



Full Disclosure: Analysing Ethics In Travel Influencer Content Through The Interpretation Of Millennial Followers

Master's thesis



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Abstract

Influencer marketing has seen a great increase in usage, and is considered a cost-effective marketing strategy, where companies and brands are collaborating with influencers to promote their products. Influencer marketing covers a large variety of niches, such as for example travel, and many millennials use social media to gather information and inspiration for travel activities. Previous research has noted a lack of an ethical framework for influencers, and the need to research ethics in relation to the strategy. Here the focus has generally been on influencers' view of ethics and choices in relation to this. It was further identified that previous research lacked a focus on followers' interpretations of ethics in influencer content. Therefore, this thesis aimed to look into followers' interpretations of ethics in travel influencer content, and how authenticity might affect their interpretation as well.

This was done through semi-structured interviews with millennials, who follow one or more travel influencers. They were considered to have knowledge about travel influencers, both in terms of content they prefer, but also the elements in said content, which has a negative or positive impact on the viewer experience. Through the interview replies, patterns and themes were determined, to gather insight into how the followers interpret ethics. Here it was considered that personal values of the followers', determined the interpretation of ethical content. If content did not align with their values, it was more likely to be considered unethical, or at least give a negative impression. Authenticity was in this regard considered a guiding factor of creating ethical content, but at the same time this concept was also viewed to have limitations based on a variety of factors. Overall, the followers had a lot of concerns in certain types, which means there is a potential need for a clearer guideline, or ethical framework for travel influencers.

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1. Introduction

In an emerging world of digital communication, social media is having an increased effect on people's lives. For many people, especially millennials, the world of social media is a trusted source of information and inspiration searching (Scott et al, 2018). In terms of finding inspiration for traveling this is no exception, and previous research has found that millennials are especially likely to seek out travel influencers for inspiration on this matter, and the communication from these play a huge role in the decision-making of millennials (Sofronov, 2018), and millennials are more likely to find credibility with recommendations from travel influencers, than they are from companies and brands (Ribeiro et al. 2020). This has led to an increase in interest for companies to collaborate with influencers, which is also known as influencer marketing. This marketing strategy is a relatively new strategy, but nevertheless it is highly effective to convey messages from companies, in a way that is more credible in the eyes of the followers of influencers (Lou and Yuan, 2019, Scott, 2015). Within the tourism sector, influencer marketing has seen quite an increase over the recent years, and it is considered important, because of the increase in attachment from people to social media (Yetimoğlu, S. and Uğurlu, K. 2020). While the marketing strategy is highly effective, there are some concerns connected to it, as influencer marketing lacks an ethical framework to help guide them within the practice, and influencers has because of this been known to draw from individual experiences to develop their own ethical framework (Wellman et al., 2020). This makes the process of ethical considerations for their content more complicated and means that these might vary a lot from influencer to influencer. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the ethics of influencer marketing, and in this case the focus will be on travel influencers. Previous research has investigated this topic from the viewpoint of influencers, however, there is a lack of focus on the viewpoint of the followers. They are the consumers of both the content posted by influencers, as well as the consumers of products from potential sponsors, meaning they directly interact with the sponsored influencer content in multiple ways. The focus on travel influencers, is a matter of learning the viewpoints concerns from the followers, on the effects of promoting destinations and attractions in potentially harmful ways, and the impact this can have on, locals, followers etc.

The problem formulation for this paper therefore is: **How do millennial followers of travel influencers interpret ethics in sponsored travel content, and what role does authenticity play?**

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media and web 2.0 + Travel 2.0

Previous research on social media, focuses on the concept of Web 2.0. It is the main evolution of the internet for our generation (Wright and Zdinak, 2008). The development of Web 2.0, and in relation to that especially social media, comes with a huge growth in user-generated content (Riegner, 2007). Even in the 2020's this is still the case. Rather than just searching for, and consuming information as people would previously do, they are now directly engaging with said information in online discussions (Sakshi and Pardeep, 2017). Social media has removed the limits of time and space, as people are able to engage with cultures and people at any time of the day, anytime they want. There are no longer constraints, such as with traditional methods of communication. It is also made easy to use, so even non-specialists can share and connect through social media platforms. (Sakshi and Pardeep, 2017). Communication and information search has become much easier, convenient as well as accessible (Xu Xu (Rinka) & Stephen Pratt (2018). Kaplan (2015) defines social media as a “*group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content*”. The use of the internet has evolved, and co-creation is an increased factor when considering the social media platforms and its users. The web 2.0 advancement is considered to have a significant impact on tourists' behavior, before, during and after a trip (Ghandour and Bakalova, 2014).

Now tourists are engaging on social networking such as travel review websites, social media platforms, blogging, and many other internet-based applications. Here they share their experiences with other users (Mintel, 2013). This has led other researchers to consider the advancement of the travel 2.0 concept; “*Travel 2.0 being the development that the consumer could keep up with the latest tourism trends, check out various offers and readily find other consumer opinions on tourism products with much less difficulty*” (Viglia, Minazzi and Buhalis, 2016). Web 2.0 and Travel 2.0 are considered to function particularly well because they function as an “electronic word of mouth” (EWOM) (Muñoz-Leiva, Hernández-Méndez and Sánchez-Fernández (2012). Tourists consider Travel 2.0 websites to be more dependable, because people who are like themselves are sharing their knowledge about a particular destination or event (Sakshi and Pardeep, 2017). The increased development of internet and

mobile technologies is thereby creating revolutions in consumer behavior. The digital age creates a need to browse through the experiences of other consumers, before trying out a product, or in the case of tourism before going on a trip somewhere. (Yetimoğlu, S. and Uğurlu, K. 2020)

The advance of the internet also means that companies are changing their strategies for marketing. Especially because the consumers are allowed to customize the content, and thereby also the messages they receive on their personal platforms (E. Wright, et al., 2016, referenced in Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2019). Tourism companies are realizing the increasing importance of Social media, and are increasingly working with influencers and bloggers, to convey the information and messages about products and services (Yetimoğlu, S. and Uğurlu, K. 2020).

2.1.1 Millennials

Social media is primarily used for information, leisure, and entertainment purposes, regardless of generations. As previously established, social media has also opened a lot of marketing opportunities (Scott et al, 2018). Especially Instagram plays a significant role in influencing travel intention and purchase behavior; pictures posted to the platform paints the ultimate picture of a destination, and if it does not give that effect, it will simply not be posted. (Scott et al, 2018). As of 2020, over 90.4% of millennials were in some way actively using social media (Mohsin, 2020) and 38% of millennials trusting digital influencers and their content, making influencers a huge factor for the generations' decision-making process (Klein, 2018). For millennials, social media plays a huge role in how they view the world, and furthermore themselves within that world. Influencers therefore play a huge role for this generation (Sofronov, 2018). Especially because a lot of people in this generation are more likely to seek advice from people rather than a business when it comes to travel (Sofronov, 2018).

Ribeiro et al. (2020) found that the relationship between millennials and source credibility with influencers was positive. Further noting that it was consistent with the source credibility theory, where people are more likely to be persuaded when the source presents itself as credible. Influencers tend to have a good sense of credibility, and people are more likely to readily accept the words of communicators with prominent levels of source credibility (Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey et al., 1974; referenced in Ribeiro et al., 2020).

2.2 Influencer marketing in tourism

Influencer marketing has seen an increase within the tourism sector in recent years. Not only has it become more common for influencers to be included in the communication and marketing strategies, but it has also become more necessary, because people have become more attached to social media and influencers (Yetimoğlu, S. and Uğurlu, K. 2020). Influencer marketing is a relatively new marketing strategy, which involves influencers (Either celebrities or normal people). These are active on social networks and have gathered a following where they can use their influence as drivers for brand awareness, or their purchasing decisions (Lou and Yuan, 2019, Scott, 2015). Influencers can be considered as “micro celebrities,” who have accumulated a following on social media, often through their own narrations of their personal lives (Abidin 2016). Many researchers also refer to influencers as “opinion leaders” (Vanninen et al., 2022; Libai et al., 2013; Iyengar et al., 2011). The EU Parliament defines that “*An influencer is a content creator with a commercial intent, who builds trust and authenticity-based relationships with their audience (mainly on social media platforms) and engages online with commercial actors through different business models for monetisation purposes.*” (Michaelsen et al., 2022).

Communication between organizations and its stakeholders is rapidly moving from print to digital, and furthermore making its way from digital on the desktop, to digital on mobile devices. Even though communication is now closer to everyone than ever before, it has also become easy to swipe away the things that have no interest. This is one of the greater challenges with the increased use of the digital world, because it is difficult to attract attention, but also difficult to build credibility as a brand (Smith et al., 2018). Especially with the rise of fake news, and people questioning everything more than previously.

Smith et. al (2018) defines the role of the brand ambassador, or commonly known as social media influencer, in the expanded use of the digital world, and especially social media. Their role is to convey the messages of brands or destinations, in a way that is meaningful to consumers and stakeholders (Ambroise et al., 2014). The influencer serves as a mediator between an organization, and in the process humanizes it, and becomes a relational connection for the followers (Ambroise et al., 2014). Companies benefit from the influencers advertising, since it is a cost-efficient way of reaching their target buyers (Childers et al., 2018).

Furthermore, it increases brand trust, due to recommendations from social media influencers, who people have chosen themselves to follow at some point in time (Dimitriesk and Efremova, 2021, referenced in Sesar et al., 2021). The popularity of influencer marketing has increased a lot in the tourism industry (Yilmaz et al., 2020). Especially in the aftermath of Covid, digital connectivity is considered important for the travel and tourism industry (Sesar et al., 2021). As travel was highly restricted, in the otherwise growingly accessible sector, digitalization and online movement during the pandemic opened many new ways of providing services to the travel and tourism industry, through influencer marketing (Sesar et al., 2021).

