

Article

Exploring the Characteristics and Extent of Travel Influencers' Impact on Generation Z Tourist Decisions

Codruța Adina Băltescu *  and Elena-Nicoleta Untaru 

Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, Transilvania University of Brașov, 5000036 Brașov, Romania; elena.untaru@unitbv.ro

* Correspondence: codruta.baltescu@unitbv.ro

Abstract: The social media phenomenon revolutionized the way people communicate and share information in all age groups. In the context of global expansion and its undeniable popularity, social media platforms have favored the emergence of a new concept, the social media influencer (SMI). SMIs are online celebrities, followed and copied by a large number of users. The paper's goal is to investigate the capacity of travel SMIs to influence the tourist decisions of Generation Z members. Aiming to obtain insight results, an exploratory study was conducted using the qualitative focus group research method. The respondents are members of Generation Z, users of social media platforms for travel planning. The main results highlight the characteristics of travel SMIs' activities and influences, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of following their recommendations in the travel planning process. Also, this study highlights the reduced influence of Romanian travel SMIs on Generation Z tourists, despite the fact that they are primary information consumers on this communication channel. The results could contribute to establishing general benchmarks of a future professional career for Generation Z members as travel SMIs, an important sustainable option for communication in tourism.

Keywords: Generation Z; social media platforms; travel SMIs; tourist decisions



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1. Introduction

Technological development has fundamentally changed the way we obtain information, communicate, and purchase products and services. Accessing online information sources has become a constant of the contemporary way of life, as information is easy, quick, vast, and diverse, facilitating consumer selection [1–3]. Among online information sources, social media is considered extremely friendly [4]; its digging and tagging features favor a visualization increase in posted information [5], which is primarily consulted in the purchase process [6] (p. 517).

Online communication systems took over the attributes of traditional communication while also imposing themselves with new and specific communication tools, which have proven their ability to influence users' consumption decisions. Through existing platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and others, virtual communities are created, and permanent interactions are facilitated between all categories of users [7,8]. Within existing communities, the key function consists of following the actions of other members, a phenomenon that represents the essence of the interrelation process and mutual influence, which explains how social media platforms perform [9].

Purchasing a holiday is the result of a complex and long-term decision-making process [10,11]. The stages that tourists pass through begin long before consumption and

continue long after returning from the trip [10] (p. 195). During this process, tourists undertake numerous decisions, and the most important of these refers to the choice of destination [11,12], followed by the selection of transport means [13] and the tourism services, activities, and attractions at the destination [10].

In the travel industry, social media is the main source of information [9,14–19], which has definitively changed the way in which tourists gather information and choose holiday destinations and tourism services [3,20,21]. Although the analyses carried out on this topic are extensive, the dynamics of changes demonstrate that research in the field is still in its early stage [9] (p. 2).

The information revolution caused by the use of social media platforms contributed to the consolidation of social media influencers' (SMIs) role. They represent, in fact, a new channel of communication with the consumer, which is more direct and closer and takes place on a very large scale with confirmed success, and it is one of the most important trends in social media [22] (p. 92). SMIs are members of social media communities who gain the attention of other users and register a considerable and committed number of followers [23,24]. SMIs have become personalities in the online environment, and their activities can be carried out on several platforms simultaneously and have the ability to influence followers' consumption behavior [7,25]. Unlike celebrities, they are ordinary people who become online personalities as a result of the content created and posted on social media platforms [25,26]. Previous studies highlighted that SMIs have a higher degree of influence and a higher degree of trust compared to celebrities [27]. The information they provide is credible, as it comes from peers and has the ability to influence thousands of people [10] (p. 494). Based on the social capital of trust they have acquired, SMIs recommend various products or brands to their followers [7,28] and influence their decisions [29]. Childers and Boatwright (2020) emphasized that the success achieved by SMIs is based on strengthening partnerships with advertisers and marketers [30]. SMI relevance has been analyzed in many fields of activity, such as food, travel, fitness, fashion, etc. [23,28,31]. Influencers in tourism are among the most followed [22] (p. 96), and the literature on the subject is extensive and explains the main aspects of the effects exerted on travel service consumption [5,18,25,32–34]. Travel SMIs also perform an important role, which is explained by their capabilities to influence sustainable tourism consumption. Johnstone and Lindh (2018) demonstrated that influencers who promote ethical consumption are able to improve sustainable behaviors among their followers [35] (p. e136). The generations that are active on social media and follow SMIs are, mainly, the younger generations [36]. The overwhelming majority of previous assessments on travel SMIs have been conducted among generations Y and Z [37–42]. A reduced number of analyses performed comparisons between Generations Y and Z [30,34,43]. More than that, the impact of travel SMIs on Generation Z is presented in a very small number of studies [44,45].

The existing studies on the topic are limited to the analysis of frequently followed social media platforms and the posted topics that attract the largest number of followers. It is important to mention that these studies did not analyze the benefits or the advantages and disadvantages, of using the information provided by travel SMIs in holiday planning by Generation Z members. Based on this observation, which reflects the limited nature of studies assessing the influences of travel SMIs on Generation Z, the authors emphasize the opportunity to deepen the research by exploring the impact of travel SMIs on the travel decisions of Generation Z tourists. Investigating this subject also includes the most important characteristics of a travel SMI, the preferred posted contents or the benefits experienced by followers, which are all elements whose in-depth analysis we consider to be of great interest.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the impact of travel SMIs on Generation Z members. The authors set out to highlight how, to what extent, with what benefits, and what characteristics a travel SMI has to influence followers' travel decisions among Generation Z. The four objectives of our study are mentioned below.

- O1—Identifying the main sources of information used by Generation Z members for travel planning and the role played by social media platforms;
- O2—Evaluating the characteristics of a travel SMI that underlie Generation Z members' decision to follow the posts;
- O3—Analyzing the specific types of content (e.g., visual content, textual content, user-generated content) posted by travel SMIs that are most effective in attracting and influencing Generation Z tourist decisions;
- O4—Analyzing advantages and disadvantages of the information received from travel SMIs by Generation Z tourists.

Regarding the structure of the paper, the details are presented as follows. In the Section 2, the literature review presents an extended analysis of subtopics of interest for the purpose of the article. Further on, the qualitative research method that was used is presented in detail, followed by explanations of the results. The article presents, in the final part, the discussion and conclusion sections.

2. Literature Background

2.1. Main Information Sources Used for Tourist Decision Making and Social Media Impact in the Travel Industry

A vacation is often considered a dream, and its materialization involves anticipated searches for a complex and complete set of travel information. Tourists obtain information from various sources, and the most important are the following: (a) information from family, friends, acquaintances, etc., which are considered personal sources, (b) advertising, displays, dealers, tourism agencies, etc., which are known as commercial sources, (c) reviews, editorials in specialized magazines, etc., which represent the public sources, and (d) the internet [10] (p. 196). In the tourism information process, personal sources are considered the most reliable but are also complex and detailed [15]. Cox et al. (2009) pointed out that commercial sources, mainly organizational sources, prove to gain tourists' attention and trust [46]. But, as recently highlighted in the literature, social media platforms are the most powerful and most frequently accessed sources of information. Digital marketing and social media have a huge impact on tourists' decisions and behavior, the effects being complex and multifaceted [47] (p. 11). The relevance of digital marketing in tourism is based on the new approaches and solutions for targeting and retaining tourists' interest [48].

