

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE TO TOURIST DECISION MAKING AND PREFERENCES

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Abstract: This study focused on determining and describing what characteristics of tourism-related social media posts impacted tourists' and/or social media users' decision-making and preferences, in terms of prospect travel destinations. While a number of studies have discussed the relationship between social media and the travel industry, as well as the motivations that drive tourists to travel, few have focused on studying the details and content of social media, known better as 'social media posts'. This study aimed to bridge this gap, and additionally aimed for its findings to contribute to tourism establishments' and stakeholders' knowledge of social media as a tool for promotion and reaching out to a wider range of tourists. The proponents grounded the study on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974), and the Travel-Buying Behavior Model by Mathieson et al. (1982). This quantitative study employed the descriptive research design, to describe social media posts' characteristics and impact to travel decisions and preferences. Purposive sampling under the non-probability sampling methods was also used, with the first- to third-year BS Tourism Students of De La Salle University - Dasmariñas as the study's participants. The study's findings showed that for most of social media's functions, there are no significant differences in the respondents' assessment, with regards to their demographic profile. In contrast, it was found that there is a significant difference in the assessment of social media's purchase decision influence depending on respondents' level of social media usage. Through this study, tourism stakeholders can plan their social media contents accordingly, and ensure that their social media posts have a balance of informativeness, reliability, visual appeal, and accessibility to make sure that it positively impacts and motivates future guests. Furthermore, the data gathered in this study can be used in expanding social media users' knowledge of tourism marketing.

Keywords: social media, tourist preferences, tourist decision-making, social media users, tourism posts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this modern day of the tourism industry, the spread of information has been evolving rapidly to different mediums, specifically through social media platforms. Many people have become users of social media and it has become something that everybody needs. People share almost everything in social media like their opinions, daily activities, interests, experiences, businesses, and events that can easily be seen and shared by everyone. Now that our community is fast-paced, and with how social media sites can reach a larger audience, companies and businesses are switching to social media platforms in conducting their marketing activities (Kim et al., 2017) as cited in Javed et al., (2020), as it proves most convenient than traditional techniques (Kutuk, 2016).

Based on a survey of Statista in the year 2019, Facebook is the most popular social media platform among Filipinos and fourth is Instagram. Additionally, their 2020 survey showed that Facebook has 92.73% of market share of social media platforms within the social media market in the Philippines. These two social networking sites are greatly utilized today for marketing and spreading trends, most notably in the tourism market - hence they were specifically emphasized as the platforms whose social media content was to be observed in order to achieve the study's objectives.

"Social media" is defined as '*websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking*' (Stevenson, 2012), that allows people to connect and interact with others even from across the globe.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram are two of the most well-known platforms that are greatly utilized today for marketing and spreading trends, especially in the tourism market. These platforms play a significant role in tourists' experience, in which it is where they share their insights and overall experience of their travel journey. Consequently, it makes the tourist destinations more commercialized and virtually accessible to other tourists, which in turn, can affect their travel decisions.

This study observed social media posts - particularly User Generated Content or UGC (shared on Facebook and Instagram) created by individual social media users), through the study's participants' perspective, (content that may be written, visual or audio-visual. In the scene of travel, particularly, social media is used extensively, which is why this study focused on identifying which factors and characteristics of (UGC) social media posts on Facebook and Instagram made an impact on tourists' decision making process and preferences. With recent developments and increased usage, social media is a growing community platform, and the researchers believed that social media's role brings great impact to tourists in this digital age, hence the study's significance. The proponents aimed for the study's results and findings to be used for reference in future studies, and contribute to tourism establishments' and stakeholders' knowledge of social media as an aid for promotion and catering to a wider range of tourists. Additionally, the researchers prompted this particular study in order to educate social media users of the circulation of numerous false news and inaccurate information on social media platforms.

The researchers adapted the study of Anil Kutuk (2016), which examined the ways in which social media affected the process of tourists' decision making and the significance of its users' demographic information. The researchers also conducted the study to help tourism students become aware and more mindful of the reliability and what to examine on the social media information they consume.

De La Salle University-Dasmariñas was the research locale for the study. The survey was conducted online, and the study's participants were the first, second and third year students under the Tourism Management course. The participants were chosen as majority of them have prior experiences and knowledge about travelling, through educational tours conducted by the university, a partial fulfillment and a vital learning experience in their course.

General Objectives:

The study's objective was to determine and describe which factors (and characteristics) of social media content or posts are considered by tourists in their travel decisions and preferences. Specifically, it attempted to determine the following:

1. What is the demographic profile of the study's participants in terms of:
 - a. Year Level
 - b. Gender
 - c. Social Media Usage
 - d. Frequency of Travel
2. How do tourists view tourism-related social media content/posts in variables in terms of:
 - a. Informativeness
(Pertains to how reliable, accurate and useful the contents of the posts are)
 - b. Utilization
(Pertains to how the platform was maximized and what tools were utilized to create the social media posts)
 - c. Impact or reach to viewers
(Pertains to how many were able to notice and give feedbacks about the social media posts)
 - d. Purchase decision influence
(Pertains to the social media posts' ability to influence social media users to purchase a tourism product/service)
3. Is there a significant difference in the respondents' assessment of the content of social media posts with groups according to demographic profile?