Asan (2021) considers travel influencers to have four different effects on followers: informative effects, motivating effects, effects as a role model, and communal.

effects. These findings enhance the previous mentions of the travel influencers working as a mediator who enhances brand credibility. Thereby, also important findings for the companies or public leaders who could have any interest in conveying their messages through travel influencers. Other research findings from Jang et al. (2021) suggest that there are more factors to keep in mind, such as for example higher number of followers; as this can predict the effectiveness of the advertising messages promoted; The follower-to-like ratio can say a lot about the effectiveness of a travel influencer promoting something, because this creates an idea of engagement level (Jang et al., 2021). It is further considered that consumers are not sceptical about influencer messages, unlike the message that comes directly from a brand (Sesar et al., 2021). Consumers tend to see social media influencers as trustworthy experts, and therefore they influence the decision-making of the consumers/followers (Koay et al. 2022).

2.3 The followers and advertising content

The increased focus on influencers and bloggers, in terms of tourism marketing is considered to have a significant impact on consumers. People are more likely to listen to a person they follow, rather than the message of a brand. Credibility is a huge factor in influencer marketing (Yetimoğlu, S. and Uğurlu, K. 2020). Influencer marketing in travel and tourism is based on the concept of electronic word-of-mouth in the travel context (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Tourism marketers started early on collaborating with blogs, and these quickly became valuable information sources for travel decision makers, making social media valuable for marketers (Lin & Huang, 2006).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is positive from the viewpoint of DMO's and tourism companies, however, there are many elements that need to be taken into consideration as well when looking into the followers directly. The effectiveness of influencers advertising means there is a need for laws to protect the consumers/followers. As aforementioned, consumers tend to not be sceptical about influencer messages (Sesar et al., 2021), and therefore, it becomes important with clear boundaries.

2.3.1 The potentially harmful practices

The European parliament underlined in a study that some practices done by influencers, are exploiting consumers in a potentially harmful way within the EU countries, and within topics such as travel, fashion, lifestyle, gaming, or health (Michaelsen et al., 2022). The study outlines a list of practices, within influencer marketing, that in some way can be problematic.

1. Lack of transparency and unclear disclosure
2. Lack of separation between advertising and content
3. Misleading messages
4. Targeting vulnerable consumer groups [such as children]. (Michaelsen et al., 2022)

The first being when influencers do not mention their business relationship with the company, or an advertisement is not clear on whether it is an advertisement or not. This practice also includes situations where there are no contractual agreements between the two, but there are other commercial interests tied to the post (Such as with gifts, or invitations for events etc.) (Michaelsen et al., 2022). The second practice being similar, as it includes making advertisements like their usual content and have not (yet) received any consideration from the company whose products are mentioned, there it can be hard to determine the level of sponsorship present in said post. These practices are, according to the study, among the most reported consumer complaints, and are also among the common worries of consumers when traveling in the digital world of social media (Michaelsen et al., 2022). Misleading messages on good/service sponsored include false trademarks, and false trade descriptions which are incorrect, and cannot otherwise be proven to be true. This is not a widespread practice, but there have been situations where influencers (not specifically within travel) have been accused of misleading messages. (Michaelsen et al., 2022).

The practices are important to note, as the study also points out, that influencers are subject to many existing laws within EU and national level. Important to note is that the EU consumer acquis applies to influencers, even though there are no specific legislation focussing on influencer marketing; “*Certain rules apply more to influencer marketing as an advertising activity, while others cover influencers who act as sellers.*” (Michaelsen et al., 2022). These laws are specifically to protect the consumers, and in this case followers. So, while influencer marketing is a valuable option for marketers to reach out to an audience and is a main source of income for many influencers, there are some issues connected to it (Naderer et al., 2021). The marketing approach is through consumer complaints (Michaelsen et al., 2022), as well as through regulators often questioned as an approach for a variety of reasons (Boerman et al. 2018).

2.3.2 The ethics between influencers and the followers

Influencer Marketing is not per se an unethical practice, but there is a lack of an ethical framework within the practice, as well as lack of a professional organization the influencers are accountable to, making it more complicated to make the ethical lines clear within influencer marketing (Wellman et al. 2020; referenced in Fedeli et al., 2022). Unlike many practitioners in existing media such as journalism and advertising, there is no codified set of ethical principles for the influencer to follow that can guide them in their work. Therefore, they draw from personal experience and different industries to develop their ethical framework, and authenticity is an important driver for them because of this (Wellman et al., 2020). Wellman et al. (2020) found that the ethics of authenticity plays a role for the influencers, as they try to create their own ethical framework for their sponsored work. Putting the influencer on a line between being true to themselves and the brand, as well as being true to the audience; “*This framework puts the influencers’ brand identity and relationship with their audience at the forefront while simultaneously allowing them to profit from content designed to benefit brands and destinations,*” (Wellman et al., 2020). The focus of this is from the perspective of the influencers, and they want to stay true to their audience, and this study works from the idea that influencer marketing is not inherently unethical, but rather the ethical principles guiding the influencers in the world of sponsored content is not well understood. The study considers authenticity to be the guiding ethical principle with influencer marketing (Wellman et al., 2020). Their study sought to ask the influencers to reflect on the ethical decision-making

process they use when determining to work with brands, and what to include in sponsored posts. Therefore, trying to move focus solely on disclosure when making the posts. Instead, this should be the last consideration in the process, and instead focusing on a more holistic view of the collaboration process, where ethical considerations appear at various stages (Wellman et al., 2020).

While there are cases of digital influencers being the source of questionable behavior, Fedeli et al. (2022) notes that: *“the ethical conundrum can also involve the businesses who have chosen the influencers in the first instance. This was the case for the airline Air Canada that contracted influencers to promote their international vacations during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021”*.

2.3.3 The effects of disclosing sponsored content.

An influencer’s legal obligations in sponsored content, is typically to disclose it as such. However, certain disclosure practices have raised concerns regarding the ethics of sponsored content (Bogle, 2017; Bowen, 2013). Most influencers agree that disclosure is important, however historically audiences have struggled to recognize disclosure statements, which was meant to help them differentiate between the original unpaid content, and the sponsored paid content (Boerman et al., 2012). Audiences are put in a situation where, to differentiate between the two, they must first notice the disclosure, and then comprehend what is being disclosed (Wellman et al. 2020). Wojdyski and Evans (2016) found that audiences have difficulty recognizing disclosure statements, when looking at sponsored content, on that note less than 20 percent of the participants were able to recognize the “sponsored content” terms used in the paid advertisement. Other studies showed that even when audiences were able to identify sponsored content, it was found that they still did not distinguish between posts with disclosure, and articles that had no disclosure (Hwang and Jeong 2016). Furthermore, sponsored content was found to be more successful and persuades the audience easier, when the content is not viewed as an advertisement (Boerman et al., 2012). Campbell et al (2013) found that audiences recognizing disclosure of blogs, establish a less favorable attitude towards the brand. This creates a tension between legal obligations for the influencer, and the needs to keep both audiences happy, and the advertiser who is sponsoring their content (Duffy, 2017; Schauster & Neill, 2017).

2.4. Authenticity

Authenticity as a concept has sparked much debate among philosophers, ethicists, and critical scholars. For this reason, there are also many definitions of authenticity. For existentialists, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, authenticity is based around living life meaningfully, while rejecting all popular consensus, to find one's own beliefs and actions, representing a normative ideal to live by (Holt, 2012). Whereas critical scholars consider it as a social construct; "*a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance, and either accepted or rejected by relevant others.*" and further connects it to commercialism (Peterson 2005), another scholar similarly considers that "[w]hat is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as not commercial" (Banet-Weiser 2012). Hence if something is commercialized, it becomes more difficult to perceive it as authentic.

2.4.1 Mediated authenticity and influencers

In relation to social media influencers, another view on the concept is "mediated authenticity" defined by Enli (2015), which is surrounding itself within media, and learning on the tension between performativity and expectations of spontaneity. This is relevant in contemporary society, where an increase in media is readily available from anywhere, especially with an increase in social media content. Enli (2015) argues that authenticity is closely related to trustworthiness, which furthermore suggests consistency is a barometer within authenticity, and not necessarily likeability. Wellman et al. (2020) notes how influencers can project authenticity and build credibility, when they are disclosing working together with a commercial brand. This is because sponsored content is clearly labelled as advertising, and furthermore it is perceived as a third-party that provides the publisher's relationship with the brand (Sonderman & Tran, 2013).

3 Theory

3.1 Ethics

Defining ethics can be a challenging task, as the concept is considered somewhat individual. For some people, ethics refers to following their law, their religion or even their feelings, and using these to determine right from wrong. However, neither thought, feelings or laws are necessarily ethical. Others consider ethics based on society's standard, but here the issue lies with needing to understand society's understanding of every single concept (Velasquez et al., 2010). The above ideas are based on answers from businesspeople, what they consider ethics to. It shows the idea of ethics being a concept that is based around several individual factors, and therefore heavily nuanced.

Velasquez et al. (2010), do, however, go into more details on what ethics are.

Firstly, ethics are considered well-founded standards of right or wrong, and they are based on obligations, their benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Other elements such as honesty, loyalty and compassion are also considered important when considering something ethical. A standard of right or wrong becomes ethical, when it is supported by well-founded and consistent reasons (Velasquez et al., 2010).

Secondly, ethics refers to the development of an individual's ethical standard. As aforementioned feelings, law and social norms can deviate from what is ethical, so therefore it is important to constantly examine one's standards, so ensure them to be reasonable and well-founded (Velasquez et al., 2010). Ethics in this case means to continuously study one's morals, beliefs, and moral conduct as well, making sure these live up to the reasonable standards that are solidly based. Based on this, the thesis considers ethics to be a concept of expanding upon individual knowledge, which is meant to shape right and wrong in a social setting, and these ideas are shaped through a variety of factors, such as social norms, cultural practices, and religious influences. Furthermore, ethics being individual also provides some issues, because it can be difficult to say something general about a social concept and the ethics behind it, because within a group of people, the viewpoints may vary.