Inspiration is the first step in future trip coagulation, and posts on social media platforms have the ability to generate new ideas and impulses [49]. Social media influences tourism consumption from several perspectives, including destination choice [9,50,51], accommodation, food and transport options [17,52], trip duration, and activity selection at the tourism destination [53]. Among these elements, obtaining information about tourism destinations occupies a primary place in users' search activities on social media platforms [5,12,15,17,54,55]. Numerous studies highlighted the crucial role that social media plays prior to departure, arguing its major contribution to reducing purchase risks [15,46,56]. However, there are also tourists who postpone some of the important decisions until the moment of arrival at the destination, as technology gives them access to all the useful information [14].

According to Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017), the information acquired in social media is current, dynamic, and interactive, and the opinions are expressed by a significant number of people who have experienced the product, allowing the follower the opportunity to

acquire a more complete image of the object of the purchase desire [52]. Digital technologies facilitate the opportunity to select from a huge variety of options and information shared between users, which underpin the quality of the purchasing decision-making process [16,56]. In such a context, consumers rely on the opinions and experiences of other people, which they consider important and useful, enabling them to reduce uncertainties [10].

Țuclea, Vrânceanu, and Năstase (2020) noted that people active on social media platforms consider the information provided as more useful compared to other information sources and use it to a greater extent compared to traditional sources [57]. The same finding is supported by numerous other analyses, validating the idea that the degree of tourists' trust is higher for posts on social media platforms compared to information provided by commercial organizations or other traditional forms of information [6,20,58–60]. All these elements explain the communication success of social media platforms, as they have proven significantly superior performances compared to traditional communication systems [61]. There are also studies that recommend preserving and still consulting traditional sources of information, in addition to information from online sources [14,62].

Liu et al. (2020) evaluated the impact of social media on travel decisions, noting the existence of an indirect impact (exercised when the user is in the information search stage, the viewed images and comments affecting the desire to go on vacation) and a direct impact (when an SMI fulfills the guiding role for completing travel decision process) [17] (pp. 39–41).

Prior evaluations have either demonstrated the usefulness of social media platforms for tourism as a whole [63], or the social media platforms were approached separately. The most frequently analyzed platforms were YouTube [9,64], TikTok [33,53], Instagram [23,41,44], and Facebook [65]. Regarding the impact of these platforms among followers, Instagram is appreciated with the highest follower engagement rate [23]. TikTok is the platform used predominantly by young consumers and has a high influence on tourism destinations' development [33,53]. Facebook is the platform mainly used for sharing reliable information [65].

Social media platforms confirmed their usefulness as an information source in tourism. However, some negative aspects induced by followers cannot be ignored, manipulation being the most cited [66]. Tang, Zhang, and Yuan (2024) analyzed the shortcomings of social media platforms in tourism and highlighted the limited nature of the information distributed about tourism destinations, as well as the negative effects of specific algorithms through which followers remain in a "filter bubble", information continuously received lacking diversity [66].

2.2. Defining the Characteristics of Travel SMIs

The high potential of travel SMIs is recognized in the literature [19,32]. Yoo, Gretzel, and Zach (2011) conducted one of the first analyses of travel SMIs and found that persons could become opinion leaders in tourism because they travel a lot, especially to other countries, are very involved in travel planning, generate a lot of content, master technology, and come to consider themselves as experts, communicating their opinions in the online communities of which they are part of [19]. A travel SMI is considered a tourist information channel accessed especially in the case of lesser-known destinations [32]. The advice on events organized at the destination, nightlife, and activities at the destination are also considered highly valuable [5].

The success of a travel SMI is a topic that has also been extensively analyzed in the literature. A major coordinate of success is credibility, and it creates the basis of other attributes appreciated by followers, which subsequently underpin customer engagement [7,25,26,34,43,67–73]. On the pillars of credibility, trust in the influencer's person

is consolidated [25] (p. 58). But, as Lisichkova and Othman noted (2017), there is no blind trust in SMIs, with rationality being the element that will prevail when following their advice [74]. At the same time, previous research has emphasized that SMI success is explained to a greater extent by trust in the posted opinions rather than in expertise or travel experience [27,75].

The attributes that outline the credibility of travel SMIs include the content and quality of posts, which have a primary role [25,29,39,75], followed by volume and variety of information [74,76]. Continuing the analysis of attributes, the following are highlighted: originality [23,29], attractiveness [25,72], uniqueness [23], authenticity [74,75], creativity [9,23,77], interaction [29,34], honesty [52,53,74,78], and persuasiveness [69,71,72], as well as the connection between the person of the follower and the SMI person [23,27,68,70,79]. The quality of entertainment offered to followers is also considered a key element [29,67]. Last but not least, the lifestyle, remarks, and personality are appreciated as relevant attributes [39,69,71].

Balaban and Mustățea (2019) argue that followers choose SMIs they can compare to, which is considered to be the essence of their credibility [70]. Leung, Sun, and Bai (2019) explained that SMIs' success can also be analyzed from another perspective, in which behavior, motivations to create content, experience, image, content quality, and the way they tackle followers' dissatisfaction are also assessed [6] (p. 524). Another point of view was expressed by Fang et al. (2023). They accentuated the importance of SMIs' attractiveness, namely, physical attractiveness and voice attractiveness, alongside solid expertise [77]. Schoner-Schatz, Hoffmann, and Stokburger-Sauer (2021) revealed that facial emotions expressed by travel SMIs, especially smiles, could influence their communication performance [80].

Reputation is a relevant aspect that shapes the success of a travel SMI. Reputation is assessed through several elements, such as the number of followers [39], followers' loyalty [29], the number of daily accesses and shares [81], and the constancy of their posts [26]. Top persuaders have both positive and negative influences, which are quickly propagated and promoted through followers and friends [71].

Based on their actions, travel SMIs become e-service providers, as they support brands and services [29,72,82] and provide answers to questions and curiosities formulated by followers [68].

Having an intermediary role between consumers and different producers and their offers, SMIs can influence sustainable consumption [35]. Johnstone and Lindh (2018) also argued that awareness increases with age, and influencers play a role in this process [35]. Other studies identified the bivalent impact of influencers in achieving sustainability goals. On one hand, the influencer has the capacity to determine followers to increase attachment to a sustainable life concept [83], and, on the other hand, influencers serve corporate sustainability [84]. Also, another important aspect needs to be highlighted, addressing the fact that digital communication has no physical support and zero waste and is efficient, transparent, continuous, etc., which are elements that validate its sustainable characteristics [85]. There are motivations that determine users to become travel SMIs. Social benefits, such as the desire to help others and protect them from unpleasant experiences and the promise to gain material benefits and incentives, are the main motives [54,86]. Travel SMIs enjoy greater credibility compared to relatives or friends [32], with followers' trust being higher than in traditional forms of communication [60,81]. However, it should be noted that numerous followers do not rely exclusively on information communicated through virtual communities, and when they decide to plan a trip, they gather and consult information from various sources, including those provided by companies or specialized organizations [62].