Several studies have observed social media's role in tourists' process of decision making and their preferences, however, studies specifically aimed at identifying which factors (such as informativeness, visual appeal, etc.) of social media posts are relevant to the decision making process of tourists are very few. As social media is constantly developing, the proponents deemed the study and its findings to be beneficial to the following:

- Tourism Establishments/Businesses - The discussions and findings of the study will help improve tourism stakeholders' marketing strategy by emphasizing importance to social media content planning that can help the betterment of the reputation of their establishment.
- Influencers/Bloggers - The discussions and findings of this study can give them more ideas for making their own contents and being of great influence to more social media users.
- Tourists and Travelers - The discussions and findings of this study will help tourists or travelers on seeking the best options and shall serve as a guide for their future travel plans. Findings of the study can also help them be more mindful of the tourism-related social media posts they consume.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study was grounded on the Uses and Gratifications Theory by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) (learning-theories.com, 2016), and the Travel-Buying Behavior Model by Mathieson and Wall (1982) (Juvan et al., 2017). The proponents based this study's theoretical framework on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which is audience-centered, and generally aimed to understand the reasons behind people's choice of media type (such as newspaper, radio, television, etc.), as well as the purposes or manner in which these media are used (i.e., entertainment, information, socializing). The proponents chose to apply this particular theory to the present study - as unlike other related theories which focused mainly on media's influence to its users, the Uses and Gratification Theory is the opposite, in that it emphasizes on the power that people possess over their preferred media and the uses they make of it. The theory expressed relation to the study's topic of how tourists and travelers turn to social media (among other options of media) and use it to obtain information or as reference, prior to their decisions to travel to certain destinations.

In addition, the study's conceptual framework (Fig. 1) adapted the Travel-Buying Behavior Model (Mathieson & Wall, 1982), which presented a five-stage linear model depicting tourists' consumer behavior prior to, during, and after their travel decisions. The study's conceptual framework was based on the first three stages of the travel-buying behavior model, which supported tourists' need to research on their desired travel destinations before making decisions, through the help of social media. As illustrated below, the tourist initially feels a need to travel, hence he/she turns to social media to gather information and evaluate possible destination options. After gathering ideas for destinations, the tourist's travel decision follows, shaped by the information he/she has gathered through the chosen platform - social media.

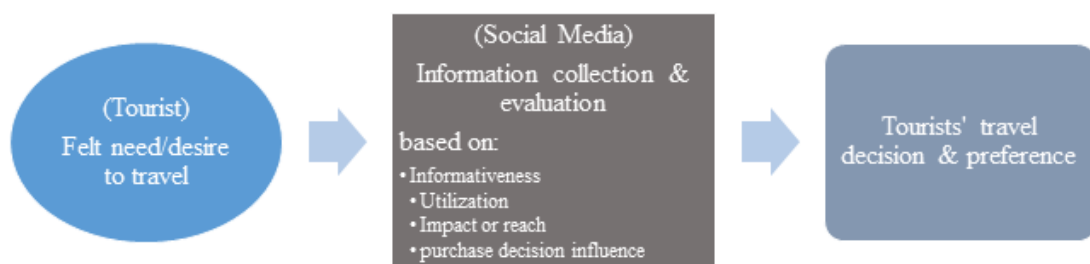


Fig.1

Tourism advertising has been widely used and adapted through social media, specifically on Facebook, as supported by the study of Hamouda (2018) entitled "Understanding Social Media Advertising Effect on Consumers' Responses: An empirical investigation of tourism advertising on Facebook" where he examined the precursor of the advertising value and its effects on the consumers' attitude and behavior of tourism advertising. He presented a deeper understanding of social media advertising using Ducaffe's advertising value model. In addition, the study's major findings found out that informativeness, entertainment and credibility is the key to good social media advertising value, which consequently leads to a positive attitude of the consumers. Hamouda's study relates to the present study, as it could both contribute to the better understanding of using social media in advertising tourism products and services.

In relation to advertising of tourism products and services, a dissertation entitled “Does Social Media Influence an Individual’s Decision to Visit Tourist Destinations? Using a Case Study of Instagram” conducted by Parsons (2017) examined the depth of influence that social media has on the individual’s decision on choosing tourist destinations. The study’s aim was to analyze the ways in which social media became a motivational factor for tourists to visit a destination. It focused on Instagram along with its UGC (User Generated Contents) as an addition to the effects of social media to travelers. The study’s findings discovered that social media does impact the individual’s process of decision making, as well as their motivations to visit a destination. Furthermore, Instagram had major influences on the younger generation because of their predominant use of these social media platforms everyday and gaining the recognition from UGC instills self-gratification and better self-image. However, the study also concluded that social media also impacts tourists to reconsider visiting a destination due to its negative consequences such as overcrowding.

The decision-making process in general, is the product of many different factors including age, background, economic status, and personality to name a few (lumenlearning.com, n.d.). Additionally, decisions are influenced through different media and channels, especially with the emergence of the Internet, social media, and social networking sites. In the tourism industry’s point of view, tourists make their decisions about purchasing tourism products and visiting destinations with ‘significant’ influence from social media (Javen et al., 2020). Furthermore, Javen’s study also indicated that the during and after phase of the tourists’ trips also involved the use of social media, evident in the sharing of stories, posted pictures, blog posts, and critics or reviews, among others. Through these content posted on the Internet, other tourists can then view and access them, influencing their decision-making process, consequently.

In addition to social media’s influence on its users to purchase or to consider purchasing tourism products/services or to visit certain destinations, evidence also showed that social media extensively impacts decision making at an individual and organizational level (Power et al., 2011). Furthermore, the impacts of the online platforms can also involve decision making in politics, with Power & Phillips-Wren (2011), citing Kirkpatrick (2011), that commentators believe social media to have been ‘integral’ to Arabian revolutions and revolts in the year 2011. This illustrates and agrees with Power and Phillips-Wren’s study, where they stated that “anecdotal evidence” suggested social media “altered opinions” and “influencing our choices”. In such ways we may not even be conscious about, social media has played this large role in our decision-making process, and even impacted our behavior, thought process, and opinions on certain issues. This is applied in the tourism point of view as well, as tourists are influenced and constantly consuming information from the media through easily accessible mediums such as television, the Internet, and other gadgets.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adapted the descriptive research design, as it aimed to comprehend and describe the factors of tourism-related social media content considered by tourists with regards to their travel decisions and preferences. The particular research design was applied as it best aligned with the study’s objective to describe the functions of social media that tourists focus on when researching for prospect travel activities. As compared to a correlational research design, which focuses on defining relationships of two variables (Kowalczyk, 2017), the descriptive research design better justified the aim of identifying and describing the factors considered in tourist decision-making. The research did not center around the impacts of social media use to the tourism industry as well, however some related studies and literature covering these impacts were included to support the study.

