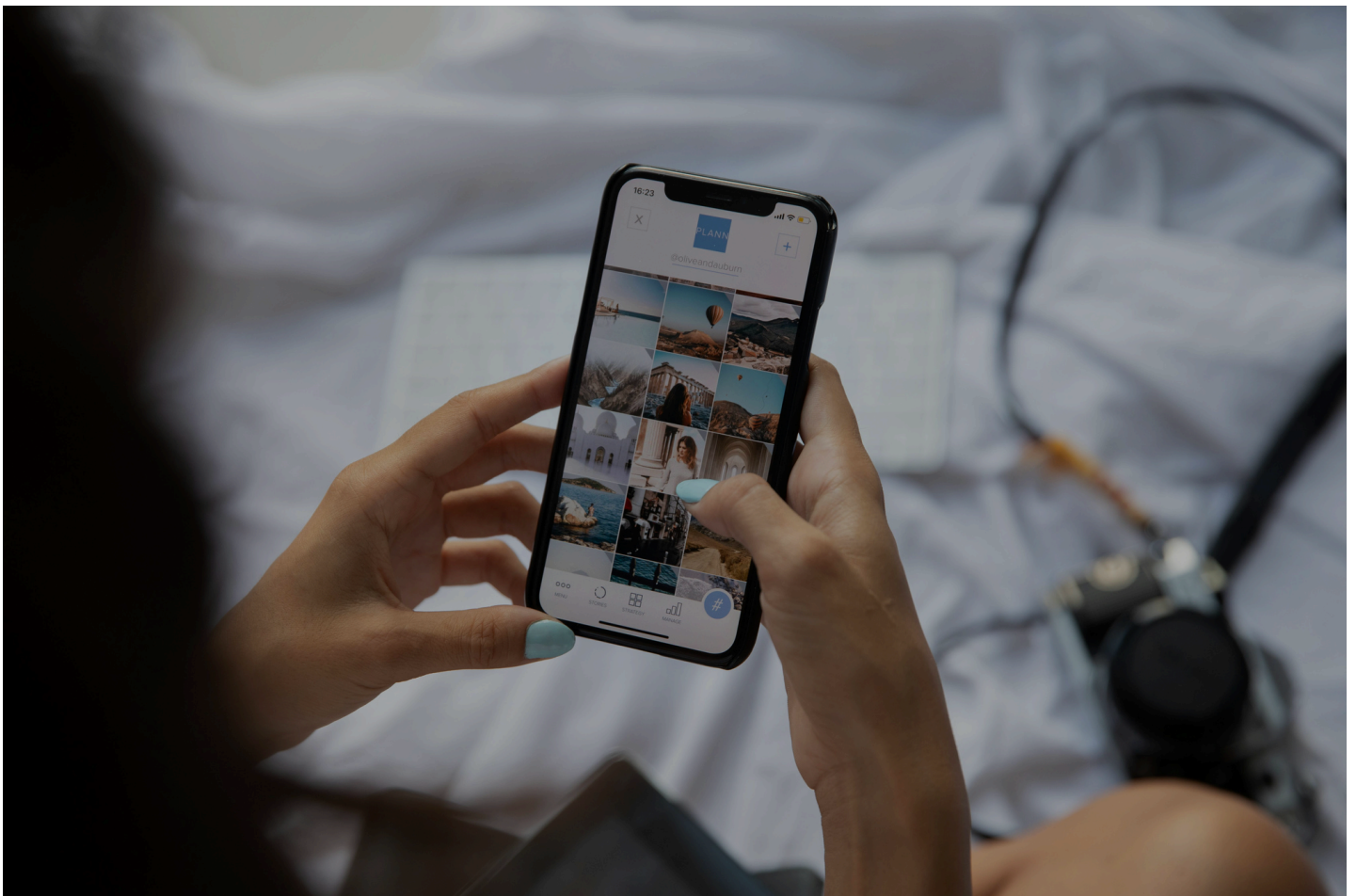


HOW DOES DIGITAL STORYTELLING IMPACT YOUTH TOURISM AND YOUNG TRAVELERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DESTINATIONS AND TRAVEL, SPECIFICALLY REGARDING SUSTAINABILITY?



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How does digital storytelling impact youth tourism and young travelers' perceptions of destinations and travel, specifically regarding sustainability?

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
1. Introduction.....	6
2. Research Questions & Objectives.....	9
3. Literature Review.....	12
3.1. Defining Youth Tourism	12
3.2. Youth Tourists behaviors, motivations and impact.....	13
3.3. Sustainability and it's Position within Youth Tourism	19
3.4 The Positive Impact of Responsible Travel	22
3.5. Digital Platforms in Tourism	23
3.6. Digital Storytelling.....	26
3.7. Digital Natives	28
3.8. The Role of Digital Platforms in Shaping Travel Behaviors.....	31
4. Methodology.....	35
4.1. Research Philosophy	36
4.2. Research Approach.....	37
4.3. Data Collection	39
4.3.1 Survey Design.....	40
4.3.2. Conducting Survey	42
4.3.3. Interviews Design	44
4.3.4. Conducting Interviews.....	46
4.4. Data Analysis.....	48
4.4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis (Survey).....	48
4.4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis (Interviews)	49
4.4.3. Integration and Triangulation of Findings	50
4.4.4. Confrontation with Literature Review (Developing the Discussion).....	51
5. Data Analysis	53
5.1. Analysis of Survey Data	53
5.1.1 Digital-Native Travelers: Critical Engagement with Online Content	54
5.1.2 The Intention-Action Gap in Sustainable Travel.....	60
5.1.3 Post-Travel Reflections: Aligning Expectations with Reality.....	63
5.2. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data.....	65
5.2.1. The Authenticity-Expectation Gap in Digital Destination Portrayals	66
5.2.2. Trust and Authenticity in Digital Travel Content.....	68
5.2.3. Navigating Sustainable Travel: Intentions, Barriers, and the Drive for Local Impact	69
5.2.4. Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Responsible Travel & Social Change.....	71
5.2.5. The Evolving Traveler: Consciousness and Criticality	72
5.3. Integration and Triangulation of Findings.....	74
6. Findings & Discussion	80
6.1. Integrated Findings.....	80
6.1.1. The Authenticity-Expectation Gap in Digital Destination Portrayals	80
6.1.2. Trust and Authenticity in Digital Travel Content.....	81
6.1.3. Navigating Sustainable Travel: Intentions, Barriers, and the Drive for Local Impact	82
6.1.4. Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Responsible Travel & Social Change.....	83

6.1.5. The Evolving Traveler: Consciousness and Criticality	84
6.2. Discussion: Theoretical Contributions and Emerging Frameworks.....	85
6.2.1. The Digital Authenticity Paradox	86
6.2.2. Constructed Digital Trust	86
6.2.3. Negotiated Sustainability Practice	87
6.2.4. Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism.....	87
6.2.5. The Digital Sustainability Dilemma (Green Travel Paradox)	88
6.3. Limitations and Future Research.....	89
7. Conclusions.....	92
7.1. Summary of Key Findings	92
7.2. Main Contributions	93
7.3. Limitations and Future Research.....	95
References	97
Appendix.....	102
Declaration of Generative AI Use.....	102
Interviews Questions & Summary	104
Survey.....	128

Abstract

In the recent years the world has witnessed a profound transformation in global travel, largely driven by **digitalization**. Digital platforms and **digital storytelling** have emerged as central sources of inspiration and information, fundamentally reshaping how young people discover, experience, and share their journeys (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However, this powerful influence presents a critical dilemma: while digital content construct wanderlust, it paradoxically risks fueling **overtourism**, misrepresenting cultures, and subtly hindering sustainable practices (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). This thesis explores the complex tension between idealized online portrayals of destinations and the real-world challenges of sustainable and authentic travel, focusing on how young travelers **actively perceive and construct their experiences** within this dynamic landscape.

This study aims to understand **how digital storytelling impacts youth tourism and young travelers' perceptions of destinations and travel, especially concerning sustainability**. Our objectives include critically assessing how digital storytelling shapes travel narratives, identifying how it influences the construction of trust in online content, analyzing the gap between sustainable intentions and actions, and evaluating digital platforms' potential to encourage responsible tourism and social change.

Rooted in a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), this research adopted an abductive, mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). We first conducted a quantitative online survey (n=221) to identify broad patterns in digital media use, travel habits, and sustainability attitudes among young European travelers. This was followed by qualitative in-depth interviews (n=8) to explore participants' personal interpretations and constructed experiences. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics for the survey and rigorous thematic analysis for the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006), then triangulated, with findings integrated with literature review to provide a comprehensive understanding of these subjective realities.

The research reveals five interconnected themes that illuminate how young travelers actively engage with digital influence:

- 1) A pervasive **Authenticity-Expectation Gap** between idealized online images and real destination experiences, challenging pre-conceived notions.

- 2) The active **Construction of Digital Trust**, where young travelers prioritize transparent, peer-generated, and candid digital stories over polished commercial content, shaping their understanding of credibility.
- 3) A consistent **Negotiated Sustainability Practice**, showing that ethical intentions often clash with practical barriers (like cost and convenience), though supporting local businesses remains a clear sustainable action, reflecting ongoing ethical compromises.
- 4) The strong belief that **Digital Platforms can be Powerful Drivers for Responsible Travel & Social Change**, with calls for platform improvements and amplified local voices, reflecting a constructed vision for collective action.
- 5) The emergence of the **Conscious Digital Traveler**, characterized by heightened media literacy, critical awareness, and a desire to actively shape ethical travel, embodying an evolving identity forged through digital interaction.

This thesis concludes that digital storytelling exerts a profound and often contradictory influence on youth tourism, offering both immense inspiration and significant challenges to authenticity and sustainability, as perceived and experienced by young travelers. It contributes theoretically by introducing the **Digital Authenticity Paradox**, **Constructed Digital Trust**, **Negotiated Sustainability Practice**, **Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism**, and the overarching **Digital Sustainability Dilemma (Green Travel Paradox)**. Practically, it provides actionable insights for platforms, destinations, and businesses to use digital media more ethically and effectively, fostering genuinely sustainable and authentic travel experiences for younger generations, aligned with their evolving constructed realities of responsible travel.

1. Introduction

The early 21st century has seen rapid technological growth, fundamentally changing many parts of life, including how people travel globally. A key part of this change is **digitalization**, which has transformed how individuals discover, plan, experience, and share their journeys. At the same time, **youth tourism** has emerged as a significant and growing part of the economy. Young travelers are often very mobile, comfortable with technology from a young age, and increasingly look for genuine cultural experiences, adventure, and meaningful trips (Richards & Wilson, 2004). This group shows a strong desire to travel; for instance, the **World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) highlights youth travel as a powerful and growing segment, underscoring its significant potential and evolving characteristics within the global tourism landscape** (UNWTO, 2018). This combination of digitalization and highly mobile youth travel forms the contemporary backdrop against which this thesis is set.

A major aspect of this digital shift is the increasing importance of **digital platforms**. Popular social media sites like Instagram and TikTok, along with video platforms such as YouTube and specialized travel blogs, have become more than just communication tools. They are now powerful sources of travel ideas and information. Studies consistently show this dominance; research indicates that a **large number of travelers, especially younger ones, depend on social media for new destination ideas and inspiration** (Statista, 2023; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). These platforms create a unique space where **digital storytelling** thrives, allowing people to actively create and share stories about their travel experiences using various multimedia formats (Couldry, 2012). This content, made by users themselves, is often seen as more believable and relatable than traditional advertisements. It greatly affects how people view destinations, influences their travel choices, and builds new online communities among travelers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The act of sharing and consuming these digital stories has become a vital part of modern travel, with people spending a lot of time engaging with travel content online, often several times a week (eMarketer, 2023).

At the same time, the global discussion about **sustainability** has become more urgent, affecting all industries, including tourism. It is now crucial to address environmental damage, social inequality, and the loss of cultural heritage, especially for a generation keenly aware of global issues. For young travelers, sustainability is not just an abstract idea; it is an increasingly important factor that shapes their desire for responsible, ethical, and impactful travel

experiences. Research shows that **younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) consistently demonstrate a higher level of environmental awareness and prefer sustainable products and services more** than older groups (Deloitte, 2021; Nielsen, 2018). This commitment positions youth tourism as a potential contributor to sustainable development. However, actually putting these ideals into practice within the complex tourism industry remains a significant challenge, highlighted by a noticeable **intention-action gap where consumers' stated environmental concerns do not always lead to actual sustainable buying behaviors**, often due to factors like price and convenience (Carrington et al., 2010; Font & McCabe, 2017).

The **main research problem** of this thesis focuses on the complex and often conflicting influence of digital platforms and digital storytelling on youth tourism. This is especially true concerning the crucial link between sustainability and authentic cultural representation. While digital stories certainly inspire travel and make information more accessible, they also risk promoting **overtourism**, contributing to the **misrepresentation or commodification of local cultures**, and unintentionally **hindering truly sustainable practices**. Research indicates that the **carefully chosen nature of social media content can lead to idealized images of destinations, creating unrealistic expectations and causing disappointment for visitors** (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Furthermore, the **"dark side" of social media in tourism** can present significant challenges for sustainable tourism development, exacerbating issues of overtourism and undermining authentic experiences (Hall, 2019). The ongoing **gap between intending to be sustainable and actually acting sustainably in travel**, where ethical values often take a backseat to practical limitations like affordability (a major obstacle mentioned in studies on sustainable consumption; Font & McCabe, 2017), highlights this challenge. Understanding this dynamic is vital for both its **academic and practical importance**. Academically, this study adds to the developing theories in tourism, media, and sustainability research. It specifically explores concepts such as the **Digital Authenticity Paradox, Constructed Digital Trust, Negotiated Sustainability Practice, and Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism**. Practically, the findings offer useful advice for destination managers, tourism businesses, content creators, and policymakers on how to use digital platforms more effectively and ethically to encourage truly sustainable practices, reduce negative impacts, and promote genuine cultural exchange.

Despite the growing amount of research on digitalization in tourism and the importance of sustainability, a significant **research gap** still exists, particularly at the nuanced intersection of

these fields. While existing studies broadly acknowledge the role of digital marketing or examine sustainability attitudes in general, there is a distinct lack of **in-depth, constructivist-informed research** that specifically investigates the *subtle, subjective ways* in which **digital storytelling shapes young travelers' perceptions and behaviors regarding sustainability and authenticity**. Previous research often observes *what* behaviors occur or *what* attitudes are held, but less attention has been paid to *how* young travelers, as active meaning-makers, interpret and internalize the complex and often contradictory narratives presented through digital platforms. Specifically, the dynamic processes behind the **observed gap between intention and action** in sustainable travel within a digital context, or the intricate ways young travelers **construct and deconstruct trust in online stories** (e.g., what specific clues and validations they look for in user-generated content versus influencer marketing), have not been fully explored from a qualitative, experience-based viewpoint. This thesis aims to critically delve into this specific lacuna, providing a deeper, more complete understanding of these complex dynamics. It draws on the real experiences of a highly mobile, digitally native, and multinational group of young European travelers. The study seeks to move beyond simple observations to uncover the underlying processes of meaning-making that define modern youth travel.

2. Research Questions & Objectives

This research explores how young travelers actively construct their understanding of the relationship between digital platforms, tourism, and sustainability. We aim to understand **how digital storytelling impacts youth tourism and their perceptions of tourism, specifically regarding sustainability**. We acknowledge that these perceptions are not fixed but are actively shaped by individual experiences and interpretations within the digital landscape (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998).

The core research question guiding this study, directly derived from our thesis title, is:

How does digital storytelling impact youth tourism and young travelers' perceptions of destinations and travel, specifically regarding sustainability?

To explore the nuances of this question, we break it down into the following sub-questions, each emphasizing the active role of young travelers in constructing meaning:

1. **How do young travelers, through their engagement with digital storytelling, actively construct and interpret destination narratives, and how does this process relate to their perceptions of authenticity and sustainability?**

This question focuses on the active interpretation of digital narratives. It moves beyond simply asking *what* they see to explore *how* young travelers, based on their individual experiences and values, make sense of and internalize the stories told through various digital formats (e.g., vlogs, Instagram posts). It directly addresses the emerging **Digital Authenticity Paradox** and its influence on their understanding of destination portrayals.

2. **In what ways does digital storytelling influence the formation of Constructed Digital Trust among young travelers, and how does this trust (or lack thereof) shape their perceptions of sustainable destination and cultural representations?**

This refines the focus on trust, exploring how young travelers actively assess the credibility and reliability of different forms of digital storytelling. It investigates what cues (e.g., transparency, rawness, peer validation) contribute to their trust in online narratives, and how

this trust, in turn, shapes their understanding of a destination's cultural integrity and its commitment to sustainability.

3. How do young travelers negotiate their sustainable travel intentions with practical behaviors within a digitally mediated context, reflecting the concept of Negotiated Sustainability Practice as it is informed and challenged by digital storytelling?

This sub-question explicitly examines the interplay between digital storytelling and the persistent intention-action gap in sustainable travel. It explores how digital narratives (e.g., budget travel guides, eco-friendly promotions) inform or challenge their ethical aspirations, and what perceived barriers (e.g., cost, convenience, accessibility of options) shape their real-world sustainable choices. The focus is on understanding the active negotiation process young travelers undertake.

4. How can digital platforms and digital storytelling be leveraged to foster Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism and drive social change in tourism, particularly concerning sustainable practices and local community benefit?

This question evaluates the proactive role of digital platforms. It explores how digital storytelling can be used to promote sustainable practices, address issues like overtourism, amplify local voices, and encourage ethical engagement with destinations, aligning with the theoretical contribution of Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism.

Objectives:

Our objectives are designed to systematically address these research questions and contribute meaningfully to the evolving understanding of youth tourism:

1. To critically assess how digital storytelling facilitates the construction and dissemination of youth tourism narratives, specifically analyzing its role in shaping perceptions of authenticity and its impact on the authenticity-expectation gap concerning destination sustainability.

This objective aims for a deep analysis of how various forms of digital storytelling (e.g., vlogs, social media posts, travel blogs) function as mediums for creating and interpreting youth travel experiences, with a specific focus on how these narratives, and their perceived authenticity, shape expectations regarding a destination's sustainable character.

2. **To identify the key criteria and processes through which young travelers construct digital trust in online travel content, impacting their perceptions of sustainable destination and cultural representations.**

This objective focuses on understanding the active evaluation process by which young travelers assess the credibility of digital storytelling. It examines how transparency, relatability, and peer validation within these narratives influence their understanding and acceptance of a destination's cultural and environmental integrity.

3. **To analyze the interplay between young travelers' sustainable travel intentions and their actual behaviors, elucidating the barriers and motivations that define Negotiated Sustainability Practice in a digitally informed context.**

This objective aims to pinpoint specific factors (e.g., affordability, accessibility, greenwashing concerns) that, as informed by digital storytelling, either encourage or hinder the adoption of sustainable tourism practices, with a particular emphasis on the role of digital narratives in framing and influencing these choices.

4. **To evaluate the potential of digital platforms and digital storytelling to drive Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism, fostering social sustainability and ethical engagement within the youth tourism sector.**

This objective explores how digital tools and the narratives shared through them can empower local communities, promote ethical interactions between tourists and hosts, facilitate forms of tourism that directly benefit local populations, and actively mitigate negative impacts like overtourism, ultimately aiming to define best practices for responsible digital storytelling within the tourism industry.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Defining Youth Tourism

Youth tourism traces its origins to Europe's "Grand Tours" of the 18th century, during which young aristocrats embarked on educational journeys to explore cultural and historical landmarks across the continent (Horak and Weber, 2014). These trips were considered a rite of passage for the elite, symbolizing both status and intellectual enrichment. However, what began as a privilege reserved for the wealthy started to evolve in the early 20th century, as the concept of youth travel expanded to include a broader demographic, marking the beginning of its transformation into a more inclusive and widespread phenomenon.

In 1912, a German teacher by the name of Richard Schirrmann, established the world's first youth hostel in Altena Castle, Germany, he was also the one to organize the first trips for school children. Through this initiative he was able to provide affordable accommodation and foster a sense of adventure and learning among young people, laying the groundwork for the modern youth tourism movement (Horak and Weber, 2014). This idea of youth hostels quickly rose in popularity, spreading across Europe and later globally, particularly after World War II, as young people sought opportunities for exploration, cultural exchange, and personal growth. Thanks to these early developments the transition of youth tourism to a more accessible and widespread phenomenon was finally possible, marking the start of its evolution into the diverse and influential market it is today.

Due to this, youth tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing segments in the global tourism industry, challenging traditional perceptions of young travelers as low-spending tourists. Usually defined as a segment of people "aged between 15 and 29" (Khoo-Lattimore and Yang, 2018, p. 2), the definition of 'youth' is currently changing, with some scholars referring to people whose mobility is greatest, rather than purely basing it on age (Horak and Weber, 2014). This is because of a phenomenon referred to as "extended adolescence" (Stetka, 2017, as cited in Khoo-Lattimore and Yang, 2018, p. 2), where essentially young people now spend longer periods in university, delay entering the workforce, and leave home much later in life, resulting in a broader and more diverse market segment. They are characterized by their high mobility, flexible schedules, and preference for longer trips, often engaging in diverse activities such as backpacking, adventure tourism, volunteering, and nightlife tourism (Khoo-Lattimore and Yang, 2018).

With the youth travel market valued at over 190 billion USD and young travelers spending significantly more per trip than the average international tourist (Richards 2011), this segment has become a focal point for both industry stakeholders and researchers. The growth in their economic influence has solidified youth tourism as key market segment, as well as highlighted it's potential to bring forth innovation in the tourism industry. Young travelers are shaping travel trends more than ever, while also putting significant value on cultural exchange, authentic experiences, sustainability and personal growth, over the more traditional tourism offers. Due to this, we can see destinations and businesses adapting in ways that help them cater to this demographic, creating products and services that align with the younger generation's unique preferences and values.

Essentially, youth tourism has transformed from a privilege of the elite, to a global phenomenon, driven by the evolving needs and aspirations of young travelers - this segment has grown into a powerful force that is reshaping the tourism industry. Today, young travelers are redefining what it means to explore the world and as their influence continues to grow, understanding and adapting to this dynamic market will be essential for the future of tourism, ensuring it remains inclusive, innovative, and responsive to the next generation of explorers.

