Spring 5-31-2021

# Covid-19 Impact on Instagram Travel Influencer Feeds: A Content Analysis

Kerrie Jones
*University of New Orleans, New Orleans*, jones3777@gmail.com

Covid-19 Impact on Instagram Travel Influencer Feeds: A Content Analysis

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Sociology

by

Kerrie Jones

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2019

May, 2021

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Abstract

Instagram travel influencers are facilitators in the social institution of tourism that help connect potential travelers with stakeholders and destinations. The Covid-19 travel restrictions that started in March of last year have had significant impacts on tourism. Content analysis was used to assess impacts on Instagram travel influencer posts before and after the pandemic travel shutdowns. The analysis answered: 1. Has Covid-19 impacted Instagram travel influencer posts? 2. Is resilience showing in the frequency of posts by reaching pre-pandemic levels? Ten codes were analyzed individually across posts and categorized as: sponsored posts, pandemicrelated posts, and current travel trends. Results showed decreases sponsored posts and current travel trends since the shutdowns that have increased but not at the levels seen prior to the pandemic. Resilience is not supported currently because frequencies are not back to prepandemic levels. Pandemic-related posts increased and remain steady indicating the change in travel discourse surrounding Covid-19.

Keywords: sociology, travel, tourism, covid-19, pandemic, cultural exchange, shutdowns, travel influencer, Instagram, content analysis, sociological, covid

Introduction

Technology is an increasingly important facilitator for stakeholders in the tourism industry, and it is mediated online through social media websites (Smith, 2018). The tourism industry has suffered because of the recent worldwide disruption of travel from the Covid-19 pandemic. All facets of the institution of tourism have been affected by these travel shutdowns and restrictions (Kell, 2020). It has been just over a year since the restrictions and they have not been fully lifted at the time of this study.

Social media travel influencers are important facilitators in the tourism industry and have been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic as well (Kell, 2020). Social media influencers are defined as "third party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg, et al. 2011). Travel influencers are defined as social media influencers who gain followers and exert influence in travel and tourism-related posts (Barbe, et al 2019). Instagram travel influencers gain followers by posting tourism and travel-related photos, videos, comments, and stories accompanying those photos or videos. The content posted by influencers is considered user-generated content (UGC) which helps build a following to market the tourism industry to potential travelers and they are paid for their influence by stakeholders in the tourism industry (Barbe, et al 2019). They have become an integral part of this important industry and their posts can reach millions of potential travelers (2019). The social exchanges between these influencers and their followers are an example of what Lawler, Ridgeway, and Markovsky discussed as, micro-level processes and interactions that can influence larger institutions, or macro-level interactions (1993). Social media travel influencers facilitate the micro-level interactions that impact the macro-level

1

social institution of tourism (1993). The power of these micro-interactions to affect change on the social institution of tourism makes travel influencers and important area to study. Despite the travel influencer's connection to the social institution of tourism, there are few studies that have focused on this area in relation to impacts from Covid-19. The focus of this study was to answer the questions of 1. Has Covid-19 pandemic has impacted travel influencer feeds? And 2. Is resilience showing in the frequency of posts by reaching pre-pandemic levels? This was achieved using content analysis to generate data on a sample of Instagram travel influencers and their feeds for descriptive purposes. The data generated from this study adds to the literature in the social institution of tourism and will assist in comparative future research on impacts in this focused area of Instagram travel influencers.

Background

Tourism has been defined as the collection of activities and interactions between hosts and visitors involved in the act of temporary travel away from one's permanent home to another location for more 24 hours for leisure (Gmelch, 2010, Cohen, 1984). Additionally, leisure and the freedom of movement have been historically studied as a sociologically significant collection of interactions (Larsen, Urry, 2011). Tourism also involves impactful cultural exchange that can have lasting effects in society. Cultural exchange has been studied in relation to tourism and can facilitate changes in attitudes and cultural activities (Gmelch, 2010). Georg Simmel described the way exchange and interaction occurs between individuals as the exchanging of values between each individual where each can be permanently changed by the interaction (1907). Gmelch further gives an example of this exchange and how it can become a

permanent change in the host society by describing how a staged dance created for tourists has become a part of the Balinese culture and is now regularly performed at weddings there (2010). This demonstrates how tourism can bring lasting change to hosts and visitors and remains embedded in societal structure (Larsen, Urry, 2011). Besides hosts and visitors, tourism is mediated through different actors who shape expectations and provide information for the tourist as well as advertisement for the stakeholders or businesses in the travel industry (2011).

Tourism involves social processes and interactions that can impact how the world is experienced. Glaser defines social processes as growth and change which are "fundamental, patterned processes in the organization of social behaviors which occur over time and go on irrespective on conditional variation of place" (2005). Panos Bardis furthered this concept by explaining that the growth and change can be personal or between groups (1979). Zdravka Tordorova describes the process as "continuous, interconnected social activities and agency through collective action" (2015). Tourism and leisure are an integral part of social processes because interaction related to tourism can change individuals, groups, and have an impact on the geographical space in a destination (Kirollova, et al 2017). The cultural exchange that tourism can facilitate is a form of acculturation. Acculturation is a social process that is defined as: "cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures." (Sam and Berry, 2010 ). Tordorova's research further shows that consumption activities in relation to tourism are social in nature and have impacts on broader social institutions (2015). This brings us back to the reason that investigating the interactions of the travel influencer at the micro level can have an impact on the macro-level institution of tourism as well as society.

Literature Review

   Social media has become an important platform that facilitates interactions virtually. Travel

is increasingly guided by these online interactions and tools that are easily accessible

(HerasPedrosa, et al. 2020). Kozinets, et al. define word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) as "the

intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing

techniques." (2010). Social media sites such as Instagram have brought WOMM online and

made it easily accessible and engaging (Kozinets, et al. 2010). Instagram is a visual platform that

allows users to post photos, videos, and text that is able to be seen and followed by other users

globally. Instagram travel influencers encourage travelers to visit certain destinations, engage

in certain activities, and frame expectations for the future traveler. This framing can even

influence tourist behavior when visiting a place that they have seen online by visually informing

the potential tourist of expected behavior, photos to be taken, things to do, etc. (Edensor,

2000). In 2020, Instagram users were over 1 billion (Sehl, 2021). Travel has been the fourth

most searched topic on the platform which makes it an important part of the travel industry

(Von Puttkamer, 2019).

   The discourse that travel influencers post serves as a form of "word of mouth" (WOM)

advertising for destinations and businesses in the travel industry (Kozinets, et al. 2010).

Stakeholders, such as hotels, tourism boards, and other businesses dependent on travel pay

travel influencers to direct or influence potential travelers to visit their businesses or

destinations (De La Heras-Pedrosa, et al. 2020). An example of travel influencers' importance in

the travel process was displayed in 2015, when a small town named Wanaka in New Zealand

hired travel influencers to generate interest by posting their personal travel experiences which resulted in a fourteen percent increase in tourism surpassing all tourism growth in the whole country that year (Miller, 2017). Tourism is also economically significant and according to the World Travel and Tourism Council, "tourism growth in 2019 was 3.5 percent which exceeded the global economy's growth of 2.5 percent" (WTTC, 2019). Additionally, "Tourism also accounted for 10.3 percent of the global GDP in 2019 and accounted for 330 million jobs globally" (WTTC, 2019).