3.1.2 Ethics in Tourism

The Tourism sector has seen a massive growth over the past century; however, the massive growth is not necessarily considered a positive development overall. Many researchers have over this time been critical of the social and environmental impacts from tourism (Enea, 2007). Host/guest relationships based on western world domination over developing countries, or visible scars left on nature based on damage from ski resorts and golf courses, is further leading the industry to seek out more responsibility for its actions (Enea, 2007). In the last few decades, the western world has started a significant trend, where lifestyle marketing, and especially ethical consumption have spread to the tourism sector (Goodwin and Francis, 2003). In that relation, tourism organizations started to realize the positive impact on business that an ethical stance gave them (Fleckenstein and Huebsch, 1999; Hudson and Miller, 2005). However, the increased attention to ethics in tourism, still has a lot of work to be done, before it has a solid foundation of research (Fennell, 1999). Ali Donyadide (2010) considers that now tourism is facing one of its greatest challenges, to become sustainable both in relation to social, environmental, and economic factors as a bottom line. These are also considered key factors in relation to ethical tourism because growth should consider positive growth for all of these, rather than just the economic growth as previously seen used in the tourism sector (Donyadide, 2010).

3.1.3 Ethics in this paper

This thesis works within the idea of descriptive ethics, which is meant to explore attitudes of individuals or groups of people in terms of ethics (Cragg, 2017). In the case of this study, the concept of ethics is used determine attitudes from followers to travel influencers, and their perception of ethics in travel influencer content. To do this, people will be invited for interviews, where questions surrounding ethical content will be brought up, which will be further defined in the methodology section. The followers of travel influencers are more likely to understand their content, as they engage with it often, furthermore they also have experiences that makes them able to determine the ethical stances and viewpoints they have experienced within it. The followers of travel influencers have made active choices on who they follow, based on many varied factors. This also means they have made active choices on who not to follow, based on many varied factors.

4. Methodology

In the following, the methods for the thesis will be discussed. The aim of the thesis is to understand the experiences of travel influencers from the perspective of the followers, identifying the potential ethical limits in terms of advertised content. This chapter will outline the research strategy based on phenomenology, to collect qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews, where the social world of the participants and their experiences will be the main data.

4.1 Paradigm

4.1.1 Constructivism

This paper works mostly within the paradigm of constructivism. This thesis is focusing on followers of travel influencers, who have experienced this concept over time, and therefore have experiences they can reflect upon. They are representing new learned knowledge, which can be used to provide new information for knowledge that already exists in the known about travel influencers and paid content. Therefore, this paradigm is considered to fit well with the research because constructivism works with people's construction of their known world, based on their experiences and reflections upon them (Honebein 1996). Constructivism understands knowledge as something that cannot just be given but must be learned through experimentation and doing; hence through learning (Kalender, 2007). This means that simply providing an individual with information is not going to teach them to understand it, however, if experiences are constructed in relation to the knowledge, it creates the ability to make constructive arguments, and even draw tentative conclusions of situations (Adom et al., 2016). Furthermore, constructivism works within relativist ontology, meaning there are multiple intangible mental constructions. Constructivism's epistemology focuses on the link between the investigator and the object of the investigation, as the findings from the data are created through the investigation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

4.2 Research Method

To reach the aim of this thesis, mono method was used, with the conduction of a qualitative research. The use of qualitative research typically includes small samples, where the outcomes are not measurable, as they are in quantitative research. This type of research is context driven,

and therefore appropriate for this type of research. It offers a complete description and analysis of the research subject, without having limitations on the scope of the research in question, and the responses of the participants (Bryman, A. and Bell, E., 2007).

4.3 Data Collection Methods

To conduct qualitative research, primary data is collected through interviews with a relevant group of people. Furthermore, thematic analysis is used for in-depth analysis of the collected data, through the inductive approach, basing the themes in the data around what is being said by those participants.

4.3.1 Interviews

The interviews conducted for this thesis were “semi-structured” interviews. These types of interviews take place with few structured questions. Typically, with few predetermined questions, designed to start normal conversation about the given topic. Being semi-structured it will have a combination of structured questions as well as unstructured questions. This style provides some advantages, as it both gives a rapport and comfort with the participants, as well as makes way for a deep dive into the research topic through the conversation (Kallio et al., 2016).

The request for interviews was shared in an online community, where the users are within the millennial age range. Specifically, people with an interest in following travel influencers are chosen for the interview process. This resulted in ten interviews, which lasted around 25-30 minutes on average. The questions were divided into subtopics, where one covered paid content from travel influencers, another authenticity, and lastly ethics in relation to travel influencers. Examples of the questions asked are the following:

1. Do you expect travel influencers to be authentic with their content?
2. How clear do you expect the travel influencers are when it comes to disclosing if content is advertising or not?
3. Do you think all paid travel content is all right, or are there some limits to what they can promote according to you?

These three questions are from different sections of the interview, meant to discover the viewpoints of influencers as authentic even within paid content, as well as looking into the ethics of paid content, both in terms of disclosing it, as well as discovering limits.

The interviewees are all millennials, as this group has been considered to adopt the use of social media platforms, for arranging their travel activities, as well as motivations for travel. Bolton et al. (2013) suggests the span for this generation to be the members of society, who are born between 1981 and 1999. This age-range is considered, because of their exposure to technology at an early age, likely being responsible for their frequent use of digital media, and the use of these kinds of platforms. Millennials' use of social media involves a lot of practices such as: contributing to the online communities, as well as sharing, consuming and searching for information. These practices are considered advanced in comparison to earlier generations (Bolton et al. 2013).

4.4 Secondary data

The secondary data used in the writing process of the thesis, is in the form of online news articles, which comments on similar ideas as the topic of the paper. As well as data considered within the papers of the literature review.

4.5 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed, and furthermore read and re-read to identify potential themes. The themes reviewed kept in mind that the research question of the thesis talks about the ethics within influencer marketing specifically linked to travel influencers, and the perspective of the followers. The transcribed interviews are found in Appendix A.

Thematic analysis (TA) is used to report patterns within the data collected. This method is used to identify, analyse and report said patterns, to make sense of collective or shared meanings, which will be apparent within the data (Braun et al. 2006). The patterns are identified through codes, which can be either predetermined, or be constructed through the analysis. This makes it a systematic process, to make sense of varying amounts of data, making it a flexible method (Braun et al. 2012). TA can be conducted in many ways, but the most common approach

follows a six-step process: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing. themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Ahuvia, 2001).

4.5.1 Inductive reasoning

The research approach followed in the research for the thesis is the inductive approach. Through this approach, the research begins with specific observations, which is being used to produce generalized theories and conclusions. The inductive approach furthermore also considers the context where the research takes place within. This also means this approach is most appropriate for small samples of qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, the inductive approach to the research is making way for identifying themes and patterns in the collected data, to analyse them further. For this thesis, the data is analysed using themes and patterns (Braun et al. 2006), which has been identified through the data collection process, and the themes will be presented in further detail later in the paper. Any approach has its weaknesses, and one of the main weaknesses of the inductive approach is the production of generalized theories and conclusions which are based on a small number of observations. This means the results of said data can have questionable reliability, since it is based on a small amount of data, but the data is still able to have density when not aiming for representativity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

5. Analysis

The following sections explore millennial followers' perception of ethics in sponsored travel content, and detail their concerns and comments on the practice, and how authenticity can affect the content, as well as the differences in paid and unpaid content. The first two sections explore their perception of disclosure in content, as well as how paid and unpaid travel content is more likely to be viewed differently, as the followers are more likely to be critical of content that is sponsored, unlike paid content, which is free from influence from a brand or similar. The third section explores how authenticity is perceived by followers in travel content, as well as limitations to this concept when it comes to paid content, since content is not considered to be inherently authentic in this situation. The fourth section details the examples of content the interviewees consider unethical based on personal values and research, and the fifth section considers the concerns of unethical content, and the impact it can have, followed by the sixth section which talks about the social responsibilities of travel influencers, as considered by the

followers. The analysis is based on the interviews, and the transcript for this is found in Appendix A.

5.1 The importance of disclosing advertisements

This section concerns itself with advertisements, and the clarity of the disclosure from the travel influencers to the followers, and their expectations in relation to this. This was due to observations from many news articles regarding the topic, of some influencers failing to disclose content as paid. An article from 2023 by The Guardian disclosed how more than 150 social media influencers, including within the travel sector, have had misleading content, including failure to disclose content as advertised content (Taylor, 2023). Furthermore, as presented in the literature review, there have been cases in the past, where disclosure barely had an impact when it was presented in an online post before people had decided that it was in fact an advertisement. After this point they would then be more likely to give less value to the post, if it were an advertisement (Boerman et al., 2012). This means there was a need to further explore the problems of disclosing or not disclosing paid content, from a conversation giving the viewpoint of the followers, and the impact it could have to disclose or not disclose advertisements.

The interviewees were asked about the importance of travel influencers disclosing advertisements in their posts, and all the interviewees had no doubt that it was important. To begin with, it was noted that disclosure should be clear, and preferably visible in several aspects of the content. In the case of videos, it should be spoken directly, and in the case of images, it should be in both the image and the description of said image, according to Interviewee 6; *“That goes for all ‘influencers’ to be honest. It should in my opinion both be written in the video or caption and also physically spoken by the person if it is a video.”* They further point to the disclosure laws of Norway, but also the UK, as a crucial factor for clarity of advertisements, because such laws can ensure that the followers are aware of potential bias and other effects the advertisement can have on the reception of a post. Several interviewees brought these up, and the benefits of them: *“I believe in The Netherlands there's a social code now that says influencers, YouTubers and other content creators are required to be open about whether content is sponsored or not.”* (interviewee 1). These laws were considered to be helpful, in the eyes of the interviewee, because they help preventing the aforementioned hidden

advertising, and the interviewee further considers how there is a general interest for followers to see influencer being honest about paid content; *“Yes, I even think this should count worldwide, because how often are people being impulsive and then end up being disappointed because influencers made things look better than they actually are.”* (interviewee 1). Thereby, these laws are very much in the interest of the followers, but also considers the influencer as well since clarity can increase trustworthiness. Interviewee 4 considers the laws in Norway, where she is from, about disclosure to have a positive impact, as this is one example of a country that requires clarity on influencer advertising:

“In Norway there is a law that says they have to be clear if it is advertising or not. So, from them I expect them to have it clear, but at the same time it is easy to understand if something are advertising or not, of course sometimes people would not know if it are or not. But in Norway we always know because of this law.” (Interviewee 4)

Thereby, she can trust that the Norwegian travel influencers are clear about advertisements, increasing their trustworthiness from her perspective. The laws of clear disclosure were considered a positive factor because it provides some protection for the followers, to not be misguided by the contents intentions of selling a product. Especially because these laws are meant to make sure content is not unethical, or at least interviewee 5 sees this as an impact of the law, mentioning how she experienced more unethical content before the law was put in place; *“They are there to protect people after all. Anything that does not follow them, is inappropriate”* (interviewee 5), indicating that content should make sure to follow the guidelines, to prevent being problematic.

