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## SOCIAL MEDIA AND MILLENIALS: EFFECTS, COMPLEXITIES, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical review of previous studies on the intertwining between social media and tourist behaviour among millennials. This literature review aims to map out the tendencies of those studies—as evidenced by their theoretical perspectives, methodological frameworks, and arguments—and show the gaps they have left. A survey of the literature was conducted by Googling a number of keywords/subjects, and critically assessing the results. This article contents that most previous studies have focused excessively on the effects of social media on millennial tourists' behaviour in the pre-trip stage and have viewed millennials as passive agents; few have been concerned with how millennials use and actively construct meaning through social media. Such studies focus on the trip stage and post-trip stage, in which the millennials make various choices regarding their social media usage. Studies have only rarely concerned with the tourist destinations and attractions themselves. The attractiveness of the portrayal of (man-made) tourist destinations on social media is inseparable from their creative design processes. This article suggests that further studies should investigate the creative processes through which tourist destinations are designed and attract millennial tourists.

## INTRODUCTION

This article provides a review of previous studies that have investigated the intertwining between social media and tourist behaviour among millennials. Through this intertwining, social media influences tourists' behaviour while simultaneously being used, understood, and signified by millennial tourists in their tourism activities. This article seeks to map out the tendencies evidenced in previous studies, as well as to identify gaps in the literature. It notes particular trends in the theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and arguments (as abstractions of findings) of the surveyed studies. Before undertaking this exploration, however, it is necessary to provide a generic overview of this article's two key concepts—social media and millennial tourists—as a basis for subsequent discussion.

According to Wolf, Sims and Yang (2018), social media has been defined diversely. Most commonly cited is the definition provided by Boyd & Ellison: "web-based services that allow individuals to construct profiles, display user connections and search and traverse within that list of connections" (cited in Wolf et al. 2018). Another widely cited definition, with several thousand references in Google Scholar, is provided by Kietzmann et al., who understand social media as "a system of functional 'building blocks'" (cited in Wolf et al., 2018). Further enriching the literature has been the taxonomy of social media, particularly the identification of six categories: blogs, social networking sites, collaboration projects, content communities, virtual social worlds, and virtual game worlds. Meanwhile, Stevenson (in Parsons, 2017) defines social media as involving "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content and to participate in social networks".

In *Social Media: A Guide for Researchers*, Cann, Dimitriou and Hooley, (2011) state simply that social media refers to internet-based services in which online content is created/mobilised by service users themselves. This definition, however, is far from comprehensive. It refers only to internet technology and users' creation of online content, and fails to consider communication between service users.

Treem *et al* (2016) do not simply define social media, but rather trace the trajectory of the concept. They write that the term 'social media' first emerged in the 1990s, and initially referenced the internet-based communication media that were emerging at the time. As social media has developed, it has become increasingly difficult to provide a comprehensive definition of social media; no single scope, format, topic, audience, or source applies to all social media (Treem et al., 2016). Nonetheless, definitions of social media share one key similarity: an emphasis on internet technology and online communication.

Since the dawn of the Web 2.0 era, as values such as transparency and sharing have become increasingly prominent, it has become common for applications (websites, mobile apps, online systems etc.) to be integrated with other applications. As such, any working definition of social media must consider not only its technological aspects (internet, mobility), but also its ideological

and functional components (transparency, sharing, integration). Such a tendency is evident in the ongoing efforts to define and re-define social media, as well as its usage and its adoption (Kapoor et al., cited in Wolf, Sims and Yang, 2018).

Meanwhile millennial tourists are defined as tourists from the millennial generation, which itself is defined as 'Generation Y', or the cohort following 'Generation X' (born between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s). As such, in terms of age, millennials are people who were born during or after the mid-1980s. However, such an age-based definition would be problematic on its own; millennials are not only distinguished from their predecessors by their age, but also by their shared characteristics. Millennials are characterised as 'digitally minded' and 'tech-savvy' individuals who view themselves as part of a 'global community', and who view the future optimistically. Also characterising millennials is 'a strong desire to enrich their lives through travel' (Anonymous, 2017).