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel Caronavirus (Covid-19) as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta, Vanelli, 2020). The resulting restrictions and shutdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic have had a devastating effect on the travel industry on a global scale (WTTC, 2020). As of March 2021, there are many restrictions still in place and the recovery is still evolving in many sectors besides tourism (WTTC, 2021). Analyzing influencers in this area helps to gain a fuller understanding of the impacts that have been experienced.

Tourism is easily impacted and can be harmed by crises or major events, but it has shown to be resilient and able to bounce back to pre-event levels in recent research (De La HerasPedrosa, et al. 2020). Resilience in the tourism sector is defined as the ability of the impacted areas to show recovery from crises by showing pre-pandemic assessment numbers (2020). The importance of Instagram travel influencers and their invaluable connection with the travel industry makes it a crucial area to assess the impact of the pandemic. The data showed that there have been increases in many areas since the shutdowns, but not at pre-pandemic

levels so resilience is not indicated currently. The World Travel and Tourism Council projects

that domestic tourism will be the first to recover due to domestic travel restrictions being lifted

before intercontinental travel (WTTC, 2020). Many issues such as, other waves of infections,

quarantines, government coordination, and governmental support for the travel industry will

affect if the actual impacts are worse than projected (WTTC, 2020). However, a positive sign is

seen in the increasing availability of vaccines and the changing discourse that it is bringing to

people discussing travel plans (Kiesnoski, 2021).

The goal of this project is to assess the impacts that Covid-19 restrictions have brought to

aspects of tourism. This will give insight into this important facet of the travel industry and

assess if resilience is implicated in the content analysis of the influencer sample. The resilience

of tourism and those in the travel industry are important areas to concentrate on for insight

into the future recovery (Prayag, 2020).

Recent literature on tourism and travel have looked at the growing importance of the travel

influencer. The concept of the "tourist gaze" which is the socially constructed process of

directing attention to points of interest and destinations can apply to how influencers use their

visual platforms to generate interest or direct the "tourist gaze" to certain locations or

attractions (Larsen, Urry, 2011). Larsen and Urry further found that the "tourist gaze"

incorporates buildings, technologies, practices, and objects through depiction in images (2011).

Instagram provides a visual frame to facilitate the "tourist gaze" (2011). A recent study by De la

Heras-Pedrosa, et al found that encouraging tourist involvement with influencer content is

effective for enhancing a destination promotion (2020). Influencers post photos and videos on

Instagram that followers see and form impressions of because of that interaction. Travel influencer content was found to be most effective at word-of-mouth marketing when the content adhered to online community norms or the expectations of the followers who interact virtually with the influencer posts (Kozinets, et al.).

The sociological dynamic between the travel influencer, potential traveler and the travel industry is an essential part of the travel planning process. Recent research found that influencers in many cases started as ordinary travelers just posting about their travels but have now become an important economic connection that bridges advertisers and potential travelers (Driel, Dumitrica, 2020). Travel influencers employ techniques that can be understood using the historical framework of Goffman's dramaturgical analysis (1959). Goffman's concepts of "front stage" and "back stage" performance behaviors can be applied to the curated way in which the travel influencer displays the finished photos and posts as "front stage" without letting the online audience see the behind the scenes editing and steps involved with getting the photos (1959). Instagram is an editable platform that allows the influencer to create a curated archive. These techniques create a carefully crafted view or online social "performance" by the influencer and research shows that one of the main motivations that people state in following travel influencers is the enjoyment that the photos and videos posted brings them (Barbe, et al. 2019, Goffman, 1959). Influencers capitalize on this and try to create content that people will enjoy and want to follow. Larsen and Urry also point out that the consumption of these travel experiences is also a performance by the traveler (2011). The traveler adheres to expectations and takes cues from the performance of the influencer. The stage of performance is continually changing for the traveler due to the changing places and

situations, but the travel influencer can control their performance by carefully crafting what

others see (Ferguson, Veer, 2015, Edensor, 2000).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic shutdowns in March 2020, researchers have begun to study

the effects on the travel industry. A recent interview series by author, John Kell, found that not

only was posted travel content changed post-Covid-19, traffic to the travel-related posts

dipped as well (2020). Influencers are dealing with the personal aspects of the pandemic while

having to change what they post about because of the travel restrictions (Kell, 2020). A study

by Mahmudur Fatmi on urban mobility found that since Covid-19, travel and activities outside

the home were reduced over 50 percent (2020). Kock, et al. are studying how the tourist's

psyche or mindset will be changed post-pandemic and whether it will slow the inclination to

travel (2020). Their findings suggest that tourist perception of security and safety will be

important factors for future travel (Kock, et al, 2020). Future travel planning is also an

important factor research has found during Covid-19. David Jarett's research found that live

webcams during the shutdowns have facilitated a sense of connection and have influenced

future travel planning (2020). Other researchers are studying how the travel industry can use

the Covid-19 shutdowns as an opportunity to make future tourism more sustainable. A study by

Freya Higgins-Desbiolles found that travel could be made more "socialized" for the "public

good" going forward (2020). She further found that concentrating travel on "public good" is a

way to reverse the effects of exploitation of place that have been a part of many concerns prior

to Covid-19 (HigginsDesboilles, 2020).

The recent nature of the travel shutdowns due to the pandemic limit the amount of studies

that have been completed because the situation is still fluid. This has created an opportunity to

study the travel industry impacts as well as Covid-19 impacts on travel influencers. This study

adds to the sociological body of research regarding how covid-19 has affected this area by

analyzing Instagram travel influencers using qualitative methods. It also assesses whether signs

of resilience are showing in the sample by analyzing travel Instagram influencer content three

months before and twelve months after the March 2020 declaration by the World Health

Organization of the pandemic status of Covid-19 (Cucinotta, Vanelli, 2020). The data collected

answers the research question of if the pandemic has affected Instagram travel influencer posts

in my sample and conveys whether resilience is evident. This research broadens the knowledge

of the impact of Covid-19 on tourism and travel by assessing interactions at the micro level.


Methods

The methods used to gather data in this study are qualitative content analysis. The data

generated was analyzed quantitatively for comparison, trends, patterns, and insight to answer

the research question.

My own perceptions of these micro-level social interactions pertaining to the social

institution of tourism are informed by my status as a late 40's female who has travelled

extensively since the 1990's. In the last several years, I've increasingly utilized Instagram

influencer feeds to aid in travel planning. I have often followed the posts of travel influencers

and have used the posts to find reviews and images of destinations that I plan to visit. It was

this immersion in the realm of travel influencers and my status as a sociology graduate student

that generated the interest in studying this area from a sociological viewpoint. I chose the

research site of Instagram travel influencer feeds due to the attainable, online, public access and because of the unique research limitations that Covid-19 has brought to in-person interviewing at this time.

Content Analysis

This study used the method of content analysis and utilized systematic coding and reviewing of content to generate data which was then analyzed to answer the research question of impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to travel influencer content in the sample. This process allowed for inductive reasoning to inform relevant conclusions about the sample. Comparative analysis was used to analyze the quantified results for the patterns and frequency of the coded themes.