3.2. Youth Tourists behaviors, motivations and impact

Today, youth tourists account for a substantial share of international trips - approximately 20% in Europe alone during the late 20th century (ATI, 1995) - and their behaviors reflect shifting priorities in contemporary tourism: a quest for experiential depth over passive leisure, and a blurring of boundaries between tourism, education, and cultural exchange. On this chapter, we will analyze the different motivations, behavioral patterns, economic and social impacts, as well as the possible future trends of youth tourists, by drawing on empirical studies and market analyses that highlight the segment's growing influence on global tourism.

Motivational Shifts: From Cultural Exploration to Identity Construction

Youth tourists typically reject conventional mass tourism labels, preferring identifiers like "traveler" or "backpacker" to emphasize their pursuit of meaningful experiences (Richards & Wilson, 2004a). The ISTC/ATLAS survey in 2002 reveals that 83% prioritize cultural exploration, 74% seek excitement, and 69% pursue knowledge, framing tourism as both self-

development and a modern "rite of passage" (Desforges, 1998). These patterns are essentially driven by four primary motivations: experience-seeking, relaxation, social bonding, and altruism (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

While some travelers, like backpackers, emphasize deep cultural immersion, others pragmatically blend tourism with visits to friends and family, complicating some more simplistic portrayals of this alternative travel culture. This tension between individualism and social structures is further illuminated by contrasting academic perspectives: Richards and Wilson (2003) position youth tourism as an individualistic identity project centered on authentic, off-the-beaten-path experiences, whereas Horak and Weber (2000) highlight its institutional dimensions through programs like EU educational exchanges and hostel networks, demonstrating how policy and infrastructure shape collective travel patterns. Despite these interpretive differences, both studies agree that youth tourism remains fundamentally experience-driven - whether through solitary backpacking journeys or organized group travel, young tourists consistently prioritize cultural engagement, learning, and personal growth over passive leisure, revealing the multiple layers by which this phenomenon resists a simplistic categorization.

The primary motivations of youth tourists have remained remarkably consistent across decades; however, twenty-first century developments have complicated this narrative. The ISTC/ATLAS longitudinal studies reveal a 50% decline in backpacker self-identification since 2002 (Richards, 2015), replaced by new categories that reflect technological and economic changes. "Flashpackers" – tech-equipped travelers blending budget consciousness with digital convenience – now dominate many traditional backpacker routes. More significantly, the emergence of "global nomads" represents a fundamental shift from tourism as temporary escape to mobility as permanent lifestyle. These digital workers, constituting approximately 35% of long-term youth travelers (Richards, 2015), prioritize location-independent careers over traditional tourism markers, using travel as both workplace and living space.

This evolution in motivation reflects deeper transformations within society. Where early youth travelers sought to "find themselves" through cultural immersion, contemporary nomads often travel to "create themselves" through hybrid work-travel lifestyles. The growth of work-travel platforms and digital nomad visas in countries like Portugal and Estonia institutionalizes this shift, suggesting that youth mobility has evolved from a transitory experience to a structurally recognized element of global work economies.

Behavioral Transformations: The Digital Revolution in Travel Practices

The "travel career" model (Pearce, 1993) gives insights into how youth tourism functions as a developmental process, with novices starting in "safe" destinations (Europe/North America) before progressing to more challenging regions like South Asia. Richards and Wilson (2003) validate this progression, showing how extended multi-country trips generate significant spending despite the low daily expenses, while Horak and Weber (2000) give some macroeconomic context – “European youth tourists contributed €55.5 billion annually in the 1990s, rivaling mainstream markets”. These financial impacts emerge through an interplay of institutional frameworks (hostels or Interrail systems) and more organic networks (via travel guides and digital communities), manifesting the field's dual characteristics: simultaneously institutionalized through EU mobility programs yet fiercely individualistic in its rejection of conventional tourism paradigms (Horak and Weber, 2000). The tension between these dimensions - independent exploration versus structured opportunities - ultimately underscores youth tourism's complexity as both rite of passage and economic force.

The behavioral patterns of youth tourists have undergone radical changes since the turn of the millennium, primarily driven by technological innovation. Early studies emphasized the sector's reliance on informal networks – 71% used peer recommendations and 70% consulted guidebooks for trip planning (ISTC/ATLAS, 2002). While these patterns persist, they now coexist with digitally-enabled behaviors that have redefined youth mobility. Essentially, highlighting the existence of three key behavioral shifts:

First, the democratization of travel information has reduced reliance on traditional intermediaries. Where 65% of early 2000s youth travelers still used travel agents for critical bookings (ISTC/ATLAS, 2002), today's travelers use meta-search engines and sharing economy platforms to construct itineraries in real-time. This has increased spontaneity – a 2022 *Nomad List* survey found 82% of digital nomads make accommodation decisions less than 72 hours in advance.

Second, the nature of travel duration has transformed. While extended trips remain common (averaging 60+ days), the concept of a "trip" itself has blurred. Digital nomads engage in continuous mobility, with 28% having no fixed return date (Richards, 2015). This challenges Pearce's (1993) travel career model, which presumed eventual reintegration into sedentary

lifestyles. Instead, a new paradigm of "location hopping" has emerged, where travelers establish temporary bases for months before moving on.

Third, spending patterns have become more complex. The persistent "budget traveler" stereotype obscures the reality that youth tourists now exhibit split ways of spending their money – saving aggressively on accommodation (via hostels or house-sitting) while splurging on experiences and technology. The average digital nomad spends \$2,200 monthly (Nomad List, 2022), comparable to mid-range conventional tourists but distributed differently across budget categories.

Economic Impact and Contributions

The economic impact of youth tourism is consistently underestimated due to its paradoxical financial dynamics. While daily expenditures remain modest, cumulative spending generates substantial revenue, particularly in long-stay destinations like Australasia (Richards and Wilson, 2003). This economic footprint exists because of extended durations (often exceeding 60 days) that transform small daily spendings into significant cumulative contributions. Backpacker enclaves exemplify this multiplier effect, sustaining entire ecosystems of budget accommodations, tour operators, and local services while promoting off-the-beaten-path destinations (WTO, 2002).

Horak and Weber's (2000) European analysis demonstrates this impact by highlighting a 'paradox' in youth tourism economics: while accounting for only 25% of trips, young travelers contribute 20% of regional tourism expenditure. Their extended stays redistribute spending into secondary markets (transportation, dining) - a finding that challenged industry assumptions. This becomes possible, since the modest daily budgets yield significant value through the cumulative spending on prolonged trip durations. As such, youth tourism's economic impact can be said to operate across three levels:

At the micro level, backpacker enclaves continue thriving by adapting to new traveler preferences. Traditional hostel beds now compete with "poshtels" offering premium amenities, while entire business ecosystems (laundry services, tour operators, coworking spaces) develop around traveler hubs. In Lisbon, digital nomad-focused businesses grew 340% between 2015-2020 (Portuguese Tourism Board, 2021).

At the macro level, governments increasingly recognize youth tourism's long-term value. The success of working holiday visa programs demonstrates how temporary youth migrants can address labor shortages while stimulating tourism. More recently, digital nomad visas aim to capture this demographic's spending power over extended periods.

At the structural level, youth travel drives tourism diversification. Young travelers' willingness to venture beyond traditional destinations has helped decentralize tourism flows, with secondary cities like Porto (Portugal) and Da Nang (Vietnam) emerging as major hubs.

Cultural Impact: The Paradox of Influence and Displacement

Building on its economic footprint, youth tourism generates a profound yet paradoxical cultural influence that oscillates between meaningful exchange and disruptive transformation. As cultural intermediaries, young travelers demonstrate remarkably high engagement with local communities: 77% visit historical sites and 68% participate in festivals (ISTC/ATLAS, 2002), while their prolonged stays foster deeper connections than conventional tourism allows. This manifests through voluntourism programs, niche cultural interests and grassroots interactions that promote what Richards and Wilson (2004) refer as "global youth culture."

Yet this cultural mediation carries inherent contradictions. The same extended stays that enable authentic exchange often trigger gentrification, particularly with the rise of digital nomads. Lisbon's Intendente district saw rents surge 137% following nomad influx (Saaristo & Silva, 2024) replicating patterns observed in Bangkok's Khao San Road and Barcelona's El Raval. These areas undergo a cyclical transformation: initial cultural discovery attracts youth travelers, whose presence commercializes the very authenticity they sought, ultimately displacing local residents.

The tension reflects in policy approaches. While EU programs successfully harness youth mobility for multiculturalism (Horak & Weber, 2000), the growing nomad demographic - 35% of whom reside abroad indefinitely (Richards, 2015) - increasingly operates outside formal frameworks. This creates a paradox where youth tourists simultaneously strengthen cultural bridges through engagement while inadvertently undermining community preservation through displacement - a duality that demands a careful governance approach to sustain tourism's cultural benefits without sacrificing local integrity.

Future Trends: Professionalization, Diversification, and Policy Support

Looking ahead, youth tourism stands at a crossroads shaped by three transformative forces. Richards and Wilson (2003) anticipate market professionalization through global brands that will cater to the demand for affordable reliability, alongside explosive growth in emerging markets like China and India where rising incomes fuel travel aspirations. This commercial evolution converges with Horak and Weber's (2000) policy-focused vision of expanded EU educational exchanges and demographic shifts, as UNESCO projected 97 million students by 2015 would sustain demand for structured programs. Both studies fundamentally agree on youth tourism's enduring economic value, recognizing that early travel experiences cultivate lifelong tourists.

The sector now faces unprecedented evolution. First, nomadic infrastructure is undergoing rapid institutionalization, with brands transforming anti-establishment travel into standardized offerings, including innovative "travel degree" programs. Second, sustainability tensions escalate as perpetual mobility's carbon footprint clashes with eco-conscious values, propelling slow travel networks and green hostels as compromise solutions. More importantly, policy frameworks lag behind reality - traditional visa systems struggle to accommodate digital nomads' indefinite mobility, creating legal gray zones that may require transnational agreements to resolve. These developments reveal youth tourism's central paradox: its countercultural roots are being reshaped by the very commercialization and institutionalization it once resisted, even as it continues driving tourism's global transformation.

In conclusion, youth tourism has evolved from a countercultural movement to a dynamic economic force that continues to shape global mobility patterns. By synthesizing the foundational work of Richards and Wilson (2003) and Horak and Weber (2000), we see how this sector balances individual agency with structural influences: where experience-driven motivations meet institutional frameworks like EU mobility programs. While early research accurately predicted the market's professionalization and economic impact (debunking the "low-budget traveler" myth), it underestimated digitalization's transformative role. The rise of flashpackers and global nomads redefined youth mobility as a permanent lifestyle rather than a life stage, creating paradoxes where anti-system travelers simultaneously drive demand for nomadic infrastructure.

The implications are clear: youth tourism is neither niche nor transient. Its extended durations generate substantial economic value, while its cultural impact oscillates between exchange and disruption, as seen in gentrified neighborhoods across the globe. As youth tourism blurs boundaries between work, travel, and identity, it remains a powerful barometer of broader societal shifts—challenging destinations to harness its potential while mitigating its pressures on housing and local cultures. The sector's future lies in navigating these tensions, ensuring youth mobility remains both sustainable and transformative.

3.3. Sustainability and it's Position within Youth Tourism

When considering the development of tourist destinations, nowadays, sustainability is one of the most important factors to consider (Kronenberg et al., 2020). As such, it is important to keep the balance between the attractiveness of a destination and the impacts a higher number of visitors may cause on that location. As Kronenberg (2020) puts it, a destination's appeal lies in how well it fulfills visitors' expectations in terms of amenities, activities, natural scenery, and biodiversity, but some of the factors that shape the attractiveness of a location, will most likely also affect the environment as a result.

It is thus, easy to understand why sustainability has emerged as a key concern when discussing modern tourism development. Sustainable tourism requires a carefully designed and managed approach that is able to last long-term while minimizing the negative impacts on both ecological systems and local societies. Its primary goal is to prevent environmental degradation, ensuring that tourism activities do not disrupt natural processes or hinder other essential developments.

The concept of sustainability was formally defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report as *"meeting present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet theirs"*. This idea gained traction in the tourism field, after the 1992 United Nation's Earth Summit, which led to the development of Agenda 21 - a blueprint for sustainable development, that scholars started to apply in the industry. Some years after, when many started to address their concerns over tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts, UNEP and UNTWO, joined forces and outlined the three pillars of sustainable tourism:

1. **Economic Sustainability** – Ensuring long-term viability for businesses while fostering equitable prosperity.
2. **Social Sustainability** – Promoting human rights, fair benefit distribution, and cultural preservation, with a focus on empowering local communities.
3. **Environmental Sustainability** – Protecting natural resources, reducing pollution, and conserving biodiversity and heritage.

(UNEP & UNWTO, 2005, p.9)

Although some scholars saw these guidelines as being too broad, they have helped the sector evolve towards a more sustainable future, even if the term “sustainable development” is somewhat paradoxical in itself, since it combines the idea of “sustainable”, that implies upholding a steady state, with “development”, which usually gives the idea of growth (Cotterell, D. et al, Journal of Sustainable development, 2019), it has given the sector the right foundations to develop in the years to come. However, implementing sustainable tourism remains challenging, with debates about its practicality and concerns that tourism may never be fully sustainable (Sedai, 2006).

While these tensions between sustainability and development persist at the theoretical level, they manifest concretely in the youth tourism sector, where young travelers represent both a significant challenge and remarkable opportunity for sustainable tourism, as their behaviors today will shape industry practices for decades to come. Recent scholarship has identified young travelers (typically aged 18-26) as a demographic paradox in sustainability terms. Research by Grønhøj and Thøgersen (2009) demonstrates that while young people generally possess greater environmental knowledge than older generations, they frequently struggle to translate this awareness into action - what Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) term the "value-action gap." This disconnect becomes particularly evident in contexts like Korea's Rail-ro backpacking culture, where despite explosive growth in participation (from 7,868 passes in 2007 to 173,654 in 2012 according to Bae & Chick, 2016), the environmental impact of mass youth travel remains largely unaddressed.

Three key factors emerge as critical for fostering sustainable behaviors among young travelers. First, moral norms - defined by Bamberg et al. (2007) as internalized feelings of obligation to act pro-environmentally - show the strongest correlation with actual sustainable practices. Kim's (2017) study found moral norm accounted for up to 71% of variance in intentions to

protect natural resources. Second, environmental awareness serves as a crucial moderator; youth with high awareness are 62% more likely to choose sustainable options when traveling. Third, ascribed responsibility - the belief that one shares accountability for environmental impacts - proves particularly effective in resource conservation contexts ($\beta = 0.79$, $p < .01$ in Kim's 2017 study).

However, significant barriers persist. The tourism industry continues to grapple with what Ko (2005) identifies as the "incalculable" nature of sustainability goals, while youth face unique constraints including budget limitations (Nash et al., 2006) and competing social pressures. Compounding these challenges, Boyle et al. (2015) found that educators themselves often hold only "weak to moderate" conceptualizations of sustainability, potentially limiting effective transmission of these values to students.

Practical pathways forward emerge from these findings. Destination managers might employ social norm messaging (e.g., "Most guests reuse towels") which Goldstein et al. (2008) showed can increase compliance by 26%. Cost remains a critical factor; providing affordable sustainable options aligns with the budget-conscious reality of most young travelers (Bae & Chick, 2016). Educational interventions, both formal and through tourism marketing, could strengthen the moral norms and environmental awareness that drive sustainable choices.

As the WTO (2004) emphasizes, effective measurement remains crucial. For youth tourism, focusing on concrete indicators like recycling participation rates or energy savings in hostels can make abstract principles tangible. While the inherent tension between "development" and "sustainability" noted by Cotterell et al. (2019) persists, the youth travel sector offers a promising arena for reconciling these priorities through targeted, evidence-based interventions.

Despite these challenges, the growing engagement of young travelers with sustainability principles offers tangible hope for the industry's future. As moral norms and environmental awareness gradually reshape youth travel behaviors—from Rail-ro backpackers adopting reusable products to student groups prioritizing eco-certified accommodations—these incremental changes collectively demonstrate responsible travel's potential to mitigate tourism's environmental footprint while amplifying its socioeconomic benefits. This emerging paradigm shift naturally leads us to examine the measurable positive impacts of responsible travel practices in youth tourism, where reduced resource consumption, strengthened

community partnerships, and heightened environmental stewardship are already yielding transformative results.

3.4 The Positive Impact of Responsible Travel

A quiet revolution is sweeping across the global tourism industry as responsible travel practices demonstrate their remarkable capacity to create meaningful, measurable change. Beyond simply reducing harm, sustainable tourism is emerging as a powerful force for positive transformation - benefiting ecosystems, local communities, and businesses alike. The latest research reveals how conscientious travel choices are generating tangible impacts that extend far beyond individual trips to influence broader systemic change.

Environmental breakthroughs are being achieved through innovative, guest-centric approaches. Groundbreaking studies have documented how subtle behavioral interventions can yield dramatic results. When hotels implemented real-time eco-feedback systems in showers, guests unconsciously reduced their shower time by an average of 71 seconds - conserving approximately 9.5 liters of water per shower while reporting no decrease in satisfaction (Pereira-Doel et al., 2024). Such psychologically-informed solutions prove that sustainability doesn't require sacrifice, but rather smart design. With accommodations responsible for a significant 6.37% of tourism's global carbon footprint (Booking.com, 2024), these types of innovations are critical for achieving the sector's ambitious emission reduction targets.

The economic case for sustainable tourism has never been stronger. Contrary to outdated perceptions that sustainability compromises profitability, recent data shows that 74% of environmental impact-reduction investments in hospitality deliver positive financial returns within 15 years. This compelling business case aligns perfectly with shifting consumer preferences - a remarkable 83% of modern travelers now actively seek sustainable options when planning their trips (Booking.com, 2024). Properties that communicate their sustainability efforts effectively enjoy measurable competitive advantages. For instance, research by the University of Surrey, Accor and Booking.com demonstrated how reframing food waste messaging as "Plan Your Plate with Pride" simultaneously increased perceived property responsibility by 67% while reducing guest skepticism about sustainability claims by an impressive 54%.

Perhaps most inspiring are the profound ripple effects that responsible travel creates. The transformative power of sustainable tourism extends far beyond immediate environmental metrics or short-term economic benefits. Some 67% of travelers report that witnessing sustainability practices during their journeys fundamentally changes their daily behaviors long after returning home (Booking.com, 2024). This multiplier effect suggests that thoughtful tourism initiatives may be one of our most effective tools for inspiring widespread societal change. When guests experience firsthand how small actions - like reusing towels or supporting local artisans - can create meaningful impact, they become ambassadors for sustainability in their own communities.

The evidence is clear: responsible travel has evolved from a niche concern to a powerful movement that is reshaping the tourism industry and beyond. As innovative operators continue to refine their approaches and share best practices, we're seeing the emergence of a new tourism paradigm - one where every stay, every meal, and every excursion becomes an opportunity to create positive change. This isn't just the future of travel; it's a blueprint for how industries worldwide can align economic success with environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

3.5. Digital Platforms in Tourism

The tourism industry has undergone a significant transformation with the increasing integration of digital platforms. While online booking platforms such as Booking.com and Airbnb have gained much attention, social media platforms have emerged as powerful forces in the tourism sector, profoundly influencing how travelers access, share, and act upon information related to their trips. These platforms, which include Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TripAdvisor, among others, have shifted the balance of power in the tourism information ecosystem by empowering travelers to create and share content. As a result, consumer-generated content (CGC) now plays a central role in shaping tourism marketing, consumer decision-making, and the overall travel experience.

Digital platforms are no longer limited to merely connecting suppliers to consumers; they have evolved to become spaces for innovation and user interaction, driven by continuous feedback and content shared by travelers themselves. The iterative innovation of digital platforms, including social media, is crucial for maintaining their competitiveness (F. Qu et al, 2024).

Social media platforms are particularly influential because they facilitate the exchange of personal travel experiences, opinions, and recommendations. This consumer-generated content offers a level of authenticity that traditional tourism marketing strategies cannot match. This way, social media platforms allow users not only to share their travel experiences but also to shape the experiences of others, making them an integral part of the tourism information domain.

The growing importance of social media in tourism has led to its integration into the online tourism domain, a term coined by *Xiang et al. (2008)* to describe the vast digital space where information about travel and tourism is exchanged. This domain includes all digital platforms, such as search engines, tourism websites, and social media, that travelers use to plan their trips. Social media platforms are now critical sources of information in this domain, as they enable travelers to access firsthand experiences and reviews that directly influence their decisions (*Xiang & Gretzel, 2010*). The increasing reliance on these platforms for travel information has led to a shift in how destinations and tourism businesses approach marketing, with an increasing focus on engaging with consumers on social media platforms.

One of the key features of social media platforms is their ability to generate substantial amounts of user-driven content, which, whether in the form of travel blogs, reviews, photos, or videos, is shaping how future travelers make decisions (*Xiang & Gretzel, 2010*). These platforms empower travelers to share their personal experiences, opinions, and insights, which others then use to make informed choices. As travelers increasingly turn to social media for recommendations, digital platforms have become key resources in the travel planning process that offer users a sense of community, where they can engage with others who have visited the same destinations, shared similar experiences, and offered their advice. However, the power of social media extends beyond just providing travel recommendations; it also enables travelers to relive and reconstruct their trips through shared experiences, social media platforms allow users to portray their travel experiences, which are then consumed by other travelers, effectively creating a cycle of shared content (*Xiang & Gretzel, 2010*). In this way, social media platforms not only facilitate the sharing of travel experiences but also mediate the way these experiences are represented, influencing future travel decisions.

Despite the benefits that social media brings to the tourism industry, it also creates new challenges for marketers, the overwhelming amount of information available on social media can make it difficult for travelers to navigate and determine the credibility of the content

(Messeni et al., 2020). Social media platforms are flooded with user-generated content, which can vary widely in terms of quality, accuracy, and relevance, as such, the iterative innovation of platforms is essential for maintaining the quality of user experiences and ensuring that content remains relevant to users' needs (F. Qu et al, 2024). The increasing volume of user-generated content on social media also means that tourism businesses must invest in managing their online presence and reputation. And since social media has changed the competitive landscape for tourism businesses, traditional tourism websites are now competing with social media platforms for attention in the online travel information space (Xiang et al., 2008). While search engines, such as Google, have been a primary gateway for travelers seeking information about destinations, accommodations, and activities, the dominance of social media in search engine results has made it more challenging for traditional tourism websites to maintain visibility, forcing tourism businesses to also focus on optimizing their content for social media platforms, as well as search engines, to ensure they remain competitive (Messeni et al., 2020).

