



Exploring the Impact of Social Media and Travel Review Websites on the Decision-Making Process of International Tourists

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how social media and travel review websites affect the decision process of international tourists. The method of the study was qualitative research for the way standards of travel review websites and social media influence the international tourist decision-making processes. The study presented vital information regarding the limited knowledge about how travel review websites, together with social media sites, affect international visitors' trip planning process. Trip planners looked at Instagram, Facebook and TikTok as their primary research platforms, even though Booking.com and TripAdvisor offered important travel information and feedback. The proposed social-influence travel decision-making model, SMITDM-IT, extends existing knowledge on how the different forms of social media content influence every step taken in the journey of a tourist. Participants were willing to continue using social media and travel review websites because of the platform provided for receiving various comments. The results from the study would be useful to industry practitioners such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture and the Ghana Tourism Authority.

INTRODUCTION

International tourists' travel experiences and choices are highly influenced by social media platforms and review websites (Gursoy et al., 2022; Cunha et al., 2023; Guerrero-Rodriguez et al., 2023). Tourists utilise these social media platforms to rate service providers, share their experiences, and eventually decide on future destinations (Xu et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2020). Besides that, the growth of social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has made available an abundant amount of user-generated content to travellers, which can be used for both travel ideas and information (Fauzel & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2022; Rita et al., 2022; Mariani & Borghi, 2022; Azazi & Shaed, 2020; Carroll, 2023; Oltra et al., 2022; Paul & Roy, 2023; Bhuiyan et al., 2022).

The increased interest in social media and travel review sites in the tourism industry has altered how travellers seek information and make travel decisions. However, there is still a significant gap in the research about how these platforms influence the choices of incoming visitors, particularly in developing countries such as Ghana (Azazi & Shaed, 2020; Olorunsola et al., 2023; Gulati, 2022). There has been an inadequate study on how platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter influence a tourist's decision-making process at various stages of trip planning. Furthermore, social media has altered so radically with new means of information sharing that travellers utilise to make travel selections, that fresh research is required (Jia and Liang, 2021).

Different theoretical frameworks were applied, such as Engel Kollat and Blackwell's consumer decision-making (Osei & Abenyin, 2016), social cognitive theory (Preko et al., 2023), stakeholder-based theory (Amoako et al., 2022), profit maximisation and survival theories (Kankam, 2022), the decision-making process theory, and preference theory (Cheng et al., 2023). These theories, however, do not entirely convey how certain attributes coupled with experiences on diverse social networks, plus travel appraisal websites, affect international tourists' decision-making processes, especially considering the specificities that emerging economies possess in contrast to more developed countries regarding their cultural values or access to technology resources. Henceforth existing research only paid attention towards developing nations (Resat Arica et al., 2022; Marić et al., 2022), hence neglecting certain aspects specific to emerging nations like Ghana, whose cultural values, access to technology, as well as socioeconomic factors can thus affect travellers' use of social media platforms when planning their trips (Tham et al., 2020).

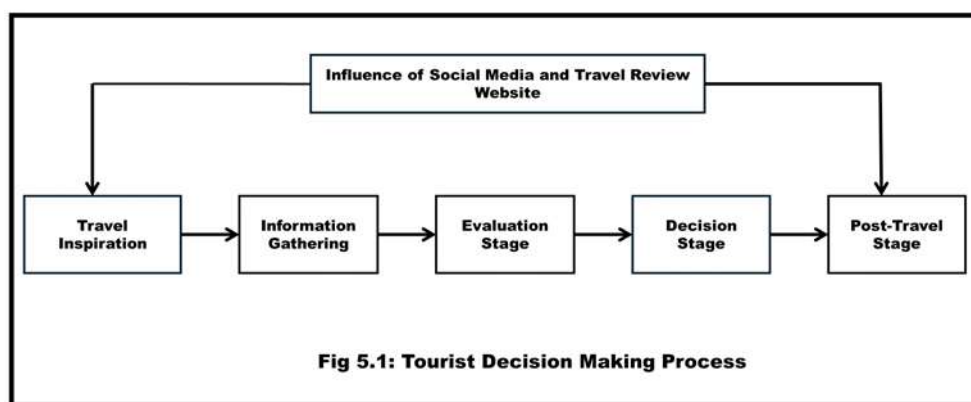
Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park and Mausoleum which is one of the most significant tourist sites recently renovated in Ghana. This site is expected to draw over 1 million tourists a year, making it suitable for examining how social media and travel review websites affect decisions about heritage tourism (Dadzie, 2023). The study is important both in terms of knowledge and practice. In terms of knowledge, it examines the little-known effects of social media and travel review websites on the decision-making process among foreign visitors to Ghana, adding another dimension to the current literature. Furthermore, the

findings are useful to members of the tourism fraternity and stakeholders in Ghana, among other places. This includes concentrating on popular channels among international tourists and changing marketing campaigns accordingly. Therefore, this study aims to explore how social media and travel review websites influence international tourist decision-making using the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park and Mausoleum in Ghana as a point of reference.