Interviewee 3 considered that sponsored content should always be disclosed, no matter what it is. Especially for travel influencers, who travel all over the world, disclosing sponsored content can lower the risk of glorifying areas too much, which is a potential outcome of promotions, when seeking to show the positive sites of a place. Interviewee 3 brings up another potential problem in this regard; *“especially when we are talking about people who go to different destinations, where showing it in a good light could bring tourism to an area, where it might not be such a good idea after all”* (Interviewee 3), meaning that some destinations might not be as suitable for tourism, or an increase in tourism for that matter. Thereby, some promotions can create problems for the areas that are not suitable for the impact of tourism growth.

Travel influencers failing to disclose content it not considered a general problem by the interviewees, but in the cases, it does happen, the impact is not only negative for the influencer but also the follower; *“It might be entertaining to watch them, but as a watcher you can’t be sure whether their recommendations are actually good, so it can be hard to trust them and their opinion on the stuff they promote.”* (Interviewee 2). The trustworthiness of the influencer will be damaged if the content has not been disclosed as sponsored, and it is found out that the content was in fact paid. The risk of increasing trust issues can therefore be the result of influencers not disclosing paid content. While paid content can appear less authentic, not disclosing promotions can just be the cause for more problems, especially in terms of the influencer being called out for lying; *“if they don’t disclose something as an advertisement, then they risk a situation of being called out as liars for not being clear about something being paid content or not... and then I think, why was it so bad to disclose that it was an ad?”* (interviewee 3), this quote also questions the intention of not disclosing paid content, as the impact will be negative in case of it coming to the surface. Therefore, the consequences of not disclosing paid content, should outweigh the effects of posting a sponsored post that appears less authentic.

5.2 Differences in paid and unpaid content

The interviewees were asked to identify differences between paid content, and normal content, and the effects it could have on them as viewers. Overall, paid content was considered different from normal content. In many cases it tended to not be as authentic, when the content was sponsored, but content being sponsored is not per se a problem.

Firstly, it can be noted that the amount of sponsored content varies a lot from influencer to influencer; *“Some are sharing very openly if something is sponsored and also give negative feedback when needed. Others seem to only promote stuff, no matter what they post,”* (interviewee 2), based on this, some influencers focus a lot on presenting content as sponsored, with an occasional sponsor, meanwhile also making sure to present the sponsored bit with both the positive and negative elements. While others are promoting stuff all the time and can be considered too much advertising overall. This indicates that the amount of sponsored content also affects the experience of the followers, and from the perspective of this interviewee a less is more approach seems more positive.

In relation to how a product is received by followers, it can make a difference if a recommended product is sponsored or not; *“I like that they keep it real, and make sure to show what is sponsored, and what is not... because to me it make a big difference between products they recommend, because they actually prefer them, versus products they are only paid to recommend”* (interviewee 5), as this indicates, products that are recommended without sponsorships, seems more genuine to this interviewee, because the recommendations is likely based on a wider range of experience, while sponsored products can be more likely based on their need for income. Furthermore, sponsorships could mean more to followers, if they are based on products the influencer already used, giving more value to the recommendation, even in the case of sponsored content.

Sponsored content is not per se an issue, but it can be viewed differently from non-sponsored content; *“I guess with paid content I take it with a grain of salt because I know the risk of it being inauthentic is there.”* (Interviewee 8), this interviewee considered how the sponsorship influences the content to a degree. For example, If the influencer is instructed in what to say and mean about a destination, or culture, the message of the promotion becomes less authentic; *“The part of the authentic is that it is something real from the destinations or culture, and if the influencers present it after being told to do so I would say it is not that authentic anymore.”* (Interviewee 4), this response indicates that authenticity lies with the influencer stating their own experiences and ideas about the product, making the recommendations more valuable. The sponsors of the content should therefore not try to influence the sponsored message too much. Other interviewees note that the paid content can be considered suspicious if for example reviews are almost entirely positive, as they are considered more genuine when they show both the positive and negative elements; *“I guess someone who makes good or positive reviews only or the ones who only shows small bits of holidays/activities, that’s kinda suspicious in my opinion. There needs to be more than just the good and positive to make it seem more normal.”* (Interviewee 2), so according to this, travel influencers who only make positive reviews, or who only show small bits of travel activities can appear suspicious. There needs to be more of a balance for the influencer to appear more normal, and thereby more authentic.

The presentation of the promoted content can play a role in the effect; *“If they promote with a voice that clearly does not care about the product or it gets too obvious, I do not like it.”* (Interviewee 4) As this indicates, the tone in which the product is presented plays a role, since the followers go to travel influencers for recommendations on several aspects within travel. If

the influencer is not seeming to care much for the product in question, their recommendation will lose value for the followers.

The choice of sponsor matter; *“it can seem off if a travel influencer is advertising something that doesn’t fit within their “brand”*” (Interviewee 6). Travel influencers are more dependable if they promote products that are known to them. Opposite, there is the situation of travel influencers accepting sponsors that does not fit within their usual scope of content. This can have a negative effect on the reception of the sponsorship, interviewee 6 notes that it can appear off-putting. Some followers are expecting travel influencers to go by the products they believe in, or actively use this creates value, because the influencer is recommending a product they believe in, therefore it is a genuine recommendation, which makes it more authentic. Interviewee 7 further considers how some influencers are just accepting every sponsorship they receive, which makes them seem less real; *“I expect the influencers to pick only products that they really believe in or use. But in some people, you can kind of see that they take every ad possible, not just the ones they like for real. So, in that case, it can easily seem less authentic.”* (Interviewee 7). Authenticity of an influencer is therefore affected by the action they take in relation to sponsored content.

Promoting big companies can spark some debate in relation to the authenticity of content, as one of the interviewees considers that; *“I suppose the authenticity comes with them staying true to the content they have “promised” their followers so to speak... like not suddenly make a lot of huge changes because they suddenly got a sponsorship with a huge tourism company or something. Like it can feel like money meant more than staying true to themselves, even if that is not necessarily the case at all.”* (Interviewee 3) this indicates that authenticity means staying true to yourself, and for travel influencers staying true to the content that have “promised” their followers, referring to the identity the influencer has created for themselves, that has then attracted people to follow them. Being suddenly affected by the chance to earn a lot of money from big sponsorships can appear off-putting, particularly if this brings on a lot of changes in behavior from the influencers. The interviewee does consider that this is not necessarily the case, and thereby travel influencers working with a big company is not per se a problem, but it can lead to speculations on why they’re working with a particular huge company, because it can seem like money is more important to the influencer, than staying true to themselves. Interviewee 1 considers that sponsorship with big brands is not necessarily a problem; *“I would say, just be yourself and use your platform not only to promote big brands but also inspire your*

followers and give them useful tips” thereby staying true to the influencers own brand is important, so promoting bigger companies is not per se a problem, but if it is too frequent it can tend to seem less authentic.

5.3 Authenticity in travel influencers content

The interviewees had many different considerations regarding the need and use of authenticity by travel influencers content. They all follow one or more travel influencers, for a variety of reasons, however, primarily within their own personal interests regarding travels and inspiration searching. When it comes to authenticity, the interviewees were clear that this term meant to either be honest or staying true to yourself/the brand you have created as an influencer. One of the interviewees notes the negative impact of straying from this idea as she responds: *“I generally expect them to at least try to be themselves, because it can often seem fake, or rather it is fake whenever they’re not themselves,”* (Interviewee 3). The idea here is that the lack of genuineness in their content, makes them appear fake, which as mentioned makes the content have a negative impact, especially because the followers have certain expectations to the content they follow. Interviewee 6 also points out the expectations in this regard; *“Yeah, I do expect that they’re authentic, and I also hope they are with their content.”*, hence the expectation for authentic content is present.

Authentic content could contain a lot of different things, and more interviewees came up with examples of content they consider honest: *“A lot of “on-the-road” content, being filmed from all various places, and she also often records herself in more “uncomfortable” situations,”* (interviewee 3) this should be understood as content that shows the different viewpoints of travel, but not to a degree where the negative is sensationalized for the sake of interesting content, but rather just showing an authentic situation, that could happen in relation to traveling. Another interviewee adds that *“The authenticity of which your account makes people expect you to be truthful for, you need to be authentic”* (interviewee 7), this reply indicates that the influencers do not need to put everything on display to be authentic, but there is a need for them to stay true to the image that portray to the followers through their general content. Preferably there is a correlation between their personality and their image, but they do not become less authentic for not putting everything about themselves on display. This can also refer to niches within a travel influencer's content, and the authenticity remains if the content

does not stray away from the niche. It was therefore considered that authenticity does not have a set-in stone definition when it comes to what is authentic in travel influencer content. Instead, it is the general content of the influencer in question that determines the need for a more genuine and authentic output.

Authenticity can appear in terms of accessibility in content. This means that the content of the travel influencer, in some way or form, is within realistic reach of the followers. One interviewee comment on how one of the influencers she follows, make content that is fun and engaging, in a way that is also accessible to their viewers, which can have a positive impact: “[...] I do like when they do something special. For example, live_*thedash* does play this kind of game where they play darts. The arrow will then land on a place and that's the place they are going to. This makes them authentic, and I like them for doing that.” (Interviewee 1), the interviewee considers this positive and authentic, since it is accessible for followers, in terms of the activity, while also working as entertainment. The activity in question is also considered to show the personality of the influencer, which can further make them appear more relatable for the followers, which as previously discovered is something many of the interviewees (1, 4, 9) find important. Therefore, it can be noted that relatable content is more authentic and has a positive impact on motivation to follow and engage with content.

