at a product as 70% of consumers trust reviews written by other customers above professionally written marketing content and Millennials have been found to trust “UGC” 50% times more than brand content (Ipsos MediaCT, Crowdtap, Social Media Advertising Consortium, 2014). On one hand, content created by social media users is beneficial to brand owners as it gives them free advertising, helps spreading a positive image and cuts down the costs of time and money spent on content creation and advertising. On the other hand, the spread of user generated content presents new challenges for brands as it needs constant monitoring since users could share negative comments or pictures, creating a negative image that could reach numerous probable future customers. With respect to traditional word of mouth, e-WOM cuts the boundaries of known relationships as the source of the message can easily reach unknown people as well, increasing its coverage. Specifically, travels fall under the category of experience goods, i.e. goods with features

and characteristics which are difficult to observe in advance of purchase but are easily observable upon use or consumption (Dacko, 2008); therefore, when selling an experience good, a positive word-of-mouth is extremely valuable. Moreover, Chang (2010) states that e-WOM significantly influences travel intentions and decisions and that because of that, e-WoM on social media is a powerful marketing tool for DMOs to encourage traveler's interest toward their promoted destination. Still, within the realm of social media players, Destination Marketing Organizations are among the weakest as the majority of travellers do not follow their official social account or actively looks for them while searching for destination inspiration. Since the overall amount of content uploaded on social platforms is huge, as 95 millions of photos on Instagram and 500 millions stories on Facebook are shared daily, it is difficult to draw attention to a destination. Hence, Serra and Gretzel (2020) suggest that to reach more people, DMOs should consider engaging with external partners: to stand out of competition, tourism organization could partner with social media influencer to further attract the population segment of Generation Y and Z.

Influencer marketing relevance in travels and tourism

Marketers have long used endorsers such as traditional celebrities for promoting their destinations, but research have shown that nowadays, the rise of social media influencers has shifted the concept of “celebrity” and that partnering with influencers to promote a product or a brand is more effective. Influencer marketing hub defines influencer marketing as being nowadays a well-established form of online marketing; it takes the idea of celebrity endorsement and places it into a modern-day content-driven marketing campaign. Since communication is at the basis of social media usage, influencers have created interpersonal relationships with their audience, narrowing the gap between them and their followers so that they can easily identify themselves with them and perceive them as normal people with a passion for fashion, food or travels, trusting them more. In fact, as Think with Google 2016 research has reported, while the “older” social media users tend to follow traditional celebrities, younger users follow mostly social media creators: 70% of teens trust influencers more than regular celebrities. Traditional celebrities do not enjoy the power in shaping cultures that they once had as online blogs and reviews are becoming more influential since they are considered more authentic and accessible (Wiley, 2014). In fact, by 2019, 42% of organizations and companies in tourism have allocated around 20% of their annual budget on influencer marketing as ROI in influencer marketing is eleven times greater than in traditional marketing methods because it is more authentic and engaging (Axon, 2019). In addition, 41% of Millennials agree that travel bloggers and social media influencers inspire their holiday destinations (WeSwap, 2018). Axon 2019 report “Influencers as promoters of tourism” has revealed data that confirm the power of influencers in travels and tourism: 82% of tourism service users between the age of 18-35 follow travel bloggers and lifestyle influencer and 80% has stated that social media influencers have affected their choice of tourist destination. *“Before choosing my last holiday, I remember seeing lots of pictures of my favorite travel bloggers at the*

waterfalls in Croatia's Krka National Park. I hadn't really considered Croatia as a holiday destination prior to seeing these images and seeing the great pictures people were taking there definitely influenced my decision to plan a holiday to Split with my friends. I think it's great that social media has opened up the opportunities for people to travel to beautiful and incredible places. These are places that I wouldn't have known about and wouldn't even have thought to research had I not seen images of them online". @Olivia . This quote is extracted from the social media account of a traveller and social media user belonging to Generation Y and is a clear example of the strength that the messages and pictures shared by social media influencers have in shaping people's interest to visit a destination. Moreover, influencer marketing seems a perfect fit for the visual nature of tourism as it mainly relies on the sharing of appealing content in the format of pictures, videos and stories on social media platforms. What the marketers of the tourism sector should be well aware of is that at the heart of the success of an influencer marketing campaign lies the proper choice of the influencer. In fact, the choice of which influencer to select to promote a brand can bring a digital marketing campaign to extreme success or to complete failure; 68% of marketers consider that finding the right influencer is their biggest challenge (influencer Marketing Hub infographic, 2019). According to influencermarketinghub.com, there exist different ways to classify influencers. For the purpose of this study, two of those will be analyzed: by number of followers (Mega-Influencer, Macro- Influencers, Micro – Influencers) and by types of content (Bloggers, Youtubers, Podcasters, Social Posts Only). Influencer marketing has been described as “the process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influence over a specific target audience or medium, in order to be part of a brand's campaign towards increased reach, sales or engagement” (De Veirman, 2017). In light of this definition, the large amount of existing influencers means, on the one hand, wider choice for marketers, but on the other, with such an amount of possible partners, making the appropriate choice is harder and the possibility of mistakes is very real.