This research aims to answer several research questions as follows: (1) What social media platforms and travel review websites are specifically implicated in the decision-making process of international tourists? (2) How do the different types of social media platforms and travel review websites (e.g., social media platforms, travel review websites such as Ctrip or TripAdvisor, etc.) influence the decision-making process of international tourists? (3) What are the effects of social media and travel review websites on decision-making among international tourists? The research adopted the decision-making model developed by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell. Tourists make selection decisions through the Engel-Blackwell-Kollat (EKB) Model for their destination choices among different alternatives (Chng et al., 2023). The process starts with problem recognition, after which tourists engage in information search and move to alternative evaluation before making their purchase decision and completing with post-purchase evaluation. Visitors can improve their trip planning with rationality when they follow the five stages of decision-making models (Coghlan et al., 2017). Tourists use social media and travel review websites to choose destinations through the availability of information combined with positive feedback (Wang et al., 2020). This paper is presented as follows. The Section 'Theoretical model demonstrates how the decision-making model operates. It then introduces decision-making theory. The section 'Methodology' presents both research approaches alongside information regarding the examined sample details. This section shows the findings retrieved directly from the research environment. This paper's subsequent sections explore the discovered data while emphasising its influence on literary research and business operations. The article identifies study restrictions along with forthcoming research directions before its termination.

Research about social media and travel review websites' effects on destination choices applies the Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell models (Osei & Abenyin, 2016), social cognitive theory (Preko et al., 2023), stakeholder theory (Amoako et al., 2022), profit maximisation and survival theories (Kankam, 2022), decision-making process and preference theories (Cheng et al., 2023), social feedback loop theory (Gulati, 2022), and many more (Dimitriou et al., 2019). This complexity in international travel prompts tourists to look for advice from other people to make well-informed decisions (Hamid et al., 2021). According to decision-making theory, by understanding the decision stages, tourists can plan their travels more rationally (Coghlan et al., 2017). For instance, social media and reviews have been found to help pick out destinations based on positive feedback, hence ensuring safety perception (Wang et al., 2020). Novel travel plans or ones that are modified or postponed are facilitated by smartphones, which have different cultures' sociocultural

factors affecting their decision-making processes (Liu et al., 2022). Before embarking on a journey, tourists seek information from friends, family members, as well as the internet (Baksi 2020). Additionally, tourists' engagement, co-creation of value (Baksi, 2020), movements of tourists under flow control systems (Han et al., 2021), and how the use of social media interacts with factors such as gender and income across travel stages could be looked into in future research (Gulati, 2023). This study furthers the application of decision-making theory concerning the destination choices made by international tourists. The tourist decision-making process comprises five steps: problem recognition; information search; evaluation of alternatives; purchase decision; and post-purchase evaluation (Cheng et al., 2023; Purbaningsih et al., 2023; Chopra et al., 2020; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019; McCabe et al., 2016; Osei & Abenyin, 2016).



Source: Author Construct (2024)

Figure. 1 Model on the Influence of Social Media in Travel Decision-Making Process

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluation of Social Media and Travel Review Websites

The early forms of social media can be dated back to the late 1970s with Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which facilitated online communication (Dhingra & Mudgal, 2019; Ortner et al., 2018). In the 1990s, Six Degrees and Friendster were the platforms that emerged for online relationships (Appel et al., 2020). The next decade saw the launch of sites such as LinkedIn and Myspace in addition to Facebook in 2004, which brought about a revolution in social networking (Appel et al., 2020). Other key platforms like Flickr, Reddit, and Twitter also came into existence, thus providing avenues for sharing diverse kinds of content (Pearce et al., 2020). Subsequently, Instagram (2010) was created for visual content, while Snapchat (2011) focused on ephemeral messages (Amanatidis et al., 2020). Thereafter, TikTok (2016) became famous for its short-form videos, and Clubhouse (2020) gained popularity due to its voice chatrooms (Patel & Binjola, 2020). Tourists can thus share experiences through social media while companies get into direct contact with their customers (Arica et al., 2022). Personalisation of content, privacy, community connections, and video content will dominate the social media movement (Nadzri et al., 2023). Travel review websites have come a long way

in the past few years, where such gigantic hotel listings are present online (Guo & Pesonen, 2022).