The analysis was conducted online using descriptive content analysis on travel influencer Instagram posts. Visual (photos or videos) and textual posts were included in the analysis. The method of using visual analysis is described by K. Parry in "Quantitative Content Analysis of the Visual" as having benefits in uncovering patterns and manners of depiction to develop interpretations that can link observations to social processes or structure (2019). Instagram is a social media website that is associated with what is termed, web 2.0 technology, which was used initially in the early part of the 2000's to describe the technology facilitating the social media platforms and the inclusion of "user-generated content" (Gruzd, et al. 2012). A defining feature of this technology is the socially interactive and participatory way in which it is used to facilitate virtual social interactions (2012). De Las Heras-Pedrosa describes how Instagram posts

serve as a publicly available, online archive that can be searched to collect data in chosen areas for research (2020). The travel influencer Instagram feed is editable by the influencer and serves as a public, curated archive of current and past posts. The curated posts are contained on the user's history of posts or feed which is held on their profile page on the Instagram website. Access to the research site (Instagram) is public and posts of the sample subjects were viewed individually in chronological order from the start date of December 15, 2019 to the end date of March 15, 2021. This provided a window into the posts and content before the declaration of the pandemic status of Covid-19 and resulting travel shutdowns to the current situation of March 15, 2021 which is the one-year anniversary of the travel shutdowns (WTTC, 2021). Identities of sample subjects are publicly available on the "bio/profile" sections of their Instagram feeds, but for this analysis the Instagram handles will be used to identify each subject mentioned. A full list of available demographic information and public names of the feed owners will be listed in appendix a.

   Purposive sampling was used to select the subjects due to unique characteristics of their Instagram feeds and their standing as travel influencers (Schutt, 2019). The subjects were chosen using the criteria of having 5000 or more Instagram followers, being based in the United States, self-identifying as travel influencers, and containing posts sponsored by companies and organizations in the tourism industry. The sample is part of the wider universe of Instagram influencers, but is not representative of all influencers due to purposive sampling (Schutt, 2019).

   The sample includes the regional home base locations that the influencer lives full-time. There are 5 influencer accounts based in New York, 2 based in Utah, 4 based in California, 2

based in Hawaii, 1 based in Maryland, 1 based in Florida, 1 based in Kansas, 3 based in Texas, and 1 based in D.C. (see figure 1). During the course of the observations one subject moved from Maryland to Seattle, Washington, but I have left the home base as Maryland because it was the home base for the majority of the posts during the observations. Two others also moved internationally for a period of time during the last year, but I have also kept their home base locations in the United States because their moves were temporary. The total followers of the influencers in this sample is 9,705,747 which means that their posts have the potential to reach over 9.7 million Instagram followers notwithstanding any followers who follow multiple accounts in the sample. With a potential reach that large, it is evident how impactful their posts can be on a destination.

Some of the subjects in the sample also host television shows or podcasts, but only their Instagram content was analyzed because the focus of the study was impacts in their Instagram feeds. I also did not analyze the comments made by followers or number of likes on the posts because I found that the comments were inconsistent and did not relate to the post in many cases and sporadic in some cases which did not add insight to the areas that the study was focused on. The number of likes on a post also can be changed at any time-period (with new likes) and I felt that it may not describe the time-period that I was researching in the analysis.

Figure 1: Sample subjects, followers, location

| Subjects in sample Instagram handle | Number of followers | # of posts analyzed | Home State |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Adventurouskate | 994,000 | 101 | New York |
| 2. Annaeverywhere | 178,000 | 144 | Utah |
| 3. Expertvagabond | 144,000 | 48 | Utah |
| 4. Dining Traveler | 14,400 | 273 | Washington, D.C. |
| 5. Dashofting | 141,000 | 43 | California |
| 6. Theblondeabroad | 535,000 | 86 | California |
| 7. Erubes1 | 474,000 | 243 | California |
| 8. Thebucketlistfamily | 2,600,000 | 232 | Hawaii |
| 9. blairadiebie | 1,700,000 | 137 | New York |
| 10. chelseakauai | 1,100,000 | 162 | Hawaii |
| 11. Kelleyflanagan | 840,000 | 88 | Florida |
| 12. Samanthabrowntrav | 97,000 | 180 | New York |
| 13. Disneyslostqueen | 5,247 | 264 | Maryland |
| 14. Nomadicmatt | 124,000 | 175 | Texas |
| 15. Mommypoints | 10,900 | 127 | Texas |
| 16. Culturaltourist | 97,400 | 28 | California |
| 17. Oneikatraveller | 108,000 | 329 | New York |
| 18. Karl_shakur | 504,000 | 197 | Kansas |
| 19. Bradtravels | 20,800 | 20 | Texas |
| 20. Ochristine | 18,000 | 107 | New York |
| | 9,705,747 | 2984 | |

Coding and data

The Instagram posts for the duration of one year and three months or fifteen months total were analyzed for a sample of 20 Instagram travel influencers. The total number of posts that were observed for thematic visual and textual content in the sample was 2,984. Saturation was reached when similar trends across the postings continually emerged (Schutt, 2019). I manually went through each post starting with the posts on the date of December 15, 2019 and

13

systematically reviewed each post until the end date of March 15, 2021 for each sample

subject. Some of the subjects posted extensively and some did not post as frequently. For the

breakdown and frequency of the total posts by each influencer feed see *figure 1* above.

For coding purposes, the visual observation of photographs, videos, and the photo captions

or comments by the influencer were reviewed. The codes were assigned by theme of the

influencer photo caption or specific comments by the influencer, the theme or content of the

posted photos, and the associated hashtags the influencer used with the post to indicate a

sponsorship relationship to the posting. A hashtag is a way of labeling and organizing content

online using the symbol, #, and then the label which allows others to find the content they are

interested in using that label or hash tag (Campbell, 2013). Some examples of sponsored

hashtags that were used were #marriott #Puertoricotourism, #chasevisa, #hilton, #ad,

#sponsored, #disneyambasador, and #visithawaii. Some influencers also label the sponsored

posts at the top of the content. The content was coded manually using tally marks on a

spreadsheet for the codes listed in (figure 2). I felt that each post had to be manually observed

for coding because the theme or feel of wording cannot be ascertained by coding software in

the way in which I observed the posts.

The observational data collected during the content analysis was further broken down into

totals for each code by influencer and analyzed for patterns and frequency pre and post

Covid19 to reach conclusions on the impact of the pandemic on the influencers. The data were

further divided into five, three-month quarters to ascertain trends and patterns over time

intervals. In addition, some influencers frequently post journal-like content along with their

photos and videos and further observations were made from their own words and feelings portrayed in specific postings. Hashtags associated with the pandemic were also recorded from the reviewed posts for frequency and insight (Figure 12).