2.3. Specific Types of Content Posted by Travel SMIs

SMIs' activity on virtual platforms is embodied in posts, photos, and videos [39,87]. Images complement already-known information and play a substantial role in the purchase decision stage [88]. Among existing online information, photos have the largest audience, followed by travel impressions posted on Instagram, live streaming, and short videos on TikTok [12]. However, it has not yet been clearly identified which type of content, namely, text, image, or video material, generates greater emotions and has the ability to influence tourists, especially in the pre-travel period [80,89]. It was argued that followers particularly appreciate recent posts that do not include exaggerated appreciation or excessive praise [68].

Posts made by travel SMIs are considered valuable sources of information based on several elements, including the length of the post, the type of information and details highlighted, the style of presentation, and the language used [90].

Photos are essential components in posting content about travel experiences [54,58,90], and the influences they exert on followers contribute to developing needs, generating feelings, fueling inspiration, and, in some cases, determining action [68] (pp. 215–218).

Travel vlogs are increasingly used to complement tourism information sources [89]. Their influences consist of generating emotions that favor inspiration and travel planning behavior [78,91]. Travel vlogs are considered attractive [49] and offer an intuitive and authentic experience [92]. Their relevance and influence are remarkable when they present tourist destinations/attractions and are completed by a priori congruence with the follower's expectations [93,94].

Short videos are a recent tool to present destinations and tourist attractions, the main characteristics being flexibility, accessibility, and distribution to a very large number of users [53]. The information provided is richer compared to posts containing text and pictures [17]. They are frequently used, especially on the TikTok platform, with the perception of their usefulness being high, as they positively influence the intention to travel and save the user's time in the planning process [95,96]. It has been concluded that for short videos, the value and quality of the audio–video material prevail over the credibility and popularity of the source [31,97]. However, recent analyses have shown that the influence exerted by this type of content also depends on the background of travel SMIs (whether they are experts in the tourism field or destination, as well as whether they have extensive travel experience) [96]. The existence of common values and similarity in entertainment motivations between the follower and the vlogger define the short video's influence on the follower's intention to share the video with friends [98].

Regardless of the method of communication, the quality and aesthetics of the content, the inclusion of interesting images, the choice of colors, and the appropriate background music are all criteria used to appreciate the post and consider it as useful information [99].

2.4. Generation Z Behavior for Obtaining Travel Information from Social Media Platforms

Generation Z members were born between 1996 and 2010 [34,100]. They are the first digitally native generation [22,30,101] who, unlike other generations, prefer to communicate through images, and they are addicted to technology [102]. They are characterized by distributive attention, which reduces their control over activities they carry out in parallel and over their performance, efficiency, and well-being [102,103]. They value easy and fast transactions, as well as information obtained online, in the same way [104]. Unlike Generation Y, for whom the credibility of the source is the main criterion for appreciating information, Generation Z is influenced by the quality of the argumentation [37,38]. Generation Z is reluctant to be influenced by traditional promotion; SMIs are very important to them, and the viewed content plays a crucial role [28,30,45,101]. They are also very critical of SMI posts [34]. The most followed SMIs have posts on Instagram, TikTok, and

YouTube [28,30,105]. Creating authentic relationships with Generation Z members is key to marketing communication, and honesty and empathy are elements they particularly value [22].

The tourism behavior of Generation Z has been the subject of several previous studies [106,107]. Studies have highlighted the essential role of information obtained through social media platforms, especially before going on vacation [5,9,12,15,17,50–55]. Amaro, Duarte, and Henriques (2016) identified that members of Generation Z demonstrate the same behavior, namely, they seek a large volume of information for travel planning in order to reduce risks [36]. Especially, when they choose a vacation destination, they rely, to a large extent, on recommendations made on social media [108].

However, direct research evaluating the impact of travel SMIs on Generation Z members is limited. Despite the role that we attribute to travel SMIs in contemporary society, there is a lack of studies on this topic [44]. Francis (2024) approaches the subject based on the evaluation of studies conducted in the last 5 years [109]. Choi, Choi, and Lee (2024) emphasize the essential impact of travel SMIs and demonstrate that Instagram is the preferred social media platform [44]. Barbe and Neuburger (2023) explained the low visibility of travel influencers among members of this generation, as they often represent minorities [45]. Ghaly (2023) validates the attributes that explain the trust of members of Generation Z in travel SMIs, namely, expertise, attractiveness, and honesty, but the results obtained only confirm the previous research [110].

Generation Z members are very active on social media; the enjoyment element of the content influences their attention to travel information, and they, in turn, create and post a lot of content [30,36]. They are attracted by posts that stand out for their uniqueness and that emphasize the sustainability aspect of the post's subject [44,45]. Local offers, the food and beverage industry, and festivals are the most followed posts [44,45]. They manifest low trust in travel SMIs who declare the existence of sponsorship relations [44].

3. Materials and Methods

This paper presents the results of exploratory research using the qualitative focus group research method. The focus group research method is considered the most important procedure used in qualitative research [111] (p. 139). Qualitative research offers the possibility to collect detailed information to explain respondents' experiences, with data collected being free from the constraints imposed by the researcher [112] (p. 279). The aim of the research targeted subjects' perceptions of the characteristics and extent of the impact exerted by travel SMIs on their tourist decisions.

Guided by the literature review presented in the Section 2 and the recommendations for conducting qualitative studies [111–113], the authors defined the content of the research questions, which were based on the established objectives, aiming to

- Explore the main travel information sources and describe the relevance of social media platforms in the travel information process for Generation Z members;
- Assess travel SMIs' main characteristics considered valuable by members of Generation Z to convince them to follow their content and to be influenced by their opinions and recommendations;
- Describe the relevant elements of the content provided by travel SMIs to attract and influence travelers from Generation Z;
- Identify the main advantages and disadvantages encountered by Generation Z members in following travel SMIs.

Based on the main requirements to ensure homogeneity within the groups [114] and to focus on at least two groups of respondents [111], two groups of subjects were chosen. The variables to identify the two different groups were (1) age, members of

Generation Z, (2) education level, students or graduates with higher education degrees, and (3) employment status, full-time employees, part-time employees, and without employee status. The first group included master's degree graduates aged between 24 and 27 years. All of them were employed, had travel experience, and were accustomed to travel SMI activities. The second group included respondents aged between 19 and 23 years who were students. Some of them were employed, but most of them did not have employee status. They had less travel experience but were accustomed to travel SMI activities. Both groups included 11 participants. The demographic structure of the two groups is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographical characteristics of respondents.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Women	12	55
Men	10	45
Age		
19–23	11	50
24–27	11	50
Education level		
Students	11	50
Graduates of higher education degree	11	50
Employee status		
Full time	12	55
Part time	4	18
Not employed	6	27

Source: authors' research.

The discussions within the two established groups were organized face to face, and participants were informed prior to the date, time, and location of these meetings. The focus groups were organized at different times in June 2024.

An interview guide was used, which contains open-ended questions that are specific to this research method and aimed to collect primary data, which enabled obtaining information to highlight the views and opinions of participants [113]. The interview guide included 4 discussion topics and 11 research questions and was designed based on the analyzed literature, as shown in Table 2.

Both focus groups were organized in the classrooms of the Transilvania University campus in Braşov in a relaxing atmosphere. The duration was 1 h, including 40 min for group 1 and 1 h and 15 min for the second group. Before each focus group, the respondents signed an agreement regarding their participation in the research and permission to disseminate the results obtained. The discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed and analyzed [111,113]. The moderator of both focus groups was one of the authors of this article.