Building on these definitions, this article will map previous studies that have explored their intertwining. It will focus particularly on how these studies have positioned these specific variables vis-à-vis other variables. This article is divided into several sections; after providing a general map, it explores the effect/influence of social media on tourism, the interlinkage between social media and millennial tourists, and digital media-induced tourism. The last section of this paper draws several conclusions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *General Map of Social Media and Millenials*

In the past six or seven years, many studies have investigated the effect/influence of social media on millennial tourists' decision to travel, as well as their agendas during these travels (Afif, Priyambodo, & Widyaningsih, 2017; Ana & Istudor, 2019; Angelika, 2015; Arun & Antony, 2018; Daisy, 2017; Duong, 2018; Dwityas & Briandana, 2017; Ly & Ly, 2020; Matikiti-Manyevere, R Kruger, 2019; Parsons, 2017; Senanayake & Anise, 2019; Techajirakul, C Prasongsukarn, 2019; Živković, Gajic, & Brdar, 2014). These studies have shown that most, if not all, millennials are inspired (rather than informed) by social media when choosing their travel destinations (Whitepaper, 2018). In such studies, social media is viewed as an independent variable, while millennials' tourist behaviour is framed as a dependent variable; furthermore, these variables are found to be positively correlated. In other words, the more interesting the visual and/or textual material uploaded to social media, the more popular the destination amongst millennial tourists. The reverse is also true.

However, tourism activities consist of multiple stages, with planning being only the first step. Whitepaper (2018) identifies tourism behaviour as consisting of five stages: dreaming, planning, booking transportation and accommodation, experiencing, and sharing. The above-mentioned studies have

focused predominantly on the effects of social media on tourists' behaviour through the booking stage. The subsequent stage, during which social media is used as an instrument for recording and memorialising their sights, experiences, and activities, and subsequently communicating said realities to others (their friends, peers, family, etc.), are discussed much less frequently (Daisy, 2017; Du, Liechty, Santos, & Park, 2020; Ly & Ly, 2020; Matikiti-Manyevere, R Kruger, 2019; Moorthy et al., 2019; Živković et al., 2014). At the same time, such studies have ignored digital elasticity, the fact that social media enables individuals to remain 'up-to-date' on events in their places of origin and thereby blurs the line between everyday life and tourism (Gotardi, Senn, Cholakova, Liebrich, & Wozniac, 2015).

Meanwhile, in the post-tourism stage—one not mentioned by Whitepaper (2018), many tourists do not only upload their sights, experiences, and activities, but also review them. Through these reviews, millennials express their expectations and their desires. Such reviews have been explored widely in the literature (Gotardi et al., 2015; Komboj & Sharma, 2016; Lim, 2016; Lončarić, Dlačić, & Pisnik, 2019; Pramono, Sumartaha, Santosa, & Herlambang, Purwanto, 2020; Starčević & Konjukušić, 2018).

Millennial tourists' sharing of their activities on social media, in turn, have an effect (positive and negative) on attractions' marketing potential. This is a major driver of 'digital media-induced tourism' (Divinagracia, LA, Divinagracia, MRG Divinagracia, 2012). In other words, the degree to which a tourism destination can attract new visitors is informed significantly by the 'marketing' activities of former tourists through their social media accounts. Social media thus has a central role, one that must be considered and recognised by marketers and managers of tourist destinations.

In the following sections, we will discuss in further detail the phenomena mentioned above, thereby identifying the different nuances of the studies mapped.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***Method and data***

The method used in this research is literature review research. The literature conducted by Googling a number of keywords/subjects about social media and millennials and has been published in various international journals. The analysis process was carried out by qualitative descriptive analysis. All the papers have been reviewed and classified by three major themes, i.e., (a) the influence of social media on tourism, (b) millennial tourists and social media, and (c) digital media-induced tourism. The papers classified by theme are reviewed and critically assessed.

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

### *The Influence of Social Media on Tourism*

Živković et al (2014) provide a pioneering study of the influence of social media on tourism. Focusing on the means and extent to which information and communication technology have influenced tourism, they describe the behaviours of millennial tourists based on global statistics regarding the effect of social media on tourists' decision-making processes. They show that millennial tourists are more likely to consider the opinions of other tourists rather than the promotional materials distributed through official channels. Through the new spaces offered by social media, consumers are able to influence others by sharing their personal opinions and experiences (Živković et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, Živković et al (2014) write that social media offers an important motivation for travellers to upload their experiences, comments, and opinions to the internet, thereby providing important information to other users. Social media offers a channel for 'electronic word of mouth' (eWOM) to be spread. As such, Živković et al (2014) argue that digital technology has significantly transformed the tourism industry, including tourists' decision-making processes as well as their behaviours before, during, and after their trips.