COVID – 19

In December 2019, the first cases of Covid – 19 (also known as “*coronavirus*”) were identified in Wuhan, China. On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization declared it to be a pandemic: by June 2020, more than 7.81 million cases in over 188 countries were reported (CSSE at Johns Hopkins University). With a focus on Italy, the first cases of Covid- 19 were confirmed on 31 January in Rome as reported by the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera”; by the beginning of March, the numbers provided by the Italian “Protezione Civile” confirmed that the virus had reached every Italian region. To avoid the further spread of the virus, governments have resorted to hard preventing measures focused around social isolation among which there were: travel restrictions and lockdowns. Globally, measures were taken differently. Other than representing a sanitary emergency, the coronavirus pandemic had and will have dramatic social and economic consequences at a global level. In the “Statista Covid-19: Economic downturn and recovery” dossiers, the economic recovery from the

pandemic is estimated to be in 2021. However, for some countries such as USA, Germany and Italy, the economic recovery might proceed at a slower pace. Globally, the travel and tourism markets are predicted to see a loss of 100.8 million jobs. After the Asia Pacific Region, Europe will be the second country expected to undergo a loss of tourism and travel related jobs, with a predicted drop of 13 million (Lock, 2020). Also, it is estimated that the market of travel and tourism will suffer a decrease of 34.7%, which will translate into a global revenue reduction from \$685.1 billions in 2019 to \$447.4 billions in 2020. Moreover, compared to the forecasts of 2020 made before the Covid-19 outbreak, the new predictions foresee that the markets of travel and tourism will generate \$396.370 million less, a drop of 42 (Covid-19: Statista Mobility Market Outlook, 2020). Without any doubt, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic damaged the global tourism sector and the managers and marketers will need to quickly and efficiently adapt to the new scenario presenting ahead of them. In this context, how can travel influencers help in creating digital destination marketing campaigns? With flights, events and trips canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic, travel influencers have not only lost their primary source of income but they have also found themselves without the possibility of creating the content their audience follows them for: no travel, no picture. Launch Metrics has analyzed the different ways in which influencers have tried to cope with the difficulties of content creation and it has found out that while the more criticized were the ones who have kept posting fancy travel pictures without any mention to the sanitary emergency whatsoever, the ones that saw more success were those who showed their transition and adaptation from the “globetrotter” lifestyle to the new “stay at home” life. However, the world of influencers and marketing professionals could actually seize some opportunities from the social changes generated from the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and re-think about marketing strategies to target efficiently the customers who firstly will visit their destination. In fact, Facebook and Instagram’s usage has seen an increase of 40% since the Covid-19 began in mid March and nearly 80% of influencers reported higher engagement from their followers (Travel Mindset, 2020). Data predict that the recovery of the tourism sector will be local and that it will be important to target the drive market (defined as “potential travellers within driving distance of a city, port or attraction”): 46% of travellers will take more regional trips near their home this year and 38% more road trips (Destination Analysts, 2020). Travel Mindset’s Webinar “The three stage of recovery: how to use influencer marketing after Covid-19” suggests that engaging with influencers who are followed by the right target audience could be a useful and effecting marketing tool for promoting destinations, as their follower base looks at them for reassurance and inspiration. The Webinar highlight the importance of collaboration over competition: as road trips will likely be the most preferred holiday choice, destinations need not to see nearby attraction as a threat but rather as allies: by collaborating, they could benefit by cutting down advertising costs. In this sense, influencers could be used to create and spread possible road trip itineraries within and among cities which will show how they are

reopening in safety and will include all the collaborating destinations, increasing awareness of them as a great addition into travellers' holiday plans.