The rise of social media in tourism has also been facilitated by the growing trend of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which includes online reviews, ratings, and recommendations, has become a significant factor influencing consumer decision-making in the tourism sector (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Travelers are increasingly turning to social media platforms to seek advice from fellow travelers, as the content shared on these platforms is perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional marketing messages.

The iterative nature of digital platforms, including social media, allows them to adapt to changing consumer needs and preferences (F. Qu et al, 2024) and this adaptability is essential in the fast-paced digital economy, where user expectations are constantly evolving. Social media platforms, by providing users with the tools to create, share, and comment on content, have become central hubs for travel information and the presence of social media in the search engine results page reflects their increasing dominance in the tourism information space (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The ranking algorithms of search engines prioritize content that is frequently updated, highly linked, and relevant to user queries, which makes social media an attractive source of information. In response to these changes, tourism businesses must adopt strategies to integrate social media into their broader digital marketing efforts. This can include engaging directly with consumers on social media platforms, creating shareable content, and leveraging user-generated content to promote destinations and services (Messeni et al., 2020). Social media influencers, for example, have become an increasingly popular tool for tourism

marketers, as these influencers can help spread positive messages about destinations and businesses to their large, engaged audiences.

In conclusion, social media platforms have become a central force in the tourism industry, transforming how travelers access and share information. The rise of social media in the tourism information domain represents a significant shift in the balance of power, with consumers now playing an active role in the creation and distribution of travel content. Social media's ability to facilitate the exchange of consumer-generated content has empowered travelers to share their experiences, shape perceptions, and influence the decisions of others, as a result, tourism businesses must adapt to this new reality by embracing social media as a key component of their marketing strategies, ensuring they remain competitive in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

3.6. Digital Storytelling

Nowadays, the digital landscape has transformed communication and digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool across various sectors: by combining traditional narrative methods with contemporary multimedia tools such as video, audio, images, and text, it provides a more dynamic, engaging, and immersive experience for both creators and audiences. As the world shifts towards digital, storytelling is not only evolving as an art form but also as an educational and marketing strategy that connects individuals, brands, and regions in meaningful and impactful ways. The role of digital storytelling extends far beyond simple entertainment or passive learning; it has found a robust place in areas like tourism, where storytelling is key to creating emotional connections between visitors and destinations.

Digital storytelling plays a significant role in tourism marketing and the promotion of destinations. In an era where tourism is increasingly driven by personal experiences and emotional connections, digital storytelling provides an avenue for destinations to craft authentic and immersive narratives that resonate with potential visitors, since it is not just about communicating the physical attributes of a destination but about crafting a compelling identity that connects emotionally with the audience (Bassano et al., 2019). When regions or tourism organizations share stories that highlight local culture, history, and traditions, they invite visitors to engage with these elements in a deeper, more personal way, and digital media amplifies this impact, as online platforms allow these stories to reach a wider audience.

Essentially, destinations can showcase their unique characteristics, creating a digital presence that engages potential visitors even before they physically arrive at the location.

Additionally, value co-creation is an important aspect of digital storytelling in tourism, because tourists share their own stories and experiences through online platforms, thus becoming co-creators of the destination's narrative. This user-generated content further enriches the destination's story and can serve as a powerful tool for attracting new visitors (Bassano et al., 2019). This way, digital storytelling creates a cycle of continuous engagement, where both tourists and destinations contribute to the evolving narrative. The use of **digital platforms** for tourism marketing allows destinations to tell their stories in innovative ways: videos, podcasts, and interactive websites offer tourists a preview of the destination's essence, creating excitement and anticipation before their visit.

Social media platforms also enable real-time interaction between tourists and destinations, allowing visitors to share their experiences and create a sense of community around a location, as such there has been a profound effect on the way tourism destinations communicate their stories. Traditionally, marketing campaigns were controlled by companies and destination managers, however, the rise of social media platforms has shifted the power to consumers, who now have the ability to share their experiences and shape the narrative surrounding a destination.

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or YouTube have become critical tools for tourism organizations to share their stories. Yet, they also allow tourists to share their personal experiences, photos, and videos, which in turn contribute to the destination's narrative. This shift to consumer-generated content amplifies the power of storytelling in tourism marketing, as potential visitors trust the experiences of other travelers more than traditional advertising (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In this context, digital storytelling becomes not just a way for destinations to market themselves, but also a tool for engagement and interaction, since social media allows tourism organizations to actively participate in conversations with tourists, responding to their feedback, showcasing user-generated content, and promoting personalized experiences that resonate with their audience.

Digital storytelling has proven to be a versatile and powerful tool that enhances learning, promotes engagement, and shapes marketing strategies across various sectors. In tourism marketing, digital storytelling helps destinations create compelling narratives that attract

visitors by highlighting unique cultural experiences and local traditions. Moreover, social media has revolutionized the role of digital storytelling by enabling consumers to co-create and share stories that contribute to the evolving narrative of a destination. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the integration of digital storytelling will become even more essential in marketing; by effectively leveraging technology and content, tourism marketers can continue to create immersive, engaging, and personalized experiences that resonate with their audiences.

3.7. Digital Natives

The term ‘Digital Natives’ has gained prominence in discussions about education, technology, and societal change. Coined by Marc Prensky, it refers to the generation of young people who have grown up surrounded by digital technology, such as computers, the internet, smartphones, video games, and social media. These technologies are integral to their daily lives, shaping their cognitive development, learning styles, and ways of interacting with the world. In contrast, ‘Digital Immigrants’ are those who were not born into this digital world but have had to adapt to its tools and technologies later in life (Prensky, 2012). The difference between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants is not just generational but also cognitive, as each group processes information in fundamentally different ways due to their respective exposure to digital technology.

Digital Natives are individuals who have spent their entire lives in a digital environment and this constant interaction with technology has not only made them more comfortable with it but has also fundamentally altered the way they think and process information (Prensky, 2012). Digital Natives are “native speakers” of the digital language, and they often navigate technology intuitively: they multitask, learn through interactive media, and prefer fast-paced, dynamic environments that provide instant feedback. On the other hand, Digital Immigrants are older generations who were not born into this digital world, and while many Digital Immigrants have embraced technology, they do so as “immigrants” in a foreign land (Prensky, 2012). Their learning of digital tools is slower and often accompanied by an “accent”, that is, they retain the habits and behaviors from their pre-digital upbringing and this contrast is evident in their approach to information processing, learning, and communication.

A key aspect of the distinction between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants lies in how each group approaches information. While for Digital Natives, accessing information via the internet is second nature, since they are used to the instantaneity of digital content and the ability to multitask across multiple platforms, for Digital Immigrants, who grew up in an era of slower, more linear information acquisition, often prefer a more deliberate and sequential approach to learning.

One of the most significant differences between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants is the impact that digital technology has on the brain. Research on neuroplasticity has shown that the brain can physically change in response to different stimuli and experiences and as Digital Natives have grown up surrounded by technology, their brains have likely been shaped by constant exposure to digital tools (Prensky, 2012). In his study, Prensky suggests that, much like how music training can enhance certain areas of the brain, the constant engagement with video games, social media, and digital devices has led to changes in brain structure and cognitive patterns among this younger generation. The brain areas responsible for tasks such as attention and decision-making are more developed in Digital Natives, while areas tied to slower, more linear thinking may be less engaged.

A critical component of this is the shorter attention span that Digital Natives often exhibit: while this is frequently perceived as a deficit by older generations, it is more accurately understood as a result of the digital age's rapid information flow (Prensky, 2012). As such, the impact of digital technology on education is evident as this generation, accustomed to fast-paced, interactive learning environments, enters the workforce and academia. Traditional educational systems, which were designed for the slower, more deliberate learning styles of Digital Immigrants, struggle to meet the needs of Digital Natives, who thrive in environments offering collaboration, instant feedback, and active participation. Digital Natives excel with tools like video games, social media, and the internet, which foster nonlinear learning, multitasking, and interactive engagement. However, many educators, often from the Digital Immigrant generation, find it challenging to adapt to these new learning styles. They continue to rely on lecture-based, sequential methods, which are less effective for students who are used to dynamic, multitasking environments.

The learning style of Digital Natives is characterized by rapid information processing, multitasking, nonlinear learning, and a preference for visual and interactive media. This generation is accustomed to quickly scanning information and engaging with multiple streams

of content simultaneously, which can hinder their ability to engage in slow, reflective thinking (Prensky, 2012). These traits, while beneficial in fast-paced digital environments, can present challenges in traditional educational settings, where slow, deliberate learning is often emphasized. In the context of travel and social media, this shift in learning style requires a reevaluation of how information is presented and how educational tools are designed. Digital Natives, who are adept at navigating complex digital landscapes, need learning experiences that allow for exploration, interactivity, and the application of knowledge in real-time (Prensky, 2012). These methods should reflect the way Digital Natives engage with content on platforms like Instagram, YouTube or TikTok where they actively participate in learning by sharing and consuming content.

In regions where access to technology is limited, some may struggle to engage fully with the digital tools and platforms that are central to the modern industry practices. This divide affects not only access to information but also the ability to develop the necessary digital literacy skills required to succeed in the tourism and hospitality industries. Many businesses, particularly in less developed areas, may lack the training or resources to incorporate digital tools effectively into their practices. Addressing the gap requires investment in technology infrastructure, as well as comprehensive professional development programs to enhance digital literacy among educators and tourism professionals, since only through these investments can the tourism sector ensure that all generations are prepared to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

As Digital Natives continue to dominate the workforce, the tourism industry must adapt to meet their preferences. They thrive in environments that are interactive, collaborative, and technology-enhanced, which aligns with the evolving nature of tourism marketing and education. Tourism businesses need to embrace these tools to build meaningful connections with customers, encouraging interaction and engagement through social media and user-generated content. By understanding the unique characteristics of Digital Natives, the tourism sector can adapt its methods, marketing practices, and engagement strategies to better serve this generation, ensuring they are equipped to navigate both the digital and physical aspects of the tourism industry. This shift not only enhances the learning experience but also helps tourism businesses remain competitive in an increasingly tech-driven marketplace.

3.8. The Role of Digital Platforms in Shaping Travel Behaviors

The digital transformation within the tourism industry has radically reshaped how travelers interact with information, make decisions, and experience destinations. Digital platforms have become indispensable in the modern travel experience, offering everything from flight bookings and hotel reservations to the curation of personalized travel experiences through user-generated content. These platforms are no longer mere sources of information but have evolved into active participants that significantly influence travelers' perceptions, decisions, and behaviors. As such, understanding how digital platforms shape travel behaviors is crucial for tourism marketers, destination managers, and policymakers alike.

One critical framework for examining how digital platforms influence travel behavior is the concept of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). Traditionally, the tourist gaze referred to the way tourists perceive and interpret the places they visit. However, with the rise of digital platforms, the tourist gaze has evolved, mediated increasingly by social media, online reviews, and visual content (Urry, J., & Larsen, J., 2011). This shift underscores the growing influence of user generated content in shaping how tourists form expectations and behaviors. The tourist gaze, once shaped largely by commercial representations, is now more complex and co-created through the experiences of travelers themselves, amplified by digital platforms.

Digital platforms, particularly social media, have empowered travelers to become active creators and curators of content. Today's tourists are no longer passive consumers of information but contribute to the global pool of travel knowledge by sharing their experiences through photos, reviews, videos, and posts. This shift has made user generated content a central driver in shaping the modern tourist gaze: with travelers' perceptions shaped by the content shared by fellow tourists, this "digital gaze" is increasingly characterized by visual consumption, with images and videos shared on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube playing a pivotal role in how tourists form their expectations of destinations.

Research shows that over 70% of tourists use user generated content to gather information for their trip planning (CrowdRiff, 2024), and more than 3.8 billion active social media users engage with travel-related content (Smart Insights, 2020). As such, the tourist gaze is no longer merely the product of institutionalized destination marketing but is now shaped by the shared experiences of other travelers, which means that travelers are increasingly turning to this kind of content as a reliable source for both inspiration and information.

The power of user generated content in influencing tourist behavior can be understood through the dual appeals of emotional and rational UGC. Emotional UGC typically consists of personal stories, images, and videos that evoke feelings of excitement, joy, nostalgia, or wonder about a destination. This type of content is often shared on visually rich platforms, where travelers post stunning photographs or videos from their trips, generating emotional connections with potential tourists. In contrast, rational UGC serves a more utilitarian role: it provides functional, practical information about a destination, such as pricing, location, availability, service quality, and visitor experiences, it is typically found on review-based platforms where tourists search for detailed information before making decisions. Both emotional and rational UGC are vital in shaping the perceived value of a destination. **Since one** fosters an emotional connection to the destination, enhancing the **emotional value** associated with it, **while the other** offers functional value, allowing tourists to make more informed decisions about where to go, what to do, and what to expect (Cheung et al., 2020).

Digital platforms shape the tourist gaze by fostering a sense of community among travelers, especially through social media, and this sense of community enhances the social connection and group identity values that tourists derive from engaging with user-generated content (Cheung et al., 2020). These values are central to social media interactions, where tourists exchange experiences, advice, and reflections, deepening their engagement with destinations.

In this digital age, the tourist gaze becomes more social and relational, rather than just visual or informational, as such the mutual gaze between tourists and locals plays a critical role in shaping perceptions (Maoz, 2006). Tourists are no longer passive recipients of a destination's image, they are active participants in a reciprocal process of influencing and being influenced. User generated content, whether emotional or rational, also significantly impacts tourists' behavior, particularly their impulse buying and future purchase intentions.

For tourism marketers, understanding how digital platforms shape the tourist gaze is crucial. To appeal to both the emotional and rational dimensions of travelers' decision-making, marketers must balance the creation of visually engaging content with the provision of useful, practical information. Moreover, the integration of both types of user generated content can help tourism marketers foster a sense of belonging among tourists. Encouraging travelers to share their experiences, provide feedback, and engage with others on digital platforms

strengthens the community surrounding a destination, as travelers form connections with one another, they co-create the destination's image, enhancing the overall appeal of the location and further shaping the digital tourist gaze.

As digital platforms increasingly shape travel behaviors, their influence extends beyond traditional concerns such as convenience and cost. Social media platforms, in particular, are significantly shaping tourist decision-making by promoting sustainable tourism and encouraging ecotourism practices. Social media serves as an essential tool for raising awareness of sustainable travel practices and encouraging eco-friendly behaviors, through it, travelers not only search for sustainable destinations but also share their eco-friendly travel experiences (Martí-Parreño & Gómez-Calvet, 2022). Platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok or YouTube enable users to share their experiences in nature reserves, sustainable lodges, or eco-friendly activities, which in turn encourages other travelers to make similar decisions. Travelers now look to their peers, rather than only to the tourism industry, for inspiration and guidance on sustainable travel, and as a result, social media platforms have transformed the local gaze (Maoz, 2006) by enabling travelers to interact with locals and fellow tourists, fostering a more participatory and community-driven approach to sustainable tourism.

The emphasis on user generated content in the digital tourism landscape has made it a vital component of sustainable tourism promotion. Travelers sharing their eco-conscious experiences provide invaluable insights into sustainable tourism practices, and this content, often accompanied by photos and personal anecdotes, motivates other tourists to engage in similar behaviors (Martí-Parreño & Gómez-Calvet, 2022). It serves as a crucial element in sustainable tourism marketing, since emotional content fosters a deeper connection to the environment, while rational content provides the practical information necessary for travelers to make informed, sustainable choices.

Despite growing interest in sustainable tourism, a significant attitude-behavior gap remains (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Tourists often express favorable attitudes toward sustainable practices but fail to adopt them consistently in their travel choices, but this gap can be bridged, in part, by the frequent exposure to eco-friendly content on social media, which helps normalize sustainable behaviors and make them more appealing to a broader audience. By enabling peer-to-peer interaction, social media fosters a community-driven approach to sustainability:

travelers who engage with content promoting sustainable practices are more likely to internalize these behaviors and adopt them in their own travel choices.

Social media platforms allow this type of destinations to reach a global audience by showcasing their natural landscapes, wildlife, and environmental conservation efforts. Social media's ability to amplify these messages is particularly important for the younger generations, who are increasingly motivated by environmental sustainability in their travel decisions. As tourists themselves share positive experiences, they co-create the destination's image, which in turn makes these eco-friendly destinations more attractive to like-minded travelers (Martí-Parreño & Gómez-Calvet, 2020).

Essentially, digital platforms play an essential role in shaping travel behaviors, since through user generated content, travelers can explore, experience, and share sustainable travel options. The evolution of the tourist gaze, shaped by UGC and mediated through social media, is now more participatory, more environmentally conscious, and increasingly community-driven. As sustainable tourism continues to grow, social media platforms will remain a vital tool for travelers and suppliers alike, facilitating the promotion and exchange of sustainable practices and encouraging environmentally responsible travel behaviors. Ultimately, digital platforms are providing travelers with a more authentic, sustainable, and communal experience, enabling them to explore destinations that align with their values while promoting sustainability in the tourism industry.

4. Methodology

This research was designed to explore the intricate connections between **digitalization, youth tourism, and sustainability**. To achieve this, we adopted a **constructivist philosophical paradigm**, recognizing that young travelers actively build their understanding and meaning from digital content rather than passively receiving objective truths (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). This perspective emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge, acknowledging that individual experiences and interpretations shape perceptions of destinations, cultural representations, and sustainable travel.

Our research approach was primarily **abductive**, which meant we iteratively moved between empirical data and theoretical insights. We started with intriguing observations from our data, then built up the theoretical frameworks to understand them (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This iterative process allowed us to deeply engage with participants' lived experiences and construct nuanced understandings grounded in their perspectives, rather than imposing pre-determined hypotheses. This abductive approach was situated within a broader **mixed-methods strategy**, specifically a **sequential explanatory design** (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data collection unfolded in two distinct, yet interconnected, phases. First, a **quantitative survey** was conducted with 221 young travelers to identify broad patterns in their digital media consumption, travel habits, and attitudes towards sustainability. This provided a contextual overview and helped to inform the second phase: **qualitative in-depth interviews**. These interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of young travelers, allowing for rich, subjective narratives to emerge regarding their interpretations of digital content, cultural representations, and sustainable travel behaviors (Seidman, 2013).

Finally, our data analysis involved processing both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey data was analyzed to identify common **perceptions and trends**, while the interview data underwent a rigorous **thematic analysis** to uncover deeper, constructed meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A crucial step involved integrating and **triangulating the findings** from both methods, deliberately confronting the quantitative patterns with the qualitative narratives to enhance validity and reduce bias (Bryman, 2016; Denzin, 2017). The overall findings were then systematically **compared with existing academic literature**, allowing us to position our contributions, identify convergences and divergences, and inform the theoretical implications

of our research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This comprehensive methodological framework aimed to provide a robust and insightful understanding of the dynamic relationship between digital platforms and youth tourism narratives in the context of sustainability.

4.1. Research Philosophy

The selection of an appropriate philosophical paradigm was paramount in shaping the direction of this research and the subsequent interpretation of its findings. The **constructivist paradigm** was deemed the most pertinent philosophical stance, providing a robust framework for understanding the complexities of the research topic. At its core, constructivism posits that meaning is not an inherent property to be discovered, but rather is actively constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world and the subjective interpretations they develop based on these engagements (Crotty, 1998). This philosophical foundation aligns directly and profoundly with the project's central focus: to understand how young travelers actively make sense of and engage with the diverse digital narratives surrounding tourism and sustainability.

From an **epistemological perspective**, constructivism suggests that knowledge is inherently subjective, and that multiple, equally valid realities can exist, each shaped by individual experiences and the specific social and cultural contexts in which they are situated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This understanding is particularly crucial for this study. It acknowledges that young travelers' comprehension of sustainable tourism principles, their perceptions of cultural representations encountered online, and the subsequent influence of digital platforms on their travel-related attitudes and behaviors are likely to vary significantly. These variations will be contingent upon their unique personal histories, diverse cultural backgrounds, and varying levels and types of engagement with different forms of digital media.

Methodologically, a constructivist approach inherently favors qualitative research methods. These methods are particularly well-suited for enabling an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2015). Techniques such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and the critical analysis of textual and visual data generated on digital platforms become essential tools for uncovering the rich tapestry of meanings that participants construct and utilize in their understanding of the research phenomena. While quantitative data might offer a broader descriptive overview, within a constructivist framework, its role is often to contextualize or inform the more nuanced

qualitative inquiry, rather than to establish definitive causal relationships. The primary emphasis remains on elucidating the "why" and "how" behind observed phenomena, as articulated and understood from the lived experiences of the participants (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2018). As the researcher, it is also acknowledged that the interpretation of these constructed meanings is an integral part of the research process.

Furthermore, the choice of constructivism is strongly supported by its inherent relevance to the study of media and its influence in contemporary society. Digital platforms are not neutral conduits of information; rather, they are inherently social and interactive spaces where meanings and narratives are continuously being constructed, shared, and negotiated among users (Couldry, 2012). Understanding the active role of young travelers in this meaning-making process – how they interpret, contribute to, and potentially challenge digital narratives, rather than passively receiving information – is therefore central to effectively addressing the core research questions of this study.

4.2. Research Approach

Building upon the constructivist paradigm outlined in the previous section, this research endeavor primarily employed an **abductive research approach**, strategically situated within a broader mixed-methods strategy. Abduction, as a mode of inquiry, moves iteratively between theory and data, starting with surprising or perplexing observations and then seeking the most plausible explanation or theory to account for them (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Peirce, 1998). This iterative process involves continually refining both theoretical constructs and empirical observations. Given the constructivist emphasis on emergent meaning and the exploratory nature of the research questions – particularly those concerning the nuanced ways digital platforms influence narratives and behaviors within youth tourism and sustainability – an abductive approach was deemed most appropriate. It allowed us to engage with the rich, diverse data collected from participants, identify recurring patterns and unexpected insights, and then seek the most fitting theoretical explanations or develop new understandings grounded in these empirical observations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomena as experienced and constructed by young travelers themselves, rather than being solely constrained by pre-established theoretical frameworks or purely inductive discovery.