Similarly, Matikiti-Manyevere, R Kruger (2019) focus on social media's influence on the decision-making processes of millennial tourists. However, where Živković et al (2014) refer to global statistics, Matikiti-Manyevere and Kruger build their argument based on a review of case studies from around the world. They reach a similar conclusion: social media has taken an increasingly important role in the tourism sector, from the pre-trip stage through the post-trip stage. They also provide a detailed discussion of the different platforms used during the process, noting that planning involves such platforms as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TripAdvisor, while experiences are shared primarily through Instagram (Matikiti-Manyevere, R Kruger, 2019). As with (Živković et al., 2014), they note the importance of stakeholders in the tourism industry (particularly marketers) developing and maintaining their social media platforms (Matikiti-Manyevere, R Kruger, 2019).

Beham (2015) makes a similar finding, noting that social media plays a significant role in the tourism behaviour of millennials. Using a survey of Austria, Beham (unlike Matikiti-Manyevere and Krueger) identifies Facebook as the social media platform most commonly used by millennials for their post-trip sharing. Respondents also indicated that information regarding tourism destinations is collected predominantly through TripAdvisor, followed by YouTube. Uniquely, Beham (2015) notes that most respondents tend to disconnect their gadgets while travelling; such a finding has not been made by subsequent studies.

Importantly, Beham also contrasts the tourism behaviour of millennials with that of previous generations. In the pre-trip stage, for example, earlier generations tended to rely on information from their closest relatives and friends (particularly those who had visited the destinations in question), and only consulted conventional/new media if they feel dissatisfied with the results; millennials, conversely, tend to consult social media as the first (or even only) source of information. They only consult others to confirm their decisions, and this only happens where necessary (Beham, 2015).

While Matikiti-Manyever, R Kruger (2019) identify Instagram as increasingly popular amongst millennial tourists, Duong (2018) focuses specifically on the platform's influence on young Asian travellers' tourism activities. Through a survey, Duong identifies several reasons why Instagram has become popular among tourists. First, the platform is simple; it is easy for users to share their photographs and their experiences. Second, Instagram enables tourists to reach new audiences, those who could not be reached through conventional media. Duong (2018) notes that such results are not surprising.

As with Matikiti-Manyever, Kruger (2019), Senanayake & Anise (2019) writes that social media's most significant effects are evident during the decision-making process. It is during this stage that tourists seek information by reading reviews, exploring blogs, and collecting information before choosing their next destination, accommodations, and means of transportation. Reflecting other studies, Senanayake & Anise (2019) notes that user-created content is trusted more than the professionally generated content of travel bureaus. There is thus a positive correlation between social media content and travel decisions (Senanayake & Anise, 2019); the more interesting the visual and/or textual material uploaded to social media, the more popular the destination amongst millennial tourists. The reverse is also true.

Similar findings have been made by Techajirakul, Prasongsukarn (2019), using a case study of Thailand. They write that social media is used most intensively during the planning process, and is positioned as millennial tourists' main source of information regarding potential destinations. This is also true in the case of Malaysia, as is studied by (Moorthy et al., 2019).

Dwityas & Briandana (2017), who view themselves as marketing researchers, similarly write that social media plays an important role in all stages of the decision-making process. However, unlike other scholars, Dwityas and Briandana examine the stages of the decision-making process in detail, including users' preferred media platforms and processes. As with previous studies, they note that millennials tend to believe the information available on social media over the information made available by travel bureaus (Dwityas & Briandana, 2017).

Daisy (2017) also note that social media has increasingly influenced the behaviours of millennial tourists. By combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including surveys and forum group discussions,

Magill offers an interesting point about the usage of social media; the most effective social media content is often heavily edited, something made possible by new media. According to Magill, informants were prone to editing their images after concluding their tourism activities. At the same time, however, they were unlikely to admit that said tourism activities were heavily influenced by the social media content created by others, as they recognised that such content was often polished or heavily edited. Informants, thus, were involved in the projection of edited realities to others (Daisy, 2017). These findings, it could be argued, were informed by the selection of informants; informants who were first-time tourists could provide very different responses.

Similarly, Parsons (2017) finds that the uploading of photographs and texts regarding tourism destinations to social media (particularly Instagram) can be a catalyst for further tourism. However, the reverse may also be true; individuals exposed to excessive content, rather than be incentivised to travel, may feel as though they have seen and experienced all the site has to offer and thus decide to remain at home.

The potential deleterious effects of social media on tourism are also recognised by Arun & Antony (2018). They conclude their article by acknowledging that their study focused solely on the positive aspects of social media, and that further research is needed to understand any harmful consequences.