TripAdvisor was the first to include user-generated content on its platform and employ “the wisdom of crowds” approach in content development (Saydam et al., 2022). These sites expanded to include various categories of travel, thus comprehensively addressing the travel experience. In addition, metasearch engines such as FareChase, Kayak, and Skyscanner helped compare fares from several booking sites for mobile-optimised review sites that are responsive in design as well as mobile apps (Forouzandeh et al., 2022). It is easier for users to identify relevant information through improved search and filtering options, while integrating booking services enhances reservation processes (Siagian et al., 2022). Therefore, websites targeting cultural consumers think of authenticity and personalisation, making use of user-generated content and the personalisation of recommendations to engage millennials (Alsubari et al., 2022). To guarantee review authenticity, software uses several other measures.

Social Media Platforms and Travel Review Websites

Previous studies are based on wide views from social media and excursion review websites, neglecting particular platforms foreign tourists use in their capacity for decisions (Olorunsola et al., 2023; Gulati, 2022). Earlier studies considered the general viewpoint of social networks and travel review websites, but not the platforms for international travellers’ decision-making processes (Olorunsola et al., 2023; Gulati, 2022). Even though nearly all tourists rely on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TripAdvisor, Trivago, Booking.com and so on while searching for travel-related info (Azazi & Shaed, 2020). In the tourism sphere, except for Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, the most widely used social networking sites to influence international tourist behaviour. Since Facebook has more than 2.9 billion active users worldwide and growing, Ghana's will be at least 8.6 million in 2023 (Statista, 2023). This makes it a great platform where tourism entrepreneurs can showcase the services and products they offer while at the same time engaging with potential clients as well as establishing an online presence (Budu et al., 2020; Borg et al., 2021; Amoako et al., 2022). To lure visitors and measure the efficacy of marketing strategies through Facebook posts reviews, targeted advertisements and subjective communication are employed by firms engaged in promoting tourism (Bruce et al., 2022; Majeed et al., 2022; Budu et al., 2020; Amoah & Jibril, 2021; Soliku et al., 2021; Hinson et al., 2020).

TikTok currently has over 4 million active users in Ghana in the year 2023 and is obtaining global recognition through a huge 1 billion existing user accounts worldwide, adding up from contenders like the Instagram app (Instagram goes to be spoken about in detail), which claims up to 5 million accounts in Ghana. Kaur & Gurnani (2022); Statista (2023) assert that globally, Instagram has more than 1 billion users with about five million people in this country The short videos on tourism destinations, attractions and experiences make an invaluable promotional tool such an enormous audience for tourism

promotions through short video clips on social media platforms like TikTok (Jia & Liang, 2021; Nair et al., 2022). Due to its rapid growth and extremely engaged user base, TikTok is a potent marketing instrument. On the other hand, Instagram is well known as an ideal platform for visual promotional activities about travel agencies, including travel businesses and travel attractions photos, videos, as well as influencer marketing (Sakas et al., 2022; McCosker et al., 2021; Hur et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2020; Krasniak et al., 2021; Acquah et al., 2022; Kyei Mensah, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2021). There exists a popular tourist website called TripAdvisor, hence most tourists use it for sharing experiences about their destinations, hotels and sites, thus helping others in making decisions based on facts (Lee et al., 2022; Akin, 2021). This platform plays an essential role in planning trips for foreign visitors going to Ghana, renowned for its cultural and historical riches (Darko et al., 2023; Lamptey, 2022). Tourists can compare various hotels, restaurants, and attractions using TripAdvisor according to their reviews, ratings, prices and services (Khorsand et al., 2020; Padma & Ahn, 2020; Yang et al., 2023; Drummond et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Mensah & Boakye, 2023). For tourists visiting Ghana from abroad who desire different kinds of places to stay within one travel site, Booking.com is the one that allows you to check out numerous accommodation possibilities together with evaluations & locations (Pop et al., 2022; Mavridis et al., 2020; Bigné et al., 2020; Oe & Le, 2023; Shambour et al., 2022; Taviana et al., 2020). Competitive rates, discounts, and promotions make it popular among frugal travellers (Borges-Tiago et al., 2021; Martin-Fuentes et al., 2020; Kapoor & Kapoor, 2021; Borges-Tiago, 2021).