While the initial literature review provided a crucial theoretical backdrop, identifying key concepts and prior scholarship in the areas of youth tourism, digitalization, and sustainability, the primary aim of the data collection and subsequent analysis was to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants without imposing pre-determined hypotheses. The adoption of a semi-structured interview format was particularly adequate to this abductive approach, offering the necessary flexibility in questioning to probe emergent topics and allowing participants to articulate their experiences and interpretations in their own terms (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This facilitated the discovery of the diverse meanings and understandings that young travelers themselves ascribe to digital narratives and the impact these narratives have on their travel-related attitudes and behaviors.

The potential inclusion of a preliminary quantitative survey was considered to serve a more deductive function. The aim of such a survey would have been to gather broader, generalizable data on digital media usage patterns within the youth tourism demographic and to assess general attitudes towards sustainable tourism. If conducted, this quantitative phase would have informed the subsequent qualitative sampling strategy and the design of the interview protocol, thereby ensuring the inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives in the more in-depth qualitative exploration. The findings from any quantitative data collected would have been used to provide a broader contextual landscape for the richer, more nuanced insights derived from the qualitative interviews, aligning with the principles of a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, J. W., 2013), where initial quantitative trends are followed up by qualitative data to provide deeper explanations.

Therefore, while the overarching research strategy incorporated the potential for mixed methods, the core of the investigation into the influence of digital narratives and their impact on sustainable travel behaviors and cultural perceptions relied heavily on a qualitative approach. This methodological choice was deeply rooted in the constructivist philosophical framework, allowing for a deep, context-specific, and emergent understanding of the complex relationships being explored within the dynamic intersection of digitalisation, youth tourism, and sustainability.

4.3. Data Collection

To investigate the complex interplay between digitalisation, youth tourism, and sustainability from a constructivist perspective, this research employed a **sequential explanatory mixed-methods design** (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This methodological choice is theoretically robust for several reasons. Firstly, it aligns with the fundamental tenets of constructivism, which emphasizes the subjective construction of meaning and the existence of multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The sequential design allows for an initial broad mapping of potential trends and relationships through quantitative data, which can then be explored in greater depth through qualitative inquiry to understand the diverse interpretations and meanings held by individuals within those patterns (Morse, J. M., 2010). This movement from general trends to specific understandings mirrors the constructivist aim of elucidating the varied ways individuals make sense of their experiences.

The sequential explanatory design is particularly advantageous for this study's objectives. The initial quantitative phase (if conducted) serves to identify potential patterns in digital media usage, attitudes towards sustainability, and reported travel behaviors across a larger sample of young travelers (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This broad overview provides a crucial context for the subsequent qualitative phase. By then engaging in in-depth interviews, the research can delve into the 'why' and 'how' behind these identified patterns, exploring the individual narratives and meaning-making processes that shape young travelers' engagement with digital platforms and their orientations towards sustainable tourism and cultural representations (Maxwell, J. A., 2016). This sequential approach allows the qualitative data to explain and enrich the statistical findings, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation – one that is grounded in the lived experiences and interpretations of the participants, consistent with the constructivist paradigm (Schwandt, T. A., 2007).

Furthermore, the sequential explanatory design is well-suited for research where the researcher seeks to first identify the prevalence or extent of a phenomenon and then explore the underlying reasons or mechanisms (Ivankova et al., 2006). In this study, this translates to first understanding the general ways digital platforms influence young travelers (quantitatively) and then exploring the specific narratives, interpretations, and contextual factors that shape this influence, as well as their connection to sustainability and cultural perceptions (qualitatively). This design acknowledges the complexity of human behavior and the social construction of

reality, allowing for both the identification of broader trends and the in-depth exploration of individual meaning (Flick, U., 2018). The integration of these two phases provides a more holistic and robust understanding than either approach could offer in isolation, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced and theoretically grounded set of findings.

4.3.1 Survey Design

The initial quantitative phase of this research employed an **online survey**, a widely used method for gathering data from a large sample, offering efficiency and anonymity (Bryman, A., 2016). The design of this survey was guided by principles of effective questionnaire construction to maximize response quality and relevance to the research questions (Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, F. J., Jr., 2013).

Target Audience: The survey was specifically targeted at young travelers (defined in the survey as individuals aged 16-31), a demographic identified as key consumers and producers of digital travel narratives and a significant segment within youth tourism (Richards & Wilson, 2004). This age range aligns with established definitions of youth tourism and captures individuals who are highly engaged with digital platforms (UNWTO, 2019). Recruitment aimed for a diverse sample in terms of nationality and travel experiences, as reflected in the survey responses provided.

Formation of Questions: The survey instrument incorporated a variety of question types to capture different dimensions of the research focus. Demographic questions (age, nationality, education, travel frequency) were placed at the beginning to establish the characteristics of the sample (Fink, A., 2015). Questions regarding digital media consumption explored the specific platforms used for travel inspiration and the frequency of engagement, utilizing checklists to allow for multiple selections reflecting the multi-platform usage of young people (Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M., 2010).

The survey also included open-ended questions strategically placed to elicit qualitative data. These questions aimed to understand the how and why behind the quantitative responses, such as the reasons for differences between online portrayals and actual experiences, and suggestions for changes in digital tourism promotion. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), such open-ended questions within a survey can provide rich contextual data that complements

quantitative findings, facilitating a more nuanced understanding aligned with a mixed-methods approach.

Order of Questions: The order of questions was carefully considered to maintain respondent engagement and minimize bias (Dillman et al., 2014; Czaja & Blair, 2005). General and less sensitive questions were placed at the beginning, followed by more specific questions related to digital media use and travel behavior. Questions about sustainability and ethical concerns were positioned to follow the exploration of travel inspiration and decision-making factors, allowing respondents to first reflect on their general travel habits before considering these specific aspects. Open-ended questions were placed towards the end to allow respondents to elaborate on themes that may have emerged throughout the survey (Guest et al., 2012).

Qualitative Aspect within the Survey: While the survey's primary function was quantitative data collection, the inclusion of open-ended questions integrated a qualitative dimension. These narrative responses provided initial insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions, offering a valuable layer of data that could be analyzed thematically to identify preliminary patterns and inform the development of the subsequent qualitative interview protocol (Guest et al., 2012). This aligns with the principles of a sequential explanatory design, where initial qualitative data from the first phase can help to explain or provide context for the quantitative findings (Ivankova et al., 2006).

Terminology Studied: The survey instrument directly addressed key terminology relevant to the research project:

- **Digital Platforms:** Defined broadly in the instructions and exemplified in Question 6 (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Travel blogs, Online travel agencies). This aimed to capture the diverse online spaces relevant to travel.
- **Youth Tourism:** Implicitly targeted through the age range of the participants and the focus on their travel behaviors and inspirations.
- **Sustainability:** Explicitly addressed in Questions 9 and 13, exploring the value and concerns related to sustainable travel. Question 21 further probed specific sustainable practices.
- **Digital Narratives:** Explored indirectly through questions about travel inspiration (Question 6), consideration of destinations based on digital content (Question 8), and

the accuracy of digital representations (Question 15). The open-ended questions further aimed to uncover the nature and impact of these narratives.

- **Cultural Perceptions:** Addressed in Question 15 regarding the accuracy of cultural and social aspects in digital portrayals and further explored in open-ended questions.
- **Travel Behaviours:** Investigated through questions about travel frequency (Question 4), traveler identity (Question 5), and factors driving travel decisions (Questions 10-14).

The survey design, therefore, aimed to systematically gather data relevant to the research questions, employing a mixed-question format and a logical flow to capture both broad trends and initial qualitative insights from the target demographic of young travelers engaged with digital platforms.

4.3.2. Conducting Survey

The online survey served as the initial quantitative phase of this research, gathering broad data on young travelers' interactions with digital platforms, their perceptions of destinations, and their behaviors related to sustainability. To ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data, its deployment followed a meticulous process.

Pilot Testing and Refinement:

Before full-scale distribution, the survey instrument underwent a rigorous pilot test. This crucial step assessed the clarity, relevance, and overall effectiveness of the questions in capturing the diverse perspectives of the target demographic. Given the study's focus on the nuanced interplay of digitalization, youth tourism, and sustainability, it was essential to identify and rectify any ambiguities or potential misinterpretations.

The pilot involved a small, representative group of participants (n=15). This group was chosen to reflect the intended diversity of the final sample, including various nationalities, travel styles, and differing levels of engagement with digital platforms and sustainable practices. Feedback was actively sought from these pilot participants. Discussions focused on the clarity of question wording, the comprehensiveness of response options, and the overall flow of the survey, particularly regarding concepts like "digital narratives" and "sustainable travel." This iterative process of testing and refinement, consistent with best practices in survey methodology (Dillman et al., 2014), led to precise adjustments in question phrasing and sequencing, significantly enhancing the survey's coherence and reducing potential response bias.

Survey Deployment and Data Collection:

Following its successful pilot testing, the finalized survey was deployed online for a duration of fifteen days, from April 13th to April 27th, 2024. To maximize reach and ensure a diverse and representative sample of young travelers, a multi-faceted recruitment strategy was implemented. This involved:

- **Social Media Platforms:** The survey was disseminated across popular platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, targeting relevant communities and groups frequented by young adults interested in travel.
- **Youth Organizations:** Strategic collaborations were forged with organizations affiliated with the Danish Youth Council (DUF), facilitating direct access to their extensive networks of young individuals across Denmark and abroad.

The survey itself was hosted on Google Forms, a platform selected for its user-friendly interface, robust data collection capabilities, and ease of access for respondents. This ensured a clear, organized, and known method for data acquisition. By the close of the collection period, a total of 221 usable responses were successfully gathered.

To underscore the academic credibility and integrity of the research, the introductory section of the survey prominently featured the Aalborg University logo. This strategic placement aimed to assure participants of the study's legitimacy and highlight its association with a respected academic institution. The introduction also provided a concise yet engaging overview of the research project, outlining its objectives and the anticipated impact of their insights on understanding the role of digitalization in youth tourism. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous, that their participation was voluntary, and that the survey would take approximately 5-7 minutes to complete. This transparent approach fostered trust and encouraged participation, all while strictly adhering to ethical research principles and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679), ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of all respondents.

The survey's design incorporated a blend of question types, including multiple-choice, scales, and open-ended questions, enabling the collection of both quantifiable data on travel habits and attitudes, as well as rich qualitative insights into individual experiences and perceptions (Fowler, F. J., Jr., 2013). This comprehensive design facilitated a nuanced understanding of how digital narratives are constructed and interpreted by young travelers, directly supporting the overarching research aims.

4.3.3. Interviews Design

Following the quantitative survey phase, in-depth, semi-structured interviews constituted the core qualitative component of this research. This approach was strategically chosen to delve into the nuanced and subjective experiences of young travelers, aligning profoundly with the study's constructivist paradigm (Seidman, I., 2013). While the survey provided a broader understanding of trends and patterns, the interviews aimed to capture the 'why' and 'how' behind these phenomena, exploring participants' constructed meanings, interpretations, and lived realities regarding digital platforms, youth tourism narratives, and sustainability (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Interview Type and Rationale:

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary qualitative method. This format offers a flexible yet focused approach, guided by an interview protocol that covers key thematic areas while allowing for spontaneous follow-up questions to explore emerging topics and unexpected insights (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This flexibility is crucial in constructivist research, as it permits participants to elaborate on their unique perspectives and construct their narratives in a way that truly reflects their experiences, rather than conforming to rigid pre-determined categories (Charmaz, K., 2014).

Sampling Strategy:

A **purposive sampling** strategy was employed for selecting interview participants. This non-probability sampling technique is particularly suited for qualitative research where the goal is to obtain rich, in-depth information from individuals who are knowledgeable about, or have experience with, the phenomenon under study (Patton, M. Q., 2015). Participants were primarily recruited based on their responses from the preliminary quantitative survey. This allowed for the strategic selection of individuals who could provide diverse insights, potentially including:

- Respondents with high or low stated sustainability concerns.
- Those who reported significant positive or negative discrepancies between online portrayals and real-life travel experiences.
- Individuals with varied levels of digital platform engagement for travel inspiration.
- Those willing to engage in discussions about social change in tourism.

The aim was to ensure a diverse range of perspectives on the influence of digital platforms on travel narratives and sustainable behaviors, reflecting the multinational and varied profiles identified in the survey demographics (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Interview Protocol and Thematic Areas:

The interview protocol was meticulously developed, drawing insights from three primary sources:

1. **Research Questions and Objectives:** Ensuring all core areas of inquiry were addressed.
2. **Literature Review:** Incorporating key concepts and theoretical constructs from existing scholarship.
3. **Preliminary Survey Findings:** Utilizing themes and intriguing responses from the open-ended survey questions and quantitative trends to formulate more focused and probing interview questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The semi-structured interview guide was organized around the following key thematic areas, designed to elicit participants' subjective interpretations and experiences:

- **Making Sense of Digital Travel Content:** Exploring how participants personally interpret and construct meaning from digital travel narratives, focusing on their trust mechanisms and evaluation of online information.
- **Defining Authenticity:** Delving into participants' individual understandings of 'authentic travel' and how they judge the genuineness of online portrayals, including the role of social interaction (comments, reviews) in shaping their perceptions.
- **Navigating Sustainability:** Investigating participants' personal interpretations of 'sustainable travel,' the barriers they perceive in adopting sustainable practices, and the influence of digital content on their sustainability values and actions.
- **Local Connections & Ethical Impact:** Exploring participants' decision-making processes regarding supporting local businesses versus international chains, and their views on how platforms should address issues like overtourism and promote ethical engagement.
- **Resolving Contradictions & Future Visions:** Discussing the tension between stated values (e.g., sustainability) and actual behaviors (e.g., prioritizing budget), exploring instances where expectations were unmet, and seeking participants' creative insights into how digital platforms could be redesigned to foster a more responsible and authentic travel culture.

4.3.4. Conducting Interviews

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews, forming the core of the qualitative data collection, were conducted following a detailed protocol designed to ensure consistency, ethical rigor, and the elicitation of rich, nuanced narratives from participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Interviewer Preparation:

Before commencing the interviews, both researchers involved in the data collection process underwent thorough training and preparation. This included:

- **Familiarization with the Interview Protocol:** We ensured a deep understanding of the interview guide, its thematic areas, and the specific open-ended questions. We practiced the protocol to develop a conversational flow and identify potential areas for probing and follow-up questions.
- **Ethical Considerations Review:** A comprehensive review of ethical guidelines, particularly concerning informed consent, confidentiality, and data security, was conducted. This ensured we were fully aware of our responsibilities in protecting participant rights and well-being throughout the interview process.
- **Technical Proficiency:** For interviews conducted online, we ensured we were proficient in using the chosen video conferencing platform (Zoom, Microsoft Teams) and recording equipment. This included testing audio and video quality, managing screen sharing (if necessary), and troubleshooting potential technical issues.
- **Reflexivity and Bias Awareness:** We engaged in reflective exercises to become aware of our own potential biases, assumptions, and preconceptions related to the research topic. This critical self-awareness is crucial in qualitative research, as it allows researchers to acknowledge and mitigate their influence on the interview process and data interpretation (Charmaz, K., 2014; Patton, M. Q., 2015).

Informed Consent and Participant Comfort:

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reiterated the information provided in the participant information sheet, ensuring that the participant fully understood the following:

- The purpose of the research and the interview.
- The voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

- The measures taken to ensure their anonymity and the confidentiality of their data, in accordance with GDPR regulations.
- The intended use of the data (for academic research purposes only).
- The recording procedure and its purpose.

Participants were given ample opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before providing their explicit informed consent to participate and to be audio-recorded. This process adhered to the ethical principle of informed consent as an ongoing process, rather than a single event (Orb et al., 2001).

Interview Procedure:

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, using the interview protocol as a flexible guide. The researcher began with broad, open-ended questions to establish rapport and encourage the participant to share their experiences in their own words (Seidman, I., 2013). As the interview progressed, the researcher used probing questions to delve deeper into specific themes, clarify ambiguous statements, and elicit richer descriptions and reflections. These probing questions were both planned (based on the protocol) and spontaneous, arising from the flow of the conversation and the participant's responses.

The interviewer adopted an empathetic and active listening approach, paying close attention not only to the content of what was said but also to the nuances of language, tone, and nonverbal cues (for video interviews). The goal was to create a comfortable and supportive environment that encouraged participants to share their perspectives openly and honestly. The interviewer also practiced reflexivity throughout the interview, being mindful of their own reactions and how they might be influencing the participant's responses, bracketing their own assumptions as much as possible (Charmaz, K., 2014; Patton, M. Q., 2015).

Post-Interview Reflection:

Immediately following each interview, the researcher:

- Made brief notes on key themes, any unexpected insights, and the overall dynamics of the interaction.
- Reflected on their own role in the interview process and any potential biases that may have influenced the data.
- Ensured that the audio recording was securely stored and backed up, in compliance with data management protocols.

These post-interview reflections contributed to the ongoing analysis of the data and helped to refine the interviewing technique as the data collection process progressed (Charmaz, K., 2014).

4.4. Data Analysis

4.4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis (Survey)

The data gathered from the **online survey (Phase 1)** underwent quantitative analysis not to establish universal truths, but rather to identify broad patterns in reported perceptions, attitudes, and self-described behaviors among the young travelers. The analysis was conducted separately by the researchers and then **cross-validated to reduce bias**. This analysis provided a generalized understanding of the "what" and "how much" – or rather, how commonly certain phenomena were perceived or reported within the sample – thereby laying a contextual foundation for the deeper qualitative inquiry (Tashakkori & Teddlie, C., 2010).

All quantitative responses from the closed-ended questions were systematically organized and subjected to descriptive statistical analysis. Frequencies, percentages, and means (for scales) were calculated to characterize the prevalence of specific viewpoints regarding digital platform usage for travel inspiration, the perceived importance of various travel decision factors (including sustainability and affordability), and the reported adoption of sustainable practices. This allowed us to discern widely shared tendencies and commonalities in how this diverse group of young travelers engaged with and conceptualized digital tourism (Field, A., 2018).

Crucially, the **open-ended questions** embedded within the survey were subjected to an initial, inductive content analysis. This involved a careful reading of responses to identify recurring concepts, themes, and nuances in participants' expressions. These preliminary qualitative insights, emerging directly from the participants' own words, were invaluable. They helped to illuminate the range of interpretations and constructions of meaning related to discrepancies between online portrayals and actual experiences, or suggestions for changes in digital promotion. These emergent themes from the survey directly informed the subsequent design and refinement of the semi-structured interview protocol, ensuring that the qualitative phase specifically probed areas of interest identified from the broader sample (Guest et al., 2012). This ensured that the quantitative phase acted as an exploratory mapping of shared perceptions, providing a critical guide for the in-depth investigation of individual meaning-making.

4.4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis (Interviews)

The qualitative data, derived from the in-depth, **semi-structured interviews (Phase 2)**, were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its capacity to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data, making it particularly suitable for exploring the subjective meanings and constructed realities central to this constructivist study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis process involved several systematic steps:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Immediately following each interview, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The researchers then immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts, listening to the audio, and making initial notes and observations. This iterative process fostered a deep understanding of the participants' narratives and contexts (Clarke & Braun, 2017).
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** This involved systematically working through the entire dataset, line by line, to identify interesting features of the data that were relevant to the research questions. Codes were generated inductively, directly from the data, without imposing a pre-existing theoretical framework, thereby allowing themes to emerge organically from the participants' own words and interpretations (Boyatzis, R. E., 1998).
3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were then grouped into broader potential themes based on their coherence and relevance to the research questions. This involved organizing codes into meaningful clusters that captured significant patterns across the dataset.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** This critical step involved two levels of review. First, themes were checked against the coded extracts to ensure they accurately reflected the data within each theme. Second, themes were reviewed in relation to the entire dataset to ensure they captured the essence of the data as a whole and that no significant aspects were overlooked (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This iterative process involved refining theme definitions, collapsing similar themes, or splitting overly broad ones.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Once the themes were refined and finalized, each was given a clear, concise name and a detailed definition. This involved articulating the story each theme told and how it contributed to understanding the overall data, supported by compelling verbatim quotes from the participants (Guest et al., 2012).
6. **Producing the Report:** The final stage involved weaving the defined themes into a coherent narrative, supported by illustrative quotes, to address the research questions.

This inductive thematic analysis, rooted in the constructivist paradigm, allowed for the exploration of how young travelers actively construct their understandings of digital travel narratives, authenticity, sustainability, and social change. It prioritized the participants' voices and interpretations, providing rich, context-specific insights into their lived experiences (Charmaz, K., 2014).

4.4.3. Integration and Triangulation of Findings

A critical aspect of this mixed-methods study was the **integration and triangulation** of the quantitative and qualitative findings. This process was not merely about presenting results from two separate analyses but about combining them to form a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the research phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Triangulation, involving the use of multiple data sources or methods, served to enhance the credibility and confirmability of the findings by cross-validating insights and providing different perspectives on the same phenomenon (Denzin, N. K., 2017).

Specifically, the integration occurred by:

- **Elaboration:** The qualitative interview data elaborated on the quantitative patterns identified in the survey. For instance, if the survey showed a perceived moderate concern for sustainability but a reported high priority for affordability, the interviews explored why this "intention-action gap" existed from the participants' subjective perspectives, revealing underlying barriers or interpretations.
- **Complementarity:** Different facets of the research questions were addressed by each method. The survey provided the breadth of digital platform usage patterns, while the interviews offered depth into the subjective interpretations of digital narratives and their perceived impact on behaviors.
- **Confrontation and Bias Reduction:** By analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data separately initially, and then bringing them together, the researchers were able to confront potential discrepancies or convergences. This systematic comparison helped to reduce researcher bias by challenging initial assumptions and fostering a more balanced interpretation of the data. For example, if quantitative data suggested a high influence of social media, qualitative data could reveal which aspects of social media content were perceived as influential and why they were trusted or distrusted, providing a more nuanced picture (Bryman, A., 2016).