Figure 2: code list

```
                                Code List

Pt - pandemic related    Ct - current trip         Tp - previous trip
Sh - staying home post   Sp - sponsored post or ad  Dp - destination post
Cp - cancelled plans     Vt - virtual travel        Ts - travel shaming
                         Tc - travel close
```

Analysis and Results

The analysis of data is a descriptive representation of trends, patterns, and insights gained from the coded data and observations of the subjects' posts in the sample. I calculated the frequency totals for each of the code categories and analyzed the trends that appeared over the date range to describe the observations. The totals are divided into 5 date range quarters that span three months as follows; Quarter 1: 12-15-2019 to 3-15-2020, Quarter 2: 3-16-2020 to 6-15-2020, Quarter 3: 6-16-2020 to 9-15-2020, Quarter4: 9-16-2020 to 12-15-2020, Quarter 5: 12-16-2020 to 3-15-2021. Dividing in this way made it possible to see the changes and trends over the timespan of the data. The code frequencies were analyzed individually and in categories to draw conclusions. The categories are 1. Sponsored Posts (monetized posts Sp, Dp)

2. Pandemic-related posts (Pt, Sh, Cp, Vt, Tp, Ts) 3. Current travel trends (Ct, Tc). The graphs in

figures 3-11 quantitatively display the individual code frequency results with descriptive

analysis and results under each figure. Figure 12 shows the results of the most used hashtags

that were recorded from the influencer posts during each quarter related to the pandemic.

Hashtag usage by the sample subjects were not consistent because some used them in their

posts and others did not use hashtags at all in some cases. For this reason, I recorded the most

used ones during each period instead of calculating frequency by influencer.

Figure 3: Individual coding totals by quarter

| Coding totals | q 1 | q 2 | q3 | q4 | q5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cancelled plans Cp | 7 | 21 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Sponsored posts Sp | 470 | 287 | 346 | 389 | 366 |
| Pandemic related Pt | 43 | 232 | 167 | 129 | 91 |
| Destination post Dp | 460 | 284 | 325 | 315 | 301 |
| Current trip post Ct | 179 | 37 | 168 | 144 | 118 |
| Past trip posts Tp | 206 | 228 | 196 | 163 | 159 |
| Staying at home Sh | 40 | 198 | 175 | 176 | 184 |
| Traveling close Tc | 4 | 53 | 85 | 80 | 59 |
| Virtual travel post Vt | 3 | 7 | 11 | 4 | 1 |
| Travel shaming mention Ts | 0 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 0 |

Overall category observations:

1. Sponsored or monetized posts decreased sharply in the quarter 2 months of 3-16-20 to 6-16-20 then increased in months since. The overall impression is that sponsored posts are not yet back at pre-pandemic levels for the subjects in the sample and indicate a decrease in sponsored revenue in this area but are remaining steady. Resilience is not supported currently. The individual impressions are detailed under figure 4.

2. Pandemic-related posts increased during and after quarter 2 and remain higher than pre-pandemic which is expected due to the change in discourse since the declaration of the pandemic. These results also support previous research in this area detailed under figure 5. The frequency of subjects at home or themes of staying home have also increased in this category.

3. Current travel trends show that current trips deeply decreased in the beginning of quarter 2 but began to rise in the next month. This indicates that as soon as quarantines were lifted people began to travel again. Trips within the United States and closer to the subject's home base increased during this time and remain high indicating a shift to domestic travel which supports recent research in this are detailed under figure 10 and figure 11.

Individual analysis and results of individual codes:

Figure 4 sponsored post frequency results by quarter
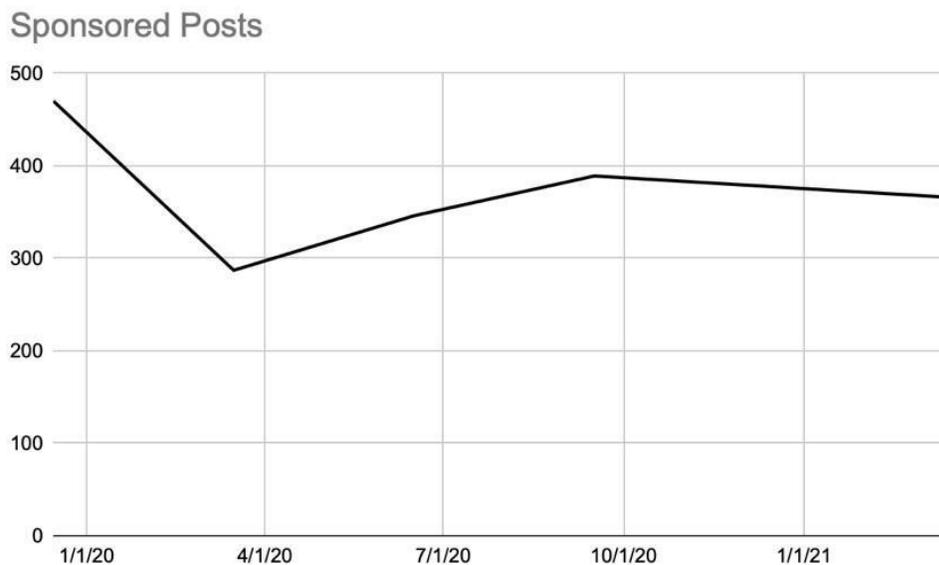


Although sponsored posts dipped during the initial weeks of the travel shutdowns, they have increased in the months since then, but are not back to pre-pandemic levels currently. I used the line graph to illustrate the dip in mid-March during the shutdowns and quarantine period that followed. The frequency seen during the last quarter is approximately 78% of the frequency seen during the first quarter before the Covid-19 shutdowns.

Some influencers expressed experiences with the economic effect it has had on their businesses and express hope for recovery. Nomadicmatt wrote, "While the travel industry is in rough shape, I have supportive friends and family and thanks to readers…this blog continues to stay afloat. Things could be a lot worse." (2020).

Figure 5 pandemic post frequency (Pt) results by quarter
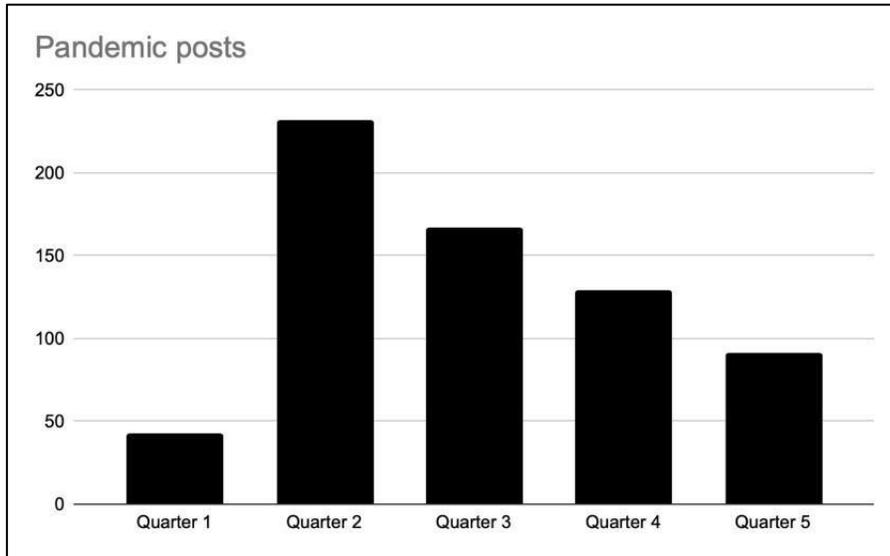


The figure 5 histogram represents the frequency of posts either specifically mentioning the pandemic, Covid-19, shutdowns, etc. or the hashtags associated with the post having been related to those themes. The increase in the discourse relating to the pandemic around the time of W.H.O. designating Covid-19 as a pandemic and the following travel shutdowns occurred at the last few days of the first quarter and is evident in the following quarters that were analyzed (Cucinotta, Vinelli, 2020). Every subject in my sample mentioned the pandemic, shutdowns, Covid-19, or other issues associated with safety during these times. Even in current postings from quarter 5, the theme of the pandemic is prevalent in 91 posts which demonstrates the change in discourse related to travel.