Expedia is one of the leading travel sites that influence the decision-making of international tourists by providing a platform through which they can book flights, hotels, car rentals and other related services all at once (Lee & Kim, 2021; Nusair, 2020; Reinhold et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020). Moreover, its review system guarantees authenticity and dependability, hence encouraging positive word-of-mouth (Tandon et al., 2020; Boateng et al., 2022; Amissah et al., 2022; Kar et al., 2022; Nadia et al., 2020; Browne & Raff, 2023; Bianchi & de Man, 2021). They also offer international tourists' information on destinations, reviews and ratings, price comparisons for travel books and other resources that can be used in planning trips and gaining relevant knowledge (Visit Ghana, 2023).

Forms of Content on Social media platforms and Travel review websites

The decisions made by tourists are massively influenced by user-generated content (UGC), including text, photos, audio, and videos posted on blogs, social networks, forums, and review-sharing sites (Bigne et al., 2021; Filieri et al., 2021; Spates et al., 2020; Arica et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2020). To some extent, social media and tourist review websites have been considered reliable and trustworthy sources of reducing uncertainty as well as building expectations about travel destinations and activities (Azazi & Shaed, 2020; Dusková, 2018). Written text: experiences, tips, and recommendations shared by users on places such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TripAdvisor, or Yelp in

the form of blogs, posts, or reviews (Koetz, 2019; Pencarelli, 2020; Chang et al., 2020; Chopra et al., 2020).

Travel experiences and attractions were shown through visual content such as photographs and videos, which were posted on social networking sites like Instagram, Pinterest, or even travel review websites (Alayrac et al., 2022; Toffoletti et al., 2022; Chaudhari & Thakkar, 2020). Several travel bloggers, including digital nomads, use video presentations about their experience as well as tips and recommendations via platforms like YouTube and Facebook (Zeng & Kaye, 2022; Zaid et al., 2022). Moreover, detailed experiences, ratings, and reviews on hotels and restaurants based on them offer an opportunity for other potential tourists to make such decisions (Assaker 2020; Assaker et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2020).

Effects of Social media platforms and Travel review websites on the Tourists' Decisions

The relevance of online evaluations as well as electronic word-of-mouth on websites that give travel reviews and in social media is massive; they play a key role in tourists' decision-making (Li et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Confente, 2015; Gulati, 2023; Preko et al., 2022; Kankam, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022). These types of sites provide information on the level of trustworthiness, attitudes to various tourism services provided and the willingness to make a booking (El-Said, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019; Kwok et al., 2017). However, decreased online negative reviews may influence the reduced purchase intention of tourists due to low consumer trust (Ahmad & Sun, 2018). Tourists tend to put more emphasis on negative reviews (Kwok & Xie, 2016; Nazlan et al., 2018; Xu, 2019). When it comes to destination choice, social media visual content, such as pictures or videos, has either positive or negative effects on what the tourists will decide (Nilashi et al., 2022; Hase et al., 2022; Manrai et al., 2020). Strong emotions may be provoked by bad comments together with related bad images, which makes them quite heavy (Bigne et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023).

Previous studies have pointed out that all social media and travel evaluative platforms have their share of critics (Laato et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2021; Kauffmann et al., 2020; Ananthakrishnan et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017). Other critics say that information overload could lead to confusion and hesitation when making decisions (Phillips-Wren & Adya, 2020; Matias et al., 2020). Again, among others, are some such critics who presently are warning against fake or misleading reviews (Cao et al., 2021; Ananthakrishnan et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017). Besides the possibility of an overabundance of information preventing individuals from recognising threats even when they are there (Phillips-Wren & Adya, 2020; Matias et al., 2020), social media has been claimed to provide an accurate source of information in day-to-day life, especially during times of uncertainty (Addo et al., 2020; Gupta, 2020; Blair et al., 2015; Erku et al., 2020). Consequently, this tends towards tourism based on unrealistic expectations that make tourists vulnerable to risky behaviour due to

indulgent social comparisons on these platforms, such as Facebook (Tandon et al., 2020).