This integrated approach ensured that the findings were not only indicative of broader tendencies (where applicable) but also deeply grounded in the lived experiences and constructed meanings of the young travelers, thereby strengthening the overall validity and richness of the research.

4.4.4. Confrontation with Literature Review (Developing the Discussion)

Following the comprehensive analysis and integration of the primary data, the **final step** in the analytical process involved a systematic confrontation of the study's findings with the existing academic literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, J., 2014). This critical engagement with the literature review (Section 4) served to:

- **Position the Research:** Identify how the study's findings confirm, challenge, or extend existing theories and previous empirical studies on digitalization, youth tourism, and sustainability.
- **Identify Convergences:** Highlight instances where the empirical data supported established concepts or findings in the literature, reinforcing existing knowledge.
- **Uncover Divergences and Novel Insights:** Crucially, pinpoint areas where the findings contradicted or offered new perspectives not previously emphasized in the literature. This is particularly valuable for contributing new knowledge to the field. For example, if the literature suggests a strong link between digital exposure and sustainable behavior, but the study's findings reveal a persistent intention-action gap informed by participants' subjective interpretations, this divergence becomes a significant point of discussion.
- **Inform Theoretical Implications:** Discuss how the empirical results, viewed through a constructivist lens, contribute to the development or refinement of existing theoretical frameworks related to digital influence, consumer behavior in tourism, and sustainability transitions.
- **Structure the Discussion Section:** The insights gained from this confrontation directly informed the structure and content of the Discussion section (Section 8), allowing for a coherent narrative that links empirical results back to the broader academic discourse and highlights the study's unique contributions and implications (Punch, K. F., 2020).

This rigorous process of data analysis, integration, and confrontation with existing scholarship ensured that the research findings were robust, theoretically informed, and capable of making

a meaningful contribution to the understanding of digitalization's role in shaping youth tourism narratives and behaviors towards sustainability.

5. Data Analysis

In this chapter we will provide a structured analysis of our survey findings, show the main themes that come up from it and show how they relate to other research. The results reveal two dominant themes that are shaping contemporary youth travel behavior: the critical engagement of digital-native travelers with online content and the persistent gap between sustainability intentions and actual travel choices. These insights come to show how young travelers navigate digital influence while struggling to reconcile ethical values with practical constraints. The discussion is structured to first explore the evolving relationship between young travelers and digital media, followed by an examination of the barriers preventing sustainable travel adoption.

To ensure analytical rigor, the survey data underwent dual independent examination by both researchers prior to comparative discussion. To ensure the most reliable findings, both of us independently analyzed the survey data before comparing results. Each conducted their own thorough examination of the responses, applying their respective analytical perspectives to identify key patterns and insights. This dual analysis process helped validate the emerging themes while minimizing individual biases. Despite having two distinct analyses, both of us identified three core tensions: the critical yet dependent relationship with digital travel content, the persistent intention-action gap regarding sustainable tourism, and digital media's dual capacity to both inspire and distort travel experiences.

5.1. Analysis of Survey Data

Our sample included respondents from a diverse range of European countries—primarily Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands—providing a broad perspective on sustainable travel attitudes across different cultural and economic contexts. While the study was not nationally representative for any single country, the inclusion of these nations allowed for meaningful regional comparisons, particularly in travel frequency and sustainability priorities.

The survey revealed clear trends in travel frequency among this young demographic: 21.3% travel more than five times a year, while **38.6% take 3-5 trips annually**. Together, that means nearly **60% are frequent travelers**, taking at least three trips per year. Another 34.6% travel

once or twice annually, meaning **94.5% of respondents travel every year** - with only **5.5% traveling less than once** (Figure 1). Simply put, this hyper-mobility suggests travel isn't just occasional leisure, but an embedded lifestyle, which aligns with broader trends among younger generations, who tend to prioritize travel more than older age groups. The widespread availability of affordable transportation options and Europe's strong travel culture likely contribute to these patterns.

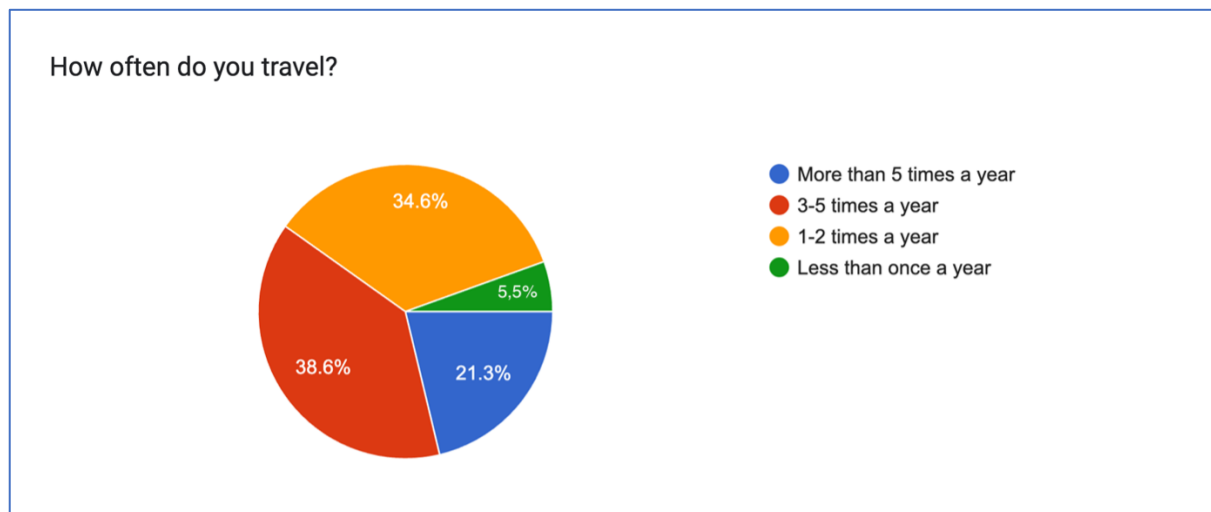


Figure 1

With these core insights established - highlighting both the hyper-mobility of young travelers and the methodological rigor of our analysis - we now turn to a more thematic exploration of the survey results, unpacking the three core tensions previously mentioned. Through this structure, we aim to provide some more insight, not only on how young Europeans travel, but also how their behaviors and opinions can shape the future of sustainable tourism.

5.1.1 Digital-Native Travelers: Critical Engagement with Online Content

Skepticism Toward Curated Digital Narratives

When analyzing the respondent data, it is clear that young travelers have shown a complex relationship with digital travel content, characterized by both reliance and skepticism. According to the survey, the majority find social media influential in shaping travel decisions, since it can show the different cultural and social aspects of a specific destination, but a significant portion (~35%) **criticize platforms for promoting unrealistic portrayals of destinations** (Figure 2). This skepticism is shown clearly by the comments of some respondents when asked for examples of places they visited being different from what was

portrayed online, as some pointed out *“Too many tourists not shown on the pictures/videos”* ; *“Went to Bled in Slovenia, social media presented it as a calm and hidden gem. Was just an extremely expensive place only based on tourism”*. These critiques underscore a growing awareness of the gap between digital idealization and on-site experiences, which makes the tension between social media's inspirational potential and its frequent failure to deliver authentic representations all the more evident.

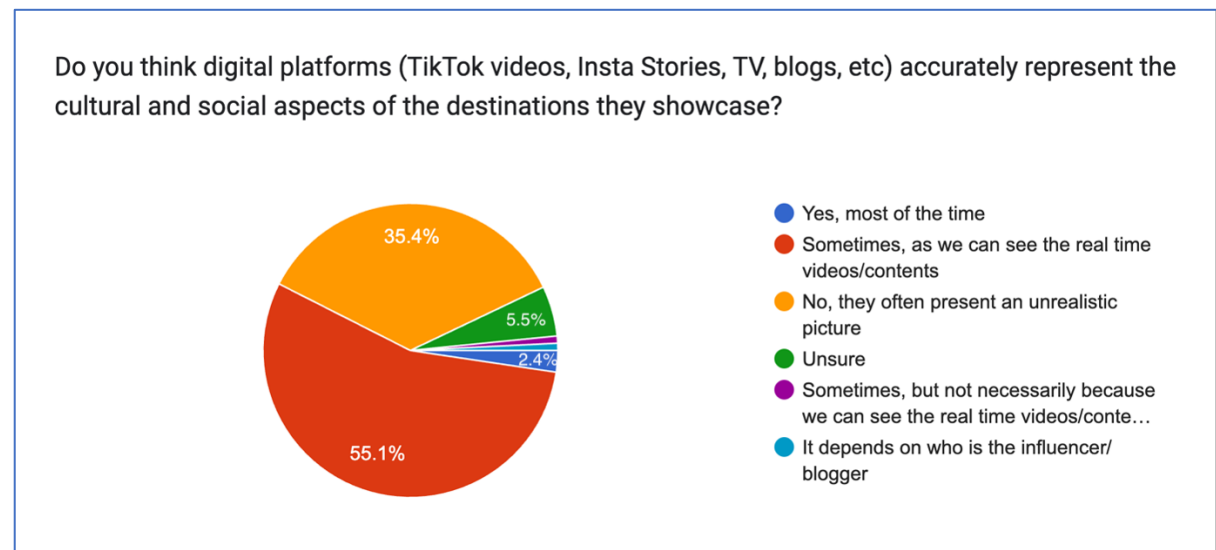


Figure 2

Other respondents also made comments about how *“often online content just shows the good part of the places it advertises”* or that *“they only show what can be instagrammed”*, which suggests that digital natives, far from being passive consumers, actively assess the authenticity of online content. This comes to show that this generation doesn’t simply believe everything they see online and are becoming more aware and careful in judging what kind of travel content is realistic or not.

Their preference for real-time updates (e.g., Instagram Stories) over heavily edited posts illustrates their need for immediacy and transparency. This behavior aligns with Prensky’s (2001) concept of digital natives, who process information differently due to their immersion in technology from an early age, and, unlike previous generations, young travelers cross-reference multiple sources when looking for information about travelling - they carefully check their network, with **57.4% attributing high value to peer reviews** (Figure 3) and **76.3% to personal recommendations** (Figure 4). This source triangulation highlights a definitive

transition in trust hierarchies, where user-generated content supersedes both traditional advertising and influencer marketing in credibility assessment.

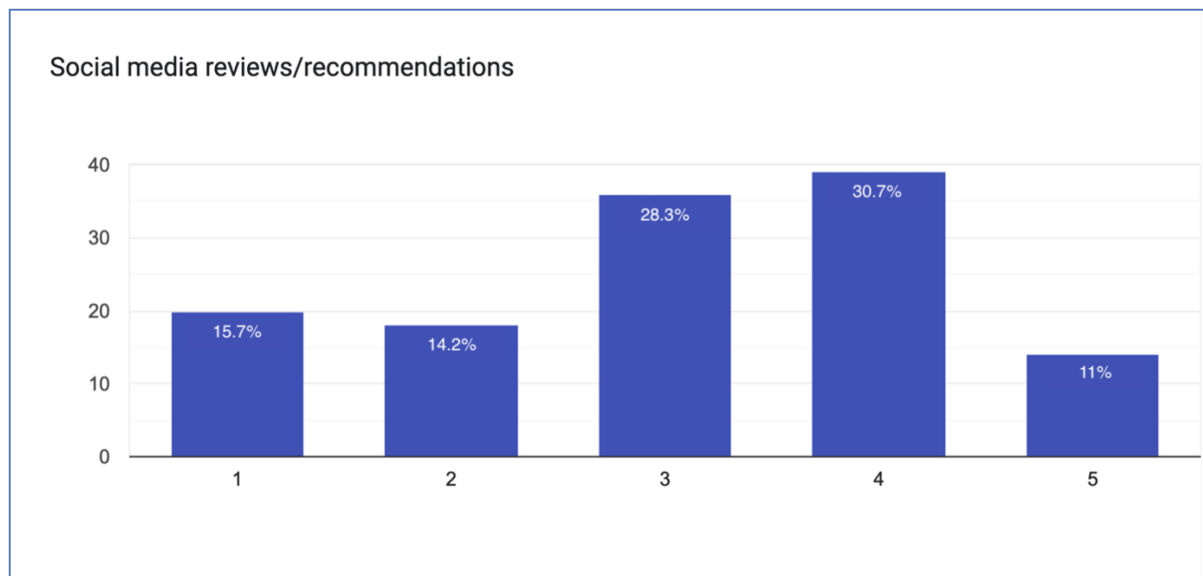


Figure 3

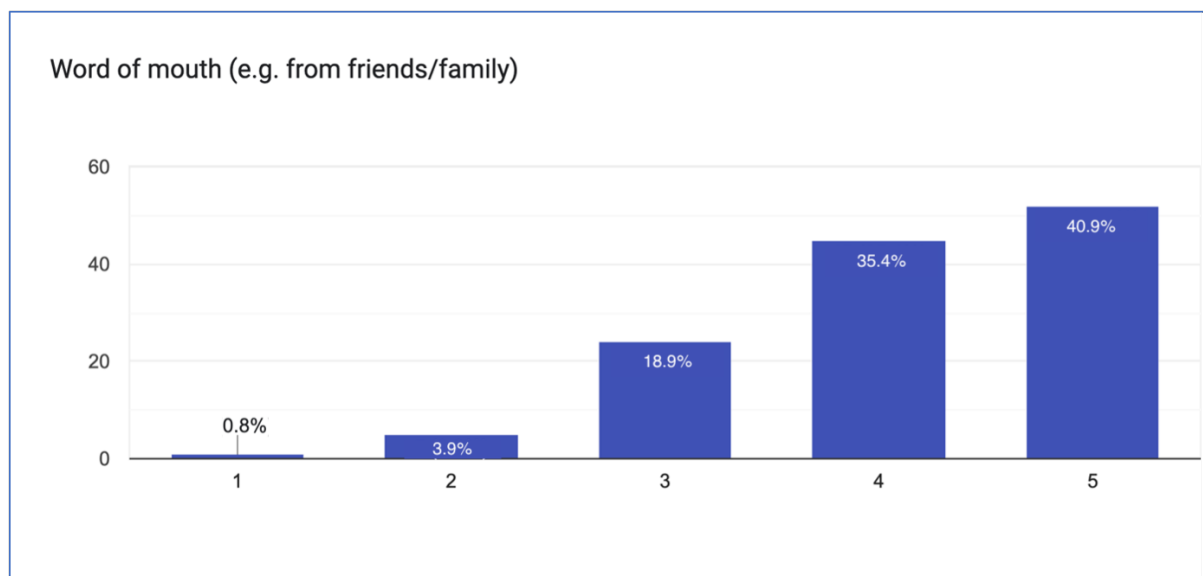


Figure 4

The Evolving Role of Influencers and Local Authenticity

While some influencers seem to play a role in shaping travel aspirations, as is seen by some of the respondents answers: “figures who explain how they interact with tourists and guide people to act (more) responsibly” or “All of them indirectly promote different kinds of sustainable travel practices” their influence appears to be secondary when compared to firsthand accounts and local perspectives. The survey respondents consistently emphasized a stronger preference

for personal travel narratives and cultural insights over polished, promotional content that influencers typically share. As one respondent stated, “I was already conscious of sustainability without social media,” reflecting the sentiment of many who view sustainable practices as deeply rooted in personal values rather than trends influenced by digital platforms. Another respondent reiterated this, saying: “My sustainable practices when traveling do not come from digital platforms, but rather my upbringing and personal morals,” showing how their sense of responsibility comes from a deeper, more personal source than simply from what is commonly portrayed online. This shift in mindset suggests a decline in the perceived authority of influencers, with travelers increasingly valuing authentic, unfiltered experiences, whether shared by fellow tourists or drawn from their own values and education. Furthermore, the respondents revealed that they are significantly more likely **(80.3%) to support a travel experience run by locals and benefiting the community than one that is suggested or advocated by a travel influencer (27.6%)**. This further highlights the growing preference for genuine, community-based travel experiences over the curated, commercialized content often associated with influencers (Figure 5).

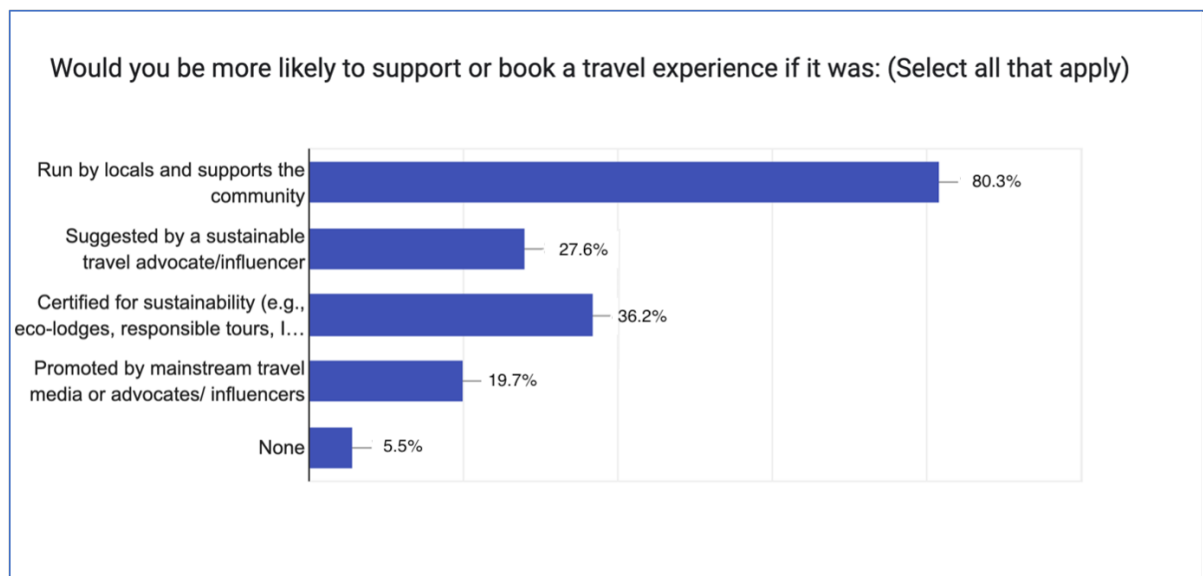


Figure 5

This preference for authentic experiences goes to show the current shift away from the polished portrayals we can often find in social media. One of the respondents even pointed out that, “*Most influencers who can afford travel don’t really care much about sustainability*”, showcasing his disapproval of those who promote luxurious or glamorous destinations without even considering the local culture or environmental impact. Many respondents were also quite

vocal about their frustration with influencers who prioritize trendy spots over responsible travel, admitting that they feel that social media has commercialized travel and turned destinations into mere "checklist" items for display rather than opportunities for meaningful cultural exchange. One respondent commented: *"Most of the time, social media shows you the good face of a place and not how it really is when you are there"*, alluding to how influencers tend to present only the idealized aspects of a destination, leaving out key factors that may not be received so positively such as overcrowding, local resentment, or the environmental degradation caused by mass tourism. This critique underscores the growing disillusionment with influencer-driven content and its impact on how destinations are perceived and experienced.

Many of the respondents also expressed a preference for local travel experiences that promote connection with the community. One respondent noted that *"digital platforms can be a great means of sharing appropriate travel behaviors and more sustainable awareness"*, but warned that *"mass tourism and exploitation of some destinations"* can negate these benefits. While digital platforms can amplify sustainable voices, they also fuel the commercialization of locations that were previously "hidden gems". Another respondent also talked about how: *"videos and short clips on social networks tend to be misleading through well-researched shots and good editing"*, which often creates a distorted view of destinations.

The responses highlight a shift towards prioritizing authentic, local travel experiences over influencer-driven content. While influencers still play a role in shaping travel aspirations, their influence is less significant compared to personal experiences and insights shared by fellow travelers or locals. Many respondents emphasized that sustainable travel practices come from personal values rather than digital trends, with a strong preference for community-based experiences that foster genuine connections. In contrast, influencer content often presents idealized, commercialized views of destinations, neglecting important factors like environmental impact and overcrowding. This shift showcases the growing desire for more honest, meaningful travel experiences that focus on authenticity and cultural respect.

Algorithmic Influence and the Demand for Authentic Representation

A recurring concern among respondents was the role that algorithms can have in shaping travel trends, with many commenting about how these platforms often lead to overtourism in

destinations that go viral. In the survey they were asked about what changes they would like to see in the way digital platforms promote tourism and many expressed their concern about the overwhelming popularity of certain "Instagrammable" spots, driven by social media algorithms, which in turn creates a feedback loop where destinations gain massive visibility but struggle to handle the influx of tourists. As one participant shared, "Many people really rely on influencers for travel destinations", which illustrates the influence that digital platforms have on travel decisions. These platforms often prioritize visually appealing, curated content, leaving destinations that don't fit the aesthetic trends or appeal to the algorithm's preferences to remain hidden. This can result in once underappreciated places becoming overwhelmed, while lesser-known, more authentic alternatives continue to be overshadowed.

Many respondents expressed frustration with the algorithmic promotion of over-hyped tourist spots, often driven by social media trends, and the corresponding neglect of locations that offer a more genuine or immersive experience. A respondent said: "*I'd like digital platforms to promote more sustainable and responsible tourism by highlighting lesser-known destinations and authentic experiences*", showcasing a desire for a more balanced representation of destinations that goes beyond the idealistic portrayals that are usually associated with viral locations. The critique of platforms focusing only on popular or trendy spots was also shared by others who said that platforms should "*be more open, attracting people based on accurate depictions of the destination and letting people choose by themselves*", suggesting that giving a bigger range of perspectives could lead to more diverse travel choices that are better suited to each individual's taste.

Moreover, several respondents specifically called for changes in the algorithm that ideally would promote a diversity of travel narratives, including those that emphasize local culture, sustainability, and community-focused tourism. One participant commented, "*I would like content to be more realistic and show both positive and negative sides of places, without exaggerations to grab more views and likes*". This showcases a growing dissatisfaction with the trend of amplifying idealized, one-dimensional portrayals of destinations that rarely include the complexities or challenges a place might face. A more wide range of content, according to respondents, could highlight the importance of supporting local businesses and embracing authentic travel practices, which many believe is lacking in the current algorithmic-driven way that digital platforms work.