Coding Frequencies for cancelled plans, virtual travel, and travel shaming:

The totals for posts mentioning cancelled plans (Cp), virtual travel (Vt), and travel shaming (Ts) were included in the totals to show the change over time, but the frequency of the posts with those designations were not high enough to be relevant for the sample and only applied to a few influencers who mentioned them in their posts.

Some influencers did experience travel shaming and cancelled plans and described them in their own words. In September of 2020, travel influencer, Oneikatraveller, posted that "shaming people for traveling during Covid won't stop them from traveling. It just means they won't tell you the next time they do" (September 20, 2020). She also posted, "as many (including myself) resume traveling, the threat of being travel shamed is definitely real." (September, 2020). On March 22nd, disneyslostqueen posted, "I'm so sad to say, yesterday I had to postpone my trip" and on April 26th, "If I can't actually go to the parks, I guess going there virtually is the next best thing!" (April, 2020). This illustrates the fact that cancelled plans, virtual travel, and travel shaming was a concern for some of the subjects in the sample.

Figure 6 Destination-themed posts (Dp) frequency results by quarter
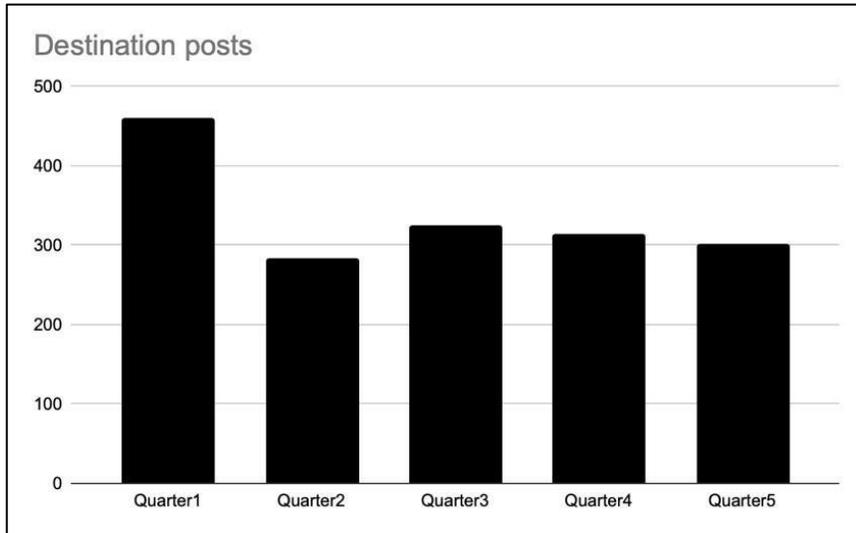
Destination posts

Although destination-themed posts declined since pre-pandemic months in quarter 1, the frequency has remained relatively stable across the remaining quarters analyzed. The last quarter frequency is 65% of the frequency total for the first quarter. Destination branding is important for creating public interest in visiting different areas (De La Heras-Pedrosa, 2020). Even if influencers are not directly being sponsored by destinations, the branding of destinations by being featured is still happening on a consistent basis. It is just at a lower rate than pre-pandemic posts.

Destination branding can have a future impact on where people choose to travel when able to plan and travel freely again (De La Heras-Pedrosa, 2020).

Figure 7 current trip post (Ct) frequency results by date

Posts depicting current travel
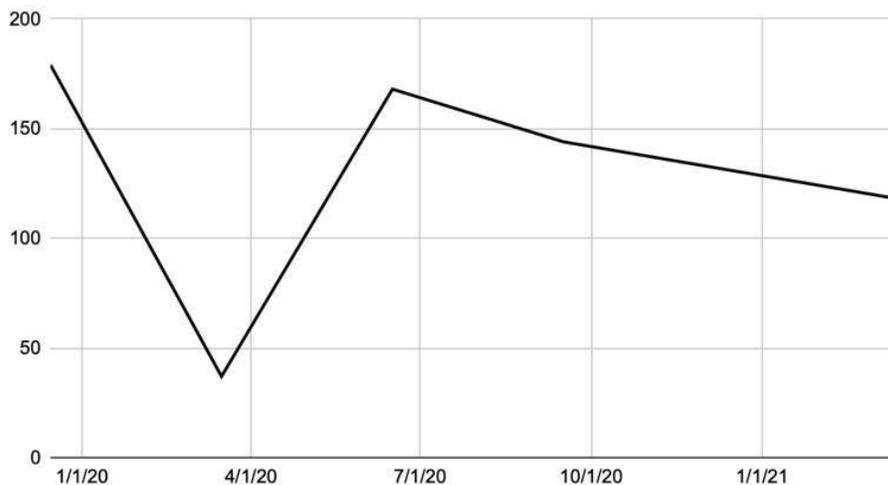
The line graph in figure 7 graphically represents the drastic drop in posts depicting current travel during the shutdowns at the end of the first quarter before rising in June during the third quarter. The frequency slightly decreased since June but has not drastically dropped again and the frequency totals from the 5th quarter are 66% of what they were in the 1st quarter. Subjects began travel again relatively soon with some traveling as early as the beginning of May. Some of the influencers who started traveling again posted thoughts on what they experienced. On July 13, 2020, mommypoints posted, "Yes, #Disneyworld with a mask, new rules and distanced lines is doable… and can absolutely still feel magical." to describe a photo of her recent trip to Disney World when it reopened. This sentiment was further described by samanthabrowntravels in a post on July 5, 2020 when she described their first trip since the shutdowns. She wrote, "Our first trip out since mid-March abruptly stopped the world. Like most we headed towards forests and mountains." (July 5, 2020). Another post by mommypoints stated, "Beginning our rewritten summer of travel with a cabin on a river in

Texas Hill Country. It's a weird time for a "vacation" but it's a good time to breathe, reconnect, and recharge in the great outdoors." (June 4, 2020).