Cohen's Classification of Tourists

According to Cohen, travellers can be divided into four categories based on what they like and how they travel: Organised Mass Tourists" are those who travel in organised group package tours by travel companies, seeking comfort, convenience, and value. They visit locations like theme parks and cruises, among various locations providing different experiences (Alves et al., 2023). Individual mass tourists have the same economic requirements and leisure interests as organised tourists, but travel alone instead of in a group. These people book their flights and accommodations but rely on public transport and popular tourist attractions for convenience (Rishi & Chatterjee, 2023). Explorers want to be independent travellers; they want to explore at their own pace while experiencing local cultures. They prefer off-the-beaten-path destinations; sometimes, less popular areas are included since they avoid other people (Rishi & Chatterjee, 2023). Drifters, on the other hand, are laid-back travellers who don't mind having it left open for bars when it involves trip organising. They spend very little money because they would like to enjoy nature without luxury or modern amenities, so that they can experience what is true in remote parts of the world where there are no large groups of people (Alves et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study opted for an interpretive approach based on the subject under investigation. The use of interpretivism facilitated the researcher's comprehension of the subject matter. The choice of interpretivism in qualitative research is well-founded because it emphasises subjective experiences. All qualitative research approaches were used for the study (Boateng, 2014). This approach allows the researcher to develop a deeper comprehension of the problem under investigation, enabling a comprehensive description and explanation of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To achieve the purpose of the study, the study used a semi-structured interview guide as a means of data collection. This is because a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to explore in-depth, even though they have some set topics to discuss beforehand. The guide helps researchers concentrate on their topics without sticking to a specific way of doing things. A purposive sampling technique was adopted for the recruitment of participants. Non-African international tourists were purposefully recruited to participate in the face-to-face interview. The interview sessions lasted between 10 and 15 minutes due to multiple arrangements by the international tourists.

A total of 12 participants were interviewed at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, which serves as a tourist site in the Greater Accra region of Ghana. The reason for selecting Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park as the focus of the study is that the park has recently undergone significant renovations and is now projected to attract over one million tourists annually (Dadzie, 2023). The park has undergone a major transformation, with a total investment of thirty million cedis (GH¢30 million). The renovation included the addition of

several new facilities, including a presidential library, a reception centre, a small theatre, a restaurant, a freedom wall, and a digital payment and access system. Thematic analysis was used to draw patterns and codes from the data collected from the participants. Microsoft Office 365 was used to transcribe the audio recordings. Qualitative data analysis using thematic analysis typically involves the following steps: Boateng (2020, p. 166) “namely, Familiarising with the Data: “This initial step involves immersing oneself in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content and context, Generating initial codes: “Once familiarisation with the data is complete, researchers systematically code interesting features or segments of data. Developing initial codes is an iterative process where researchers review data several times to ensure they capture all relevant information (Charmaz, 2021). Grouping Responses: Once coding has taken place, researchers group responses into families with common characteristics. Step 3: Defining the Responses After the researcher has grouped responses into themes or categories, they will define and refine the specific responses determined during the grouping process. Producing the report: The final step in thematic analysis involves synthesising the findings and producing a coherent report or narrative that communicates the results of the analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants Profile

The given research work was carried out by using one-on-one interviews with fifteen (15) foreign visitors from non-African countries at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park and Mausoleum in the Greater Accra region. It is paramount to state that all fifteen (15) of the individuals who took part in the interview process did so of their own volition. The data is organised in Table 1, which introduces the statistical characteristics of the fifteen (15) participants. In the group of 15 tourists, 60% were male tourists and 40% were female tourists, with the most common age group being 20-30 years, which made up 40% of the total. Most of the respondents were single (73.3%) and, along with this, 53.3% had completed a university degree, while 20% had a master's level. Regarding employment, 33.3% were full-time workers, 20% part-time, 13.3% self-employed, 13.3% retirees, and 20% students. A notable number of the survey's individuals (93.3%) rarely went to businesses, and in fact, 60% were the first-ever visitors to Ghana. Most people (86.7%) went with the group instead of going alone. All the participants were from non-African countries such as the USA (20%), the UK (20%), Germany (26.7%), Canada (13.3%), Australia (6.7%), and the Netherlands (13.3%). 73.3% of the respondents reported that they travelled less than 3 times per year internationally, while 26.7% of them travelled 3 to 5 times per year. The leisure purpose for coming had the highest share (80%), while the rest of the visitors came to see their families (13.3%) or for business reasons (6.7%).