Authenticity can have a positive impact on travel content if it allows the social media users to see many different points of views from a destination. In order to achieve this, interviewee 4 suggests that; “*I think that if you want authentic you need to follow more specific people, they may not always be traveling, but I think you get to see more of how the place really is through them*” this statement also shows that there are many different ways for travel influencers to be authentic, because variety in perspectives can give more values to content from a destination.

5.3.1 The limitations of Authenticity in travel content

This section is going into considerations about travel influencers preferably should be authentic, but also understanding that there are some limitations to the authenticity in certain cases and scenarios. Interviewee 1 comments that “*I'm not asking for them to be authentic, however I do like when they do something special.*” This indicates that she is not demanding for the travel influencers to be authentic, but the authenticity can have a positive effect on the viewer's experience. Authenticity is therefore not necessarily necessary, but the positive effects

it can have, are likely to enhance the experience of the follower, and therefore also the motivation to follow the influencer, or even partake in similar travels.

Some of the limitations can be in relation to edited content, such as edited images and videos that have been slightly altered to enhance the content to a degree, and these can appear less authentic. Editing images and videos can make content appear less honest, and editing tools that enhances colours for example should be prevented, and instead *“It should be colours that apply to the situations, like not always sunny but also some bad weather but you can still do this or this, or it can still be beautiful”* (Interviewee 4). This comment both applies to editing content, but also to making active choices such as making sure the sun is always shining in the images, can also potentially make the content appear less honest, all depending on the general weather of the location. According to interviewee 5, this is not necessarily a problem as there are elements that can affect the quality of the images, and thereby quality of the content; *“I think it’s often because of problems with like... light or similar things, and of course them wanting to appear more presentable in some”*, this statement is important because edited content can be considered problematic, but touch-ups of the content can be fine. The interviewee further notes that *“[Images] are often edited to a degree, but most of the pictures do feel natural, while some are more posed...”* (Interviewee 5) stating that the images from influencers are often edited to a degree, but they are still able to have a natural feel, and thereby not affect the authenticity of the image, though the more posed images are considered less authentic. The overall content of the influencer can also make an impact on how much they can edit their images, and still be considered acceptable. Interviewee 7 considers this as they state, *“If a travel influencer edits their bikini photos, I don't really care, because I'm not following them for the bikini photos [...] this doesn't apply to the fitness influencers though, they are kind of selling the Sixpack they have.”* (Interviewee 7), this statement says that some influencers can edit their content to a degree if the images are not manipulated, and that their niche also has an impact on how it is perceived as authentic or not.

Another situation where limitations are considered, is when content can tend to be too sensationalized, meaning there are limits to when content can be sensationalized. Interviewee 6 states that it is important for travel influencers to show a variety of the good and bad information about the destination they are reporting from, however *“I also understand that they of course focus on the positive, as in most cases that outweighs the negative”* (Interviewee 6). Therefore, the limit of authenticity in this case, is focusing too much on the positive, though

the positive is likely to outweigh the negative. Interviewee 9 notes similarly, that the sensationalized content can be problematic as she states “*I kinda weed out the ones I think seem to sensationalize their content too much*” (Interviewee 9), however, as previously considered the authenticity can depend on the overall content, and even though sensationalization is generally considered negative, and it can be more acceptable in some cases, than other; “[...] *Like I think it depends on what type of travel influencer. Showing cool stuff in London? [...] Sure. Showing stuff about historical events like the Holocaust? [...] That’s not ok in my opinion*” (9), this statement indicates that sensationalizing is more acceptable in cases of showing off the bigger cities, however, sensationalizing historical events or places of misfortune in general is considered wrong.

Sensationalized or glamorous content can be less appealing, especially if most of an influencer's content can be considered as such. Less appealing content means that the motivation to keep watching can decrease over time, and one interviewee notes how one of the influencers she follows visits a lot of places and “*They also visit very luxury resorts and promote them and that’s the main reason for me to not watch all their content.*” (Interviewee 1). This response indicates that the glamorous content is not something that prevents the interviewee from following the influencer, however, it is not content that is typically attractive to watch.

Alternatively, relatable content, or content that is meant to be useful for followers, is more appealing to the followers. This creates motivation to watch, because the value is not only for entertainment purposes, but also for more personal reasons. Interviewee 1 gives an example of how tips within travel content can be a benefit as she states: “*I mean there have been a lot of useful tips so far and it goes from spending less money in a certain city to booking trips and traveling towards a destination!*”, the interviewee considers this in relation to authenticity, which stems from influencers being willing to inspire their follower. If content is intended to inspire followers either in terms of travel destination, or in terms of useful tips to make travel more convenient, there are positive factors, and the content is more relatable, because it is easier to assume the content is accessible for the follower. Rather than showing all the glamor of a destination, which is potentially out of budget for the average follower. Other interviewees also comment on the content that is more helpful and can be considered more authentic; “*It could be tips for places, what places to eat, secret gems for the destinations. And the content should take me on a journey so I can see it from the beginning.*” (Interviewee 4) indicating that

showing the journey as it is, makes the content more engaging, especially if the follower feels they are a part of the trip. Content that is more relatable, is also easier to connect to, which a couple of interviewees find especially important; *“I follow content generally to connect to other people, so I suppose I prefer them to at least make an attempt at being authentic to their audience.”* (Interviewee 3), thereby relatable content is positive from a more social perspective, in relation to how this person connects to an influencer.

The business of the influencer industry also creates some limitations in terms of authenticity. One interviewee notes how she does follow bigger travel influencers for authentic content; *“because I know what that business is like”* (Interviewee 8), this indicates some limitations for content to be authentic, with creators that are collaborating with bigger sponsorships. This notion can make it more difficult to determine the authenticity, as bigger creators are able to be authentic, but it can make it harder to decipher online if they’re sincere or not, since sponsorships and income can have an impact. Wellman et al. (2020) comments on a similar problem with ethics of authenticity in relation to influencers; *“Of course, only the most successful influencers have the luxury of making the kinds of financial decisions she describes. Most are not in this position and must balance their need to make money with the threat of being accused of “selling out” (Duffy, 2017).”* (Wellman et al. 2020).

The interviewees were asked whether a travel influencer being authentic, could make potentially negative content less negative. There was a mix of opinions on this matter, with some of them being clear about authenticity not making a change if content is negative or unethical, and others considering that it could have influence on how it is received and dealt with. One point of view in this regard, made it clear that authenticity, follower count, and sponsorships do not matter in relation to problematic content, according to interviewee 8 who notes that; *“I think it's extremely important for travel influencers to make informed decisions about the places they're going and the activities they're doing.”* (Interviewee 8), so therefore the influencers must make informed choices when choosing to promote travel activities, meaning the negative content should not be a problem in the first place if the choices for travel have been done with proper research. This is interesting because some of the elements such as follower count is often considered to be a crucial factor in influencer marketing. Higher follower count makes it easier to see the effect of the sponsorship, but this statement indicates that more people are becoming more critical of the higher follower count. Interviewee 1 similarly considered that authenticity would not make up for unethical content: *“No, because I*

- as a follower - have a strong opinion on some things, such as animal welfare.” (Interviewee 1), Therefore, promoting an animal farm as a travel influencer, would be considered unethical regardless of the influencer's authenticity. This also relates to personal values, because interviewee 1 does not see a need to consider her own opinions less in the situation, even if the influencer is authentic and had good intentions.

Another viewpoint, says that authenticity can potentially help the influencer in situations of negative unethical content, because it is more likely the followers will consider them to have had good intentions; *“It’s more naive than I guess, and yeah maybe it seems less bad at least, because it maybe wasn’t their intention to make the negative content”* (Interviewee 2). The influencer can be considered naiver in the situation, and therefore have an easier time apologizing for the choice of content. This means that authenticity does not necessarily make negative content less negative, but the intentions of the influencer could have an impact. Therefore, authenticity can give chances of less criticism, but it still requires some actions from the influencers to portray a willingness to change their perspective based on criticism they do receive.

For authenticity to have a positive effect on negative content, there is a need for the influencer to give information on the destination, and their stance in relation to any problems: *“Like when the couple Julie and Camilla travelled to a country that's homophobic, they talked about it but chose to stay there to enjoy it, which I see no problem with, it's not the countries workers and companies fault the country has homophobic laws.”* (Interviewee 7). Thereby, they are staying true to their own beliefs, but still taking into consideration that there could be some issues because of cultural differences. This is similar to interviewee 8, but a bit of a different take on the matter. Informed decisions are considered important by both, but one considers that they should prevent problematic destinations all together, whereas another considers it more acceptable, if the influencer is making it clear that their personal values are not in alignment with anything problematic.

5.4 Ethics in sponsored content and personal values

This section investigates the considerations the interviewees have regarding unethical promotions in travel content. While a destination cannot be considered ethical or unethical, the considerations from the interviewees are based on some of the elements that can be considered

unethical to promote, from their perspective and own experiences. Ethics is an individual concept, but this does not exclude similarities in opinions and viewpoints on what can be considered unethical or not. Personal alignment, and thereby values, in content, matters to the followers when they choose to follow an influencer. It is a crucial factor looking over the responses from the interviewees in relation to their viewpoints of content and ethics. This indicates that ethics and thereby personal values, comes into play, and determines the motivation to follow and engage with content.

A travel influencer should follow an ethical standard where they stay true to their own platform, and thereby not promote anything they do not believe in or agree with, for the sake of income; *“influencers should not promote something they don't like themselves, they have to be willing to use it themselves or stand up for it.”* (Interviewee 4). If they promote things that align with their personal values, they are less likely to lead followers astray, because they are considering their choices of sponsors, over the chance to earn a larger income. Staying ethical will also serve as a positive impact on followers; *“As long as they are ethical, they are good to me.”* (Interviewee 4), the ethical standing point of an influencer, can appear more positive, or good in the eyes of the followers. The problem here is that ethics can vary a lot depending on the individual person, which can make it a challenging task.