Literature review

Celebrity endorsement in advertising and tourism advertising

Celebrities have been used as endorsers for products since the end on the 19th century (Erdogan, 1999). As provided by McCracken (1989), one of the most cited definitions of a celebrity endorser is “any person who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition to endorse consumer goods or services by appearing with it in an advertisement”. Moreover, he defines celebrity endorsement as a promotional tool whereby celebrities give their opinions, act as spokespersons or simply are associated with a product/brand. When consumers make a purchase, their decisions on what to buy are usually, on some levels, influenced by the so called opinion leaders. In the words of Godey (2016), opinion leaders can be defined as individuals who have a great amount of influence on other people's decision making, attitudes and behaviors. On a global level, marketers have long turned to celebrities as opinion leaders. Celebrities are considered effective opinion leaders as they have a large share of followers and huge influence over them (Fong & Yazdanifard, 2014). Opinion leadership plays a key role in new product adoption and diffusion of related information (Wu, 2013) so it has been recognized as an essential element in marketing communications (Tsang & Zhou, 2005). Mostly, literature on celebrity endorsement in advertising has focused on: the impact of celebrity endorsement, including the threats and benefits that could derive from it and celebrity endorser selection strategies. From an analysis of the academic literature on the topic, there is general agreement among scholars on the benefits provided by celebrity endorsement (Yang, 2018). They have been summarized by Glover (2009) as capturing an audience's attention, adding credibility, increasing ad recall, achieving synergies between the product brand and the personal brand of the celebrity and increasing brand recognition. Concerning the risks associated with celebrity endorsement in advertising, empirical evidence shows that negative information about the celebrity endorser can lead consumers to create negative perceptions of the endorsed brand and also decreased sales or market value (Knittel & Stango, 2014). Another major threat identified is the so called “vampire effect”: when a celebrity's image and the endorsed product do not match, finding it difficult to associate the meaning of the product with the celebrity endorser, consumer's attention is directed to the celebrity rather than the advertised product/brand (Erdogan & Baker, 2000). Considering the above mentioned risks, still the majority of academics and marketers believe in celebrity endorsement as an effective communication strategy to promote a product/brand and influence consumers' buying decisions if appropriately used. The key issue is deciding which celebrity to employ (Erdogan & Baker, 2000). The literature dealing with celebrity advertising selection identifies five models that describe celebrity endorsement which are focused on clarifying the relationship between the product endorsed and the celebrity endorser (Karasiewicz & Kowalczyk, 2014). They are: “The source credibility model”; “The match – up model” “The meaning transfer

model”; “The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)”; “The Dual Entertainment Path Model”. Unlike in the general marketing literature, scholars started investigating celebrity endorsement in tourism relatively late (from 2000s) and did not pay much attention to it. Most researchers have used or adapted one or more of the five above explained endorser selection models and focused on testing their efficacy on the tourism and hospitality fields instead of conceptualizing a unique model in order to capture all the specific characteristics of this sectors. Specifically, the models more largely applied were the “*Source Credibility*” model and the “*Match-up*” model (Yang, 2018). In light of this, as tourism differs from tangible, material products due to its intangible nature, the problem arises as it is not clear whether those findings and principles revealed in the general marketing literature can be directly applied to the hospitality and tourism context. Moreover, as Friedman and Friedman (1979) showed in their study, different products should be advertised by different types of endorsers for the message to reach recipients in accordance with the intended purpose. Jolly (2016) research results showed that celebrity endorsement may help consumers to reduce choices from the many destinations they have in mind to visit. Different studies on the topic explained the benefits provided by celebrity endorsement in the travel and tourism industry: Van Der Veen and Song (2010) studied the effects of celebrities endorsements in tourism printing advertising and found that the use of influential people to promote a destination by DMOs was done mostly to “differentiate a destination from its competitors and to direct awareness towards its unique selling proposition”. Aronson, Wilson and Akert (1999) outlined that if a travel program is presented by a celebrity this would result in a high degree of receptiveness to that travel destination. Moreover, Glover (2009) confirmed that celebrity involvement is an effective method in stimulating tourists visits to a destination and - on the same research topic trend – Lee, Scott and Kim (2008) study showed that celebrity involvement may act as a “catalyst” for traveler’s desire to visit a destination. After doing an extensive review of literature the determinants of the selection of a celebrity endorsement for a tourist destination were brought under eight heads (Jolly, 2016): expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, transfer of meaning, familiarity, likability, match between celebrity and product and physical attractiveness.

Destination Marketing and Destination Marketing Organizations

Wahab, Crampon and Rothfield (1976) offered one of the first definitions of destination marketing: “*the management process through which the National Tourist Organisations and/or tourist enterprises identify their selected tourists, actual and potential, communicate with them to ascertain and influence their wishes, needs, motivations, likes and dislikes, on local, regional, national and international levels, and to formulate and adapt their tourist products accordingly in view of achieving optimal tourist satisfaction thereby fulfilling their objectives*”. As reported by the UNWTO (2011), Destination marketing is nowadays recognized as a pillar of the future growth and sustainability of tourism destinations in an increasingly competitive market for tourists on a global scale. From the first conference held in 1990, eleven other academic conferences have focused on destination marketing.