Purposive sampling was used to determine the study’s participants. The participants covered the first- to third-year students of De La Salle University - Dasmariñas, who were taking up the course BS Tourism Management (BTM) in the first semester of academic year 2020-2021. Students under tourism and hospitality programs are typically well-versed in both the business and leisure side of travel, as their studies involve learning about the basics and underlying theories of the industry. They also gain practical knowledge by traveling abroad to study (educations.com, 2020) or undergo internship. As tourism students are more immersed in the tourism and travel industry as a whole, their participation in the study helped direct its findings into context. The sampling frame for the given population were the students under sections BTM11, BTM12, BTM13, BTM14 for the first years, BTM21, BTM22, BTM23, and BTM24 for the second years, and BTM31, BTM32, BTM33, and BTM34 for the third years. As the total population size of first- to third-year BTM students enrolled in the academic year 2020-2021 totaled 412, the sample size for the study resulted in 201, computed using raosoft, with a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. Purposive sampling, or the “deliberate selection of samples based on characteristics” (Barrot, 2017) was also used for the study, under the non-probability sampling method.

Survey questionnaires were used as the data-gathering tool for the study, particularly the instrument used in a previously published study entitled “Social Media Marketing In Tourism Industry And Role Of The Social Media On Consumer Preferences” by Kutuk (2016). However, as the situation did not allow face-to-face interactions (distribution of questionnaires) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook Messenger was the platform used in distributing the questionnaires, wherein all of the participants were messaged individually, that confirmed their consent to answer, followed with the link to the survey questionnaire.

The questionnaires (adapted from Kutuk’s study) were created through google forms, and were distributed online to the participants, by both the proponents of the study, with the help of friends and acquaintances from the different sections. The data gathering and survey questionnaire distribution lasted over two weeks; the proponents started in the last week of February (February 25, 2021) and ended the distribution in the third week of March (March 15, 2021). Proponents made sure that the distribution through Facebook messenger only occurred at times where it would be convenient for the participants to answer. In total, 201 individuals were able to accomplish the distributed questionnaires.

The study’s design is quantitative. Descriptive statistics, T-Test, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were the used statistical methods. The proponents of the study also used the services of a statistician in analyzing the study’s data. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences or SPSS was the software used for this study’s data analysis

In observing ethical considerations for the study, the proponents forwarded a formal message to the university’s Tourism Department chair, and permission was granted to access the complete list of students who were participants for the study. In addition, no questionnaires were distributed to minors, persons with disability, and indigenous people.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Presentation of Data for Respondents’ Demographic Profile

The first part of the study’s data presents the participant’s demographic profile. The respondents’ year level, gender, level of social media usage, and frequency of travel were the examined variables. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the respondents’ year level.

As indicated in the table, most of the study’s respondents were third year BS Tourism Management students, as most of them are peers of the proponents and subsequently taking up the same research subject at the same time as the researcher. As compared to first-year and second-year BS Tourism Management students who are unfamiliar with the proponents’ identities and activities, third-year BS Tourism Management students could easily be contacted by the researchers; through mutual friends and acquaintances, and they were also able to access the distributed survey questionnaires on Facebook Messenger more conveniently as they are familiar with and personally know the proponents. Due to the familiarity, third-year BS Tourism Management respondents were more cooperative in accomplishing the survey questionnaires.

Table 1. Year Level of the Respondents

Year Level	Frequency	Percentage
First Year	73	36.3
Second Year	46	22.9
Third Year	82	40.8
Total	201	100.0%

The findings showed how more convenient it was for the researchers to distribute the questionnaires to their peers who are most likely their year level. Evidently, the majority of the respondents who were able to respond are the third years which among year levels may have the most experience in traveling due to the different educational tours they experienced needed for their courses ever since their first year. The manner of distribution that was only done through online made it more difficult for the researchers to reach out to other year levels that supported the results on Table 1.

Table 2 presents the respondents’ gender, where it was found that of those who answered the survey questionnaire, the female respondents were dominant over the male respondents in number. This is because the population of currently

enrolled first- to third-year BS Tourism Management students in De La Salle University - Dasmariñas is dominantly female, as compared to the currently enrolled male population of the same course and range of year levels. Similarly, an article by Rinaldi et al. (2019) stated that 46% of the tourism workforce are made up of women, supporting the present study’s findings of gender imbalances in the tourism context.

Table 2. Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	48	23.9
Female	153	76.1
Total	201	100.0%

Of the 201 respondents, 153 were female and only 48 were male which suggested that female presence is more dominant on social media or that females are more active users than male. Although this data is not surprising because based on the De La Salle University-Dasmariñas registrar majority of the population of tourism students are female which also may have limited the study. In contrast, in a study by Kutuk (2016), the survey questionnaires were distributed evenly to male and female respondents. Additionally, the study’s results showed that there are no significant differences between the gender of the participants and characteristics of social media posts.

In the following table, the respondents’ level or frequency of using social media is presented. Options in answering this section show how many minutes the respondents typically used social media platforms in a day. Most of the respondents answered that they used social media more than one-hundred eighty (180) minutes per day; equivalent to three (3) hours of social media use in a day.