Promoting certain countries as a travel destination, can be considered unethical. Interviewee 1 suggests Russia as an example because; *“Russia is in the news in a negative way, and I cannot think about going there. So, in case things like this happen, it would really not find it okay if they promote such countries/cities.”* (Interviewee 1) this indicates that negative associations with a country based on, for example, war, should not be promoted in content by travel influencers. Whether or not the influencer is supportive of events, it can call for a lack of understanding of the situation, which appears inappropriate. More interviewee’s mentioned Russia as a destination that would be unethical to promote as a travel destination, due to the war with Ukraine; *“I could think that they should prevent promoting Russia, for example, as a travel destination, because of the whole Ukraine war and such”* (Interviewee 3) here considers how the situation of war plays a role in whether promoting a destination can be considered ethical or not. There are a couple defining factors making this problematic, one being that promoting a country at war, can be considered as supporting the events. Furthermore, promoting a place that is dangerous, can also mean putting followers in unnecessary danger. It should also be noted, that since the problem in Russia is a war, there are chances for the

association with this destination as negative can change over time. Another example from the Interviewees in relation to travel destinations that can be deemed inappropriate to promote, is Brazil; *“I also don't like it when they promote a country that has a prime minister that's not good for the people. Take Brazil for example [...]”* (interviewee 1) this further indicates a lack of understanding of the influencer before promoting a place, from the perspective of this interviewee, who further notes research is important before promoting a country or company. Brazil was only mentioned by interviewee 1, but it is an example of internal conflicts in a country, which can also be problematic to promote, without proper information search first.

Overall, it is not considered that unethical content is common among travel influencers, and some of the interviewees, like interviewee 2, did not consider unethical content to be a big problem. However, interviewee 2 notes how some things can be deemed unethical regardless; *“I mean, there has been a lot of criticism about influencers promoting states that have very strict and not open-minded rules. Of course, that's ethically questionable but also, I feel like it's not a big problem in society or anything in general.”* (Interviewee 2), noting that there are countries with strict laws, and they are not very open-minded, being rejecting things such as human rights, and things that are more commonly accepted in western Europe, where all the interviewees are located. In relation to this, interviewee 2 suggests travel influencers promoting the Football world cup in Qatar as unethical; *“Content such as some influencers promoting states, either in direct partnerships, or payments, that live by unethical, old-school laws, like we saw with the scandal with the football world cup in Qatar, for example”* (Interviewee 2), hence places with laws that are not in agreement with this interviewee, can be considered unethical, and further notes the problems that were surrounding the World cup in Qatar. Similarly, to interviewee 2, interviewee 3 mentions the world in Qatar, as a destination that can be considered problematic to promote; *“generally places that promote countries, with an unethical and old-school rule, as a good place you should visit. I don't think we should support such countries generally. It could be Qatar during the world cup, or similar”* (Interviewee 3), hence this destination is considered unethical by interviewee 3, as the rule is considered old-school from her perspective. Interviewee 4 agrees with this, stating how; *“They should not promote a destination or something to do somewhere if the destination or organization are not following basic respect for other people.”* (interviewee 4), so there is a tendency for the interviewees to be against promoting destinations that have a much different worldview from them. This means that their viewpoints of Qatar as a is influenced by their own values, shaped by their life experiences, which then determines how they consider this destination ethical or

not. Lastly, Destinations that are accepting problematic practices such as child labour, dangerous working environments and exploitation are problematic according to interviewee 10, *“I think promoting places that support child labour, dangerous working environments and exploitation leaves me distrusting of the influencers.”* (interviewee 10) indicating that her personal values go against promoting destinations with these kinds of practices.

Promoting historical sites, which carry memories that can be considered dark tourism, can be considered unethical. Interviewee 3 suggests Auschwitz being a destination that should not be shared as sponsored content, as this can create a negative associations with the influencers, as they show lack of understanding the attraction they are visiting and promoting ; *“Because you can of course make content about this place that is authentic, and respectful, but the moment #ad appears on my screen, I think I would be a little uncomfortable about a person receiving money for promoting such a dark history.”* (interviewee 3). Thereby, some content can be considered problematic because it is sponsored, as this can further be considered disrespectful that the influencer earns money from talking about the dark past.

There are many different attractions, which can be considered unethical to both visits, but especially post sponsored content about. Interviewee 1 suggests animal farms in Africa as problematic. Such tourist activities which involve animals is considered problematic by more of the interviewees. Animal farms, dolphin shows and riding on elephants are considered bad to promote, because they have a negative impact on animals. While ethics is a concept that is individual, there are more patterns regarding travel content that can be considered unethical. Interviewee 8 notes in relation to animals; *“I remember a pretty bad shitstorm about a year ago with a Danish influencer who promoted a Dolphin show she went to see.”* (Interviewee 8), so therefore the tendency is also apparent in situations, where an influencer has been called out for promoting an activity during travels, which is considered unethical. Interviewee 10 also noted how visiting and promoting animal farms or similar with endangered animals, which should instead be left alone according to her. Therefore, there is a pattern regarding animal protection in relation to travel, indicating how these millennials are starting to be more critical of these practices. Interviewee 1 further commented on this topic that; *“I mean: come on, those animals should live in the wilderness and therefore should not be prisoned. When influencers do this, I find it unethical yes. Unless they come up with an explanation or a public excuse, I won't unfollow them. If they don't care, it's likely I will unfollow them.”* (interviewee 1). Endangered species such as elephants, tigers or monkeys should be in the wild, and not in

animal farms, thereby making this practice unethical, which further means that promoting the content in a positive light will make the content itself unethical. Interviewee 1's and 8's personal values consider that these kinds of attractions should not be something the travel influencer considers lightly, and not accepting criticism on this topic could make these interviewees unfollow them.

Promoting places which can be considered dangerous because of high crime rates, pickpocketing or otherwise unsafe environments can be problematic. The travel influencer can influence people to travel to many different destinations, but places with unsafe elements can thereby be of danger to the people who choose to follow the recommendations of the influencers; *“At least the influencer should disclose that in a proper way and discuss it in an honest way.”* (Interviewee 10).

Interviewee 9 prefers educational content, learning about diverse cultures from residents of different countries. However, she also points out how the influencers could be mistake for doing the jobs of journalist, but that this is a misunderstanding; *“I think it is important for the consumer to be aware that a travel influencer is not a journalist, so everything should be taken with a grain of salt, obviously, you should also take a journalist with a grain of salt, but you know what I mean Not automatically assume the worst but look out for red flags”* (Interviewee 9) meaning there should be a distinction in how influencers and journalists are viewed in terms of their function in providing information. While entertainment should not take over too much of the content from an influencer if it is meant to be educational, they are still at the end of the day an entity meant for entertainment. So, for her personal values, there is a need for a distinction between these two jobs, because journalists have a different ethical framework to follow, which is much more unclear than it is for a travel influencer.

Travel content, which is based around challenges to visit dangerous spaces is another type of content which can be considered unethical; *“such as asylums, cartel locations etc. For example, Jack Paul going to the forest and filming a hanging corpse is out of pocket and horrible.”* (interviewee 10) This is also another situation that received a lot of backslashes as a general reaction to the content, hence putting more weight on the problems of the content in question. Thereby, the influencers have a social responsibility to make sure their challenges, which are meant for entertainment, do not go too far.

Some situations can make it difficult to discuss content that can be considered unethical. Personal choices can align with content that can be deemed unethical, such as visiting countries that have social problems or are at war; *“There’s also definitely a debate to be had regarding promoting certain destinations, but to be honest, I can’t speak on that since I’ve been to countries that in general aren’t the greatest.”* (interviewee 6), this interviewee considers how promoting destinations with social problems or similar, can spark debate in terms of unethical values, but her own personal choices prevent her from doing so, because of double standards. If a travel influencer has travelled to a problematic destination, and the interviewee has travelled there as well, it makes it more difficult to consider the content problematic. In that situation, some content can seem less unethical, because the interviewee has already done the same as the influencer, though it should also be noted that situations in countries can potentially change for the better or the worse.

To sum it up, the interviewees are considering a variety of travel content that they would consider unethical, in some cases depending on how the content is presented, and in other cases promoting certain destinations and attractions would be unethical from their perspective. This is based on their individual knowledge about potential problems, and they therefore have an expectation, that travel influencers are focusing on doing research as preparation for their promotions.

5.5 Concerns and effects of unethical content

Unethical content can be considered as such for many varied reasons. In this section the focus is on the topic of effects coming from sharing unethical content, as per the opinions and experiences of the interviewees. Unethical content can give a negative association to the influencer, leading to people preventing engaging with their content in the first place; *“I probably have seen something but probably just been like this is not okay not going to give it some attention.”* (interviewee 4), this response indicates that this interviewee would avoid the content, because giving it attention could just risk giving the post more attention, based on how social media algorithms work.

Paid content is generally fine, if it is not exploitative to the locals, culture, or similar instalments; *“Where I draw the line is where companies and individuals profit on poverty or*

tragedy” (interviewee 9), hence if the profiting margin of a paid post is based around profiting from poverty or tragedy, it can be considered unethical. Paid content that is exploitative of negative situations or circumstances, can seem as if earning an income for the post was more important than the negative impacts it could bring. Interviewee 9 criticizes this further and notes that; *“I think people would much rather prefer well-made content than stuff that is all rushed because the creator needs money.”* (interviewee 9) This being said, it is in the interest of both the influencer and the followers to not post content that can seem exploitative of the locals. Interviewee 4 similarly notes how unethical content from a travel influencer, is content that can have a negative impact on the locals if the promoted product is a destination. Respecting cultures, religions and so on is essential to keep content from becoming unethical. Interviewee 4 notes how it can have negative impacts to not respect these elements when promoting a destination, or overall sharing content from a place; *“I think it can be really bad for people in different countries, if their home is promoted in a way that can be negative for them.”* (Interviewee 4, thereby, it is not only a problem for the content in question, but a problem for locals in the area in question. Stereotypes and negative stories can be brought up, and paint a bad picture of a destination, for the sake of getting a reaction online.