Also, in 2012 was launched the “Journal of Destination Marketing and Management”, which was the first journal completely dedicated to the topic. Within the broader area of tourism marketing, the growing number of published research concerning destination marketing represents the acknowledgment of a significant field which has evolved into a distinct paradigm (Bowen, Fidgeon & Page, 2014). Therefore, the concepts of “destination” and “destination marketing” have been acknowledged as a focal issue of tourism research (Fyall, Garrod & Wang 2012), and the latter is commonly linked with the operational activities undertaken in the business of attracting visitors to destinations. Mostly, the destination marketing literature has to date been concerned with justification of theories adapted from the wider literature in the fields of psychology, management, economics, marketing, geography, and sociology, with few attempts aimed at the development of a theory more concerned on the issue and in line with the earlier evolution of tourism research (Pike & Page, 2014). However, there are a number of studies such as Ashworth and Voogd (1990) and Richard and Palmer (2010) which argued that because of the uniqueness of destinations, destination marketing could not be treated simply as the process of translating conventional marketing theories and practice derived from the marketing of goods and services. As an example of this, the traditional marketing concept of the four P’s (Neil Borden,1964), has been adapted in tourism marketing to the 7 Ps or 8 Ps which in addition included “partnerships”, “people”, “programming” and “packaging” (Morrison 2010). While destination marketers might have an active research interest in each of the Ps, DMOs actually have limited influence over them, exception made for “promotion”; indeed, promotion of the destination by DMOs is in practice the only field where destination marketers have control. More in general, a Destination Marketing Organization is an organization responsible for the marketing of an identifiable tourism destination with an explicit geopolitical boundary. In fact the distinction between what the core function of DMOs requires a fundamental rethink and focus on the underlying principles of marketing and how these are applied at a destination level (Pike & Page, 2014). When put into practice, the tourism destination marketing definition of Wahab, Crampon & Rothfield (1976) has shown to be idealistic as, from a managerial point of view, DMOs are limited in what they can do and achieve. The destination management issues are not under the responsibility of DMOS, rather, their actual role is related to those key concepts founded in the definition of Marketing: “a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need through creating and exchanging products and value with others (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 1999). Hence, the focus of DMO activities revolves around the development of marketing communication strategies aimed at match internal (destination) resources with the opportunities presented by the market (Pike and Page, 2014). For what concerns the development of DMOs, it is generally recognized that the first destination travel guides were printed in France in the 16th century (Sigaux, 1966). Nowadays the exact number of DMOs globally is unknown, however in 2008 McKercher estimated that they were more than 10,000 (Pike, 2008). Pike (2004) reports that the rationale behind the establishment of a DMO

was usually to enhance a destination competitiveness. As consumer have an enormous number of destination choices available, DMOs have the mission to increase a destination competitiveness: the focus of DMO activities is designing and implementing marketing communication strategies that match destination resources with market opportunities (Pike and Page, 2014).

Determinants of influencers selection in destination marketing

The rise of social media has contributed to the emergence of the so called “Social Media Influencers” (SMIs) who, as reported by Kaplan and Haenlein (2012), are also referred to as “Internet Celebrities”: they enjoy a high level of social presence and thus have a strong influence on their audience’s behaviors. Even if a relatively young phenomenon, Influencer Marketing could be considered as a well-established part of travel brand’s marketing strategies worldwide. Peltier (2018) reports that the tourism industry is the eight biggest spender sector on influencer marketing. As with traditional celebrities, consumers pay attention to and trust the opinion of SMIs, making them online opinion leaders in many cases and in different fields (Pratt, 2018). Moreover, as today’s interactions happen not only offline but also and mostly online, the power of opinion leaders might be even greater (Turcotte, 2015). In the context of tourism and travels, influencer marketing builds on the importance of the e-WoM (Litving, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). As reported by Glover (2009), when applied to tourism, influential individuals can be effective tools in attracting more or different types of visitors to a given destination. In addition, he argues that compared to direct endorsement of destinations by DMOs, influencer marketing has brought more positive results in this industry. The recent findings of Fermenia – Serra and Gretzel (2020) reveal that influencer marketing applied in tourism and travel context provides DMOs with and opportunity to gain back control over branding and promoting a destination while fully taking advantage of the power of e-WoM spread on social media. Influencer Marketing is a key marketing tool for destinations as it helps create positive e-Wom around their unique offerings and increase the target demographic travel interest because, as explained in chapter one, the age group which travels the most – Generations Y and Z – are strongly affected by social media influencers (Xu & Pratt, 2018). However, Gretzel (2018) reported that in the travel and tourism industry influencer marketing has been mostly applied by international firms while its use by DMOs – even if it has saw an increase – is still far behind. Moreover, the travel domain lacks research regarding influencer marketing (Gretzel, 2018): specifically, what is needed is a comprehensive portrayal of how decisions related to the selection and employment of influencers are made (Carter, 2016) as few studies have focused on the determinants affecting influencer marketing choices in destination marketing (Choi, 2015). Therefore, this study aims at filling this gap by testing whether some of those selected determinants for celebrity endorsement in travel domain would still in influencing people’s travel intention when applied to social media influencer selection. As the literature reviewed has shown, when selecting an endorser for a campaign, it is key that the source is perceived as credible and credibility mostly depends on expertise and trust (Hovland et al., 1953). With regard to expertise, it is

important that the celebrity is really an expert in the field and that consumers think and believe a celebrity has expertise (Ohanian, 1990). As research have shown, the level of celebrity expertise will determine its effectiveness (Amos, Holmes & Strutton, 2008). On the basis of these findings, this research aims at deepening the knowledge of the influence of the source expertise factor on consumer destination interest, testing whether the findings related to traditional celebrity endorsement can be applied to influencers as well. Moreover, as a consistent part of the success of influencers is due to them establishing a career in a particular field of interest in which they created their own expert profession (Erz and Christensen, 2018), the expertise factor might be even more relevant for influencers endorsement compared to traditional celebrities. It will be tested how choosing a travel-related influencer to promote a destination will impact consumer's travel intention. From this:

H1: choosing a travel – related influencer has a positive effect on consumers interest toward the destination.