Explore the type of social media platforms and travel review websites that influence the decision-making process of international tourists.

Daily Engagement: Participants routinely use social media to gather travel information, find inspiration, and discover destinations. Visual content has been identified as an emerging factor enabling travellers to visualise experiences (Liu & Chong, 2023), to which photos and videos, in particular, contribute greatly. **First-Hand Experiences:** Most travellers like to hear directly from their contemporaries rather than read about their experiences in traditional guides. They appreciate the content that reports life as it is and endorse something with it from friends, families, or their influencers as trustworthy individuals (Liu & Chong, 2023). **Real-Time Information:** Social media keeps travellers up-to-date about instant news and safety alerts and interact with locals during the trip, increasing the feeling of belonging among travellers (Liu & Chong, 2023).

The effect of social media on globally making the best choice of places to visit is massive, more and more platforms on different channels of Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok describe faraway places like the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Ghana. Even though the social media platforms fascinate their users, travellers, in the main, get extra information through the official websites of the tour sites or through their network. In the study, on the one hand, social media turns out to be the favourite method of the tourists in these destinations. Olorunsola et al. (2023), Gulati (2022), and Azazi & Shaed (2020), by the survey, sidelined communication in chat platforms and drew attention to the necessity of real encounter experiences. Here we find that tourists usually contact the places directly and not review sites. (Kim & Lee, 2019; Kitsios et al., 2022).

“Yes, I saw some beautiful pictures of Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park on Instagram and Facebook that made me visit this site. The photos looked so romantic and fun that I started planning a trip to visit Kwame Nkrumah Park.” Participant 1.
“Social media content like photos and short videos has led me to plan an international trip to Ghana. But seeing photos of destinations on Instagram and Facebook does spark my interest and inspire me to do more research into visiting this place.” Participant 4:
“Yes, I relied on social media content for my trip planning. Facebook and TikTok have become part of my life, and in terms of information gathering, Facebook is fast and easy to use to seek all the needed information about destinations in Ghana. I booked a whole trip to Ghana just to experience the culture of Ghanaians” Participant 15

Travel Websites

Trip planning websites, such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com, are the best when it comes to international travel (Participants 1-3, 5-10, 15), as they are the ones that provide recommendations and information that is the most recent (Rita et al., 2022). On the other hand, people prefer to use this method for getting recommendations (P4, 11-14), where they first-hand check online reviews to make a shortlist of the most promising destinations Baksi (2020) or the ones that are not reliable (Arica et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). The perspectives ascertain this reflect that personal experiences majorly decide the places people travel to, being the most frequent outcomes over other factors (Tham et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020).

Travel Review Websites Utilised: Many participants mentioned certain travel websites such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and visitghana.com, that it is an important resources for travel planning. These websites are praised for providing up-to-date information. Travel advice and facilitating accommodation and other aspects of travel (Rita et al., 2022) also mention the website of the Ghana Tourism Board for providing detailed information on tourist attractions in the country.

Mixed Reliance on Travel Websites: Although many participants found travel review websites useful in gathering information and inspiration from their travels, it is also common to confirm this information with more private sources (Izogo et al., 2022). Many people express a preference for recommendations from friends and family or direct accounts over online reviews. It suggests trust in personal experiences over online content that may be anonymous or less trustworthy. This was especially noticeable in cases where participants wanted a truer or more accurate understanding of their intended destination. (Azasi & Shed, 2020).

Secondary Role of Travel Websites and Preference for Personal Recommendations: Some participants clearly stated that travel review sites play a secondary role in the planning process. They learn more about social media. Direct recommendations from friends or family, and contact the destination to receive information. As confirmed by Baksi (2020), this trend highlights doubts about the objectivity and trustworthiness of travel review websites. Personal advice and direct experience that favour more reliable information or personal gain stand out. It is implied that even though travellers start their journey on these platforms and are heavily influenced by their authenticity or direct interaction with the destination, as seen (Arica et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021).