As the pandemic has placed the Philippines under lockdown for over a year, students relied on technology and the Internet for all kinds of purposes - be it for education, information gathering, work (for some), ways to kill time, or to entertain themselves. With most people confined to their home every day, students also tend to frequently be on social media applications for longer hours, with educational, informational, or entertainment purposes in mind.

Table 3. Social Media Usage

Social Media Use	Frequency	Percentage
Below 60 minutes	47	23.4
60-120 minutes	31	15.4
120-180 minutes	31	15.4
More than 180 minutes	92	45.8
Total	201	100.0

Even due to the certain conditions that the respondents are facing these times, the table showed that they use social media for more than two hours or an average of a hundred eighty minutes per day. According to the 2019 World Economic Forum article, it revealed that Generation Z, which the respondents fall into, use social media at an average of 2 hours and 55 minutes per day. The proponents believe that this prolonged usage of social media may be influenced by the generation they belong to, wherein ever since birth they have been immersed in the Internet and are more resistant to longer hours of phone or other device usage.

Table 4 presents the respondents’ frequency of travel. Respondents answered this part of the questionnaire by indicating whether they were able to travel once, twice, thrice, or more than four times per year. Most of the respondents answered that they were able to travel at least once per year, and only a few answered that they were able to travel as frequently as four times a year. While all of the study’s respondents are all taking up a tourism course, not all have the opportunity and time to travel more than once in a year. Most university students (including this study’s respondents) dedicate a majority

of their time for their studies, hence this could take away time, opportunity, and financial resources to travel. Meanwhile, tourism students are also presented with the opportunity to travel during educational tours, especially as part of De La Salle University - Dasmariñas' program and course requirement, supporting the study's findings of other respondents having the chance to travel at least two or three times in a year. There are also respondents whose families make it a point to go on vacations during the year, hence resulting in a few of the respondents answering that they are able to travel at least four times in a year.

Table 4. Frequency of Travel

Travel Frequency	Frequency	Percentage
1 (at least once per year)	87	43.3
2 (at least twice per year)	71	35.3
3 (at least thrice per year)	23	11.4
more than 4 (at least more than four times per year)	20	10.0
Total	201	100.0

Tourism students are likely to travel around often due to the nature of their course, specifically in the De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, as it is a major requirement to join educational tours, however the respondents mostly answered that they traveled only at least once per year. The findings showed that not all tourism students are frequently traveling per year and that some were only able to travel because it is a requirement for their course subjects. Also considering the fact that we had this pandemic situation, most of the first and second year students were not able to experience their educational tours.

Presentation of Data for Respondents' View of Social Media Content or Posts' Informativeness, Utilization, Impact or Reach to Audience, and Purchase Decision Influence

The next part of the questionnaire assessed how respondents' viewed social media's function as being informative. The respondents' level of agreement to the statements pertaining to social media's informativeness was assessed using a 4-point Likert Scale. The scale was also applied to the other three social media functions/characteristics being assessed; namely, utilization, impact or reach to audience, and purchase decision influence.

The statement with the highest perceived value for the Informativeness section was social networking sites' contribution to promoting tourist facilities and destinations (with a mean of 3.4876), as the BS Tourism Management student-respondents also use social media as a convenient platform in gathering information or researching about the locations and features of tourist destinations and its facilities. In addition to booking sites and travel blogs, social media has also become an avenue for tourism establishments to post information and media about their facilities and services. Similarly, tourists have also turned to social media sites in sharing their experiences, photos, videos, and other media. While some may not be conscious about it, shared posts and stories also helped promote the destination, its facilities, and services; some can even compare these social media posts and stories of testimonials, further promoting the destinations visited by tourists who are active in posting on the platforms.

In contrast to the statement with the highest perceived value, the statement with the lowest perceived value was statement number 3, which stated that respondents considered subscribing or have actually subscribed to tourism destinations' and establishments' social media sites. While it could be easier for the respondents to receive updates and notifications by subscribing to tourism social media sites, social media content that was user-generated was valued more, as they can be perceived as believable reviews or testimonials about a certain destination. Carnoy (2017) mentions this as well, stating that 89% of millennials planned their travel activities based on the content that was posted by peers. With social media and the Internet's accessibility in a few clicks, tourists are able to access "real guest feedback", including ratings, reviews, and check-ins. Through other users' shared stories about their experiences, other prospect visitors (including the study's respondents) are given an idea of how their ideal experience, with the belief that they themselves will meet the expectations they set.

Table 5. Social Media Informativeness

INFORMATIVENESS	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	VERBAL INTERPRETATION	Rank
1. Social networking sites provide information for me about hotels.	201	3.3184	0.89337	Agree	4
2. Social networking sites provide information for me about touristic facilities and destinations while I am making decisions.	201	3.3532	0.87155	Agree	3
3. I subscribe on the social networking sites concerning my favorite hotels and touristic destinations; and I follow their updated notifications.	201	2.9154	0.93692	Agree	6
4. I learn every kind of innovation regarding the hotels and touristic destinations by means of such social networking sites.	201	3.1294	0.86786	Agree	5
5. Social networking sites are informative before trips.	201	3.4129	0.90202	Agree	2
6. Social networking sites contribute to the promotion of touristic facilities and destinations.	201	3.4876	0.92255	Agree	1
INFORMATIVENESS	201	3.2695	0.75494	AGREE	

Legend: 1.00-1.49 - strongly agree; 1.50 - 2.49 - agree; 2.50 - 3.49 - disagree; 3.50 - 4.00 strongly disagree

The findings on table 5 showed that the respondents agreed on how informative and useful the social networking sites are when they browse the internet for their travel decisions and preferences. As seen on the table, social networking sites as contributors to the promotion of touristic facilities and destinations have the highest perceived value with a mean of 3.48776. The researchers observed that based on the results using social media has been a good marketing strategy in making tourists destinations known to the market. They can easily get a grasp of what the tourist destination offers and what to expect at the site with the information they give on the social media posts. Based on the findings of the study by Lompotet al. (2018), the majority of Filipinos have social media specifically Facebook as the most frequented site that is also the main source of information regarding tourist destinations and latest promotions which also allows easier interactions between the tourists and the business representatives for their pre-travel queries.