This study used a thematic analysis technique aiming to analyze, identify, and interpret the main themes within the gathered qualitative data [116,117]. The thematic analysis process was implemented [117]. The transcripts were systematically coded using a thematic coding framework developed based on the research questions. The coding process involved multiple stages: initial coding, focused coding, and thematic analysis. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the authors independently coded a subset of the transcripts and compared their results. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. The thematic analysis revealed several key themes, including (1) information sources, (2) essential characteristics of travel SMIs, and (3) travel SMIs' posts. For example, information sources

(theme 1) were divided into online sources (sub-theme 1a) and traditional sources (sub-theme 1b). Data were transcribed and selected, followed by keyword selection, coding and theme development, and interpretation. Table 3 shows a summary of the main themes used to explain this study's findings.

Table 2. The interview guide used in the focus group discussions.

Objectives/Research Sub-Questions	Explanations	Main Previous Studies
Q1. Icebreaker question: What does traveling mean?	Describing the main expectations for Generation Z's travel activities and experiences	Gretzel (2006) [4] Kotler et al. (2022) [10] Pricope et al. (2023) [107]
Objective 1. Identifying the main sources of information used by Generation Z members for travel planning and the role played by social media platforms Q2. What are the main sources of travel information? Q3. What is the role of social media platforms in collecting tourism information? Q4. What are the main social media platforms used to collect tourism information?	Exploring the main travel information sources and describing the relevance of social media platforms in the travel information process for Generation Z members	Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) [3] Xiang and Gretzel (2010) [5] Hussain et al. (2024) [9] Dai et al. (2022) [12] Liu et al. (2020) [17] Zhou et al. (2023) [53] Fotis et al. (2012) [60] Tang et al. (2024) [66] Puiu et al. (2022) [106]
Objective 2. Evaluating the characteristics of a travel SMI that underlie Generation Z members' decision to follow the posts Q5. Who are the main travel SMIs currently followed by the subjects? Q6. What are the main characteristics of a travel SMI when deciding to follow him? Q7. What are the elements to describe an ideal travel SMI?	Assessing travel SMIs main characteristics to convince members of Generation Z to follow their content and to be influenced by their opinions and recommendations	Hussain et al. (2024) [9] Fromm and Read (2018) [22] Lombardo (2024) [29] Wengel et al. (2022) [33] Ong et al. (2024) [34] Han and Chen (2022) [38] Bastrygina et al. (2024) [41] Pop et al. (2021) [43]
Objective 3. Analyzing the specific types of content (e.g., visual content, textual content, user-generated content) posted by travel SMIs that are most effective in attracting and influencing Generation Z tourist decisions Q8. What kind of content posted by the travel SMI attracts attention among followers? Q9. What are the types of content provided by a travel SMI that influence followers' travel decisions?	Describing the relevant elements of the content provided by travel SMIs to attract and influence travelers from Generation Z	Jung and Hwang (2023) [64] Tang et al. (2024) [66] Fang et al. (2023) [77] Nguyen et al. (2023) [78] Nguyen et al. (2024) [89] Gan et al. (2023) [93] Cao et al. (2021) [94] Wang et al. (2022) [95] Qiu et al (2024) [96] Sano et al. (2024) [115]
Objective 4. Analyzing advantages and disadvantages of the information received from travel SMIs by Generation Z members Q10. What are the advantages of following a travel SMI? Q11. What are the disadvantages of following a travel SMI	Identification of the main advantages and disadvantages encountered by Generation Z members following travel SMIs	Bastrygina et al. (2024) [41] Fotis (2015) [68]

Source: authors' research.

Table 3. Summary of the main themes.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Keywords
Information sources	Online sources	Most used social media platforms TikTok Instagram Facebook YouTube Blogs
	Traditional sources	Relatives and friends Travel guides
Essential characteristics of travel SMIs	Objective information	Sincerity/transparency/objectivity Trustworthiness Unfiltered information Critical reviews
	Detailed information on the destination, attractions, and activities	Content quality Volume of information Travel advice Tips and tricks Personal stories Budget details Curiosity
	Communication skills	Fluent communication Sense of humor Charisma Common interests with followers Romanian language influencers
	Sustainable characteristics	Authenticity Interactions with residents Culture/traditions Local lifestyle Local gastronomy Unique experiences
Travel SMI posts	Types of content	Video Vlogs Photos Story (Instagram) Carousel posts Written content
	Favorite content	Size Content characteristics

4. Results

The first topic in the interview guide approached the significance of travel for the participants. A total of 86% of the subjects (19 out of 22 participants in the research) stated that traveling is one of their greatest pleasures, and if they had the money and the necessary time, they would travel non-stop.

“I don’t have the necessary financial resources, but if I did, I would travel nonstop”
(Subject 2)

“I made a pact with myself to travel as much as I can” (Subject 8)

“If I could, I would travel every day” (Subject 15)

Traveling offers a unique sense of freedom, and returning from a trip induces two completely opposite feelings, namely, the sadness of ending the trip and the impatience of searching for the next destination.

“I travel without any constraints and travelling gives me a unique feeling of freedom, which I don’t have in any other context” (Subject 6)

“When I arrived from my latest trip, I was almost crying, and when I got home, I started thinking about the next trip I would plan. I like to look for locations and plan the trip schedule long time in advance” (Subject 9)

One of the respondents (Subject 18) emphasized his professional interest related to a future job in tourism, stating his desire to understand and learn about tourism organizations and tourism activities in the visited destinations.

4.1. Main Theme 1: Information Sources

The responses highlighted that the main sources of information for the travel decisions were online sources, followed by recommendations from relatives/friends. The synthesis of the responses showed the greater importance of online sources, with 71.5% of the subjects following them for tourist decisions. Information received from relatives and friends accounted for 28.5% of the responses.

4.1.1. Online Sources

The most used social media platforms for travel information purposes are presented in Figure 1.