Taking into account the validated “product match-up hypothesis”, furthermore Van der Veen & Song (2010) stress that native celebrities endorsed, compared to non-natives, perform better in generating positive attitudes to the advertising. Moreover, he argues that the relationship between the local-born celebrity and the destination is unique and cannot be replicated by other destination and that a link between the destination and the chosen testimonial personality can be beneficial in the promotion of that destination. Also Kwon and Vogt (2010) outline the power of this unique link as it can help destinations in creating a unique selling preposition. Therefore, Chan and Lee (2018) suggest that destination marketers should consider native celebrities instead of non-natives for promoting and increasing the destination attractiveness. Hence, on the basis of these previous research, this study will test whether the choice of a local born influencer will strengthen the relationship between the expertise and interest toward the destination

H2: choosing a local-born influencer will strengthen the effect of expertise on consumer's interest toward the destination.

In addition, familiarity has been considered one of the eight determinants of celebrity endorsement in tourism (Jolly, 2016) because, as explained by “the mere exposure effect”, consumers who are more exposed and more familiar to a celebrity tend to like her/him more (Zajonc, 1968). Hoekman (2013) stated that the more consumers are familiar with and endorser, the more the positive effect. However, a question should be raised on to what extent popularity of the endorser is an important variable in explaining endorser effectiveness. In Schouten, Janessen and Verspaget (2019) study on celebrity versus influencer endorsement advertising, well-known influencers with a large follower base were used, but their results showed that influencers who are relatively less popular may be even more effective endorsers because, compared to more popular influencers, ‘micro-influencers’ may be perceived as more experts in a relatively small field (De Veirman et al, 2017). Hence, in a field-specific domain such as travels, popularity might not be the first criteria to follow when selecting an

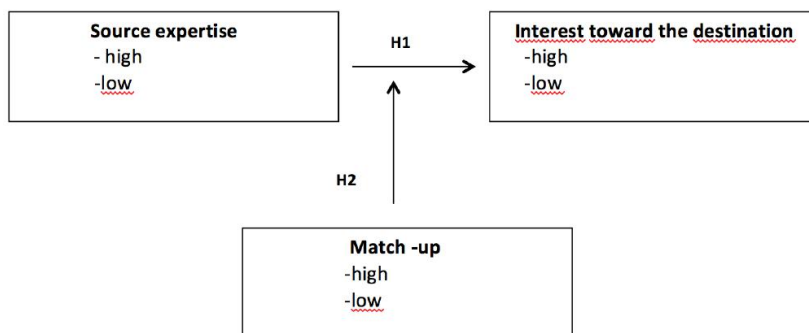
influencer. On the basis of the previous academic literature, “familiarity” will be considered as a covariate in the main study to see if it may or may not have any significant effect as it might enhance the positive effects on interest toward the destination generated by the other two endorser features.

Research Methodology

The Experiment

The aim of the current study is to investigate whether those characteristics which are usually looked for in celebrities when they are selected as endorsers for a product are still applicable to influencers in the context of destination marketing. In particular, because different academics confirmed their importance, “source expertise” and “match – up with the product” are the dimensions under investigation. The experiment’s conceptual model has a 2 (expertise present; expertise not present) by 2 (match –up present; match –up not present) design, resulting in four experimental conditions. The experiment has a between-subject design where each respondent is randomly exposed to one out of the four scenarios before answering a series of questions. As shown in figure 3.1, for the purpose of this quantitative research two relations, one direct and one of moderation, are studied.

Figure 3.1: Theoretical framework



Questionnaire description

The questionnaire was created using Qualtrics and was spread among respondents through three main social media platforms: whatsapp, instagram and facebook. All the survey answers were forced in order to avoid the issue of missing values. Four scenarios are displayed in the survey: each respondent was randomly exposed to only one of them. In the scenarios the type of influencer (travel blogger or fitness blogger) and the destination (native place of the influencer or not) were manipulated. The conditions were so formulated as to study whether the influencer characteristic “match –up” with the destination (if the blogger is a native or not) and “expertise” (if the blogger is a travel blogger or not) have a significant positive effect on the interest towards the two destinations, Madrid and Paris. Above