Similarly, Ana & Istudor (2019) write that social media—all user-generated content, rather than any specific platform—has continuously influenced the tourism behaviour of millennials. At the same time, they emphasise a point that few researchers have acknowledged: tourists freely and voluntarily upload their content to social media. This is closely correlated with tourists' desire to present themselves through social media; were tourists instructed to upload photographs by travel bureaus, it is likely that they would object.

As if confirming the above studies, Ly & Ly (2020) provide a detailed examination of how social media adds value to the tourism industry. As such, they not only see social media as a marketing instrument, but also as a technology for creating added value for all aspects of the tourism industry. They view all photographs and social media content as potentially creating economic value. Nonetheless, Ly and Ly are scholars of marketing, and thus a cost-and-benefit analysis dominates their perspective of social media, millennial tourism, and the link between them.

Although the above-mentioned studies touch on how millennial tourists use/utilise social media, most have focused on how social media (as an independent variable) influences the tourism behaviour of millennials (as a dependent variable). In the following section, we will discuss how millennials use/utilise and signify their social media activities within the context of tourism. These studies' overlap significantly with studies of social media's effect on millennial tourists.

### *Millennial Tourists and Social Media*

In a simple, reflective column rooted in the literature, Lim (2016) argues that millennials are generationally characterised by anxiety and curiosity, as well as a desire for independence and freedom in all activities (including tourism). As such, when faced with social media and its content, they tend to be selective; they are averse to simply selecting something that because it is well known or branded. As such, Lim (2016) concludes, "when it comes to millennials, no one size fits all".

Because "no one size fits all", it is necessary to study the demand side of millennial tourists' offline activities and social media usage. Unfortunately, such studies are limited in number, far surpassed by supply-side studies into the influences and effects of social media (Gotardi et al., 2015)- as discussed above. Furthermore, demand-side studies must be specific, both in their categorisation of tourism activities and in their discussion of tourism destination selection.

Gotardi et al (2015), for instance, focus heavily on the tourism activities of millennials during the "on-site travel phase", using Switzerland as a case study for understanding tourism activities in urban destinations. Two concepts—"taking pictures" and "connecting to social media"—are repeated throughout the paper, and are positioned as mutually interrelated. Based on interviews with informants, Gotardi et al. note that informants desire to remain connected with those closest to them, including by uploading photographs and sharing their experiences through their gadgets. Millennials also manifest their desire to remain connected with those closest to them by using social media and online news portals to follow recent developments in their hometowns. Even though they are physically distant from their homes, they remain electronically linked to their places of origin. The blurring of the line between everyday life and tourism, the result of 'digital elasticity', further promotes the exposure of tourism experiences.

Similarly, using the case of how Chinese millennials produce and share their short-term travel videos on the newest platform of social media, i.e., TikTok or *Douyin*, Xin Du et. al. suggest that the daily use of TikTok, a visual storytelling platform, has extended to the tourism context, resulting in the eroding boundaries between tourism experiences and everyday life. Since its inception, TikTok has increasingly played a role in shaping destination image, transforming tourist behaviour, and mediating tourist experiences. With the emphasis on how Chinese millennials consume, produce and share their short-term travel videos on TikTok, the study of Xin Du et.al shows how this new platform of social media has transformed travel experiences into creative interpretation of cultural contexts in their everyday life (Xin Du et al., 2020).

By positioning millennial tourists as social media users, scholars simultaneously position them as active agents. As social media users, millennials actively give significance to their behaviours and their interactions (Briliana, 2019), for instance, shows that millennials' uploading of

photographs and other images to social media not only interests their peers, but also establishes a shared 'sense of community' with similarly minded individuals. Often, they hope to travel together, perhaps to a different destination. For millennials, travelling is not only a means of creating life experience, but also a means of celebrating their achievements (Briliana, 2019).

Similarly, Lončarić et al (2019) note that millennials will seek experiences that they deem unique and authentic, and that differ from their own, and then subsequently share these authentic experiences with their peers via social media. They hope that, by sharing their experiences, they can inspire others to travel, just as they themselves were inspired by others' user-generated content during the pre-trip phase (Lončarić et al., 2019). In other words, millennial tourists are not only influenced by social media, but also use social media to influence others.

Social media uploads offer free advertising for tourism destinations, and the public image created by said content can shape destinations' brand. For example, Lee (2017) explores how millennial tourists participate in the branding of tourism destinations, as well as how their preferences shape the tourism industry (Johnson, 2017).