On the other hand, subscribing to favorite hotels and tourist destinations while getting updated notifications about the destination have the lowest perceived value with a mean of 2.9514. This may be due to reasons like tourists do not want to be bothered by numerous notifications and updates on their social media that might not be relevant for them and will only clutter their accounts. The researchers suggest that as the individual's knowledge about touristic facilities and destinations gets to expand the more they will make use of the said social networking sites for future references.

The next table presents how respondents' utilized social media sites and posts which promoted tourist destinations/products/services. Similar to Table 5, this part assessed respondents' level of agreement on social media's utilization through a 4-point Likert Scale. Checking pictures of the hotels on the social networking site pages concerning tourist facilities had the highest perceived value, because the respondents view media content (such as photos and videos) of prospective tourist destinations and facilities to be important prior to their decisions. As most of the respondents are both/either Facebook and Instagram users (apps which both feature media sharing), they get motivated better or are reassured, if they get a visual of the destination or hotel they are interested in visiting, prior to their decision of traveling to the location. To support this statement, a study entitled "Impacts of online images of a tourist destination on tourist travel decision" by Lian et al. (2019) stated that a tourist destination's image posted online influences tourists' motivation, perceived risks, and even their attitude towards the destination, which ultimately "helps in the making of a travel

decision”. Lian et al. (2019) further added that the quality of the online image plays a role in the decision making process of the tourist as well.

On the other hand, the survey found that the variable with the lowest perceived value was the first statement, which assessed whether or not respondents agreed that they have the chance to access websites of touristic facilities easily via social networking sites. As compared to official tourism websites and booking sites, tourists found that social networking sites and blogs give a more personal and interactive experience; most especially in sharing their travel experiences with other users. Ly et al. (2020) also mentions this in an article entitled “Effect of Social Media in Tourism (Case in Cambodia)”, where they stated that social media “encourages openness” and the participation of its users. In this encouragement of openness among users, users are not only affected, but are actually also influencing brand information.

Table 6. Social Media Utilization

UTILIZATION	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	VERBAL INTERPRETATION	Rank
1. I have the chance to access the websites of the touristic facilities easily via social networking sites.	201	3.1841	0.84318	Agree	6
2. Social networking sites help me to make faster decisions about the touristic facilities or the destinations I want to visit.	201	3.2338	0.88320	Agree	5
3. I make use of the posts and the comments of the people on social networking sites while deciding.	201	3.3035	0.95522	Agree	3
4. I watch the videos on the pages of the social networking sites concerning for touristic facilities that I am planning to visit.	201	3.2388	0.90702	Agree	4
5. I check the pictures of the hotels on the pages of the social networking sites concerning touristic facilities.	201	3.4925	0.90620	Agree	1
6. I carefully check and examine all of the special offers on the social networking sites concerning the destinations and the touristic facilities that I am planning to visit.	201	3.3433	0.89251	Agree	2
7. I ask/post questions on social networking sites while I am deciding the touristic facility or the destination that I am planning to visit.	201	2.6468	0.96933	Agree	7
UTILIZATION	201	3.2061	0.74420	AGREE	

Legend: 1.00-1.49 - strongly agree; 1.50 - 2.49 - agree; 2.50 - 3.49 - disagree; 3.50 - 4.00 strongly disagree

The findings on table 6 also showed that the respondents agreed on the accessibility and visual appeal of the posts on social networking sites is an important factor that they consider when browsing the social media posts. As shown on the table, checking the pictures of hotels on the pages of the social networking sites of touristic facilities had the highest perceived value with a mean of 3.4925. The findings show that it is very important that the pages of the tourist establishments have good and clear pictures as this brings an impact to the tourists visiting the site. The contents of the page should be well planned and pleasing and may reflect on the image of the whole tourist establishment. Similar to the study of Parsons (2017), it showed that 56% of her respondents agreed that they have visited the tourist destination after seeing the picture on social media. These proved that making the most of the features of social networking sites in creating posts is a great motivational element in tourists’ decision making.

In contrast, asking or posting questions on social networking sites while deciding on the touristic facility or destination perceived the lowest value with a mean of 2.6468. This may be due to the fact that ample information is already shown on the tourist destination or facilities page, that it is already up to the users if they decide to visit or prefer the specific tourist destination.

Respondents' assessment of social media's reach and impact to its viewers are presented in the table below. Among the statements, the variable with the highest value are the presence of positive comments/posts from users on social networking sites. This encourages tourists to put their trust on the particular tourist destination or facility. The respondents particularly recognize the importance of high ratings or feedback; similar to online shopping. This is applied to tourist services, destinations, and products as well - as the respondents are aware of the indications that high reviews and comments have; the higher the number of positive comments and reactions, the more likely that the experience of other tourists were excellent, hence, respondents will be interested and put their trust on the service, destination, or product, in hopes that they, too, will be able to have the same high quality experience. As the tourism industry is a business in itself, "the key to success is to collect social shares, positive user reviews, and customer satisfaction on social media", mentioned by Tas (n.d.).