each scenario was written a short descriptive text including the name of the influencer, her topic of influence (travels or fitness) her number of followers, her place of birth (Paris or Madrid) and the place where she is in the picture (Paris or Madrid). The two influencers were chosen through the platform www.starnpage.com which allows to find influencers on the basis of their number of followers and topic of influence. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the travel blogger @detailsofperrine and the fitness blogger @ladyfinisher were selected. After exposing the participants to the scenarios, in the first part of the survey, 7 –point Likert scales are used to measure how much the respondents perceive the influencer as being an “expert”, how much they perceive there is a match –up between the influencer and the sponsored destination (“please indicate how much you perceive there is a fit between the influencer and the sponsored destination, 1= not at all; 7=a lot ”) and how much they are familiar with her (“please indicate how familiar you are with the influencer, 1= strongly unfamiliar; 7= strongly familiar”). Specifically, to measure the perceived source expertise, Ohanian’s (1990) tri – component celebrity endorser credibility scale was used. After that, in order to measure the effect of the independent (“expertise”) and moderating (“match-up”) variables on the dependent variable “interest toward the destination”, respondents are asked to evaluate whether they agree or not with the three statement composing Machleit, Madden and Allen (1990) brand interest 7 – points Likert scale: “I am a little curious about this destination”; “I would like to know more about this destination”; “Learning more about this destination would be useless”. In the last part of the survey, participants are asked to select how they usually look for travel information among the following options: “instagram”, “facebook”, “paper travel guides”, “family and friends”, “travel agencies”, “internet”, “websites”. The end of the questionnaire includes the demographic questions.

Data preparation and sample description

For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire was distributed among italians belonging to either generation “Y” or “Z”. Out of 243 collected answers, 42 needed to be eliminated because the respondents did not finish completing the survey. The variable “nationality” was checked since the answers of non italians needed to be eliminated but there were no foreign respondent. In the end, 201 valid answers were collected. Also, before proceeding with the analysis, in order to create the variable “destinationinterest” which includes the sum of the means of the three items composing the 7-points Likert scale, the item “Learning more about this destination would be useless” needed to be reversed as it was negative and was recoded as “travel3_reversed”. In details, the analyzed sample is composed by 80% (N=162) respondents belonging to “Generation Z” and 20% (N=39) of “Millennials”; 137 females and 64 males. Specifically, “Generation Y” is composed by 16 males and 23 females, while 48 males and 114 females belong to “Generation Z”. Overall, 74% (N= 149) possesses either a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree and 25% (N = 51) graduated from high school; confirming this, 76% of the sample is a student and 20% is either self – employed, employed part-time or employed full-time. Moreover, when asked how they usually collect travel information, the most selected answers were “internet” (173 times), “instagram” (74 times) and “family and friends” (74 times) while “paper travel

guides”, “facebook” and “travel agencies” were respectively chosen only 32, 12 and 7 times. From these data, it can be inferred that the sample characteristics reflect those generational trends outlined in Chapter 1.

Main Analysis

The following sub – paragraphs will report the analysis conducted in order to test the two hypotheses under investigation. As main analysis, a two – way ANCOVA has been carried out to compare the mean differences between the groups on the dependent variable. Also, as explained in Chapter 2, the role of “familiarity” is still under investigation in the field of the use of influencers in destination marketing. Hence, “familiarity” has been incorporated in the analysis as a covariate to have deeper insights on the data. Also, two manipulations checks were performed in order to examine if the variables “expertise” and “match –up” were perceived differently by the four groups.

Two – way ANCOVA

As the study has a between - subject design, ANOVA’s assumption of the homogeneity of variances should be checked through Levene’s test. As the results are not significant ($p=0.241$), the assumption is met, meaning that the error variances of the dependent variable are equally spread. The two - way ANCOVA was executed to test whether the presence (vs. absence) of the expertise of the influencer and the presence (vs. absence) of a match – up between the influencer and the sponsored destination had a significant influence on the interest toward the destination. Moreover, the covariate “familiarity” was added to the analysis. The results report that having an expert influencer sponsoring a destination has a significant effect on consumer’s interest toward that destination [$F(1)=24.25$; $p< 0.001$]. However, the presence of a match – up does not moderate this relation [$F(1)=0.062$; $p= 0.804$] and neither there is a direct effect of the moderator on the dependent variable [$F(1)=1.47$; $p= 0.227$]. Hence, no moderation is occurring. Also, the covariate “familiarity” shows no significant effect [$F(1)=0.708$; $p= 0.401$]. From the analysis, H1 is confirmed while H2 is rejected. These results will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

<i>Hypothesis 1:</i> choosing a travel – related influencer has a positive effect on consumers interest toward the destination	<i>Confirmed</i>
<i>Hypothesis 2:</i> choosing a local-born influencer will strengthen the effect of expertise on consumer’s interest toward the destination.	<i>Not Confirmed</i>