Such studies of millennials' social media activities have shown that they have transformed the tourism industry in the past decade. In this context, it is therefore necessary to discuss how tourism has been shaped by digital technology, as will be done below.

### ***Digital Media-Induced Tourism***

Through a study of nature tourism in East Java, Divinagracia et al (2012) show how digital media-induced tourism shapes the management and perceptions of tourism destinations. Employing a survey with hundreds of respondents, all of whom were students at tertiary educational institutions in East Java, Divinagracia et al (2012) show that the images of nature tourism destinations produced and disseminated through digital media shape visitors' spatial orientation, providing them with a virtual experience that ultimately stimulates their desire to travel and visit particular destinations. Divinagracia, et al (2012) test their findings by contrasting respondents' responses before and after being exposed to images of tourism destinations.

Social media's ability to shape tourism through its images, particularly among social media users (most of whom are millennials), is explored by (Afif et al., 2017). In this study of social media users' responses to the photographs and content created by professionals and tourists, Afif et al (2017) find that photographs offer a powerful visual experience. As promotional tools, photographs can attract the interest of social media users, thereby stimulating word-of-mouth (WoM) promotion amongst tourists (both online and offline).

Similarly, through an exploration of Pura Tanah Lot, Bali, and its millennial tourist visitors, Pramono et al (2020) find that social media reviews significantly influence users' intent to visit tourism destinations. Reviews create specific images, and these images stimulate users' desire to visit particular destinations. Where these reviews are rooted in personal experience, millennials are more likely to trust them. Millennials, whose lives have become integrally and inexorably linked with social media, consult said media in order to create a specific image of destinations, and these images in turn promote interest in much-desired tourism activities (Pramono et al., 2020). In short, experience sharing on social networking sites drives millennials' tourism consumption (Liu, Wu, & Li, 2019).

Starčević & Konjukušić (2018) also show that millennials are an 'image-driven' generation, and this is a logical consequence of their fear of missing out and their fear of living offline. Involvement in online activities are integral to their everyday lives, and realised in part by their access to social media through their mobile phones and other gadgets. Similarly, in a marketing context, they are not only consumers, but also content creators and ambassadors, who voluntarily and actively participate in the marketing of particular destinations (Cornellia, Putra, Priyambodo, & Widyaningsih, 2017).

The findings of Starcevic and Konjikusic reinforce those of Chatzigeorgiou (2017) who notes that millennials—as the voluntary ambassadors of tourism destinations—participate in 'influencer marketing'. As influencers, they are more trusted by audiences than official channels. The combination of their status as influencers, the images they create, and the activities they upload to social media enables them to attract audiences to visit destinations that have previously drawn little attention.

The importance of developing tourism through specific images and perceptions is noted by (Wijayanti & Damanik, 2019), who note that both significantly influence tourists' selection of tourism destinations. This is particularly important in matters of cultural tourism, wherein tourists seek not only cultural attractions, but also wish to experience the everyday lives of their hosts. Positive images and perceptions create stronger desires and cultivate greater interest.

Such studies have shown that the tourism industry has become increasingly inseparable from, and even mobilised by, digital media and technology. Digital media produces images, and millennials—if not the largest, then a significant and growing market segment—tend to be image-driven. As such, they tend to be motivated to not only consume images, but also to create them based on their personal experiences

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

### ***Conclusion***

This review of the literature finds that existing studies have much focused on the correlation between social media and millennial tourism. Another factor has been undernoticed despite its importance: the tourism destinations themselves. The particular spots that are depicted and uploaded to social media, and that subsequently go viral among tourists, are often natural; however, many have been woven out of whole cloth, or at the very least heavily edited.

These spots, created in order to interest potential visitors, have been produced through the creative processes of their designers. It is they who design attractive sites, unique ones that can draw the attention of potential tourists and other visitors. Whence do these creative ideas come.

### ***Recommendation***

This question remains unanswered by existing studies, and as such we recommend that future studies seek to fill this gap and examine the creative processes involved in designing and presenting attractive destinations. Such a study could be realised, for instance, through focus group discussions with the designers and administrators of tourism destinations that are popular among millennial tourists. Similarly, a field survey of tourism attractions could expose the processes through which tourists receive (respond to) the attractions they deem authentic, unique, and special. As millennials are image-driven tourists, to what extent does the 'image' of a destination 'drive' them to visit it?

Both approaches are recommended for future research. In this manner, it would be possible not only to obtain a better understanding of the creative processes through which attractions are designed and managed, but also to investigate the processes through which said creative designs and management are received by millennial tourists.

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