Explore how the different forms of content on social media platforms and travel review websites influence the decision-making process of international tourists

Inspiration Stage: Visual stimuli from Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok create interest through dramatic situations and personal stories. Trigger an inspiring emotional response in potential travellers. This phase creates motivation driven by needs such as leisure or adventure (Liu et al., 2020), which are stimulated by internal and external factors (Chopra et al., 2020). **Information Stage:** Participants search for content. Covered on social media to reduce motivation and planning with current and relevant information... They didn't do it. Information is collected from personal networks. Social media and travel websites (Woramontri & Klai, 2019). **Evaluation Process:** Travellers use recent social media reviews and first-hand information to compare options. Analytically, they build trust. Evaluate options based on key factors, and eliminate fewer desirable options (Melkonyan et al., 2020). **Decision-Making Stage:** The latest social media post confirms or changes the choice, where FOMO influences the final plan. Tourists choose destinations and accommodations based on their preferences and collected information (Pop et

al., 2022; Hu et al., 2021). **Post-Trip Stage:** Tourists share their experiences on social media, which influences future tourists. This step completes the circuit. With repeat visits or recommendations, having positive experiences (Lv & McCabe, 2020). This broad impact led to the creation of the SMITDM-IT model. Social networking sites often stimulate travel plans; Instagram, for instance, is more effective than traditional marketing to get real-time insights through user-generated content (Li et al., 2022). These platforms have groups of people travelling together who exchange ideas (Jia et al., 2023). Travel review websites offer structured insights to complement visual data from social media. Therefore, it is of medium importance and is used in conjunction with other resources, such as (Fauzel & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2022). Others use guidebooks or ask travel agents for a balanced approach (Cunha et al., 2023). All 15 participants freely share their trip experiences on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as they respond promptly to comments, turning around their positions on these channels by other friends who visited Ghana besides themselves. This process affects their whole travel experience and defines what social media and travel websites do best.

*"I will say short videos on my friend's Instagram feed and Facebook get me excited to visit and experience various sites in Ghana." I have no regret visiting Kwame Nkrumah Park. Indeed, the place is very attractive for tourism. **Participant 3** "For me, it's usually from friend content on TikTok showcasing unique experiences about tourist sites in Ghana. Seeing something authentic and one-of-a-kind motivates me to visit Ghana," **Participant 6.***

Explore the effects of social media and travel review websites on the decision-making process of international tourists

Social networks and websites with tourist reviews have turned into treasured sources for many travellers who plan a trip overseas or vacation. The objective of this question is to make tourists understand the value of social media and website reviews at different stages of travel inspiration in general, from its early stages until its final planning stage. International tourists consider social networks and travel review websites as indispensable sources of inspiration as well as practical guides. This agrees with studies on how UGC affects journey preparations (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2023; Guo & Pesonen, 2022). To a significant number, social media is the catalyst for journeys. The collection of content on Instagram triggers wanderlust; hence, it gives more persuasive information about real-time travel happenings as opposed to the traditional advertisement (Li et al., 2022). On these sites are travel clubs that work like collaborative brainstorming centres (Jia et al., 2023). Travel review websites offer organised insight that complements visual data provided by these platforms. They are available at an average level of magnitude and are mostly used alongside other platforms (Fauzel & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2022). Moreover, some people employ travel agents and use guidebooks for temperance (Cunha et al., 2023). Nowadays travel planning is based on social media and review sites, from inspiration to why and post-trip remarks, so making itineraries around the world.

Some participants voiced their concerns. **Participant 1:** *“Social media played a critical role in my travel planning process. Most of the venues I visited were inspired by what I saw on these platforms. The rich and diverse content available helped me curate a list of places to visit based on the experiences and visuals shared by others.”* **Participant 3:** *“Social media and travel websites are moderately important in my trip planning process. They offer a wealth of information, providing valuable insights and visuals that aid in understanding a destination better before visiting.”* **Participant 8:** *“Social media and travel websites play a moderately important role in my trip planning process. They provide ample information, giving valuable insights and visuals to better understand a destination before going.”*

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that negative feedback about tourism and travel services on social media has little or no impact on most tourists' decisions. Many individuals usually pay more attention to their encounters as opposed to web critiques. Sometimes they may alter some details because of complaints, but rarely do they make general changes. It was observed by Ahmad & Sun (2018) that negative ratings with images can decrease purchase intentions. Most of the participants prefer to make judgments by themselves on how unique individual experience is despite the fact this might seem too subjective. They consider such factors as review intention context, authenticity plus quantity however this is overshadowed by the importance attached to personal experience preference. This scepticism makes it clear that reviews have a subjective view (Li et al., 2023). Bearing this in mind, however, it must be noted that negative reviews do not tremendously affect choices. Personal experiences are regarded more highly than others' opinions by participants. This differs from previous research (Cao et al., 2021; Soroya et al., 2021) which established that criticism heavily impacts decisions since they focus beyond individual remarks. A few other individuals also shared their thoughts on it. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that negative feedback about tourism and travel services on social media has little or no impact on most tourists' decisions.