Manipulations check for expertise and match – up

As the study has a between - subject design, ANOVA's assumption of the homogeneity of variances should be checked through Levene's test. As the results are not significant either for expertise ($p=0.812$), either for match – up (0.475) the assumption is met, meaning that the error variances of the dependent variable are equally spread. The analysis was carried out to check how the expertise of the influencer and the presence of a match – up were perceived by respondents across each scenario. When looking at the means, it appears that expertise was perceived higher in the scenarios displaying the travel blogger: $M_{nomatchnoexp}= 3,88$; $M_{nomatchexp}= 4,33$; $M_{matchnoexp}= 3,65$; $M_{matchexp}= 4,63$. The results of the ANOVA show that only the scenarios containing the variable “expertise” had a significant effect on the dependent variable [$F(1)=23.85$; $p< 0.001$], while those which displayed the match – up variable did not have a significant effect [$F(1)=0.058$; $p= 0.809$]. Concerning match –up perception, it appears that it was perceived higher in the scenarios displaying the travel blogger: $M_{nomatchnoexp}= 3,81$; $M_{nomatchexp}= 4,40$; $M_{matchnoexp}= 4.13$; $M_{matchexp}= 5.21$. These results will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

This study wants to investigate whether those criteria used for the selection of celebrity endorsement for the advertising of products can also be applied to the selection of the influencers to sponsor a destination. Specifically, the aim of this research is to fill the literature gap on how decisions related to the selection and employment of influencers are made as only few studies have focused on the determinants affecting influencer marketing choices in destination marketing (Carter, 2016; Choi, 2015). In particular, after an extensive revision of the literature, it has been chosen to test two endorser's characteristics, expertise and match – up, and their effectiveness in generating an interest toward the destination. From the results obtained, it is possible to draw some important conclusions on the topic. Firstly, after carrying out a manipulation check, it was confirmed that choosing a travel blogger creates in consumers the perception of an expert endorser compared to a non – travel related blogger. However, differently from what suggested by part of the literature (Van der Veen & Song, 2010; Kwon & Vogt, 2010; Jolly, 2016; Chan & Lee, 2018) the choice of a local – born influencer to endorse a destination does not create the perception of a match – up between the endorser and the endorsed; rather, in addition to the perceived expertise, the choice of a travel blogger created also the perception of a match – up. Secondly, a two – way ANCOVA was performed in order to test the two main hypotheses. The first hypothesis was confirmed, showing that also for influencer selection in destination marketing it is key to select an influencer which is perceived as an expert by the audience in order to generate interest toward the destination; in this case, the choice of the travel blogger @detailsofperrine was successful as respondents who were exposed to the two experimental conditions

displaying her showed the highest mean score for the interest toward the two destinations promoted ($M_{expmatch} = 5.0$; $M_{expnomatch} = 4.86$). From this, it can be inferred that the validity of “*the source credibility*” model can be expanded to the current field of study, further highlighting the importance of the expertise factor in the case of tourism and hospitality endorsements due to their intangible dimensions. Differently from what expected on the basis of the literature, the hypothesis that “*choosing a local-born influencer will strengthen the effect of expertise on consumer’s interest toward the destination*” was rejected. As suggested by Van der Veen & Song (2010), Kwon & Vogt (2010), Jolly (2016) and Chan & Lee (2018), it was chosen an influencer native of the sponsored destination to create a match – up between the endorsed and the endorser as it was believed to increase the level of a destination attractiveness compared to a non –native one. From an empirical point of view, it could have happened that the descriptive texts above the instagram posts did not manage to highlight the match –up between the influencer and the destination sponsored, even if the native place of the influencer and the place she was in the picture were stated twice in the text. However, it is the topic of influence (travel vs. fitness) that was written at the beginning of the text and this could be the reason why it and not the match –up captured the attention of the respondents. From a theoretical perspective, it should be taken into account that there are several fundamental differences between tangible products and the intangible dimensions of the tourism destinations and thus it should be questioned whether findings and principles revealed in the general marketing literature should be directly applied to the context of destination marketing or not (Yang, 2018). What Yang (2018) underlines, is that it happened that instead of conceptualizing a specific model of celebrity endorser selection to capture the unique features of the tourism industry, most researchers have used or adapted one or more of the endorser selection models conceptualized for products or brands and focused on testing their impact in the hospitality and tourism industry. In addition, Yang (2018) states that even if both the source credibility and the match-up hypothesis have received empirical support, there seems to be a lack of agreement over which model is the most powerful and whether one could be more suitable than the other in different conditional situations. Moreover, focusing on the match –up model, there is not a shared opinion on which should be the product/brand attributes and celebrity characteristics to match. Given the intangible nature of the hospitality services and the risk associated with the inability to try/taste the product before the purchase, source credibility and expertise can be the most important when selecting an endorser (Kim et al., 2014; Magnini et al., 2008; Van der Veen, 2008). The results of the analysis performed on the perception of the presence of a match – up reported that, confirming what hypothesized on the basis of literature, highest match – up was perceived in the scenario displaying the travel blogger in her place of birth. However, in contrast to what was supposed, match – up was perceived higher in the scenario displaying the travel blogger not in her place of birth rather than in the scenario displaying the fitness blogger in her place of birth. From these it could be inferred that it is the choice of a travel blogger to sponsor a travel destination which created the perception of a

match –up, no matter where she was born. However, this does not contrast with what affirmed in the literature, as the perception of match – up is still an important determinant for endorser selection; in fact, respondents exposed to the scenario with the highest score of match – up perception showed significant interest toward the destination. Rather, these findings highlight that the place of birth of the influencer was not the variable that created the highest perception of a match – up, leading to the rejection of H2. From these results it could be inferred that it is key to endorse a travel – related blogger to sponsor a destination, no matter where she is born, as this endorsement choice will create in consumers the perception of both expertise and match –up, confirming the validity of the match – up model also in the context of influencer marketing applied to destination promotion.