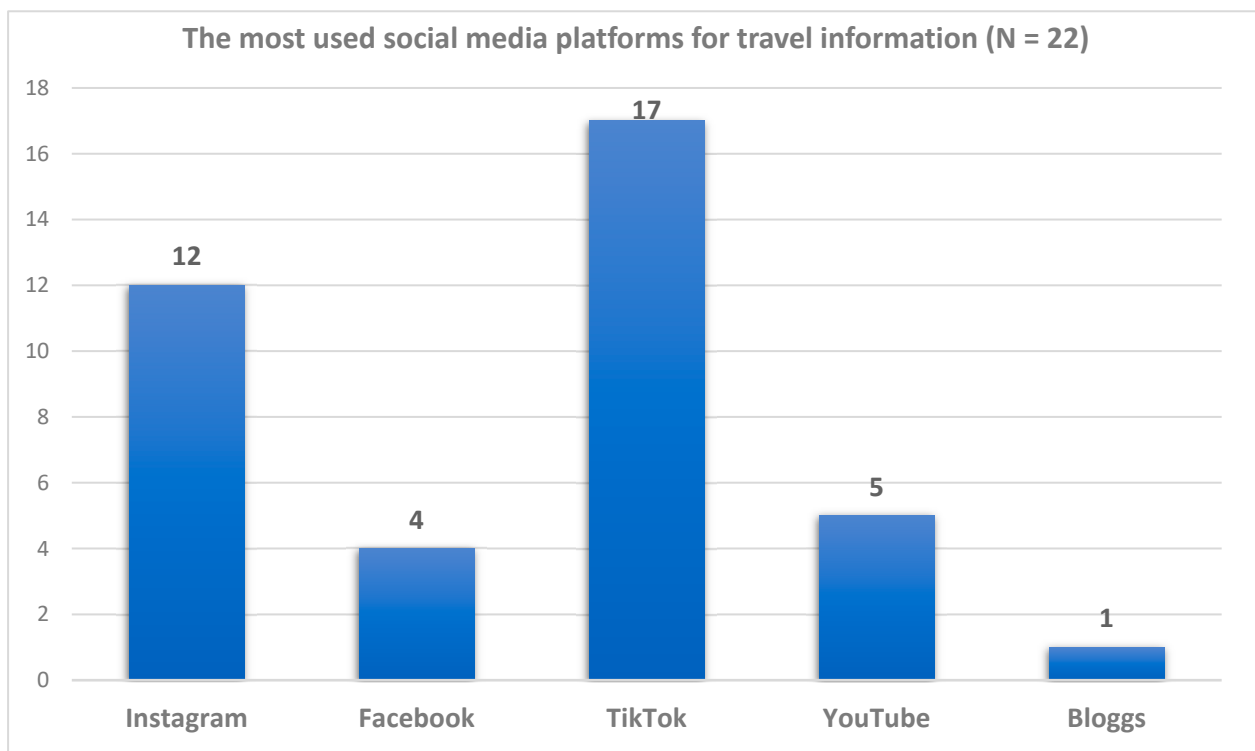


Figure 1. The most used social media platforms for travel information purposes.

The most frequently used social media platform is TikTok, which is closely followed by Instagram. Facebook and blogs are the least used sources of information for tourist decisions. Regarding the role of social media in obtaining information for vacation planning,

a significant part of the subjects reported they use multiple social media platforms to outline a more complete picture, with all the necessary information.

“After I decide the tourism destination, I search for information on social media platforms to outline all necessary details of the trip, namely which tourist attractions to visit, which traditional restaurants to bear in mind, etc.” (Subject 3)

“I choose my holiday destination by searching for the most convenient flights, and after that I fill in my information on social media platforms to finalize the details of the trip” (Subject 5)

TikTok promotes destinations and informs about special offers feeding travelers' inspiration. Instagram provides the same type of content as TikTok, but it was acknowledged that this platform is not used as frequently as the previously analyzed one. YouTube is considered a platform that has unique qualities, as the uploaded video materials allow for a deep delve into the destination and present, in an accurate manner, the major attractions at the spot. The five respondents who mentioned a preference for YouTube highly appreciated this online source of information for tourist decisions. Facebook is no longer a platform frequently used by the younger generation of tourists, which explains its lower ranking. Blogs are considered difficult to use, as respondents prefer audio or visual content.

“I spend most of my time on TikTok, and the posts inspire me to choose a location for my next trip” (Subject 8)

“YouTube videos inspire me the most because they highlight which are the attractions on the spot and explain the best way I can plan a memorable vacation” (Subject 19)

4.1.2. Traditional Sources

Respondents who chose relatives and friends as a traditional source of information stated that they were influenced when planning their trips most and foremost by people from this category.

“Relatives and friends influence me the most in my travel decisions, I desire to experience the same pleasant holiday they told me about” (Subject 16)

“I have the greatest trust in recommendations from relatives and friends because they are honest, for me they are the most important sources of information and they provide every helpful detail I need” (Subject 21)

Although online sources are used to a greater extent among members of Generation Z, it is obvious that relatives and friends still provide valuable information. In this context, the relevance and importance of WOM in tourism is proven to be still valid for the youngest segments of tourists. Subjects who emphasized the use of recommendations from family and friends stated the highest degree of trust compared to online information sources.

Only one of the subjects mentioned that he seldom finds inspiration from the travel guides' content.

Analyzing the responses, it is worth highlighting that choosing a tourism destination is a decision influenced to a small extent by the information from social media. Of the twenty-two subjects, only six out of them (27%) emphasized that they were inspired by social media in their decision about the destination. Most often, online sources are useful for choosing tourist attractions, accommodation services, food services, and entertainment services.

4.2. Main Theme 2: Essential Characteristics of Travel SMIs

Identifying the most important characteristics of the travel influencer represents one of the major objectives of this study. A summary of the nominated characteristics and their frequencies is presented in Figure 2.

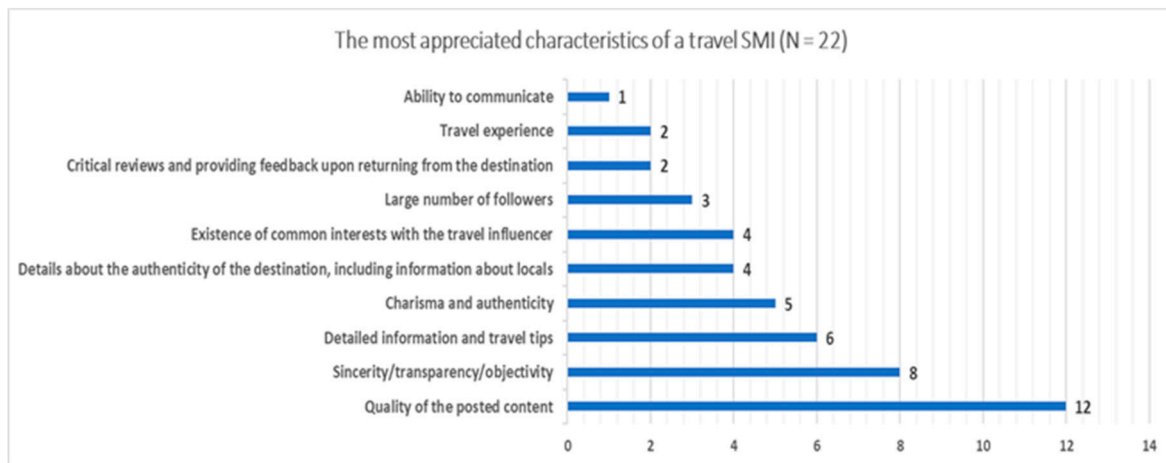


Figure 2. The most appreciated characteristics of travel SMIs.

Also, the characteristics of the ideal travel SMI person were identified, and they are highlighted in Figure 3. By combining data in Figures 2 and 3, the most appreciated characteristics of the travel SMI have been nominated. Subsequently, four sub-themes were revealed and further presented.