Influencers with sponsored content, face a higher risk of content being considered unethical, versus a social media user without a larger following, this is the point of interviewee 3, who considered posting sponsored content from Auschwitz as unethical. The main point here was that earning an income based on the dark history of this attraction made the interviewee uncomfortable, because the influencer would technically be earning their income based on humans having suffered. This marks a different discussion, but this also indicates that posting content from Auschwitz, which is not sponsored, is less likely to be considered unethical. This type of content seen by more people, in terms of more followers, is also more likely to spark a reaction, rather than people without a larger following who just post from their more private trips. The higher engagement also means that the influencer must make more considerations before they promote Dark tourism attractions, especially since this is often a spark of different debates.

“I think I have seen some posts from users at Auschwitz, who weren’t influencers, but who still just posed in front of the gate, and just wrote a lot of travel related hashtags... I know it was not an influencer, but I can imagine if [an influencer] did something like that, that it would be kinda disrespectful, and possibly unethical” (Interviewee 3).

Posting a picture from Auschwitz, in a hypothetical scenario, posing in front of the gate, and adding a lot of different hash tags can be considered unethical, thereby the type of content posted from a dark tourism attraction also matters in terms of how it is received. In this case it can show a lack of research from the travel influencer, and it is instead being treated as a general tourism attraction, where some social rules might apply differently.

Interviewee 9 suggests some differences in content from a travel influencer providing information, versus a journalist providing information as an example of the limits for the influencer; *“Especially because many travel influencers attempt to make entertaining content rather than educational content. A journalist showing poverty is different because a journalist's job is to educate. A travel influencer doesn't have the same requirements”* (interviewee 9). Many travel influencers make content that is entertaining, rather than educational. The interviewee compares the travel influencer's role to that of a journalist's role and considers the journalist's role to be more of an educator in general, and the influencer more of an entertainer. In both cases there are exceptions, but there are limits to what an influencer should be posting about due to their role as an entertainer.

The interviewees were asked whether they had in the past stopped or chosen not to follow a travel influencer based on something they advertised. Most of the interviewees were not able to think of situations where this was the case, and interviewee 7 could only think of situations that did not relate to travel influencers specifically. However, some did consider hypothetical scenarios where advertisements could influence how one looked at some influencers, and why they do not follow them; *“what did happen is that I saw some snippets of content of some creators and that caused me to have a certain thought about the influencer, and that's why I don't follow them.”* (Interviewee 1) thereby, advertisements can say something about the influencers, and how they present themselves, and give an indication on whether they are interesting to follow or not. Interviewee 1 further notes that she has not experienced posts she would consider unethical, but she would speak up against it if she were to witness it. Interviewee 4 has not stopped following people because of advertisements she did not agree with, but has prevented following influencers who promoted all-inclusive chains, as she finds those to be damaging to the environment. Thereby, social media users make active choices, to follow content they agree with or believe in, and to prevent influencers who promote content that can be damaging to their beliefs in some way. Interviewee 5 has stopped following an influencer, because they started promoting and glorifying Dubai as well as plastic surgery and

similar cosmetic surgeries (Interviewee 5). Thereby, personal values about what is deemed ethical or not, made this person reconsider following an influencer, because they started promoting things the interviewee did not agree with. Interviewee 9 has stopped following a travel influencer, because it was revealed this person is a sex tourist. This influencer did not do sponsored content, but had merchandise promoting this, and she stopped following the influencer because of this, as it was very much against her own values. Most of the interviewees have not experienced unethical content personally, which shows that there is not a general tendency for unethical content to appear, at least not from the experiences of these interviewees. Furthermore, the examples confirm how many situations of unethical content, is a matter of the content not aligning with their personal values, but rather being a complete opposite.

5.6 Social responsibilities of travel influencers

This section is looking into the points and arguments which talk about the impact travel influencers can have as opinion leaders and mediators of brand messages (Vanninen et al., 2022), which further leads to followers commenting on social responsibilities. The sponsored content is reaching out to an audience, who has chosen to follow the influencer, therefore feeling credibility in their judgment.

Interviewee 6 notes how the influencers have responsibilities when posting content; *“I think you have a certain responsibility as an influencer to not promote certain things, and especially if you have a younger audience.”* (Interviewee 6) thereby, the choices for content can have an impact on the audience, and especially a younger audience. The travel influencers are hence responsible for not posting content that can have a negative impact on younger viewers, such as for example on their body image, or otherwise worldview. These topics are also examples of topics that interviewee 6 considered to be against her personal values, which could make her stop following a travel influencer for this reason. Similarly, Interviewee 7 notes how she is making active choices on the influencers she chooses to follow, based on the content they promote. If influencers stay within their niche, the interviewee will follow them, but if they are sponsored by clear cash grabs that have nothing to do with their overall content, she will unfollow them. Therefore, if the content is clearly just meant to earn money, rather than staying true to their own content, this can be enough reason for this interviewee to prevent their content.

Honesty can be considered a social responsibility, in relation to the travel influencers. The information they provide can impact the followers in a variety of ways, both the truthful content as well as the more deceiving content.

“The camera can lie so much and if they're not truthful, people can end up losing money on a trip they aren't satisfied with due to their false recommendations. A lot of people rely so heavily on travel influencers when scheduling their trips, compared to before, so I truly believe they should take responsibility when presenting the information about their trips” (Interviewee 10),

this interviewee considers that many more people are going to travel influencers today, than earlier, when scheduling and planning a trip, and therefore the influencers have a rising responsibility to not misguide the followers when providing them with information. Authenticity is also being clear about potential sponsorships, and whether they are enjoying the trip as part of a sponsorship or not. The camera can be a deceiving factor, and there can be many consequences for people who try to follow in the footsteps of influencers and might end up losing a lot of money on a trip, because they were not well-informed through false recommendations.

Interviewee 1 discussed how social responsibilities in relation to honesty, also means not deceiving your followers with false information because of how people are often being impulsive, and buying things based on influencers recommendations, too often ending up disappointed by their purchase, because the influencer made it look better than it was. They mention the following example: “*I once heard a story about an influencer who posted about this luxury resort in Spain. The resort ended up with getting a lot of reservations. But it turned out the whole resort didn't even exist*” (Interviewee 1), with this example, it can be considered that travel influencers have a social responsibility to provide true information to their followers in a straightforward way as there are stories where failure to disclose real information, leading to a negative impact for the followers or other people who interacted with such content.

In terms of social responsibilities, the clarity of sponsorships can also be considered. Because it is also a matter of giving the followers a choice on whether they want to support a certain brand, even if it just through the influencer; “*I think the viewer should have the option to not watch the content if it is a brand they don't want to personally support*” (interviewee 9). Other examples could also be politically motivated content, and the disclosure makes it easier for viewers to consider content to have been influenced by the sponsor, and not necessarily the

clear opinion of the influencer. Therefore, it is in a sense both a service for the influencer and the follower. Criticism of failure to disclose paid content, is directed towards big international travel influencer by interviewee 8; *“I'd like to say 100% transparent, but I also know that often isn't the case - especially with big, international travel influencers,”*, there are mentioned no specific influencers, but rather a phenomenon the interviewee has picked up upon appearing more generally with bigger travel influencers, especially if they are not from a country where disclosure is required by law. This also means there are some trust issues between this interviewee, and bigger travel influencers.

A problem that was also noted in relation to disclosure in travel content, is the cost of travel can be high. Meanwhile some travel influencers receive big discounts and other benefits from promoting, for example, a hotel: *“Another aspect is the fact that they are probably getting good suites or trips or activities for free, and if others see that they'd want to do the same things and then becoming disappointed when it costs above their budgets”* (interviewee 10), thereby, keeping out information about even a disclosed sponsorships can become a problem to the followers when they engage with the sponsors. Influencers are opinion leaders (Vanninen et al., 2022), and therefore capable of influencing a lot of people. This is a social responsibility; they should not take for granted according to interviewee 10. Sponsored content should take the followers into account, rather than the life of the influencer; *“I think it's important to be realistic about what's attainable for "regular people" who don't have millions and millions of followers on Instagram or TikTok.”* (Interviewee 8), this relates again to the idea of influencers being relatable, thereby more authentic, making it easier to take in the recommendations for the followers. The risk of travel influencers leading followers astray by promoting sponsored hotels and airlines, without disclosing this collaboration, is too high according to interviewee 10, who further states that *“I wouldn't want to take advice from someone that could potentially be lying to me about a couple hundred dollars”*, thereby the trustworthiness is questioned in this scenario. Trustworthiness is considered important in relation to influencers, but it is also something that is built over time. Interviewee 10 states that *“I wouldn't trust anyone unless I have followed an influencer for a long time.”* indicating that following an influencer for a longer period, will give more reason to trust their opinion, even if the sponsored content should be taken with a grain of salt.

One Interviewee stood out a bit and considered the responsibility to be placed with the followers, rather than with the influencer. Interviewee 7 considers that paid travel content is

not problematic if it is disclosed as sponsored. This varies from many of others, who considers the responsibility to be placed at the in hands of the influencer posting the content, instead this interviewee notes that; “*A viewer can use their own critical thinking to choose not to buy the sponsored products or see if they trust the endorsement of their favourite influencer.*” (interviewee 7), hence the responsibility lies more with the follower, who has a choice on whether they want to engage with certain sponsors or not.

6. Discussion

This study focuses on followers, specifically millennials, and their interpretation of ethics in influencer marketing, with a focus on travel influencers. This is meant to address concerns, and experiences from the audience, who are receivers of such content, rather than the creators, whose interpretations of ethics has previously been considered for similar studies. This focus is also addressing a gap in the research, as ethics in influencer marketing has been addressed from viewpoints of influencers as well as travel and tourism media workers, but audiences’ perception has not been addressed similarly. All participants in the study are not directly involved in any kind of influencer marketing, meaning there is not an immediate interest in pointing out the positive aspects of influencer marketing over the negative aspect. Influencers and brands on the other hand are more likely to consider the marketing approach in a positive light, as it is beneficial to them when it performs well (Wellman et al. 2020). However, it should be noted that all the participants in the interview are millennial women, all living in Western Europe, meaning there are some viewpoints that are not brought up in relation to the study, such as for example elements that male followers might notice because of differing experiences.