Figure 8 Post frequency results featuring a past trip (Tp)
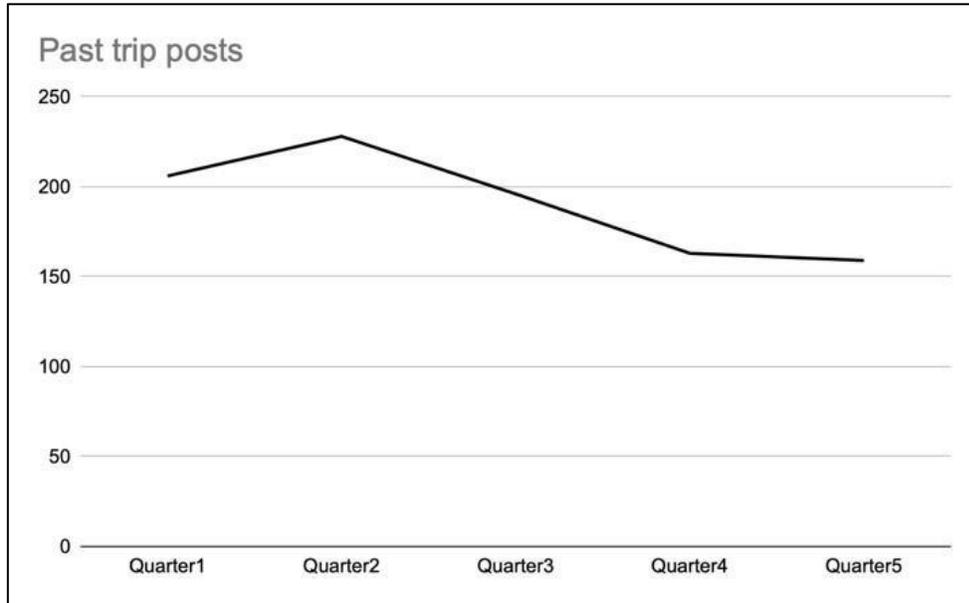


Posts featuring past trips increased in the quarter just after the Covid-19 travel shutdowns and have decreased since that time with a leveling off in the 5th quarter of 12-16-20 to 3-15-21. The frequency totals in quarter 5 are 77% of what they were in quarter 1. Influencers use past trip photos to keep engagement and did so more frequently when travel was most restricted in the first weeks of quarantines due to the pandemic. Some were just photos and descriptions of previous trips and some were inspirational posts wishing for future travel or missing destinations that they were freely able to visit in the past before the pandemic.

Figure 9 Post frequency results on staying home-themes (Sh)
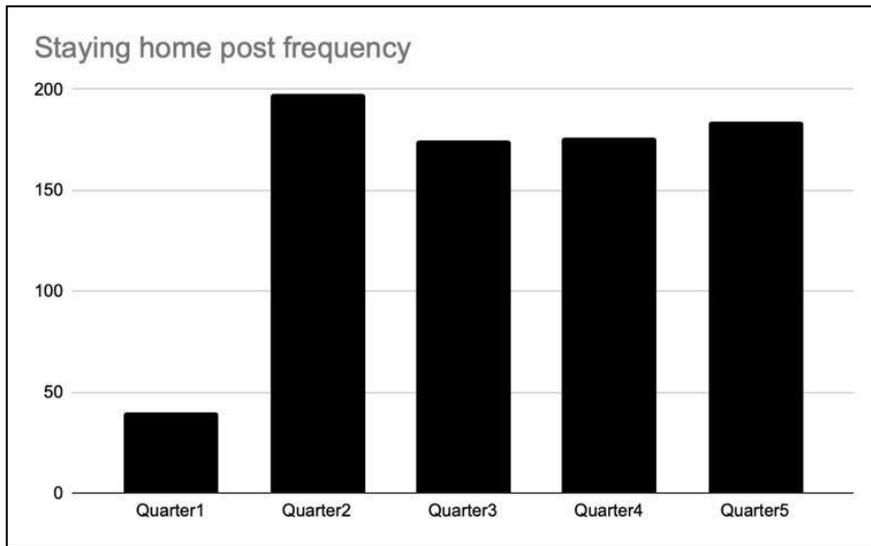


Posts depicting influencers at their homes or with the theme of staying home increased after

the shutdowns at the end of the first quarter and have remained relatively stable and increased

since then.

Figure 10 Travel close (Tc) frequency post results by quarter
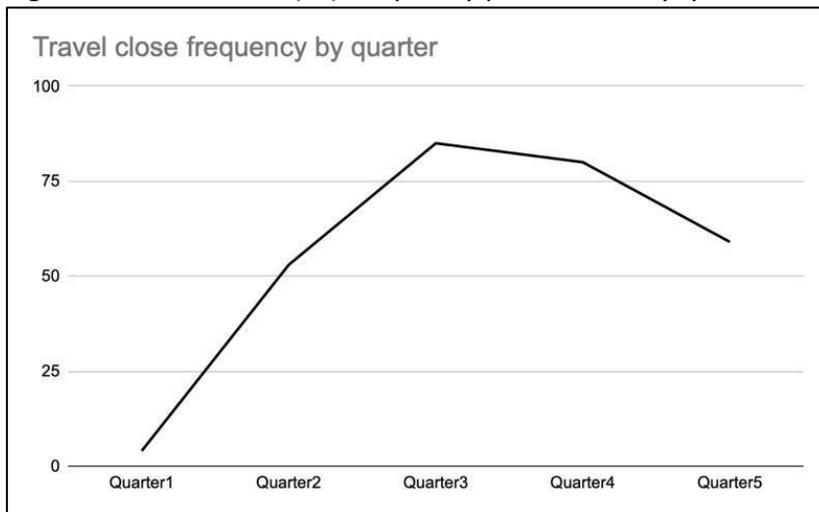


Posts indicating travel within the United States and close to the influencer's home base

location or hashtags with themes such as #nearcation, #travelsmall, #travelclose and

#nationalparks were coded under the travel close code of Tc. This chart illustrates the rising trend in the third quarter between 6-16-20 to 9-15-20.

There were also posts by influencers illustrating this sentiment during this quarter. Samanthabrowntravels posted on July 23, 2020 "I've been staying closer to home but still traveling to nearby places that recharge my batteries." (July 23, 2020). On July 6th anna.everywhere posted, "Local travel is definitely what's going to be trending for awhile. Probably why many fellow bloggers are starting niche sites about their region." (July 6, 2020). Similar sentiment was expressed on July 27, 2020, when expertvagabond described his family's trip to a national park by posting, "There's always more to see in your own backyard!" (July 27, 2020).

Figure 11 comparison chart current trip mentions and travel close themes (Ct)(Tc)
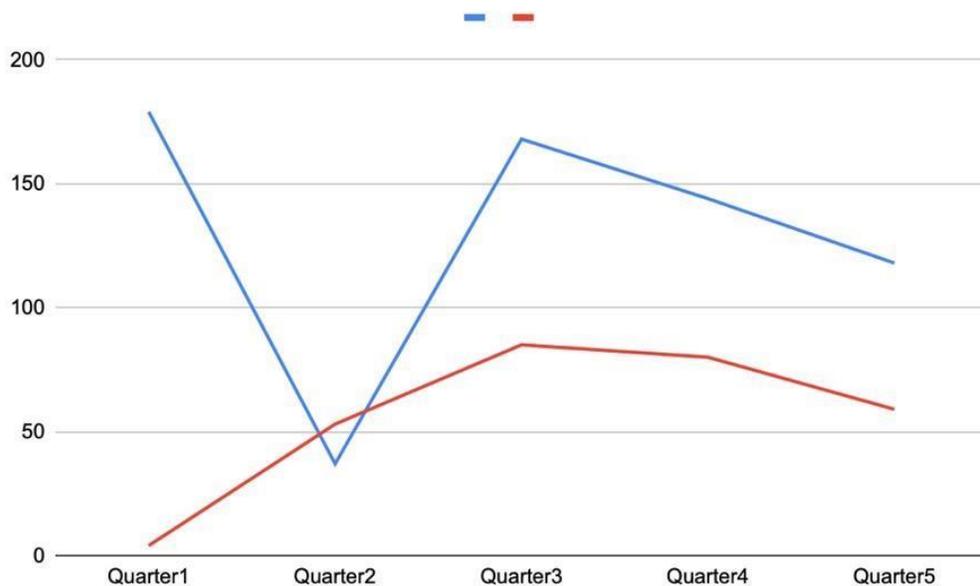


As current trip posts increased posts indicating traveling close to home also increased. This chart illustrates the comparison of both increases in the 3rd – 5th quarter time periods. This

finding is in line with the influencers who started traveling again domestically as soon as they

were allowed due to restrictions. In addition to the statements of influencers in the sample,

journalists such as, Drew Jones, documented how airlines began increasing their flights

available domestically because of the increase in demand for travelers wanting to travel closer

to home and because international travel restrictions were still in place (2020).