Online reviews, people tend to pay more attention to their own stories rather than reviews. In some scenarios, when the responses are unfavourable, they might tweak some aspects, however hardly ever do they turn their strategy around entirely. Ahmad & Sun (2018) stated, poor with images ratings could cause decreased in intend to purchasing. Most of the participants prefer to make judgments by themselves on how unique individual experience is despite the fact this might seem too subjective. They consider such factors as review intention context, authenticity, plus quantity; however, this is overshadowed by the importance attached to personal experience preference. This scepticism makes it clear that reviews have a subjective view (Li et al., 2023). Bearing this in mind, however, it must be noted that negative reviews do not tremendously affect choices. Personal experiences are regarded more highly than others' opinions by participants. This differs from previous research (Cao et al., 2021; Soroya et al., 2021), which established that criticism heavily impacts decisions since it focuses beyond individual remarks. A few other individuals also shared their thoughts on it.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that negative feedback about tourism and travel services on social media has little or no impact on most tourists' decisions. Many people tend to focus on their own experiences rather than online reviews. In some cases, they may change certain elements due to negative comments, but seldom do they change their plans completely. Ahmad and Sun (2018) discovered that poor ratings with images could lead to reduced intentions to buy. Most of the participants prefer to make judgments by themselves on how unique an individual's experience is, although this might seem too subjective. They consider such factors as review intention context, authenticity, plus quantity; however, this is overshadowed by the importance attached to personal experience preference. This scepticism makes it clear that reviews have a subjective view (Li et al., 2023). Bearing this in mind, however, it must be noted that negative reviews do not tremendously affect choices. Personal experiences are regarded more highly than others' opinions by participants. This differs from previous research (Cao et al., 2021; Soroya et al., 2021), which established that criticism heavily impacts decisions since it focuses beyond individual remarks. A few other individuals also shared their thoughts on it.

Participant 9 shared that: *“Negative social media comments haven't affected my travel plans much. Travelling to different places allows me to develop personal knowledge that exceeds what others can tell me. Social media comments about travel destinations have no impact on the travel decisions of Participant 10. The feedback I rely on stems directly from my own experiences because I choose to form opinions independently. Instead of relying on reviews, I prefer travelling to places myself and reviewing them. Social Media Bad-mouthing about travel does not usually deter me from a specific destination. Exploring places myself makes a clearer judgment than having to rely on internet comments.*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aims to explore how international tourists make their final destination choice of international destinations, taking into account the roles of social media and review websites. The study reveals the substantial effect of social media and travel reputation websites on the paradigms of authoritative individuals. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok provoke interest through photos and videos. Sites such as Trip Advisor and Booking.com provide rich, informative reviews and booking features as well as evaluative ways of content, for example, videos, images, summary-type content, rating systems and commentary that act upon decisions. Despite negative reviews and comments, foreign tourists still like to form opinions based on their own experiences. Studies have proven that international travellers still use these platforms to plan their trips. This is because of the multiple perspectives and real-time information. This study contributes to academic knowledge by presenting the Socially Influenced Travel Decision Model for International Tourists (SMITDM-IT), which details how social media and travel review websites influence travel decision-making. In practice, this study provides insights into the tourism sector in Ghana. The study emphasises online engagement effectiveness through interactive content, which Facebook, Instagram and TripAdvisor enable.

The policy creates a framework to handle online reviews as one of its effects. Companies should handle adverse feedback positively while utilising social media influencers to strengthen their market outreach to different segments.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

One of the main issues was that it was hard to interview non-African tourists because they were always busy, thus making interviews very short and hurried. This could be solved in future research by using remote or asynchronous interviews. Also, since only Ghana was studied, other areas may not apply. Qualitative methodology and small sample size limit the generalisability of this study's findings. It was difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews with non-African international tourists because they were too busy. Future researchers need to incorporate quantitative methods; for example, structured surveys should be used so that a wider range of international tourists can be reached. Optimising surveys for mobile devices is advised as well. Besides this, looking at how social media influencers help inform tourist decision-making can provide important insights into their choices regarding travel plans. In addition, future studies examining influencer content and engagement will help build an understanding of its role in international tourism.

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