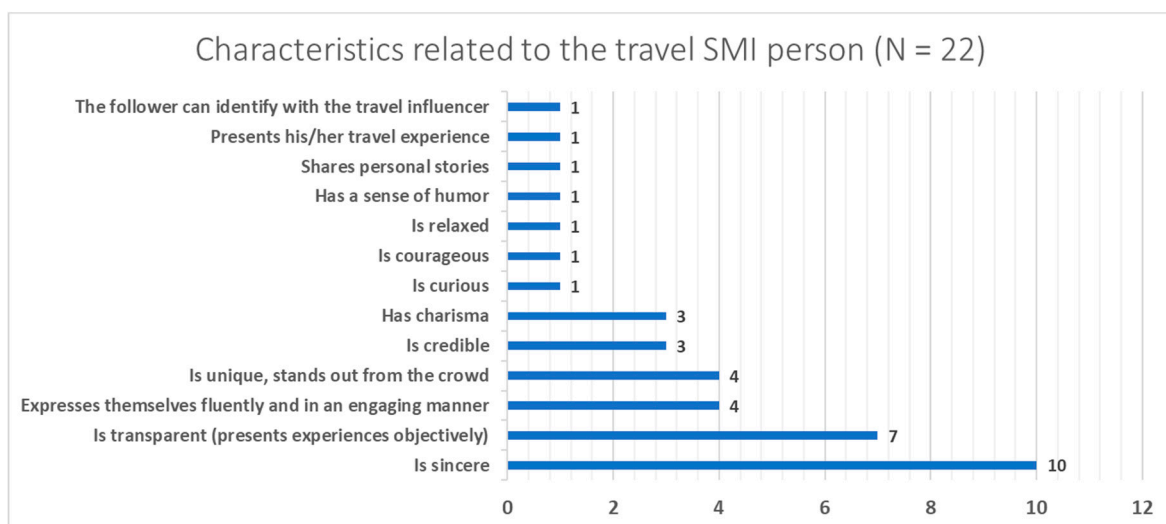


Figure 3. Characteristics related to the ideal travel SMI person.

4.2.1. Objective Information

According to research data, one of the most appreciated characteristics refers to the sincerity/transparency/objectivity of the travel SMI. Sincerity is considered of utmost importance, as it influences fidelity among followers. It is worth mentioning that this characteristic is evaluated as the most important personal characteristic of the ideal travel SMI. Declaring financial partnerships with different organizations is also an important aspect when assessing an influencer's sincerity. Sincerity and honest/transparent information generate trust and consolidate the habit of constantly following the influencer's posts. Unfiltered information is another characteristic that stands out in this group, and it is closely related to fairness in descriptions and reviews. At the same time, the critical reviews were considered a valuable characteristic and offered an objective image of the destination.

“Sincerity is the most important characteristic, after that is transparency” (Subject 2)

“Transparency is the most important characteristic. I appreciate sincerity in declaring the existence of different financial partnerships” (Subject 3)

“I evaluate the travel SMIs I follow based on their charisma and sincerity, the unfiltered presentation of the visited destinations” (Subject 14)

“Well informed, objective, transparent, to describe places as they really are” (Subject 17)

“Sincere, trustworthy, to be fair in descriptions and reviews” (Subject 20)

“The objective opinions matters the most, since young followers (like us) are easily impressed” (Subject 22)

4.2.2. Detailed Presentation of the Destination, Attractions, and Activities

Regarding the personal characteristics appreciated from a travel SMI that influence the decision to follow the posts, the answers that were formulated covered a wide area of features. The most appreciated characteristic is the quality of the posted content, which received the highest number of nominations. Respondents also indicated the volume of information posted by the influencer as a characteristic they take into account when they decide to follow him/her. Detailed information was also mentioned as an important aspect of assessing influencer’s characteristics. There are also other valuable characteristics that were nominated, including travel advice, tips, and tricks provided for each destination/travel and presenting personal stories. Curiosity is another relevant characteristic of the travel SMI, and it is an essential element in detailing the experiences and activities undertaken at the destination. Also, a well-appreciated element is based on information provided for tourists preoccupied with managing their travel budget.

“The content quality and posting frequency are very important for me” (Subject 7)

“The content quality, detailed information about the destination and the feedback provided at the post’s end are essential elements to decide following a travel SMI” (Subject 14)

“I appreciate the presence on several social media platforms and also the volume and diversity of information” (Subject 2)

“I follow their general travel advice: if you arrive in a certain country, what to do, how to manage your budget, advices for the currency exchange and so on” (Subject 3)

“I value all relevant information for both travel planning and advice for the trip, I enjoy all new elements in each post or each destination, but most of all information about means to travel on a budget. Tops and tricks I enjoy more than anything else” (Subject 8)

“From my point of view, the most important characteristic is influencer’s travel experience” (Subject 22)

4.2.3. Communication Skills

Communication skills are essential elements in creating the bond between the influencer and followers. The ability to attract attention, fluent communication, and a sense of humor are considered essential characteristics for travel SMIs. Also, common interests with followers are highly appreciated. Charisma is an inevitable feature. The most followed travel SMIs are Romanian influencers. Subjects mentioned they do not follow travel SMIs that post content in another language. Among them, calatorinbascheti (on TikTok), BackpackYourLife and HaiHui in doi (on YouTube), and la pas in 2 (on Instagram) stand out. A very important aspect that emerged from the analysis indicates that travel SMIs are followed to the extent that their posts arrive in the informational flow of followers (91%), but none of the subjects interact with them, formulate questions, insert comments, or respond to the comments made by other followers. Three of the subjects mentioned that they rarely have interventions in their relationships with SMIs, but these interventions are related to the posts of SMIs from other fields of activity, not from the tourism domain, and are motivated by their dissatisfaction with the posts or comments they viewed.

“I follow the travel influencer based on his/her fluent and attractive communication”
(Subject 20)

“It is important to find myself in the travel influencer person” (Subject 20)

“I evaluate the influencer through charisma and sense of humor” (Subject 14)

“The influencer I follow is calatorinbascheti, he doesn’t influence my travel decisions, his posts represent an interesting source of inspiration” (Subject 1)

4.2.4. Sustainable Characteristics of the Travel SMI

Respondents mentioned that they highly appreciate the information, which allows them to find the authentic essence of the destination. In this respect, they mentioned the ability to identify the destination’s traditions, local culture, local gastronomy, etc., as valuable assets of the influencer’s sustainable characteristics. Content presenting interactions with residents is also considered essential. Unique and memorable experiences are important components of this group of features.

“I am most interested in the way they present the culture, traditions and lifestyle of the locals” (Subject 5)

“I appreciate the honesty in showing the way they interacted with residents, taxi drivers, etc., elements revealing a lot about the SMI person” (Subject 14)

4.3. Main Theme 3: Travel SMI Posts

This theme pointed out two sub-themes, e.g., the types of content posted by travel SMIs and the favorite content from the respondents’ point of view.

4.3.1. Types of Content Posted by Travel SMIs

Data obtained identify the types of content posted by travel SMIs that attract followers’ attention. Respondents made a list containing six types of content, as presented in Figure 4. Respondents ranked their preferred content from 1 (least important) to 6 (most important). After that, a score was determined by multiplying the choice of each content type by the assigned importance.