Figure 12 pandemic-themed hashtags by quarter

| Quarter 1 | Quarter2 | Quarter3 | Quarter 4 | Quarter 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| #2020goals | #quarantine, #travelcomesback | #travelsmall, #rvlife | #2020goals, #rvlife | #planforvacation |
| #disneyclosed | #corona, #wewilltravelagain | #explorelocal, #nearcation | #travelcomesback | #travelcomesback |
| #quarantine | #covid19, #virtualroadtrip | #dreamingoftravel,#imisstraveling | #travel2020 | #socialdistancing |
| #staylocal | #stayathome, #socialdistancing | #magicomingback,#usaroadtrip | #flysafe | #vaccine |
| #caronavault | #safeathome, #bringbacknormal | #wecandohardthings, #travelclose | | #covidvaccine |
| | #imissdisney, #domestictravel | #workingfromtheroad | | |
| | #travelwillreturn, #stayinglocal | #travelcomesback | | |

The most frequently used hashtag across all quarters was #travelcomesback. This also is the sentiment themed in several posts from each quarter about remaining hopeful that travel will return.  Also, of note, the use in the fifth quarter of #vaccine and #covidvaccine was used by many influencers and is in line with other research showing that the availability of vaccines being an important change that will facilitate travel returning to normal levels. A recent news report noted that the automobile travel association, AAA, published results of a recent survey showing 60 % of respondents said that they were planning travel for leisure within the next 3 months (King, 2021).

Discussion

   After exploring the different themes related to travel and Covid-19 in the sample of

Instagram influencers' posts, patterns emerged indicating negative impacts in the month during

the shutdowns in the 2nd quarter then increases in a positive direction in the last 3 quarters. De

La Heras-Pedrosa, et al. described resilience in the travel sector as being able to bounce back to

pre-event levels (2020). The results of my analysis shows increase in several areas, but do not

indicate pre-event levels of travel among the subjects so resilience is not supported during the

time of this study.

   The frequency of posts containing pandemic-related themes showed a sharp increase in

quarter 2 and has remained consistent in the following quarters. This trend indicates a change

in discourse surrounding travel and is similar to findings of a qualitative study by John Kell

which found that posted content since Covid-19 has changed (2020). Trends in the theme of

traveling close to home or domestically increased in quarter 3 and 4 and remain moderately

high in quarter 5. This supports the WTTC projection that domestic travel would be the first

area to see recovery after the pandemic restrictions were lifted (2020). Influencer's own

comments and posted feelings were observed and reflected similar themes as the trends seen

in the coded posting frequencies. Their comments gave insight into how the pandemic affected

them personally and provides further description on the similarities and differences

experienced by the subjects in the sample.

Limitations

    The relatively small sample size and the restrictions on physically interacting with interview subjects due to Covid-19 impacts the choices made in the research site. The qualitative data are not statistically generalizable and do not contain random samples but are demonstrative of the complex impact that covid-19 has had at the micro-level of interactions of the Instagram travel influencer sample. In the article, "Generalization Practices in Qualitative Research", Payne and Williams call this a form of moderating the generalizing aspects of qualitative results to be contingent on the social processes involved and actors observed (2005). The results of this study do not generalize to a population, but to speak to the unique experiences of the subjects, social processes, and parameters in the study that infer impacts on the larger institutions involved. The recent and evolving nature of Covid-19 and the lack of research for comparison is also a limitation. Future research will aim to include a larger sample size and in-person interviews to help expand the overall body of knowledge further. The dataset could also be used for following up research in the future to assess further trends in the areas that were impacted by Covid-19 and if resilience in these areas has occurred. Observing and comparing the trends and impacts in the results from this study expands on the sociological qualitative theoretical knowledge on this emerging issue affecting the institution of tourism.

Conclusion

    The societal and social implications of tourism make it an important area to study for impacts from crises and recovery. The ability to assess the impacts of Covid-19 to this institution will be essential for present and future analyses. The results of this study add insight

to the experiences of the chosen sample of Instagram travel influencers which has been shown

to be an important group of facilitators connecting travel and future travelers. Observing these

interactions that travel influencers facilitate at the micro level give insight to future impacts in

the institution of tourism at the macro-level (Lawler, et al. 1993). The content of the sample

Instagram feeds indicates negative impacts throughout the timeline analyzed, but there are

positive developments in many areas indicating ongoing recovery. The most frequently used

hashtag of #travelcomesback gives hope for the resilience of this part of the travel industry in

the future although it is not quite there yet. Learning more about these small pieces of the

tourism puzzle will help put together the fuller picture of an institution that is an essential part

of society.

# References

Abidin C, Lee J, Barbetta T, Miao WS. 2021. Influencers and COVID-19: reviewing key issues in press coverage across Australia, China, Japan, and South Korea. *Media International Australia*.178(1):114-135.

Anna.everywhere. 2020. Photos and text. *Instagram*.

Barbe, D., Neuburger, L., & Pennington-Gray, L. 2020. Follow Us on Instagram! Understanding the Driving Force behind Following Travel Accounts on Instagram. *E-Review of Tourism Research*. *17*(4): 592–609.

Berry, J.W., et al. 2006. Immigrant Youth: Acculturation, Identity, And Adaptation. *Applied Psychology*. 55(3): 303-332.

Brown, Adam. 2018. Kevin Systrom In His Own Words: How Instagram Was Founded and Became The World's Favorite Social Media App. *Forbes*.

Bardis, P. 1979. Social Interaction and Social Processes. *Social Science. 54*(3): 147-167.

Campbell, A. 2013. "What is a Hashtag? And What Do You Do With Hashtags?". *Small Business Trends*. Website. https://smallbiztrends.com/2013/08/what-is-a-hashtag.html

Chunquing L., et al. 2019. Veni, Vidi, Vici: The Impact of Social Media on Virtual Acculturation in

Tourism Context. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*. 145: 513-522.

Cohen, Erik. 1974. "Who Is a Tourist?: A Conceptual Clarification." *Sociological Review* 22 (4):

   527–55.

Cucinotta D, Vanelli M. 2020. WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic? *Acta Biomed*. 2020 Mar

91(1):157-160.

De La Heras-Pedrosa, C. Millan-Celis, E. et al. 2020. Importance of Social Media in the Image

Formation of Tourist Destinations from the Stakeholders' Perspective. *Sustainability*.