In contrast, the statement with the lowest rank in the table is statement number 3, which assessed whether respondents agreed or disagreed with being easily affected by posted comments on tourism-related social networking sites. While the respondents valued the presence of positive comments and/or posts of other users highly, the study's findings showed that the comments do not necessarily and easily affect them. This was reasonable, as it has shown that the respondents possess (to some degree) a wariness for comments posted online, as the Internet can be full of inaccurate or even false information. This showed that the respondents are more careful about the information they consume from the Internet, more specifically on social networking sites.

Table 7. Social Media Impact/Reach to Viewers

IMPACT/REACH TO VIEWERS	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	VERBAL INTERPRETATION	Rank
1. Positive comments/posts of the users on social networking sites make me trust the touristic facilities that I am interested in.	201	3.3483	0.92093	Agree	1
2. I think the posts and the comments of the tourists on social networking sites are reliable.	201	3.0846	0.81106	Agree	5
3. I am easily affected by the comments on touristic facilities posted on social networking sites.	201	2.9303	0.86898	Agree	6
4. I think the experiences and comments that are posted on social networking sites concerning the travel agencies or the trips are convincing.	201	3.1194	0.84597	Agree	4
5. I can make healthier decisions about my touristic activities by the help of social networking sites.	201	3.2139	0.88826	Agree	2
6. The posts and comments on social networking sites affects my decisions about a touristic product.	201	3.1244	0.93779	Agree	3
IMPACT/ REACH TO VIEWERS	201	3.1368	0.76844	AGREE	

Legend: 1.00-1.49 - strongly agree; 1.50 - 2.49 - agree; 2.50 - 3.49 - disagree; 3.50 - 4.00 strongly disagree

The findings on table 7 showed that the respondents agreed on the relevance of the posts' reach, as well as other people's view and insights on the tourist destination. As shown on the table, positive comments/posts on social networking sites that the tourists are interested in perceived the highest value with a mean of 3.3483. The findings show that the impact the post has on other will make it more convincing for tourists to purchase the products or services in addition to visual appeal. In addition, this indicates that the need for effective strategies on social media posts is useful for tourism establishments. In support, Kutuk (2016) mentioned in his study that people who are more knowledgeable often tend to share their experiences on the tourist destinations or facilities they've been to, which brings either a positive or negative perception among others based on the user's review.

The following table (table 8) presents the respondents' level of agreement or perception of social media's influence in purchase decisions. The variable with the highest perceived value is the first statement, in which respondents agreed that they check all posts related to the tourism products they are interested in purchasing on social networking sites. Through scrolling on these sites, respondents were able to see posts about the tourism product or destination that they are interested in visiting or purchasing. In addition, searching features for these platforms are designed to be easily accessible and easy to understand, which heightens the chances that all related posts to a product or destination can be found at a few clicks. Social media or social networking sites also have suggestive features, where advertisements, products, shops, places, and websites that are related to respondents' initial searches can be seen as they scroll through the platforms.

The study also found statement number 3 for this section as the statement with the lowest perceived value, an indication showing that just because a touristic product or destination is being advertised online on social media, does not necessarily mean that respondents are willing to purchase the advertised product. Once again, this demonstrated respondents' sense of responsibility, in that they are less likely to decide where they will be planning their next trip purely because they were influenced by an online advertisement.

Table 8. Social Media Purchase Decision Influence

PURCHASE DECISION INFLUENCE	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	VERBAL INTERPRETATION	Rank
1. I check all of the posts on social networking sites about the touristic products that I am deciding whether to purchase or not	201	3.0647	0.92239	Agree	1
2. I might purchase a trip for a touristic destination which is posted on a social networking site.	201	2.8856	0.84371	Agree	5
3. I might order a touristic product that is being advertised via social networking sites.	201	2.8458	0.84917	Agree	6
4. I might decide where to spend my holiday by social media.	201	3.0299	0.97422	Agree	2
5. I might make preferences between locations/districts according to the comments posted on social media concerning such touristic locations.	201	3.0100	0.84847	Agree	3
6. I might purchase a trip from a travel agency to a destination according to the information that were provided by means of social media.	201	2.9701	0.88832	Agree	4
PURCHASE DECISION INFLUENCE	201	2.9677	0.73536	AGREE	

Legend: 1.00-1.49 - strongly agree; 1.50 - 2.49 - agree; 2.50 - 3.49 - disagree; 3.50 - 4.00 strongly disagree

The findings on table 8 showed that the respondent's agree on having an influence on the social networking sites to their travel decisions. As shown on the table, checking of posts on social networking sites about the touristic products to help them decide perceived the highest value with a mean of 3.0647. Respondents agreed that they get to know the products and services of a travel destination through social media with UGC posts and travel promotions and deals.

The study of Parsons (2017) have similarities of variables in her questionnaires and in the researchers' survey although her study resulted that travel promotions and posts may not immediately impact a tourist's travel decisions but continuous exposure to such contents on social networking sites may have an effect on them in the long-term. Ordering a touristic product through social networking sites on the other hand perceived the lowest value that may indicate that tourists prefer availing touristic products on hand or on site.

Presentation of Data for Assessment of the Content of Social Media Posts with Groups According to Demographic Profile

The next variables investigated in this study presents whether or not there is a significant difference between each of the respondents’ demographic profile (Year Level, Gender, Social Media Usage, and Frequency of Travel) and each of social media’s functions (Informativeness, Utilization, Impact/Reach to Viewers, and Purchase Decision Influence).

The following table presents the results for the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) between respondents’ groups (year level) and within groups as well. For all four of social media’s functions, results showed that there is no significant difference between first years, second years, and third years in the assessment of social media’s informativeness, utilization, impact to viewers, and purchase decision influence. This applied within the mentioned groups as well - among first years/second years/third years, there is no found significant difference in assessing social media content within their respective year levels.