The findings suggest that while digital media remains a crucial tool in the travel planning process, young travelers are increasingly aware of its limitations and biases. They are becoming more discerning about the content they consume and are advocating for a shift towards more inclusive, genuine travel experiences. One respondent pointed out that there should be: “*More focus on local culture, less promotion of overly popular places, and more sustainable travel tips*”, which would help create a more responsible and diverse travel landscape. This growing awareness points to a larger demand for digital platforms to evolve - incorporating more authentic, culturally rich narratives that reflect the true essence of travel while reducing the excessive focus on visually appealing but commercially-driven destinations.

5.1.2 The Intention-Action Gap in Sustainable Travel

Discrepancy Between Attitudes and Behavior

When asked to rate how much they value sustainability on a scale of 1 to 5, the respondents revealed a clear division in terms of their attitudes toward sustainability, with three distinct segments emerging based on their level of concern. A significant portion of the respondents, who answered 4 or 5, show a clear concern towards sustainability while travelling. They account for **37.8%** of all respondents and **showcase a strong awareness and commitment to sustainability in their travel practices**. On the other hand, a slightly larger segment of **40.2%** **rated their concern at a more moderate level** of 3, which allows us to classify them as moderately concerned travelers. While they are aware of sustainability issues, they may not always make travel decisions with sustainability as a top priority. For this group, the value of sustainability may be recognized, but they often balance it with other factors such as convenience, cost, and personal preferences. Lastly, a smaller proportion of the respondents, **22.1%**, **expressed low concern for sustainability**, as reflected by their ratings of 1 or 2 on the scale, and show minimal care for sustainable travel (Figure 6).

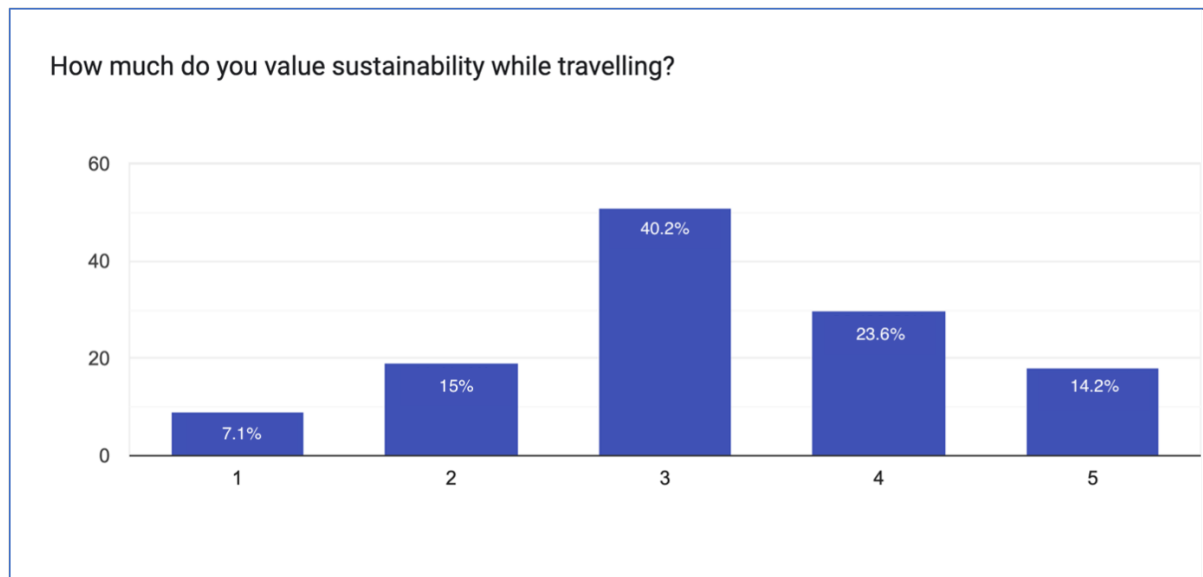


Figure 6

Notably, while the majority of the respondents say they have a decent level of regard for sustainable travel, only about **30%** (Figure 7) **have actively booked sustainable travel options**, demonstrating a clear disconnect between their values and actions. This disparity highlights a significant intention-action gap when it comes to pro-environmental behavior. Although many respondents express awareness and concern about the environmental impacts of their travel, a large portion of them have not translated these concerns into concrete actions, which can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the practical challenges of finding and accessing sustainable options, which may often be more expensive or less convenient than traditional alternatives.

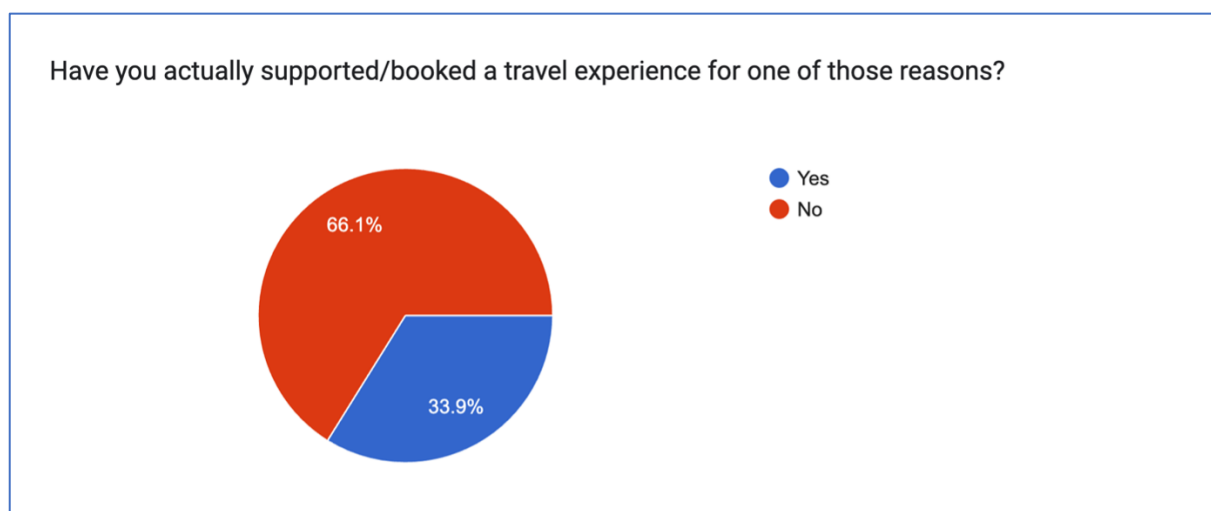


Figure 7

Despite a general understanding of the importance of sustainability, external constraints such as affordability and convenience often prevent travelers from fully embracing sustainable practices in their travel choices. This intention-action gap suggests that behavioral intentions do not always translate into actions, mainly because of external factors. One of these factors can easily be attributed to cost, as more than 90% of the respondents seem to highly prioritize (Figure 8). For the younger generation, affordability and convenience frequently take precedence over sustainability.

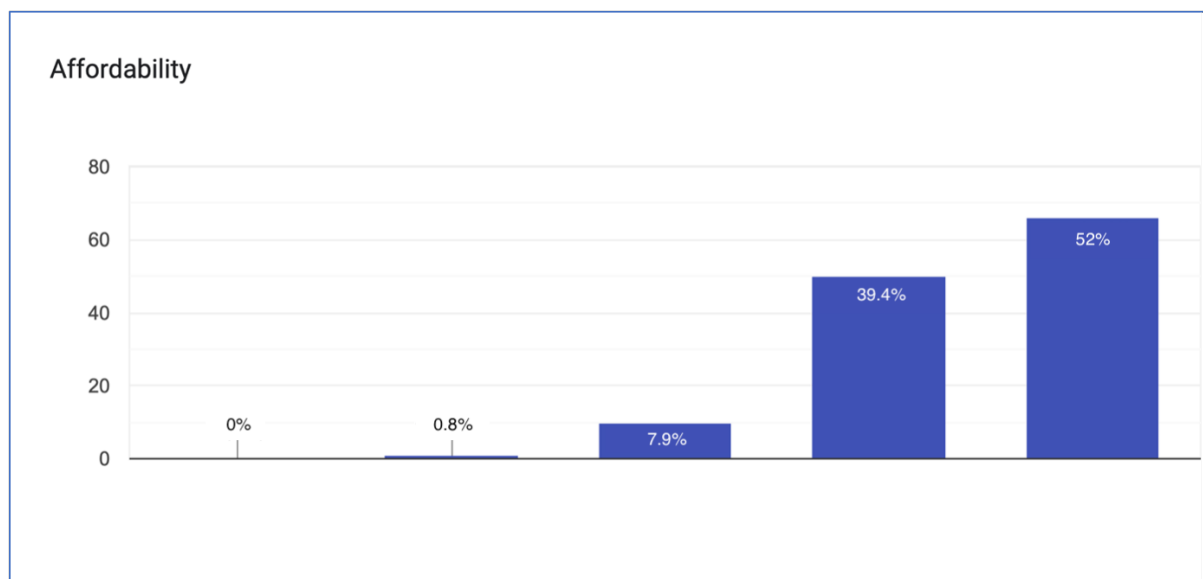


Figure 8

Even travelers who express concern about the environmental impact of their actions often find themselves choosing cheaper flights or accommodations because of their budget limitations. This gap highlights the need for more accessible and affordable sustainable travel options, along with better education and awareness about how small changes in travel behavior can lead to significant environmental impact. It also underscores the crucial role that travel platforms, governments, and the tourism industry could play in bridging this gap, by providing more sustainable choices that are both financially doable and convenient for the average traveler.

Structural Barriers to Sustainable Choices

Beyond individual decision-making, structural factors also play a significant role in limiting the adoption of sustainable travel practices. Many respondents pointed to the low offer of eco-friendly options in certain destinations, noting that sustainable choices are not really offered in a scale that is needed to meet the current demand. Additionally, they highlighted the higher

costs associated with sustainable tourism, making it challenging for budget-conscious travelers to prioritize eco-friendly alternatives. These higher costs, coupled with the fact that sustainable travel options are often not as widely available or easy to access, present considerable barriers for those who would otherwise be inclined to make more environmentally responsible choices.

Group travel dynamics are another factor that often complicates individual efforts to make ethical travel decisions. In these scenarios, some travelers may feel the pressure to follow the preferences of their friends who are less focused on sustainability, even if it means compromising their own commitment to more responsible travel practices. Whether it's choosing hotels, transportation options, or activities, individuals in group settings often find it difficult to prioritize eco-friendly alternatives when the group as a whole is not aligned on sustainability goals. Essentially, despite the growing awareness of environmental issues, the travel industry has been slow to respond and its failure to adequately provide affordable and accessible sustainable options creates a significant disconnect, hindering the widespread adoption of more responsible travel practices.

5.1.3 Post-Travel Reflections: Aligning Expectations with Reality

Common Sources of Disappointment

A notable source of dissatisfaction among this young generation of travelers was the overcrowding of destinations, something most attributed to social media driven hype. Many respondents expressed frustration with destinations that, while heavily promoted online, did not live up to their idealized portrayals: *"social media creates high expectations for travel destinations, and people there just share the good and pretty stuff"* reflecting a sentiment that social media often presents only a polished version of reality. Many of the respondents have admitted to, upon arrival to their intended destination, they were faced with a big contrast of over-commercialized spots, packed with tourists and lacking the tranquility or authenticity that they had expected.

Another common issue highlighted by respondents was misleading imagery, particularly heavily edited photos or videos that distorted the reality of a destination. For example, a respondent mentioned, *"Most of the time, social media shows you the good face of a place and not how it really is when you are there"* showing a common frustration of many travelers who, after arriving, found themselves in locations that were not the same as the curated, idealized

images they saw shared online. Additionally, poorly managed infrastructure in some destinations intensified these feelings of disillusionment, particularly when online exposure led to an influx of visitors that local systems were not well equipped to handle. The results were overcrowded sites, overburdened facilities, and a lack of local engagement—issues that often left travelers feeling disappointed and disconnected from the experience they had anticipated.

Unexpected Positive Experiences

Despite the frustrations outlined above, some respondents also reported unexpected positive experiences, often arising from destinations that were less hyped online. These places, which were not at the center of social media trends, offered a refreshing contrast to the crowded, overexposed destinations that dominate digital platforms. A respondent shared their experience, saying, “I was able to enjoy more authentic and crowd-free experiences because the places I visited weren’t popularized online”, which comes to show that while the algorithm of social networks often directs travelers to the most popular or "viral" destinations, some of the best experiences come from exploring lesser-known places.

Additionally, travelers frequently found that engaging with the local culture and community, whether through locally-run businesses or family-owned accommodations, created a deeper connection to the destination. Experiences in countries like Japan and Nepal stood out for some, with respondents commenting about the "exceptional hospitality" and an enriching cultural exchange that was not impacted by the negative aspects of overtourism. This suggests that when travelers prioritize authenticity and local experiences, they can discover a richer, more fulfilling version of travel, one that may not align with the viral destinations trending on social media but offers genuine moments of connection and cultural immersion.

The contrast between expectations and reality for young travelers is clearly shaped by the overwhelming influence of digital platforms. While these platforms serve as a powerful source of inspiration and information, they also contribute to a distorted view of many popular destinations. As respondents pointed out, social media often presents a sanitized, idealized version of travel, which can lead to disappointment when travelers encounter the more crowded and commercialized reality of these places. However, this growing frustration has not led to a complete rejection of digital media. Instead, there is a shift toward seeking more authentic experiences that are not driven by social media trends. Respondents expressed a strong desire for platforms to showcase lesser-known destinations that offer a more genuine experience, free

from the crowds and commercialization seen in the most popular spots. This desire for authenticity shows a deeper wish among travelers for meaningful cultural exchanges, where the focus is on local experiences rather than simply checking off the most “Instagrammable” locations.

Looking ahead, this suggests that there is a growing need for digital platforms to play a more responsible role in shaping travel behavior. As more travelers express frustration with overtourism and unrealistic portrayals, there is an increasing demand for content that balances inspiration with the reality of destinations. Respondents clearly indicated their preference for destinations that are not only less overexposed but also more connected to the local community and culture. Platforms have the opportunity to lead by example, promoting sustainable and authentic travel experiences that go beyond viral trends and focus on meaningful engagement with local cultures. By doing so, digital media can become a force for positive change, encouraging a shift toward more sustainable travel practices and helping to preserve the authenticity of the world’s most unique destinations.

5.2. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

This thematic analysis offers an in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between digital platforms, youth tourism, and sustainability, as understood and expressed by young travelers themselves. Drawing on qualitative data gathered from interviews with João, Miguel, Rick, Freja, Chen, Oliver, Fenja and Luca, the analysis seeks to uncover the key themes and patterns that emerge from their personal narratives. The process adhered closely to the established systematic approach of thematic analysis that involves a thorough familiarization with the data, followed by iterative coding and categorization, the search for overarching themes, and continuous refinement through reviewing and defining these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). This rigorous methodology ensured that the themes identified were both grounded in the participants’ lived experiences and that they reflect broader trends relevant to digital media’s influence on contemporary travel behavior.

Framed as a constructivist inquiry, this analysis prioritizes understanding the subjective realities and interpretation processes of the participants, rather than imposing external interpretations. It recognizes that young travelers actively interpret digital content - such as social media posts, blogs, and influencer narratives - and integrate this information into their evolving perceptions of destinations, travel expectations, and sustainability values. The

analysis showcases how digital platforms serve as both a source of inspiration and a site of critical reflection, shaping not only where and how young people travel, but also how they navigate the tensions between idealized portrayals and authentic experiences. Through this point of view, our study provides valuable insights into the dynamic ways in which digital media intersects with youth travel culture and sustainability consciousness, revealing a complex landscape of influence, agency, and evolving travel identities.

5.2.1. The Authenticity-Expectation Gap in Digital Destination Portrayals

A predominant theme across all interviews was the significant and often frustrating discrepancy between the idyllic images and narratives portrayed online and the actual experience people would have on destinations upon arrival. This "authenticity-expectation gap" is a central tension that young travelers face, as the highly curated content found on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often "masks" the realities of overcrowding, commercialization, and environmental degradation. Participants shared vivid and sometimes disheartening stories of destinations that appeared pristine, quiet and untouched in online posts but, in reality, were overwhelmed by tourist crowds and damaged by pollution.

For example, João recalled his visit to a beach destination heavily featured on Instagram. He described how the pristine sand and clear blue water that were displayed in social media contrasted sharply with an actually crowded shoreline full of plastic waste: *"I visited a beach destination that was all over Instagram, with photos of perfect sand and clear water, but when I arrived, it was crowded and littered with plastic waste"*. This sense of disillusionment was echoed by Rick, who similarly remarked, *"The beach wasn't as pristine as it seemed online, and there was more waste around than the photos showed"*. Such testimonies highlight the role of social media in constructing aspirational yet unrealistic travel narratives.

Freja's experience illustrated how popular viewpoints and landmarks that dominate online feeds are frequently overcrowded. She described how a spot marketed as the "most beautiful viewpoint" was swarmed with tourists competing for the perfect photo, and as such losing its promised sense of natural tranquility: *"The 'most beautiful viewpoint' on Instagram is always packed with people trying to get the same photo... It wasn't the wild, untouched nature vibe at all"*. Likewise, Luca's description of Bali emphasized how it was taken over by loud noise, heavy traffic, and garbage, instead of the calm and quiet place portrayed on social platforms:

"It was just... packed. So much traffic, noise, trash... not the serene, untouched paradise I saw in those perfect Instagram reels".

Fenja, another interviewee, observed that some destinations have become heavily commercialized despite being portrayed as peaceful, quiet and untouched in online imagery. She saw this as a commodification of natural beauty that builds distance of tourists from genuine experiences: *"I witnessed a place become heavily commercialized, despite the serene online images, which made it feel less authentic"*. This sentiment is widespread among interviewees who feel that the commercial imperative behind destination marketing distorts the authentic cultural and environmental contexts of travel spots.

Illustrative Codes & Quotes:

- **Online idealization / Misleading imagery:** *"I visited a beach destination that was all over Instagram, with photos of pristine sand and clear water, but when I arrived, it was crowded and littered with plastic waste."* (João)
- **Expectation mismatch / Reality of crowds:** *"The 'most beautiful viewpoint' on Instagram is always packed with people trying to get the same photo... It wasn't the 'wild, untouched nature' vibe at all."* (Freja)
- **Commercialization concern:** *"I witnessed a place become heavily commercialized despite serene online images."* (Fenja)
- **Online content as marketing tool / Mask:** *"Online portrayals often leave out the inconvenient truths."* (Miguel)

The interviewees often described online content as a carefully constructed "marketing tool" designed to attract visitors by showcasing only the most attractive aspects of a location. Chen referred to this as a "marketing tool," while Luca called it a "mask," emphasizing that online portrayals selectively hide the inconvenient truths travelers might otherwise encounter. Miguel added that such portrayals often leave out key realities like overcrowding and environmental harm, reinforcing a distorted perception of destinations: "Online portrayals often leave out the inconvenient truths."

This theme shows a deep tension between the digital narratives that drive much of modern travel and the consequences those narratives have on destinations and travelers alike. The over-idealization not only disappoints visitors but also contributes to overtourism, environmental degradation, and the erosion of local culture. It underscores the responsibility that content creators, influencers, and tourism platforms have in presenting balanced and truthful images of destinations, helping travelers to set realistic expectations and make informed decisions.

5.2.2. Trust and Authenticity in Digital Travel Content

Trust in digital travel content emerged as a vital factor that shapes how young travelers engage with online portrayals and make decisions. The interviewees emphasized that their trust is not unconditional; it depends heavily on perceived authenticity, transparency, and the inclusion of both positive and negative aspects of destinations. As digital content floods social media platforms, distinguishing reliable, trustworthy information from overly curated or commercialized narratives has become increasingly important.

Several participants expressed a preference for truthful, unrefined content over highly edited, polished visuals. Luca and Oliver both highlighted the authenticity conveyed through quick, real-time videos such as Instagram Stories or TikTok clips, even when these appear shaky or less refined. Luca explained, "I trust candid videos more than super polished photos. If it's a quick TikTok or an Instagram Story where someone's just showing what they're doing in real-time, even if it's shaky, it feels more authentic." This "rawness" factor matters for them because it suggests transparency and an unfiltered glimpse into the travel experience.

Rick mentioned the importance of honesty within curation, distinguishing authentic content not as merely raw footage but as content that balances the good and bad aspects of travel. He expressed a desire for influencers and creators to openly discuss both the highlights and the challenges of destinations, including factors like overcrowding or travel difficulties: "*Authentic content is less about raw footage and more about being honest in the curation. I want to see content that shows both the good and the bad*". João shared a similar view, valuing narratives that openly address these issues: "*I love content that shares the highs and lows, like when an influencer talks about how beautiful a place is but also mentions how crowded it can get*".

In contrast, overly polished content is often met with skepticism. Fenja expressed a general distrust for content that felt like a refined ad campaign, lacking credibility and authenticity: "*If it's all polished and idealized, it just feels too much like an ad campaign to me*". Oliver went further, stating bluntly, "*If it looks like a magazine, I know it's probably fake*". This skepticism reflects a broader trend among young travelers who are increasingly media literate and critical of the constructed nature of online content.

Illustrative Codes & Quotes:

- **Trust in raw content / Candid footage preferred:** "*I trust candid videos more than super polished photos... it feels more authentic.*" (Luca, Oliver)

- **Honesty in curation / Balanced portrayal:** *"Authentic content is less about raw footage and more about being honest in the curation."* (Rick)
- **Skepticism of polished content:** *"If it's all polished and idealized, it just feels too much like an ad campaign."* (Fenja)
- **Value of comments/reviews:** *"Comments and reviews definitely play a big role... balanced reviews help."* (Miguel, Luca)

User reviews and comments play a crucial role in shaping trust. Miguel highlighted the value of balanced reviews that include both positive feedback and constructive criticism, which aid travelers in making more informed decisions: *"Comments and reviews definitely play a big role... I prefer reviews that are unbiased, where people mention both the good and the bad"*. Luca commented that reviews provide practical advice, such as how to avoid crowds and find authentic local businesses: *"I use reviews for practical advice on avoiding crowds or finding local business"*.

This theme reveals that trust is actively constructed by travelers through careful evaluation of content's transparency and relatability. While polished, high-quality visuals remain appealing, there is an unmistakable shift toward valuing honest, transparent, and relatable portrayals that acknowledge the complexities and realities of travel. Peer and community validation, through comments and balanced reviews, strongly influence this trust-building process.