Academic and managerial Implications

Although the topic of celebrity endorsement has been well documented for a long time in the general marketing literature, the hospitality and tourism sectors have received less attention compared to the product – oriented businesses (Yang, 2018). Specifically, Gretzel (2018) recognized that there is a lack of sufficient amount of research regarding the topic of influencer marketing applied in the travel domain. The current study aims at implementing the existent literature on the issue of the influencer selection criteria to follow for destination promotion. From an academic perspective, this research sheds a light on an emerging, understudied topic whose academic and managerial importance is growing at a fast pace. The present findings are a first step in trying to enrich the literature on celebrity endorsement in the travel domain, by focusing on a specific type of “celebrity”: social media influencers. Due to the several differences between traditional celebrities and the social media influencers, from the research findings it could be drawn that it would be a mistake to take for granted the validity of the academic findings on celebrity endorsement in advertising for tourism and directly apply them to influencer marketing: differently from what asserted in the celebrity endorsement literature (Van der Veen & Song, 2010; Kwon & Vogt, 2010; Jolly, 2016; Chan & Lee, 2018) choosing a native vs. a non – native influencer for promoting a destination did neither influence the perception of the presence of a match – up between the influencer and the destination, nor had any significant effect on future traveller’s interest toward the destination sponsored. On the other hand, one of the dimensions of the “source credibility model” was validated by the research results, as it was confirmed that also in the case of influencers endorsement for destination promotion it is key that the influencer is perceived as an expert on the topic by the audience. Following the same logic, the “match – up hypothesis” showed validity in its appliance to influencer selection as well. From a managerial perspective, influencer endorsement in advertisings provides numerous benefits as well as many risks. Specifically, since 68% of marketers consider that finding the right influencer for their campaign is their biggest challenge (influencer Marketing Hub infographic, 2019), this research aims at providing some insights that could help marketing professional solving this issue as selecting the appropriate

influencer is crucial to ensure the reaching of the desired campaign goal. The current research offers various guidelines for the marketers of the travel and tourism industry. In particular, DMOs could benefit from the current findings as Fermentia – Serra and Gretzel (2020) stated that when applied to travels and tourism, influencer marketing strategies provide them with an opportunity to gain back control over the branding and promotion of destination while taking full advantage of the e – Word spread on social media. The main managerial implication to draw from the current research is that, when selecting an influencer for a destination promotion campaign, it is key that people perceive the presence of a product – endorser match – up and that the selected influencer is considered an expert on the topic this can be achieved through the choice of a travel blogger as destination endorser.

Limitations and future research

The current study is characterized by several limitations which might offer suggestions for future research. First, as the analyzed sample was composed only of Italians belonging to Generation Y and Z, no inferences concerning the two generations on a global level can be drawn. Thus, future studies could focus on the same generations belonging to other nationalities in order to find differences and similarities between the different cultures. Also, the way in which the survey has been distributed may have influenced the obtained results: it should be taken into account that some respondents may have been in a low – involvement status which might have altered the actual results. For example, some participants might have ignored part of the descriptive text or looked at the picture without the necessary attention and therefore not considered the highlighted variables when answering the questions. What should be an hint for future investigation is that, contrary to what hypothesized on the basis of previous literature on celebrity endorsement, the place of birth of the influencer had no influence on consumers interest toward the destination; this could be explained by the fact that both the endorsers were Europeans natives of two of the most famous Europe’s capital and hence people perceived no difference among them. However, this should be further studied by later research so to have a valid answer on the issue. Moreover, only one type of experimental stimulus was used in this research, influencer’s instagram post. Upcoming study should consider using other forms of media, such as videos, instagram reels or instagram stories as they may have different impacts on people’s responses to the advertisement. These could be used singularly or together as a trial of a full influencer campaign which could provide a more exhaustive view of the effects generated. In addition, it should be considered that the research framework presented is not to be considered extensive as it does not take into account many other factors which could strengthen or weaken the relationships analyzed. In fact, the current research examines the effect of the two variables without evaluating other dimensions (i.e. level of product – involvement, number of followers of the influencers). Hence, subsequent studies should investigate further possible moderation and mediation relations between different factors as it could enlarge the number of academic results on the topic.