Table 9. ANOVA - Respondents’ Assessment of Social Media’s Functions with regards to Year Level

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
INFORMATIVENESS	Between Groups	0.830	2	0.415	0.726	0.485	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	113.156	198	0.571			
	Total	113.986	200				
UTILIZATION	Between Groups	1.104	2	0.552	0.997	0.371	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	109.663	198	0.554			
	Total	110.767	200				
IMPACT/ REACH TO VIEWERS	Between Groups	1.606	2	0.803	1.365	0.258	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	116.492	198	0.588			
	Total	118.099	200				
PURCHASE DECISION INFLUENCE	Between Groups	1.904	2	0.952	1.774	0.172	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	106.247	198	0.537			
	Total	108.151	200				

Based on table 9, there is no significant difference between the year levels of the tourism respondents on what functions or characteristics of the social media contents appeal or have an impact to them. Due to the limited range of age of the respondents they all belong to the similar generation which is the Millennials who have almost the same social media patterns and usage.

Presented in the table below is the Independent Samples Test done to determine if there is a significant difference between male and female respondents’ assessment of social media’s informativeness, utilization, impact or reach to viewers, and purchase decision influence. As indicated below, it was found that there was no significant difference between male and female respondents’ assessment for all four of the included functions of social media - informativeness, utilization, impact or reach to viewers, and purchase decision influence.

Both genders of the respondents were enrolled under the same program (Tourism Management), and the survey found that there were minimal differences to their assessment of social media posts' content and its informativeness, utilization, impact, and purchase decision influence - as both genders are aware and more careful of what information and characteristics of social media posts that are safe to consume. In addition, both genders possess information literacy, in that they are more mindful of information they consume on a daily basis, with the abundance of fake news and inaccurate information all over social media platforms. This was supported by a study conducted in Ohio University, entitled "Recognise misinformation and verify before sharing: a reasoned action and information literacy perspective" by Khan et al. (2019), that observed factors such as perceived ability to recognize false information on social media, and behavior associated with information sharing without verification.

Table 10. Independent Samples Test - Respondents' Assessment of Social Media's Functions with regards to Gender

Independent Samples Test		t-test for Equality of Means			
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
INFORMATIVENESS	Equal variances assumed	1.184	199	0.238	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
UTILIZATION	Equal variances assumed	1.425	199	0.156	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
IMPACT/ REACH TO VIEWERS	Equal variances assumed	1.352	199	0.178	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
PURCHASE DECISION INFLUENCE	Equal variances assumed	0.874	199	0.383	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE

Based on table 10, the researchers observed that social media characteristics can appeal or impact any of its users regardless of its gender, therefore there is no significant difference between social media contents and characteristics and gender. In contradiction with the study conducted by Mazman and Usluel (2011) wherein it said that social media usage on male and females were found to have significant differences as to men's purpose are mostly to make new contacts whereas women's are mostly to maintain and make new relationships and for academic purposes. The researchers found the common ground that both genders use social media to browse around the Internet and it is up to the characteristics of the social media contents how it will have an impact on its users.

Table 11 presents the amount of time spent by the respondents in using social media (social media usage). As presented in Table 3, most of the respondents stated that they used social media for more than 180 minutes per day, equivalent to three hours of social media use daily. The succeeding table presents a more elaborate data, as it shows if there is a presence or an absence of a significant difference between respondents who used social media for below sixty minutes, those with one hour to two hour social media use, users who use social media for two hours to three hours, and those users who are on social media for more than three hours per day.

Between respondents who used social media for less than 60 minutes, to respondents who used the platform for more than 180 minutes, there was no significant difference in their assessment of social media's informativeness, utilization, and impact to viewers - social media's first three functions. In contrast, results showed that there was a significant difference in the assessment of social media's purchase decision influence between and within the respondent groups. This difference in the assessment of social media's purchase decision influence with regards to the respondents' level of social media usage may have been brought about by the increased or decreased exposure of respondents to tourism-related posts or content. For respondents with increased usage of social media, their purchase decisions may be greatly affected, and as for respondents with less usage of social media platforms and less exposure to tourism-related social media content, their purchase decisions may be less influenced by tourism-related posts, and vice versa. As the level of social media usage increases or decreases, so does the level of influence it holds over the respondents' decision to purchase touristic services, products, and/or visit the advertised tourist destinations.

Table 11. Respondents’ Assessment of Social Media’s Functions with regards to Level of Social Media Usage

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
INFORMATIVENESS	Between Groups	3.229	3	1.076	1.914	0.129	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	110.758	197	0.562			
	Total	113.986	200				
UTILIZATION	Between Groups	2.804	3	0.935	1.706	0.167	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	107.963	197	0.548			
	Total	110.767	200				
IMPACT/ REACH TO VIEWERS	Between Groups	3.531	3	1.177	2.024	0.112	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	114.567	197	0.582			
	Total	118.099	200				
PURCHASE DECISION INFLUENCE	Between Groups	4.470	3	1.490	2.831	0.040	REJECT HO, THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	103.681	197	0.526			
	Total	108.151	200				

Based on table 11, it is shown that there is no significant difference between the social media characteristics specifically informativeness, utilization, impact or reach to viewers and the level of social media usage. Researchers observed that the first three characteristics of social media contents namely informativeness, utilization and the impact or reach to viewers is easily observed even from a short time of social media usage. In contradiction with the purchase decision influence characteristic of social media contents there is a significant difference between the level of social media usage. This presents that the users/tourists vary in their purchase decision making depending on the level of social media usage. But not necessarily it requires more exposure to the social media contents before it could appeal or impact the users.

The following table (table 12) presents the results of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for respondents’ assessment of social media’s functions with regards to how frequent they traveled in a year. Results showed that there was no significant difference in respondents’ assessment of all social media functions, even among respondents who were able to travel only once per year, to respondents who traveled at least four times per year.