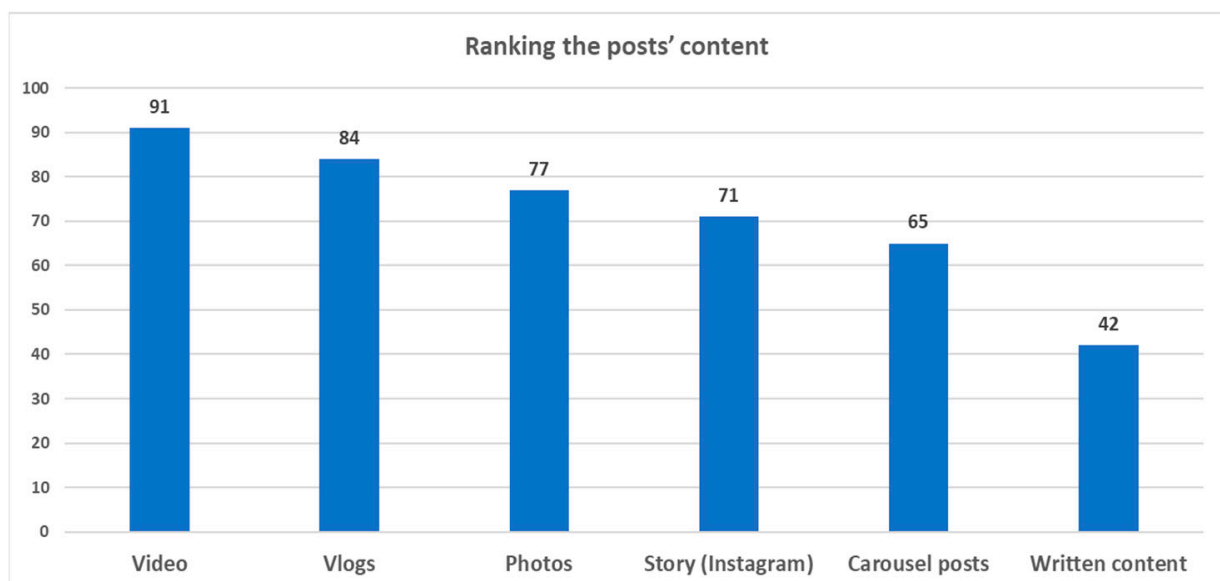


Figure 4. Ranking the posts’ content.

The results reveal the subjects' preference for filmed material, followed by photos, while written content records the lowest attraction. Respondents also highlighted which types of content posted by travel SMIs have the greatest influence on their tourist decisions. Videos are clear elements that cannot be edited and justify why it is the most appreciated content. Vlogs are also ranked high based on their visual characteristics. Photos are an important type of content and are appreciated for capturing important moments in a holiday. Other subjects mentioned their preference for photos/carousel photos doubled with a musical background.

"I prefer content that has no written material, if possible. I prefer audio material as I rather listen than read. For me, photos are not an ideal content, too" (Subject 3)

"I prefer pictures and footage that present landscapes and objectives, activities at the destination, restaurants, but without any written content" (Subject 8)

"Video clips are clear, you can't hide or distort, everything is clear" (Subject 12)

"Video material is the hardest to edit" (Subject 18)

"Videos show that the influencer was there, not in the living room, which increases the credibility" (Subject 1)

"From the short videos I learn how to travel, what means of transportation are in the area and how to get to the destination" (Subject 17)

4.3.2. Favorite Content

In terms of the content of posts, travel advice, tips and tricks, information about transportation means in the area, tourist attractions, authentic restaurants that should not be missed, etc., are highly valued by the respondents. Posts that are original and stand out from the crowd are also highly appreciated. Respondents emphasized their preference for video material and, in particular, for short videos, especially chosen from the TikTok platform. Other respondents emphasized their preference for medium-length video material since the long ones contain a too large and too detailed volume of information while the short ones fail to capture enough elements of interest.

4.4. Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Information Provided by Travel SMIs

The final objective of this study was to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of information provided by travel SMIs. The results recorded are presented in Table 4. The results identified a list of nine advantages mentioned by respondents.

The results reveal that obtaining multiple pieces of information proves to be the most important advantage, which is important when making the most pertinent travel decisions. The possibility to tangibilize the destination, the extensive travel experience of travel SMIs, and the provision of personal impressions and travel advice (eWOM) are also considered important advantages.

The biggest disadvantage proves to be the lack of trust in the posted information. Another major disadvantage was the lack of information offered that was suitable for tourists who travel on a budget. At the same time, the lack of trust due to possible financial undeclared aims, the loss of the ability to discover the destination on one's own, and the unrealism of information were also noted by respondents.

Table 4. Advantages and disadvantages of travel SMI posts.

Advantages	Frequency	Disadvantages	Frequency
Obtaining multiple information sources	17	Lack of certainty regarding the accuracy of the information presented	12
Tangibilizing destination expectations	5	Offers presented are not adapted to the travel budgets of Generation Z members	5
Travel influencer’s consumer experience	5	Underdeclared promotional intentions	4
eWOM (electronic word of mouth)	4	Subjectivity of descriptions	3
Assistance in detailing travel planning	3	Lack of complete transparency	2
Diverse presentation of destinations	3	Loss of the ability to discover the destination on one’s own	2
Highlighting the specifics of each destination	2	A significant portion of travel influencers are not tourism specialists	1
Easy access to information	2	Unrealism of information	1
Combination of information and entertainment	1		

Source: authors’ research.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the answers included in the interview guide contributed to obtaining a consistent set of information to fulfill the research objectives. First, it was highlighted what travel means for members of Generation Z. The results envisaged a permanent desire to travel. Generation Z is an important segment of the tourism market, as there are opportunities for continuous expansion after it was revealed that they are eager for numerous and authentic tourist experiences.

The first objective of this study focused on identifying the main information sources used by Generation Z tourists. Going on vacation is a complex decision based on a set of information obtained from social media, traditional communication means, and discussions with relatives and friends. Previous studies revealed different results. On one hand, numerous research acknowledged the supremacy of social media information for tourist decisions [6,20,59,60] and considered social media information as a more reliable source compared to information from relatives and friends [32]. Our findings stress a higher level of trust given to information received from relatives and friends, which is in line with the results validated in other studies [15]. However, the priority use of social media platforms by Generation Z in obtaining tourism information proves to be a constant. The conclusion of our study is consistent with previous analyses, which highlighted the increase in the popularity of social media, especially among Generation Z [51].

Choosing a holiday destination is not a decision massively influenced by information from social media, and the results we obtained do not align with the conclusions from other studies [9,50,51]. Instead, our respondents stated that social media information is used mainly to select tourist services and tourist activities at the destination, and they also highly appreciated general travel advice obtained in their virtual communities. Social media platforms thus demonstrate their ability to shape tourist behavior [2,21,68], a conclusion that is also valid for Generation Z. More than that, social media has proved its key role in shaping tourist behavior [118]. The social media platform most used by members of Generation Z to obtain details for travel planning is TikTok, closely followed by Instagram. Comparing our results with the conclusions of other studies, the findings are mixed. Fromm and Read (2018) showed that Pinterest, Instagram, and Snapchat are the platforms that best suit the short visual messages preferred by Generation Z and favor audience engagement

and interaction [22]. On the other hand, Zhou, Sotiriadis, and Shen (2023) argued that members of Generation Z mainly use TikTok, a platform dedicated to entertainment aims, but their habit of using TikTok also leads them to search for information about tourism destinations [53].

The second objective of the present study was to assess the main characteristics of travel SMIs to encourage and determine followers' fidelity and trust. We determined four groups of characteristics, namely, objective information, detailed information, communication skills, and sustainable characteristics, which are considered important by Generation Z followers. The findings indicate a reduced predisposition of the subjects to interact with the travel SMIs they follow, which in fact indicates the reduced capacity of the influence of the travel influencers since their success depends on the extent to which they establish close relationships with their followers [7,34]. The quality of posts, sincerity/transparency, and detailed presentation of destinations, activities, and tourist attractions are the most appreciated characteristics of a travel SMI followed by respondents from Generation Z. Our results demonstrate that members of Generation Z have the same benchmarks in following travel influencers as other age groups [74,82]. Another essential element was highlighted, namely, the importance of information and recommendations' objectivity. Since members of Generation Z have limited life and travel experience, they are easily impressed, and the veracity of the information presented supports the ethical behavior of the influencer towards his followers. Some distinctive elements were also noted, i.e., charisma and naturalness of the travel influencer, which were not identified in previous studies. Another result consistent with previous research emphasizes the importance of sharing the same visions and ideas with the travel influencer, thus explaining why some influencers are followed and have the ability to influence followers' decisions, while others are not [34,37,97].