The analysis indicates that ethics in influencers from the viewpoint of the followers, is based on knowledge they have gathered from their own circumstances, to which they have created values that shape their perspectives on different topics within travel content. This is supported by the general interest from followers to see content the travel influencer has put a lot of consideration into, such as making informed choices on sponsored content, rather than just presenting any sponsor for the sake of income. Furthermore, the analysis notes how unethical choices in relation to content, can lead to concerns of negative impacts on destinations, followers, or other stakeholders.

The study of Wellman et al. (2002) aligned with a lot of the opinions and viewpoints of the interviewees. Therefore, indicating the importance of staying true to your own brand, as an influencer, rather than being too influenced by commercial collaborations. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the choices by the influencers should be informed choices, giving more consideration to the collaboration process with brands and companies, as well as the choices of destinations and attractions to promote. The considerations of authenticity and ethics in relation to travel content, are important, because of the many stakeholders it can affect. The analysis shows that followers are expecting travel influencers to be truthful within their content, because it can otherwise have consequences for followers, locals, or the influencer themselves. The effect on the locals is a crucial factor, and even seemingly positive situations can have a negative impact, such as through rising tourism in areas that are not prepared to manage a larger amount of tourism. Hence while it can bring economic growth to a destination, it can also have negative social impacts, which is not sustainable.

Authenticity is considered to be staying true to their promised content, or their identity as an influencer, making it easier to build credibility, and further leading to messages in sponsored content being conveyed in a more believable manner. Authenticity is an element of trustworthiness, because the influencers are promising a certain perspective based on their content. The analysis shows that authenticity can work as a guidance for ethical content for travel influencers, because they are put in a position where they have a following, who has certain expectations of their content, meaning there can be a motivation in terms of living up to these expectations. This is not meant to suggest that considerations of authenticity will make content inherently ethical, as the analysis suggests that authenticity is not necessarily going to be a helping factor in relation to posting unethical content, even if unintentional, nor does it suggest that content can only be ethical if it is authentic. The analysis suggests that there is a bigger chance of redemption, if the influencer takes criticism into consideration in such a scenario where the influencer does research afterwards and apologizes. However, the analysis further suggests that negative reactions can be avoided if the research is instead done before starting the sponsor collaboration, preventing damage to credibility. Instead, it is a matter of presenting the idea that travel influencer's choices matter a lot, when it comes to creating ethical content, and that the motivation to remain authentic can be a helping factor. The choices should be affected by research the influencer has done, as informed choices are considered to be ethical in the analysis, or at the very least increases the chance of it being ethical. This means the influencer is in a position where their own research for their content can affect it a lot,

because it gives them different options in terms of how they want to present it, and that is something that should also be taken into consideration when collaborating with a brand for promoting a travel product. Especially because the analysis shows how authenticity can have a positive effect on the content, because it is easier to relate to such content for the followers, especially if the content is trying at being inspirational or informative.

While authenticity can work as a guideline, previous research on the topic has also suggested the need of a proper ethical framework for influencers to follow, in relation to sponsored content (Wellman et al. 2020). While this paper does not seek to suggest an ethical framework, the analysis does show concerns between the followers, and the impacts of unethical content. The analysis also indicates further that authenticity has a lot of limitations, especially when it comes to sponsored content. Edited images, need for income, content that is too sensationalized etc. can be examples of elements where authenticity has its limitations, within influencer marketing. In previous research, potentially harmful practices were noted, such as lack of transparency, or misleading messages, or targeting a vulnerable consumer group (Michaelsen et al., 2022). The analysis of this study shows these practices as problematic, and notes how travel influencers have social responsibilities in relation to their audience. They are considered opinion leaders (Vanninen et al., 2022), and thereby capable of influencing choices of their audience, meaning there are expectations that they will provide truthful information, but as seen in the analysis there are examples of some travel influencers who has made deceptive marketing, or otherwise not lived up to their social responsibility as a person with a voice of power.

There are difficulties in terms of building credibility as a brand. This makes influencer marketing an ideal approach to build credibility through a different mediator (Smith et al., 2018). Credibility between millennial and influencer was in previous research found to be a key factor (Ribeiro et al. 2020). The analysis suggested that trust, or credibility was especially important to the followers, when experiencing paid content. Some of them expressed the need to form a bond to the influencer, and that trust should be built over time. Thereby, it indicates that the followers are starting to be more critical of the influencers at first, but if stay within their line of personal values, credibility will be created over time. This also means that influencer marketing, while an effective marketing method, has some limitations, because of increasing awareness from the followers, who do not just follow bigger influencers, but rather seek to create a connection to the content they watch. Factors such as follower count and

engagement, can be used to see an effect from a business perspective (Jang et al., 2021). However, in the analysis it was found that this factor was not as important to the followers, and more of them generally avoided bigger influencers, because they believed there was a risk for the content to be less authentic, and instead be based around sensationalized content, that is more difficult to have a relation to in the first place. One interviewee also expressed discomfort in terms of paid content with bigger influencers, as she felt there was a bigger risk of being misguided in that situation, than it would be with a smaller content creator.

Previous research has shown how millennials tend to base a lot of their everyday lives, based on content they follow on social media, which plays a huge role for this generation, meaning they are also more likely to seek advice from people rather than a brand when it comes to travel, making influencer ideal (Sofronov, 2018). The analysis suggests that millennials have an interest in following influencers, but furthermore tend to criticize them working together with bigger brands, indicating that businesses have less value to them on social media. The criticism especially led to considerations of the reasoning behind collaborating with bigger sponsors, as some of the interviewees felt that this choice could have too many indications of monetary gain, rather than staying true to their content. While this should not exclude the collaborations between travel influencers and bigger brands, it is an example of the considerations travel influencers must do. Travel influencers who, for example, receive food or accommodation for free or at a huge discount, from luxury hotels and similar, is likely to have a negative effect in terms of reception, especially if it is not within the range of the influencers usual content, hence making them less authentic and credible.

Disclosing content is considered one of the most important jobs of the influencer. Previous research has shown that audiences often have a challenging time differentiating between paid and unpaid content, as well as having a more negative association to paid content. However, the arguments from the interviewees show the need to have disclosure, and the disclosure should furthermore be clear. Previous research has indicated that disclosure messages can be hard to decode for the audience (Wojdyski and Evans (2016) and indicates that message of disclosure has tended to be unclear, which provides issues in terms of trustworthiness according to the interviewees. The analysis shows that disclosure is an important factor for credibility, and that there are responsibilities for the travel influencers to do this. In that sense, lack of disclosure can be considered unethical, because there is risk of followers being misguided by the information given by the travel influencer.

Followers are becoming more critical of the influencers, and in their choice on who they support/follow, both for the sake of themselves, but in relation to travel also in terms of the negative social effects they suggested could be the outcome of unethical content. Therefore, ethical considerations are important, with the interviewees finding a need for travel influencers to do research before collaborating with a sponsor of any kind. In content that can affect other people, as much travel content will, it is especially important to consider the potential effects of the messages within the content. The interviewees were critical of various aspects of travel content, either by destinations that were against their personal values, or attractions with unethical practices according to them, hence showing that there is a need to focus on this niche of influencer marketing, and potentially negative content. This is not to say that travel content is overall unethical, but rather to say there are practices that can make travel influencers less credible, based on content they decide to share from their platform, as an opinion leader (Vanninen et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This research aimed to look into millennial followers' reception of sponsored content from travel influencers, with a focus on ethical considerations of such content. This was done through semi-structured interviews with 10 millennials, who follow 1 or more travel influencers. According to the analysis, the millennial followers interpret ethics in sponsored travel content, as content that is showing that research has been put into the post, before the content is shared. Furthermore, considerations should have been regarding the sponsor in question, on whether a collaboration is right for the influencer, or whether they should turn them down. A lack of such considerations will not necessarily make content unethical, but the followers are concerned the risk will be higher. The analysis, for example, identified that sponsored travel content can bring concerns of potential harm to destinations and locals, if sponsored content is posted without consideration of these. Furthermore, it was also considered that travel influencers have social responsibilities connected to their work. They function as opinion leaders, and the messages they convey can have an impact on the audience, and especially a younger audience. A key element in maintaining an ethical direction of content, was considered to be rooted in authenticity. An authentic approach to content cannot in itself ensure that content will be ethical, but it can help give a sense of direction when making considerations for sponsored content. The audience has made active choices to follow the travel

influencers, based on the content they have consumed, and are more likely to build credibility, if the content stays true to what they have been promised in relation to following in the first place. However, authenticity will not make sure content is inherently ethical, as there are limits to authenticity in travel content. Therefore, it can only work as guidance.

Although the study has a diverse sample of followers, from a couple different countries, it is acknowledged that there is still limited perspective even among millennials. The participating interviewees were all women, which means there is a lack of perspective from other genders. Furthermore, they were only from countries in western Europe, which is a factor in shaping their viewpoints as well. This means there are potential for more concerns to be addressed in future research in the perception of the followers of travel influencers. Furthermore, future research can look into other generations, as different perspectives of social media engagement might give varying perspectives and concerns on ethics in travel content. There are also many different niches within influencer content, which can be investigated, as the ethical considerations of the followers might vary depending on the type of content as well.

As discussed in previous chapters, past research has identified a lack of a proper ethical framework for influencer marketing. While this paper does not seek to create an ethical framework, it is still considered that the research can be a contribution in the future process of defining and articulating ethics in relation to the field. A growing focus on ethics in influencer marketing is considered by scholars, practitioners (Wellman et al. 2020), and also consumers as seen in this study, and by that also a growing focus on a more formal framework that can guide influencers.

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