5.2.3. Navigating Sustainable Travel: Intentions, Barriers, and the Drive for Local Impact

Sustainability emerged as a central theme in the interviews, with young travelers articulating a strong desire to make eco-friendly and responsible travel choices. Many participants framed sustainable travel as an effort to minimize their negative environmental footprint and contribute positively to the local communities they visit. Luca summed up this principle in simple terms: *"Sustainable travel means minimizing my negative impact and trying to leave a positive one"*. Fenja emphasized looking for places that *"prioritize sustainability and community involvement"*, reflecting a conscientious approach to travel decisions.

However, this idealism frequently clashes with practical barriers that complicate or prevent the adoption of sustainable behaviors. Most notably, cost emerged as a significant obstacle. Rick admitted: *"If the eco-friendly option is much more expensive or harder to book, I'm more likely to go with the easier, more affordable choice. It's a bit of a struggle"*. Oliver reinforced this

economic constraint, saying, *"My budget is definitely the main thing. Like, if I can save money on a flight, I'm gonna take it"*. This reflects a common dilemma among young travelers who recognize the importance of sustainability but face the realities of limited budgets and competing priorities.

Accessibility and convenience also present significant challenges. Rick noted, *"Sustainable options aren't always easy to find or affordable"*, while João pointed out that eco-friendly choices *"are harder to access or pricier"*. Chen expressed frustration with superficial sustainability measures, such as hotels reducing basic amenities under the guise of being eco-friendly but detracting from guest comfort: *"I dislike when hotels do not provide toothbrush, or slippers using the excuse 'we want to be sustainable'"*.

An additional concern that some of the interviewees mentioned was greenwashing, where businesses promote a false or exaggerated image of sustainability. Freja questioned the authenticity of eco-friendly claims, remarking, *"Knowing what's truly sustainable. Like, is this 'eco-lodge' actually eco-friendly, or is it just greenwashing?"* This skepticism points to the need for greater transparency and accountability within the tourism industry.

Illustrative Codes & Quotes:

- **Sustainability intention / Minimize impact:** *"Sustainable travel means minimizing my negative impact and trying to leave a positive one."* (Luca, Fenja)
- **Cost barrier / Affordability over ethics:** *"If the eco-friendly option is more expensive or harder to book, I'm more likely to go with the easier, more affordable choice."* (Rick, Oliver)
- **Convenience barrier / Accessibility issues:** *"Sustainable options aren't always easy to find or affordable."* (Rick, João, Chen)
- **Greenwashing concern:** *"Is this 'eco-lodge' actually eco-friendly, or just greenwashing?"* (Freja)
- **Preference for local businesses:** *"I always try to support local businesses because it helps the community directly."* (Fenja, Luca)
- **Balancing convenience vs local support:** *"Sometimes international chains are more convenient or affordable."* (João)

Despite these hurdles, a consistent and heartfelt preference for supporting local businesses stood out as a concrete and accessible way for travelers to align with their sustainability values. Fenja's commitment to patronizing local businesses was motivated by a desire to directly benefit communities: *"I always try to support local businesses because I know it helps the*

community directly". Luca further emphasized the cultural richness this brings: *"For me, the whole point of traveling is to experience the local culture, and that means supporting the people who live there, not just big corporations"*. Yet, convenience and cost pressures sometimes force compromises. João admitted that international chains occasionally become the default due to their easy accessibility: *"Sometimes international chains are more convenient or affordable, so I do end up going with them occasionally"*.

This theme highlights the complex balancing act young travelers face—between strong ethical intentions and practical limitations. While the aspiration for sustainability is high, the lived reality involves constant trade-offs and compromises. Local business support emerges as a meaningful and achievable form of sustainable travel, representing a tangible way travelers can make positive contributions despite broader systemic barriers.

5.2.4. Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Responsible Travel & Social Change

The interviewees held a strong belief in the transformative potential of digital platforms to foster social and environmental progress within the tourism sector, provided these platforms and their content creators embrace greater responsibility and transparency. Participants frequently called for digital platforms to move beyond purely promotional roles and become active agents in promoting responsible travel.

Fenja advocated for algorithmic changes that would prioritize lesser-known destinations and off-season travel opportunities: *"Platforms should definitely promote lesser-known destinations more and encourage travelers to explore places that aren't as overrun"*. Luca supported this view, suggesting that algorithms could promote *"lesser-known alternatives or off-peak travel times"*, as such easing pressure on overburdened hotspots. Many interviewees also emphasized the importance of social media presenting the full picture of tourism's impact, encompassing both beauty and challenges such as overcrowding and environmental degradation. Rick stressed the need for platforms to showcase *"not just the best, most glamorous parts, but also the challenges of tourism like overcrowding and environmental issues"*.

Beyond the dissemination of information, participants envisioned digital platforms as vehicles for subtle behavioral hints to promote sustainable choices. Luca proposed that platforms could incorporate “responsible travel” warnings or tips for popular spots, or even promote trending

hashtags highlighting "off-the-beaten-path" alternatives: *"It's about nudging people towards better choices"*. Which reflects a desire for engaging but ethically guided content that balances inspiration with responsibility. The amplification of local voices and direct support for community businesses were also recurrent suggestions. Luca expressed a desire for platforms to *"amplify local voices more - not just locals performing for tourists, but real local perspectives"*. He also, specifically highlighted the value of platforms facilitating direct bookings with verified local operators and guesthouses, thereby fostering equitable economic benefits.

Illustrative Codes & Quotes:

- **Platform responsibility / Algorithm adjustment:** *"Platforms should promote lesser-known destinations more."* (Fenja, Luca)
- **Honest portrayal of impact:** *"Social media should showcase the full picture—including challenges like overcrowding and environmental issues."* (Rick)
- **Nudging responsible behavior:** *"Platforms could include responsible travel warnings or promote off-the-beaten-path alternatives."* (Luca)
- **Amplifying local voices / Direct local support:** *"I'd love to see platforms amplify local voices more."* (Luca)
- **Educational content / Activism:** *"Platforms should promote sustainable travel options and responsible behaviors."* (João)

Educational content and activism were additional roles interviewees hoped digital platforms would embrace. João believed that platforms should actively *"promote sustainable travel options and responsible behaviors"*, leveraging their reach to educate and mobilize travelers toward more conscientious practices.

This theme reveals an emerging consensus that digital platforms have a dual responsibility: to inspire travel and exploration, but also to ensure that such inspiration is grounded in ethical considerations, environmental awareness, and support for local communities. Travelers see these platforms as indispensable tools for shifting tourism toward sustainability and social equity.

5.2.5. The Evolving Traveler: Consciousness and Criticality

The interviewees collectively depicted themselves as increasingly conscious, critical, and empowered travelers who actively engage with online content through a lens of skepticism and

reflection. This theme highlights a shift from passive consumption of travel narratives toward active interpretation, evaluation, and decision-making.

Participants expressed a keen critical awareness of the ways digital platforms filter and frame travel experiences, often glossing over less favorable aspects. Luca stated, *"It made me realize how much those platforms filter out"*, while Fenja echoed, *"If it's all polished and idealized, it just feels too much like an ad campaign to me"*. This media literacy drives a demand for more realistic, unvarnished portrayals that resonate with their desire for authentic travel. The aspiration for genuine connection was palpable. Luca described authentic travel as *"trying to experience a place as closely as a local would"*, expressing a deeper yearning for cultural immersion rather than superficial tourism. João emphasized the moral responsibility that accompanies travel choices, stating: *"If I found out that a destination was severely impacted by overtourism or harming the environment or local culture, I would skip it"*. Miguel agreed, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing sustainability over following popular trends: *"I think it's important to prioritize sustainability over simply following trends"*.

Nevertheless, interviewees acknowledged the practical tension between ideals and reality. Rick captured this tension effectively: *"I try to make the right choice, but sometimes it's not always possible"*. This sincere confession underscores the constant balancing act travelers perform between their values and practical constraints like budget and convenience.

Illustrative Codes & Quotes:

- **Critical assessment of online content:** *"It made me realize how much those platforms filter out."* (Luca)
- **Desire for genuine connection:** *"Authentic travel is about trying to experience a place as closely a local would."* (Luca)
- **Individual agency / Conscious choice:** *"If a destination harms environment or culture, I would skip it."* (João, Miguel)
- **Balancing ideals and pragmatism:** *"I try to make the right choice, but sometimes it's not possible."* (Rick)

Participants also voiced a strong desire for tools and platform features that would empower them to make informed and responsible choices. Suggestions included filters for sustainability, real-time crowd meters, and ethical warnings about destinations - tools designed to support

conscious decision-making and counteract passive influence. This desire signals a proactive traveler mindset that values agency and critical engagement with digital travel content.

In sum, young travelers position themselves as active agents in shaping their travel experiences and the broader tourism landscape. They seek truthful, balanced narratives that respect their values, practical support to live those values, and empowerment to navigate the complex realities of modern travel. This evolving consciousness represents a hopeful trajectory toward more responsible, culturally sensitive, and sustainable travel practices.

5.3. Integration and Triangulation of Findings

This section serves as a crucial link between the quantitative patterns uncovered in the survey analysis (6.1) and the rich, qualitative narratives drawn from the interviews (6.2). The integration and triangulation of these findings provide a more comprehensive and robust understanding of how digital platforms influence youth tourism narratives, perceptions, and sustainable behaviors (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This approach allows for the cross-validation of insights, enriching the statistical trends with deeper, more nuanced meanings, and identifying complementary aspects that neither method could fully capture on its own (Denzin, 2017). By bringing together these two analytical streams, the research moves beyond mere description to a more holistic grasp of the complex dynamics at play between digital content and young travelers' decision-making processes.

It also systematically confronts the findings from both the survey and the interviews, which helps mitigate potential researcher biases, resulting in a more balanced and nuanced interpretation (Bryman, 2016). This triangulation not only strengthens the validity of the conclusions but also enables a richer understanding that embraces both measurable patterns and subjective experiences. Ultimately, this integrative analysis lays a solid foundation for exploring how digital media shapes travel choices and sustainability attitudes, offering valuable insights for future academic inquiry, policymaking, and practical applications in the evolving landscape of tourism.

The integrated analysis reveals several key thematic intersections that give us an insight into how young travelers critically engage with digital media, navigate the tension between sustainability intentions and behaviors, and shape evolving travel identities. These themes not only confirm and expand upon the survey's broad statistical patterns but also bring forward the

rich texture of lived experience and subjective interpretation uncovered through interviews. Together, they offer a comprehensive picture of contemporary youth tourism within the digitally mediated travel landscape.

The Authenticity-Expectation Gap: Dissecting Idealized Digital Narratives

One of the most prominent themes emerging from both data sets is the pervasive **authenticity-expectation gap**, where the highly curated and idealized images frequent on digital platforms contrast sharply with travelers' on-site realities. The survey establishes that a significant portion of young travelers express skepticism toward the overly polished portrayals commonly found on social media, with around **35% criticizing platforms for promoting unrealistic destination images**. This statistical insight is then more elaborated in the interviews, where respondents vividly describe moments of disillusionment - arriving at once "pristine" beaches overwhelmed by crowds and litter, or highly commercialized towns far removed from their quiet online representations.

These discrepancies are not perceived as accidental but rather as symptoms of strategic marketing efforts designed to attract tourists by showcasing only the "best parts" of a destination. Interviewees like Chen and Luca explicitly labeled these portrayals as "marketing tools" or "masks" underscoring a critical awareness of the intentionality behind selective curation. Miguel's observation that such content "leaves out inconvenient truths" captures the ethical dilemma facing both content creators and consumers: the tension between enticing visual narratives and the responsibility to represent destination realities faithfully.

The consequences of this gap extend beyond mere traveler disappointment. As several interviewees highlighted, these distorted digital narratives contribute to overtourism by funneling mass attention toward a narrow set of viral, "Instagrammable" hotspots. This overexposure not only strains local infrastructures but also undermines the authenticity and sustainability of these destinations. The triangulated data thus point to a cycle in which digital platforms, driven by algorithmic priorities and commercial incentives, amplify certain idealized images that encourage unsustainable tourist influxes, while lesser-known but potentially more authentic and sustainable destinations remain underrepresented.

Trust and Authenticity: Foundations for Informed Digital Engagement

Closely linked to the authenticity gap is the critical issue of **trust** in digital travel content. The survey revealed that peer reviews and personal recommendations strongly influence young travelers' decisions, reflecting a shift toward valuing user-generated, experiential knowledge over polished promotional material. This quantitative trend finds rich contextualization in the interviews, where participants articulate the nuanced criteria they use to assess the credibility and authenticity of digital content.

Interviewees uniformly expressed a preference for “raw” honest footage - such as real-time Instagram Stories or TikTok clips - that conveys immediacy and unfiltered reality. Luca's comment that shaky, spontaneous videos feel “more authentic” than highly edited photos, shows a growing skepticism toward overly staged digital portrayals. Equally important is the desire for balanced content that acknowledges both the strengths and weaknesses of destinations. Rick's emphasis on “honest curation” and João's appreciation for influencers who discuss “the highs and lows” illustrate this critical evaluative lens.

Conversely, overly polished content was often dismissed as superficial or “ad-like,” signaling a widespread media literacy among young travelers who actively negotiate their trust in online narratives. This discernment is further reinforced by the value placed on community feedback: balanced reviews, transparent comments, and peer endorsements serve as vital reference points, enabling travelers to construct a more holistic and reliable understanding of destinations.

This triangulation underscores that trust is not passively granted but actively constructed through critical engagement with multiple digital sources, signaling a generational shift toward more sophisticated media consumption. The interplay between the statistical prevalence of peer review reliance and the qualitative emphasis on transparency and balance points to a foundational mechanism through which young travelers seek to navigate and mitigate the risks of digital misinformation.

Navigating Sustainable Travel: The Persistent Intention-Action Gap

Both survey and interview data converge on the theme of the **intention-action gap** in sustainable travel. While a large majority of survey respondents express moderate to high concern about sustainability, only a fraction actively book sustainable travel options. The

interviews provide illuminating detail on why this gap persists, revealing the tangible barriers that limit the translation of values into behaviors.

The dominant among these barriers is **affordability**, repeatedly emphasized as a decisive factor overriding ethical considerations. The survey data spotlight cost as the top priority for more than 90% of respondents, a finding that echoes in interviews where participants candidly describe opting for cheaper flights, accommodations, or transport despite a preference for greener options. Rick's and Oliver's remarks about budget constraints underscore this economic reality, emphasizing the challenge young travelers face in reconciling idealism with financial limitations.

Alongside cost, **availability and convenience** emerge as significant impediments. The qualitative accounts reveal that sustainable travel options are often scarce or difficult to access, particularly in certain destinations. This scarcity compounds the difficulty of maintaining sustainable practices consistently, especially for those traveling in groups where individual preferences may be diluted by collective convenience. Moreover, concerns about **greenwashing** add another layer of complexity. Interviewees' skepticism toward businesses that superficially claim eco-friendliness without substantive practices highlights a critical call for greater transparency and accountability within the tourism industry. This aligns with a broader mistrust of commercialized narratives that echo the authenticity-expectation gap, indicating systemic challenges in sustainable tourism promotion.

Amidst these barriers, the strong and recurrent preference for **supporting local businesses** stands out as a practical and meaningful expression of sustainability. This preference reflects an accessible, culturally resonant way for young travelers to enact their environmental and social values, even when more comprehensive sustainable options are unattainable. The triangulated findings thus reveal sustainability as a complex negotiation between ethical aspiration and practical realities, with local engagement emerging as a focal point for actionable commitment.

Digital Platforms as Agents of Change: Expectations and Responsibilities

A clear expectation surfaces across both data sets regarding the **transformative potential of digital platforms** in fostering responsible travel and social change. Respondents envision these platforms as pivotal actors capable of steering tourism toward sustainability by recalibrating the types of content they promote and the tools they provide.

Both survey respondents and interviewees advocate for **algorithmic reforms** to diversify destination exposure, reducing the disproportionate focus on viral hotspots and instead promoting lesser-known, off-peak, and community-centered destinations. This shift is seen not only as a means to alleviate overtourism but also as a way to enrich traveler experiences with authenticity and cultural depth. Participants also express a desire for **greater transparency and balanced portrayals** that encompass both the charm and the challenges of destinations - addressing overcrowding, environmental degradation, and social impact. This aligns with the calls from interviewees like Rick and Fenja for content that “shows the full picture” thus empowering travelers to make more informed choices.

Beyond information, the role of platforms as **guides and educators** is emphasized. Suggested features include sustainability filters, real-time crowd meters, ethical warnings, and direct booking options with verified local operators, aiming to support conscious decision-making and ethical tourism practices. This vision reflects a generational shift toward proactive digital citizenship within the travel ecosystem, where platforms function as facilitators of both inspiration and responsibility.

The Evolving Identity of the Youth Traveler: Consciousness and Criticality

Underlying these thematic intersections is the broader narrative of the **evolving youth traveler** - an individual increasingly more media literate, critically reflective, and ethically conscious. The survey’s depiction of highly mobile, digitally engaged young travelers finds rich elaboration in interviewees’ narratives describing a progressive distancing from passive content consumption toward active interpretation and agency.

This consciousness manifests in a heightened skepticism toward curated digital narratives, a yearning for authentic cultural immersion, and a willingness to negotiate the tension between ideals and practical constraints. Luca’s desire to “experience a place as closely as a local would” and João’s ethical commitment to avoid destinations negatively impacted by overtourism are examples of this shift. Simultaneously, travelers acknowledge the complexities of real-life decision-making, as Rick admits that “sometimes it’s not possible” to fully live out their value, which underscores the pragmatic balancing act central to modern travel. Furthermore, the expressed demand for platform tools that empower informed and responsible choices highlights a proactive traveler identity - one that seeks not only to consume but to shape digital travel culture and, by extension, the broader tourism industry.

This integration of survey data and interview narratives reveals a complex and evolving relationship between young travelers and digital platforms, highlighting how these platforms shape travel behaviors, perceptions, and sustainability practices. Young travelers actively navigate the tension between idealized, polished digital portrayals and the more complicated realities of overcrowding, commercialization, and environmental impact, creating an authenticity-expectation gap that leads to frustration and contributes to overtourism. Despite this, there is a clear generational shift toward greater media literacy and critical engagement, with youth travelers favoring authentic, unfiltered content and valuing peer reviews over glossy advertising. However, practical barriers such as cost, accessibility, and convenience maintain a persistent intention-action gap in sustainable travel, though supporting local businesses emerges as a meaningful way for travelers to live out their values. Digital platforms are seen not just as sources of inspiration but as crucial agents for promoting responsible travel by diversifying destination exposure, providing transparent information, and offering tools that empower informed choices. Together, these findings portray the modern youth traveler as a thoughtful and engaged individual striving to reconcile digital influence with a commitment to authentic, sustainable travel.

6. Findings & Discussion

This chapter presents an in-depth discussion and synthesis of the combined findings derived from the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing youth travel behaviors today, particularly regarding the dynamic interplay between digital platforms, sustainability, and authentic cultural representation. The integration of broad statistical patterns from a multinational sample of young travelers with rich qualitative insights from personal narratives offers a multifaceted view of how digital platforms shape travel perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes toward sustainability.

Building upon the abductive research approach and constructivist paradigm outlined in Chapter 5, the analysis reveals core insights into how young travelers critically engage with online content, navigate the persistent gap between sustainability intentions and actual travel choices, and how their identities as "Conscious Digital Travelers" are evolving. This chapter will first detail the integrated empirical findings, presented through five key themes, followed by a deeper discussion that formalizes the theoretical contributions emerging from this research.

6.1. Integrated Findings

The analysis of both survey and interview data, meticulously triangulated to enhance validity and reduce bias, yielded five interconnected themes that illustrate how young travelers construct their perceptions of digital tourism, navigate sustainability, and engage with online narratives. These themes are not merely descriptive but reflect the complex, often contradictory, lived experiences of young travelers in the digitally mediated travel landscape.

6.1.1. The Authenticity-Expectation Gap in Digital Destination Portrayals

A predominant and often disquieting theme across both quantitative and qualitative data was the significant **discrepancy between idealized online portrayals and the lived reality of travel destinations**, leading to a notable "authenticity-expectation gap." This theme highlights how digital platforms actively **construct a hyper-real or idealized version of a destination**, setting a perceptual benchmark that frequently clashes with the physical and social realities encountered by young travelers (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

- **Quantitative Reinforcement:** The survey data strongly corroborated this, with approximately **35% of respondents explicitly criticizing platforms for promoting**

unrealistic portrayals of destinations. This numerically underscored a widespread awareness of this perceived problem. Furthermore, open-ended comments from survey respondents highlighted concerns such as "Too many tourists not shown on the pictures/videos" and disillusionment from visiting what was advertised as a "calm and hidden gem" that turned out to be "just an extremely expensive place only based on tourism."

- **Qualitative Elaboration:** Interviewees provided rich narratives directly elaborating on *why* this gap existed and its profound *subjective impact*. Luca and Rick vividly described arriving at beaches portrayed as "pristine" online, only to find them "packed," "messy," and "commercialized." Freja recounted a "most beautiful viewpoint" in Norway being "swarmed with tourists competing for the perfect photo," losing its "wild, untouched nature vibe." These experiences confirm a critical understanding that platforms "filter out" (Luca) or act as a "marketing tool" (Chen), presenting a "masque" (Luca) of reality. Fenja further observed that destinations, despite serene online images, become "heavily commercialized," indicating a perceived commodification of natural beauty. The qualitative data revealed that these discrepancies lead to "disappointment," "disillusionment," and a need to "adjust expectations."

This integrated finding underscores that young travelers actively interpret digital content through a lens of skepticism, recognizing deliberate curation. However, this critical engagement does not fully inoculate them from the emotional impact when their **constructed expectations** collide with the tangible reality of a destination. The data points to a cycle where algorithmic priorities and commercial incentives amplify idealized images, potentially funneling attention towards "Instagrammable" hotspots, thereby contributing to overtourism and straining local infrastructures and authenticity.

6.1.2. Trust and Authenticity in Digital Travel Content

Closely linked to the authenticity gap, this theme emphasizes how young travelers actively engage in a complex process of **constructing trustworthiness** around the digital travel content they consume. It highlights a critical shift from passive consumption to an active evaluation of digital narratives, where authenticity is judged through various cues and perceived levels of transparency.