An important set of characteristics, which we consider to be very important for Generation Z members, refers to the sustainable consumption choices revealed by the travel influencers. Detailed information on the authenticity of visited locations, local traditions and culture, local gastronomy, and interactions with locals are elements very much appreciated by Generation Z tourists in influencers' posts. It is well known that members of Generation Z appreciate, more than other age groups, information to support their sustainable behavior, a conclusion also highlighted in other works [44,45,106].

The analysis also points out the characteristics of an ideal travel SMI. Among these characteristics, sincerity, transparency, the ability to differentiate themselves from other travel SMIs, a detailed presentation of the places visited, and a complete set of valuable travel advice are essential elements to capture followers' attention and recognition. The respondents mentioned that the physical appearance of the influencer does not affect following him or the advice presented. The finding is opposite to the conclusions of other studies that emphasized the interdependence between physical appearance, facial expressions of SMIs, and the influences exerted on followers [119].

The third objective of this study aimed to identify the types of content that members of Generation Z prefer. The results highlighted their preference for video materials. There are some significant reasons to explain their choice. They mentioned that these materials are the most difficult to edit and they are easy to follow, are clear and convincing, and are the most explicit for the visited destination. These findings confirm Generation Z's preference for visual communication, which is considered the most efficient and has the highest impact [22]. When aware of the sensitivity of followers towards the transparency of the posted information [53], video materials serve best the information needs of Generation Z. Also, the preference for audio material was noted since they perform multiple activities at the same time, validating their distributive attention [102,103]. Furthermore, this study's

conclusions reinforce previous results, which highlight the importance of information such as presenting destination activities, revealing natural beauty, authentic street food, and multiple entertainment options included in the posted content [99]. Also, content videos made on the spot are appreciated, giving followers a sense of presence at the destination, which inspires them for future travel decisions [94], which is, in fact, the most viewed content by members of Generation Z [95,96].

The final objective highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of information posted by travel SMIs. It is important to note that the ideas formulated are not completely new but are presented based on a different approach compared to previous research. For example, Bastrygina et al. (2024) focus on the advantages gained by travel influencers as a result of their posts [41]. Another study reveals the advantages/disadvantages of using social media platforms in the process of influencing tourist behavior [68].

6. Conclusions

The market segment of Generation Z members follows a continuous process to consolidate its importance and representativeness in the tourism market. It refers to the segment of the youngest tourists who travel unaccompanied by their parents and who demonstrate a particular appetite for organizing holidays. The popularity of social media platforms among Generation Z members is a reality that should not be ignored [120], especially by tourism stakeholders. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that the preferential use of the TikTok platform is a constant for Generation Z, at least for now. However, the impact of social media platforms on tourist behavior is not definitively confirmed, and the existing literature is divided regarding this point of view.

The present study highlighted the reduced influence of travel SMIs among Generation Z. The main explanation is based, in particular, on the lack of interaction between followers and influencers. Previous research has demonstrated the necessity that followers should resonate with the influencer, which was supported by similarities in interests and thinking, which was not confirmed in our study. Numerous characteristics of the travel SMI explain why some influencers are followed and have the ability to influence the travel decisions of their followers while others are not. This study highlights the characteristics appreciated by members of Generation Z, among which the quality of the posted content, sincerity/transparency/honesty in transmitting information, and detailed presentation of the destination visited are paramount. In addition to previous analyses on this topic, this study identifies the ideal characteristics of a travel SMI. Another conclusion that emerged from this study supports the notoriety of posts in a short video version, which confirms all previous analyses conducted for Generation Z members. This study confirms and emphasizes the role of travel SMIs in developing sustainable tourism behavior. The conclusions formulated reinforce the preference of Generation Z tourists for authentic tourist consumption, in-depth knowledge of local traditions and culture, and interactions with residents in the visited destination. In addition, the promotion of tourist services that comply with sustainability criteria, sustainable means of transport in the visited area, etc., is valuable information that when transmitted by travel SMIs will consolidate tourists' choices for sustainable travel solutions. From this perspective, tourism companies involved in practicing sustainable tourism have an important option to establish partnerships with renowned travel influencers to promote their offer and strengthen sustainable tourism behavior.

Our conclusions identify a framework for the most significant advantages and disadvantages of following travel SMI posts by members of Generation Z. Offering a complete and diverse range of information is considered the major advantage, and the lack of honesty or transparency is the most important disadvantage. Providing information that highlights authenticity and local specificity are important advantages, which are conclusions formu-

lated in a significant series of previous studies [44,45,75]. The responses formulated in this context demonstrated the desire of Generation Z to visit as many diverse destinations as possible and have as much information as possible to carefully plan their trips, and at the same time, they show special attention to the travel budget [53].

Tourism is considered an area that is still insufficiently explored from a digital marketing perspective [61]. The massive expansion of the use of online information sources is fundamentally changing the content of communication activities in tourism. Tourism companies, regardless of their profile, location, or volume of activity, will have to accept and understand the role that influencers play in tourism promotion. In this regard, identifying suitable, transparent, and gifted influencers, and cultivating substantial collaborations with them, represents a viable development solution. It should be noted that it might be relevant to collaborate with more than one travel influencer, taking into account age, expectations, or concern differences among tourist segments. The emergence of new travel influencers, without gaps in age or interests toward the members of Generation Z, will contribute to strengthening their two-way communication and could contribute to the increase in influencers' ability to influence tourist decisions. Starting from these conclusions, especially for Generation Z members, an influencer career is considered a plausible option for a professional activity, and it is essential to continue studies to find the most suitable educational and financing options [121], aiming to consolidate an entrepreneurial career in this direction. The results of this study, namely, the evaluation of travel SMI characteristics, the comments on the posts' content, and the framework that analyzes the advantages/disadvantages of the posted information, underpin the future coordinates of a travel SMI's activity and represents a practical application of our study's findings. The originality of the work lies in the added conclusions on the topic, i.e., detailing the impact of travel SMIs on Generation Z members on their tourist decisions. The assessments presented focus on the generation that includes the youngest tourists who are in a continuous process of self-definition as an important segment in the tourism market; the permanent recalibration of research on this group is a constant necessity. The present study also proposes a new approach, which highlights the advantages and disadvantages of following travel SMIs by Generation Z members.

The limitations of the research are due to the type of research chosen by the authors, namely, focus group research, which highlights general aspects of respondents' behavior, without the possibility of extending the results to the entire population. In the same sense, the research targeted subjects from Romania, with the same limits of not being able to generalize our findings. To address the limitation of generalizability, we suggest that future research could employ larger-scale quantitative studies, such as surveys, to validate the findings from our focus group study. Additionally, conducting similar studies in diverse cultural and geographic contexts could help identify universal patterns and cultural nuances in Generation Z's use of social media for tourist decisions.

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