Disneyslostqueen. 2020. Photos and text. *Instagram*.

Driel, L.V., & Dumitrica, D. 2020. Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The

   professionalization of Instagram influencers. *Convergence*.

Edensor, T. 2000. Staging tourism: tourists as performers. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 27(2):
322-344.

Expertvagabond. 2020. Photo and text. *Instagram*.

Fatmi, M.R. (2020). COVID-19 impact on urban mobility. *Journal of Urban Management*. *9*(3):

270–275.

Ferguson, S. Veer, E. 2015. 3-2-1 Bungy: A Typology of Performance Styles. *Annals of Tourism
Research*. V. 55: 61-76.

Freberg, K. et al. 2011. Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of

   personality. *Public Relations Review*. 37(1): 90-92.

Glaser, B. Holton, J. 2005. Basic Social Processes. *Grounded Theory: An International Journal*.

   3:4.

Global Economic Impact Reports. 2019. *World Travel and Tourism Council.* http://www.wttc.org

Gmelch, S. 2010. *Tourists and Tourism: A Reader*. 2nd Edition. Waveland Press.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.

Gruzd, A. Staves, K. Wilk, A. 2012. Connected Scholars: Examining the Role of Social Media in

Research Practices of Faculty Using the UTAUT Model. *Computers in Human Behavior*.

   28(6): 2340-2350.

Higgins-Desbiolles, F. 2020. Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19.

   *Tourism Geographies*.

Jarratt, D. 2020. An Exploration of Webcam-Travel: Connecting to Place and Nature Through

Webcams During the Covid-19 Lockdown of 2020. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*.

Jones, D. 2020. You Aren't the Only One Itching to Travel: Airlines are Slowly Adding Flights.

   *Washington Post* website. https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2020/06/10/dont-look
now-usairlines-are-adding-flight-routes-summer-travel/October, 2020.

Kell, J. 2020. The Coronavirus Economy: What it means to be a travel influencer when no one

can travel anywhere. *Fortune.Com*.

Kiesnoski, K. 2021. Here's What Post Pandemic Travel Might Look Like. *CNBC.com*.

https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/heres-what-post-pandemic-travel-might-look-like.html

King, C. 2021. AAA Sees Optimism for Travel Increase As Vaccine Rolls Out. *CBS News*.

https://www.cbs19news.com/story/43495096/aaa-sees-optimism-for-travel-increase-as

vaccine-rollouts

Kock, F. et al. 2020. Understanding the COVID-19 tourist psyche: The Evolutionary Tourism

Paradigm. *Annals of Tourism Research*. V. 85.

Kozinets, R. V., de Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J.  2010. Networked Narratives:

Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities. *Journal of*

*Marketing*. *74*(2): 71–89.

Kirillova, K. et al. 2018. The Sociogenesis of Leisure Travel. *Annals of Tourism Research*. V. 69:
53-64.

Larsen, J., & Urry, J. 2011. Gazing and performing. *Environment & Planning D: Society &*

*Space*. *29*(6: 1110–1125.

Larsen, J., & Urry, J. 2011. *The Tourist Gaze*. Sage Publications UK.

Lawler, E. et all, 1993. "Structural Social Psychology and the Micro-Macro Problem."

*Sociological Theory* 11(1): 268-290.

Miller, Carrie. 2017. How Instagram is Changing Travel. *National geographic*.

   https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/travel-interests/arts-and-culture/how-

Instagram-is-changing-travel/.

Nag, Oishimaya S. 2018. The Officially Recognized Four Regions and Nine Divisions of the United

States. *World Atlas*.

Nomadicmatt. 2020. Photos and text. *Instagram.*

Mommypoints. 2020. Photos and text. *Instagram.*

Oneikatraveler. 2020. Photo of travel shaming meme and text. *Instagram*.

Parry, K. 2020. Qualitative Content Analysis of the Visual. *The Sage Handbook of Visual*

*Research Methods*, Edited by L. Pauwels and Dawn Mannay. Ch 22.

Payne, G. Williams, M. 2005. Generalization In Qualitative Research. Sociology. 39(2): 25-48.

Prayag, G. 2020. Time for Reset? Covid-19 and Tourism Resilience. *Tourism Review*

*International*. *24*(2): 179–184.

Robertson, S. 2012. *Foundations in Sociology I: Social construction of Everyday Life*.
https://openpress.usask.ca/soc112/part/susans-version-of-the-nbb/

Schutt, R. 2019. *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research*. Sage    Publications.

Sehl, K. 2021. Instagram Demographics in 2021: Important User Stats for Marketers.

   Blog.hootsuite.com/Instagram-demographics/.

Sam, D., & Berry, J. 2010. Acculturation: When Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural

Backgrounds Meet. *Perspectives on Psychological Science. 5*(4): 472-481.

Samanthabrowntravels. 2020. Photos and text. *Instagram*.

Simmel, Georg. 1907. Philosophie des Geldes. *On Individuality and Social Forms*. University of

Chicago Press. Edited by Levine. D. 1971. p 44.

Smith, S. P. 2018 Instagram abroad: performance, consumption and colonial narrative in

tourism. *Postcolonial Studies*. 21(2): 172-191.

Todorova, Z. 2014. Consumption as a Social Process. *Journal of Economic Issues Taylor &*

*Francis Lt*. *48*(3): 663–678.

Travel and Tourism Recovery Scenarios 2020 and Economic Impact from Covid-19. 2020. *World Travel and Tourism Council*. http://www.wttc.org

Von Puttkamer, I. 2019. Blog posting. The Ten Most Relevant Topics on Instagram. *Fanpage Karma.*

Appendix A

The list of chosen subjects in the sample of Instagram travel influencers contains publicly available information found on their public profile page on Instagram. The list denotes the username of the influencer, the actual name on their profile page, their regional home base location, and any demographic information that is publicly available on their profile.

Instagram travel influencers:

Adventurouskate – Kate McCulley – New York – female

Annaeverywhere – Anna Karsten – Utah – female

Expertvagabond – Matt Karsten – Utah – Male

Diningtraveler – Jessica Van Dop DeJesus – Washington, D.C. – female

Dashofting – Tinger Hseih – California – female

Theblondeabroad – Kiki (no last name given) – California – female

Erubes1 – Eric Rubens – California – male

Thebucketlistfamily – no names given on profile – Hawaii –

Blairadiebie – Blair Edie – New York – female

Chelseakauai – Chelsea Y. – Hawaii – female

Kelleyflanagan – Kelley Flanagan – Florida – female

Samanthabrowntravels – Samantha Brown – New York – female

Disneyslostqueen – Kara (no last name given publicly) – Maryland – female

Nomadicmatt – Mat Schleper – Texas – male

Mommypoints – no public name on profile – Texas – female

Culturaltourist – Michael Germano – California – male

Oneikatraveller – Oneika Raymond – New York – female

Karl_shakur – Karl Ndieli – Kansas – male

Bradtravels – Brad Livingston – Texas – male

Ochristine – Olivia Christine – New York - female

Vita

The author was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana and received her B.A. in Sociology from the University of New Orleans in 2019. She entered the graduate program in Sociology at the University of New Orleans in August of 2019. Her focus of study is on sociology of tourism and cultural exchange.