As the study’s respondents were generally well-versed in social media’s role in the travel industry (especially in terms of content-sharing, photo and video documentations of their travels) as well as being exposed to tourism-related posts/content, the number of times they were able to travel in a year presented no significant difference to their assessment of social media’s informativeness, utilization, impact to viewers, and purchase decision influence.

In addition, the current situation with the pandemic has made the respondents incapable of traveling as frequently as compared to before, hence those who travel less frequently and those who travel regularly in a year might have varying levels of motivation to travel, but are equally as hesitant to go out and take the risk of being infected. These results were presented both between the respondents’ groups in accordance to their level of travel frequency, as well as within the respondent groups. In any way, the current situation has made it more difficult for many people (including this study’s respondents) to travel, as most would not take the risk of compromising their health for the sake of traveling.

Table 12. ANOVA - Respondents' Assessment of Social Media Functions with regards to Frequency of Travel

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
INFORMATIVENESS	Between Groups	1.631	3	0.544	0.954	0.416	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	112.355	197	0.570			
	Total	113.986	200				
UTILIZATION	Between Groups	1.848	3	0.616	1.114	0.345	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	108.920	197	0.553			
	Total	110.767	200				
IMPACT/ REACH TO VIEWERS	Between Groups	1.451	3	0.484	0.817	0.486	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	116.648	197	0.592			
	Total	118.099	200				
PURCHASE DECISION INFLUENCE	Between Groups	1.872	3	0.624	1.156	0.328	FAILED TO REJECT HO, NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE
	Within Groups	106.279	197	0.539			
	Total	108.151	200				

Based on the findings on table 12, there is no significant difference between the social media characteristics and the frequency of travel of the respondents. It presents that the frequency of travel of the respondents does not matter to whether the functions or characteristics of the social media contents' affect their travel decisions and preferences. The researchers observed that an individual who may not travel frequently could shift into someone who travels frequently depending on how the social media contents appeal to them. Although based on the survey majority of the respondents travel only once per year that could conclude that their travel decisions were dependent mainly on other factors like income.

5. CONCLUSION

Social media has been a part of the tourism sector in marketing the destinations and services to tourists as well how tourists use social networking sites for reasons such as pre-trip, during trip and post trip. This study focused particularly on determining which of the characteristics of the social media contents or posts are greatly considered by tourists when browsing such social networking sites namely Facebook and Instagram for their travel purposes and how their behaviors are influenced by it. The demographic profile of the respondents were investigated such as year level, gender, social media usage and travel frequency as critical points.

Most of the respondents were third year tourism students since they can easily be reached and were peers of the researchers. Most of the respondents who answered were majority female because of the nature of the course wherein mostly female students are enrolled. In addition, most of the respondents were able to use social media for more than 180 minutes per day.

Contrary to the nature of the respondents' course (Tourism Management), the study found that the majority were only able to travel once per year. The variables or the characteristics of social media contents or posts are highly considered by the respondents since they are also able to distinguish which posts are reliable and safe to consume. If any of the characteristics of the social media posts met their criteria, consequently it appealed to them and were considered by them for their travel decisions immediately or in the long term. Part of the study's last key findings is that there is no significant difference between the demographic profile of the respondents and how they perceived most of the characteristics of the social media posts - namely, informativeness, utilization, and impact or reach to the audience.

On the other hand, there is a significant difference in the respondents' assessment of social media's purchase decision influence with regards to their level of social media usage. This may be in consequence to the respondents' longer or shorter exposure to social media contents or posts. Social media's role in influencing the respondents' travel purchase decisions were determined whether or not they were exposed longer and consumed more information on tourism-related social media posts.

According to Parsons (2017), social media does not entirely pose as a sole influence to tourists in their travel decisions but the content seen and pressure surrounding it is what imposes an influence to the users. As a consequence, based on the results presented for the four given characteristics of social media in this study, tourism-related posts should be improved by social media users who generate travel content, as well as tourism establishments who make use of social networking sites as another way of marketing their products and services. Information and other contents can circulate easily through social media, hence it is vital for social media posts to show their informativeness and reliability of content to its audience. The findings of this study implied that while users get exposure to social media posts regarding touristic facilities and destinations, it should be a more easier and accessible option to buy the tourism products in social media in order to divert users' attention and instinct to turn to social media for their travel concerns.

The three main objectives of the study were met yet some aspects were not cleared. One limitation of the study is that although there is no significant difference between the gender of the tourism students who answered the survey, there was an imbalance in the number of male and female respondents, which may have shown a female bias in presenting the study's findings. Another limitation found in the study is the method of gathering data, as all operations were conducted online through a messenger app. This limitation may have caused the imbalance in the number of respondents in terms of their year levels. Should future researchers decide to conduct a study with a topic similar to the present study, the proponents suggest other methods of data gathering that can generate a more varied set of responses and findings.

Lastly, the study's references and related studies/literature were limited to online resources, as the proponents were not able to gather related literature and studies outside their homes; in compliance with the country's guidelines for responding to the pandemic.

The data gathered in this study can contribute to the knowledge of tourism marketing. Social media tourism related contents should have the right mixture of informativeness, reliability, visually appealing, and accessibility to make sure that it produces an impact to the users and possible travellers. Aspects of this study could be further studied with greater depth on how tourism marketing can be enhanced. The researchers recommend that a wider age range be applied in future studies that will tackle a similar topic, to be able to further investigate how they perceive tourism related social media contents. Most of the references and related literature/studies mentioned in this study were accessed online, and the proponents recommend future researchers to maximize the use supporting literature and studies aside from web resources. The proponents also recommend future researchers to ensure a balance in distributing survey questionnaires to female and male respondents, to prevent any bias in representing the study's data.

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