- **Quantitative Reinforcement:** The survey findings provided strong quantitative evidence for the preference for **peer-generated content**, with **57.4% of respondents attributing high value to peer reviews** and a striking **76.3% valuing personal recommendations**. This quantitatively confirmed a definitive shift in trust hierarchies away from traditional advertising towards user-generated content.
- **Qualitative Elaboration:** Interviewees provided rich insights into *what makes content trustworthy*. Luca and Oliver explicitly preferred "candid videos" and "real-time" Instagram Stories or TikTok clips, even if "shaky," over "super polished photos," as these conveyed authenticity cues and unfiltered experience. Rick and João stressed the importance of "honesty in curation," valuing content that "shows both the good and the bad," including challenges like overcrowding or travel difficulties. This highlights a desire for balanced narratives and truthfulness. Conversely, overly "polished" or "ad-like" content elicited skepticism of perfection (Fenja, Oliver), suggesting a heightened media literacy among young travelers who actively critique content rather than consuming passively. The role of peer validation through comments and reviews (Miguel, Luca) was also crucial for constructing trustworthiness and gaining practical advice.

This theme reveals that trust is actively constructed by travelers through critical evaluation of content's transparency and relatability. While visually appealing content remains important, there is an unmistakable shift towards valuing honest, transparent, and relatable portrayals that acknowledge the complexities and realities of travel.

6.1.3. Navigating Sustainable Travel: Intentions, Barriers, and the Drive for Local Impact

This theme illuminates the complex terrain young travelers navigate when confronting sustainable choices, revealing a prevalent **intention-action gap** where stated environmental and ethical values often yield to practical considerations. Their construction of "sustainable travel" extends beyond ecological impact to a significant emphasis on **supporting local economies**, yet systemic and individual barriers frequently impede consistent sustainable behavior.

- **Quantitative Reinforcement:** The survey data revealed a clear attitudinal divide: **37.8% showed high concern for sustainability (rating 4-5), and 40.2% were moderately concerned (rating 3)**, indicating widespread positive inclination.

However, a significant intention-action gap was evident, as **only approximately 30% had actively booked sustainable travel options**. This disparity is largely explained by the overwhelming quantitative priority given to **affordability (94% rated 4-5)**, consistently dominating all other decision-making factors.

- **Qualitative Elaboration:** Interviewees provided deep insights into the *constructed nature* of this gap and the underlying **barriers**. Luca, Miguel, Rick, and Fenja consistently cited **cost and convenience** as primary impediments, describing trade-offs (e.g., choosing cheaper flights over trains, or less ideal accommodations). Chen expressed frustration with superficial sustainability measures (perceived sacrifice), such as hotels cutting amenities under the guise of being eco-friendly. Freja highlighted greenwashing concerns, questioning the authenticity of eco-friendly claims.
 - Despite these hurdles, a consistent and heartfelt preference for **supporting local businesses** stood out as a concrete and accessible way for travelers to align with their sustainability values. Fenja emphasized, "I always try to support local businesses because I know it helps the community directly," while Luca stressed the cultural richness this brings. This reveals direct community benefit as a strong motivator for a culturally embedded understanding of sustainability. Yet, even this preference faced the balancing act with convenience, as João and Miguel admitted to sometimes choosing international chains for practical reasons.

This theme highlights the complex balancing act that young travelers face, between strong ethical intentions and practical limitations. While the aspiration for sustainability is high, the lived reality involves constant trade-offs and compromises. Local business support emerges as a meaningful and achievable form of sustainable travel, representing a tangible way travelers can make positive contributions despite broader systemic barriers.

6.1.4. Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Responsible Travel & Social Change

Interviewees overwhelmingly articulated a strong belief in the transformative potential of digital platforms to act as **catalysts for positive social and environmental change** within the tourism sector. Their narratives suggest that platforms are not merely tools for consumption but possess significant agency in shaping a more responsible travel culture, provided their content and functionalities are intentionally redesigned.

- **Quantitative Reinforcement:** The survey showed overwhelming support for this idea, with an **87% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that digital platforms can drive social change in tourism**. This quantitatively established a high level of **belief in platform potential**. Survey respondents also explicitly called for platforms to "promote more sustainable and responsible tourism by highlighting lesser-known destinations and authentic experiences."
- **Qualitative Elaboration:** Interviewees offered concrete, nuanced suggestions for platform redesign and content shifts. Luca envisioned "reality check features" with "unedited clips" and "dynamic 'crowd meter' indicators," reflecting a desire for transparent information and nudging responsible behavior. Freja highlighted the role of platforms in amplifying local voices and facilitating "direct booking with verified local operators." Chen suggested integrating sustainability "into the luxury or comfort aspect more seamlessly," showcasing how platforms could make responsible choices more appealing rather than a sacrifice. This theme emphasizes platform responsibility to move beyond mere aesthetics and actively promote responsible tourism tools and ethical content. João summarized the desire for social media to "focus more on promoting sustainable travel options and responsible behaviors" and "highlight the beautiful but also the challenging aspects of travel."

This integrated analysis demonstrates that young travelers **construct digital platforms as powerful agents for change**, with a clear expectation for them to actively guide users towards sustainable and responsible tourism through transparency, strategic content promotion, and community empowerment.

6.1.5. The Evolving Traveler: Consciousness and Criticality

This final theme synthesizes the observed characteristics of the contemporary young traveler as increasingly **conscious and critical agents**, actively engaging with online content and striving for responsible travel behaviors, even when navigating inherent dilemmas.

- **Quantitative Reinforcement:** The survey's demographic data (Figure 1) established the **hyper-mobility** of the sample, with **94.5% traveling annually**, underscoring travel as an embedded lifestyle. Despite this, the survey also revealed their **critical engagement** with content, with **~35% expressing skepticism about unrealistic**

portrayals and a high value for peer-generated content, indicating a demographic both passionate about travel and discerning about its portrayal.

- **Qualitative Elaboration:** Interviewees demonstrated a sophisticated media literacy ("if it looks like a magazine, I know it's probably fake," Oliver; "It made me realize how much those platforms filter out," Luca). They actively constructed their identity as a traveler who seeks "genuine connection" (Luca) and "authentic experiences" (João, Fenja), showing a critical departure from superficial, trend-driven tourism. This translates into a strong sense of individual agency in decision-making: "If I found out that a destination was severely impacted by overtourism or that it was harming the environment or local culture, I would skip it." (João). Rick, too, noted he might "reconsider visiting." Their suggested platform redesigns (e.g., "more honest content," "amplify local voices," "budget travel tips") are not just desires but active manifestations of their **proactive engagement** in shaping a better travel culture. This highlights the traveler's **evolving self-awareness** – they are not just influenced, but also want to influence, making sense of their place within the broader tourism ecosystem.

This theme illustrates that young travelers are constructing a more responsible and critically engaged identity for themselves in the digital age. They are not merely recipients of digital narratives but active interpreters and evaluators, seeking genuine experiences and striving to make conscious choices that align with their ethical values, despite the inherent complexities and tensions within the digital tourism landscape.

6.2. Discussion: Theoretical Contributions and Emerging Frameworks

Integrating the findings from both the survey and interview data yields a multi-dimensional framework to better understand youth tourism in the digital age. This framework incorporates key theoretical constructs that explain the complexities young travelers face as they navigate the evolving landscape of travel media, sustainability, and digital platforms. These constructs are essential to understand the tensions between intention and action, the increasing digital media literacy among youth, and the role of digital platforms in shaping travel choices and sustainable behaviors.

6.2.1. The Digital Authenticity Paradox

A core theoretical contribution emerging from the data is the **Digital Authenticity Paradox**. This paradox describes the tension young travelers experience when confronting inspiring, yet often idealized, digital portrayals of travel destinations. These digital depictions, predominantly shared on social media platforms, typically highlight the most visually appealing aspects, amazing landscapes, picturesque landmarks, and seemingly authentic cultural encounters (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). These representations successfully create an aspirational image, driving curiosity and exploration among young travelers.

However, the empirical findings reveal that the reality on-site frequently contrasts sharply with these idealized portrayals. As evidenced by consistent reports from survey respondents and interviewees, the actual experience of visiting these destinations often includes overcrowding, commercialization, and environmental degradation, factors rarely highlighted in digital content. This contradiction generates significant disappointment for travelers and impacts their overall satisfaction, leading to a gap between their digitally constructed expectations and the lived reality. This paradox suggests that digital media, despite its power to inspire travel and cultural curiosity, simultaneously risks distorting travelers' expectations and undermining authentic experiences. It calls for a more nuanced approach to content creation and platform governance, advocating for transparency to set realistic expectations and promote genuine, sustainable engagement.

6.2.2. Constructed Digital Trust

The concept of **Constructed Digital Trust** emerges as a critical factor in how young travelers engage with digital travel content. As digital platforms become primary sources of travel information, young travelers must actively navigate and critically assess a complex landscape of content, ranging from highly polished influencer posts to candid peer reviews and personal recommendations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The trust young travelers place in this content is not automatic but is actively built through a process of evaluation and interpretation.

The findings highlight that **media literacy** plays a pivotal role in this construction. Travelers increasingly demonstrate the ability to critically assess the authenticity and reliability of digital content, relying on cues such as transparency, immediacy, and relatability. For instance, real-time updates and unpolished user-generated content are perceived as more authentic, offering an immediate glimpse into the travel experience, whereas overly curated content is often met

with skepticism, seen as manipulative or inauthentic. Furthermore, **peer validation** significantly contributes to the construction of trust. Young travelers heavily rely on peer reviews and personal recommendations, often preferring content from fellow travelers or locals over influencers who may be financially incentivized (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This dynamic underscores the growing importance of user-generated content and community feedback in shaping travel decisions and reflects the increasing sophistication of young travelers as digital citizens who actively curate the information they consume to align with their values and expectations.

6.2.3. Negotiated Sustainability Practice

Negotiated Sustainability Practice is a key theoretical contribution that sheds light on how young travelers approach sustainable travel. While the findings confirm a strong ethical commitment to sustainability among many young travelers, the practical realities of travel often force them into a process of negotiation and compromise. The data reveal that sustainable travel practices are not always easy to implement due to a range of significant barriers, including **cost, convenience, and limited availability of eco-friendly options** (Carrington et al., 2010; Font & McCabe, 2017).

Despite these pervasive hurdles, a clear preference emerged among young travelers to **support local businesses** and engage in practices that directly benefit the communities they visit. This preference reflects a more culturally embedded understanding of sustainability—one that emphasizes local impact and tangible contributions rather than abstract environmental goals. Supporting local businesses is viewed as a practical and accessible way to enact sustainable values while still enjoying the travel experience. However, the findings also highlight the constant tension between these ethical aspirations and the financial and logistical constraints that prevent travelers from fully realizing their sustainability goals. The "negotiated" aspect of sustainability comes into play when young travelers must continually balance their ethical ideals with the realities of affordability, convenience, and availability, underscoring a broader challenge in sustainable tourism where individual values often collide with systemic limitations in the tourism industry.

6.2.4. Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism

The concept of **Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism** reflects the growing belief that digital platforms have a pivotal and proactive role in shaping sustainable travel behaviors and

fostering social change. Young travelers increasingly perceive platforms not merely as tools for destination inspiration or information but as ethical actors capable of promoting responsible tourism practices.

The findings indicate a strong demand for **algorithmic reforms** that diversify destination exposure, moving away from the disproportionate promotion of viral hotspots towards highlighting lesser-known, community-centered, and sustainable alternatives. Platforms are envisioned as ethical guides and educators capable of incorporating **sustainability filters, crowd density alerts, ethical warnings, and facilitating direct bookings with verified local operators**. This aligns with emerging theories of digital nudging and platform responsibility, suggesting that platforms can guide traveler behavior toward sustainability through subtle, ethically informed interventions. Furthermore, participants called for platforms to **amplify authentic local voices** rather than sanitized tourist performances, advocating for digital tourism governance models that prioritize community agency and equitable benefit distribution. This perspective positions digital platforms as powerful forces for social change within the tourism sector, capable of not only inspiring travel but also guiding it toward more sustainable and equitable practices.

6.2.5. The Digital Sustainability Dilemma (Green Travel Paradox)

Synthesizing the core tensions identified in the empirical findings and elaborated through the aforementioned theoretical constructs, a new overarching theoretical construct emerges: **The Digital Sustainability Dilemma**, also referred to as the **Green Travel Paradox**. This dilemma encapsulates the fundamental tension experienced by young travelers who are caught between their ethical commitment to sustainability and the powerful, sometimes contradictory, influences of digital media.

On one hand, digital platforms undeniably inspire young travelers to engage with sustainability, offering readily accessible content that showcases eco-friendly practices, green travel options, and sustainable destinations. Platforms play a key role in raising awareness about the environmental and social impact of tourism, nudging travelers toward more responsible choices. However, on the other hand, digital media concurrently promotes destinations that are not necessarily aligned with sustainable principles, often prioritizing viral content, aesthetic appeal, and commercial incentives over responsible tourism practices. This creates a paradox where young travelers are encouraged to explore new destinations and experiences, but the

very platforms they rely on to guide them also inadvertently contribute to overtourism, environmental degradation, and cultural exploitation.

The Green Travel Paradox underscores the urgent need for a more nuanced and ethically conscious approach to digital content creation and platform governance. While digital platforms possess immense power to inspire sustainable travel practices, they must also critically evolve to mitigate their inherent role in promoting overtourism and unsustainable behaviors. This dilemma highlights the critical need for **ethical responsibility within digital content creation**, urging platforms to actively balance inspiration with a clear commitment to promoting sustainability and responsible tourism, thereby fostering a more cohesive and impactful journey towards a sustainable future for youth travel.

The theoretical contributions outlined in this chapter offer a more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms shape travel behaviors, perceptions, and sustainability practices. They also point to critical areas for future research, policy-making, and platform design, especially in the context of promoting responsible tourism. The evolving role of digital platforms in youth tourism calls for a collective effort from content creators, platform developers, and the broader tourism industry to provide more transparent, sustainable, and culturally responsible travel experiences that align with the values of young travelers.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into youth travel behaviors, digital media influence, and sustainable tourism practices, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research efforts.

First, even though the survey mainly included many people from different European countries, it didn't fully represent all young people in those countries. Most of the people who took part chose to do so themselves, which means they might already be more interested in things like social media and sustainability than others. This limits the generalizability of the findings to all youth travelers, particularly those from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds outside Europe or less digitally connected populations.

Secondly, the qualitative interviews, while rich in detail, involved a relatively small number of participants. Although the interviewees represented diverse perspectives and experiences, the

sample size constrains the ability to capture the full spectrum of youth travel identities and behaviors. Furthermore, the subjective nature of qualitative data means that interpretations are inherently influenced by participant recall and willingness to disclose information, which could affect the depth and scope of insights. **Relatedly, the reliance on self-reported data in both the survey and interviews introduces the potential for social desirability bias, where participants might consciously or unconsciously present their attitudes or behaviors (e.g., regarding sustainable travel) in a more positive light. This inherent limitation of self-report means that there may be a discrepancy between stated intentions and actual practices, particularly relevant to the observed intention-action gap. Additionally, the retrospective nature of some questions, where participants recounted past travel experiences and influences, may introduce an element of recall bias, potentially affecting the precision of their recollections.**

A further limitation lies in the rapidly evolving nature of digital media platforms and travel trends. Given the fast pace of technological and social change, the findings reflect a snapshot in time that might shift as new platforms emerge, algorithms change, or global travel contexts evolve. The dynamic interplay between digital content and travel behavior requires ongoing investigation to maintain relevance. **Moreover, the broad age range of the 'youth' demographic (16-31 years old) used in this study, while capturing a large segment of digital natives, encompasses diverse life stages and experiences (e.g., high school students versus young professionals), which may lead to internal heterogeneity not fully explored within the scope of this research.** Since the research focused primarily on the perspectives of travelers themselves, with limited input from content creators, platform developers, or tourism industry stakeholders, it represents a narrow focus that may overlook critical viewpoints on how digital storytelling is shaped, governed, or monetized, which could further explain the observed phenomena and inform interventions. **Finally, while rigorous steps were taken to ensure analytical rigor and reflexivity was maintained throughout the qualitative analysis, the interpretation of interview data remains inherently subjective. The themes and insights presented are thus constructions formed through the researchers' analytical lens, influenced by their theoretical background and engagement with the data.**

Future Research Directions

Building on these limitations, several recommendations for future research are suggested. Expanding the geographic and demographic scope to include youth travelers from non-

European regions or underrepresented communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital media and sustainability intersect globally. Comparative studies across cultures would be particularly valuable to examine how different social norms and infrastructural contexts influence the digital travel experience. Longitudinal research designs would offer deeper insight into how youth travel behaviors and digital media engagement evolve over time, capturing shifts prompted by technological advancements or major global events. Such studies could explore how emerging platforms (e.g., virtual reality, metaverse environments) reshape destination perceptions and sustainable travel intentions.

Future work should also incorporate the perspectives of content creators, social media influencers, platform engineers, and tourism policymakers. Understanding the motivations, constraints, and ethical considerations from these stakeholders would enrich knowledge about the creation and dissemination of digital travel content, and how these processes impact tourism patterns and sustainability outcomes. Additionally, intervention-based research exploring the effectiveness of digital nudging tools, algorithmic reforms, or sustainability filters on traveler decision-making could provide practical guidance for platform design and policy development. Experimental studies testing different content formats, narrative styles, or transparency levels may help identify best practices for balancing inspiration with authenticity and responsibility.

Lastly, future research would greatly benefit from adopting interdisciplinary approaches that bring together expertise from media studies, tourism research, behavioral science, and environmental ethics. This blend of perspectives is essential to fully understand the complex and multifaceted relationship between digital media, youth travel culture, and sustainable tourism. By combining these fields, researchers can explore how digital storytelling, media influence, traveler behavior, and ethical considerations intersect to shape travel choices and sustainability outcomes. Furthermore, integrating large-scale quantitative data analytics—such as social media metrics and travel patterns - with in-depth qualitative ethnographic methods, like interviews and participant observations, would provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of these dynamics. Such mixed-method approaches would yield richer, more actionable insights that can inform policy, platform design, and tourism industry practices aimed at fostering responsible and sustainable travel among young people.

7. Conclusions

This Master's thesis embarked on an in-depth exploration of the intricate relationship between digital platforms, youth tourism, and sustainability. Guided by a constructivist paradigm, our central aim was to understand **how digital storytelling impacts youth tourism and young travelers' perceptions of destinations and travel, specifically regarding sustainability**. In an era defined by hyper-mobile, digitally native young travelers and an urgent global call for sustainability, this research sought to illuminate the complex, often contradictory, ways in which digital narratives shape travel behaviors, perceptions of authenticity, and commitments to responsible tourism.

7.1. Summary of Key Findings

Our comprehensive mixed-methods approach, triangulating quantitative survey data from 221 young travelers with 8 qualitative insights from in-depth interviews, revealed five interconnected themes that paint a nuanced picture of contemporary youth travel:

1. **The Authenticity-Expectation Gap in Digital Destination Portrayals:** We found a pervasive discrepancy between the idealized, curated images presented through digital storytelling and the often-crowded, commercialized, or environmentally strained realities of destinations. Young travelers actively construct high expectations based on these narratives, leading to disappointment when confronted with a less-than-perfect reality. This highlights the ethical tension inherent in digital promotion.
2. **Trust and Authenticity in Digital Travel Content:** Young travelers are not passive consumers. They actively construct trust by critically evaluating digital content. They demonstrate a strong preference for "raw," candid, and transparent digital storytelling, valuing peer reviews and user-generated content over highly polished, commercially driven narratives. This reflects a growing media literacy and a desire for genuine, relatable experiences.
3. **Navigating Sustainable Travel: Intentions, Barriers, and the Drive for Local Impact:** While a significant majority of young travelers express a desire for sustainable travel, a notable intention-action gap persists. Practical barriers, primarily cost, convenience, and the limited accessibility of genuinely sustainable options, frequently override ethical intentions. However, supporting local businesses emerged as a

consistently prioritized and tangible form of sustainable practice, reflecting a culturally embedded understanding of responsibility.

4. **Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Responsible Travel & Social Change:**

Interviewees overwhelmingly believe in the transformative potential of digital platforms to drive positive change. They envision platforms as ethical guides capable of promoting less-visited destinations, providing transparent information (e.g., crowd meters, sustainability filters), and amplifying authentic local voices. This highlights a clear expectation for platforms to actively foster responsible travel behaviors.

5. **The Evolving Traveler: Consciousness and Criticality:** Underlying these themes is the emergence of a new archetype: the Conscious Digital Traveler. These young individuals are critically aware of digital narratives' limitations, actively seek authentic experiences, and demonstrate a growing sense of personal responsibility and agency in making ethical travel choices, even when navigating inherent dilemmas.

7.2. Main Contributions

This research makes several significant contributions to the academic discourse and offers practical insights for the tourism industry:

7.2.1. Empirical Contributions: By employing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, this study provides a robust empirical understanding of the complex interplay between digital storytelling and youth tourism. It quantifies the prevalence of key trends (e.g., digital engagement, sustainability concern, intention-action gap) while simultaneously offering rich, qualitative narratives that explain the *how* and *why* behind these patterns. The multinational European youth sample offers a unique, geographically diverse perspective on these global phenomena, moving beyond single-country studies. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides a holistic view that is often lacking in studies relying solely on one methodological approach, thereby enhancing the depth and breadth of the empirical evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

7.2.2. Theoretical Contributions: This thesis contributes to the theoretical understanding of the digitally mediated travel experience by introducing and elaborating on several key constructs, which emerged from the abductive analysis of the data:

- **The Digital Authenticity Paradox:** This concept formalizes the tension between idealized digital portrayals and the often-disappointing realities of destinations. It

highlights how digital storytelling, while inspiring, can simultaneously distort traveler expectations and impact their satisfaction, leading to a critical re-evaluation of authenticity (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). This paradox challenges traditional tourism marketing by emphasizing the ethical implications of selective representation.

- **Constructed Digital Trust:** This framework explains how young travelers actively build trust in online travel content through a dynamic process of critical evaluation. It posits that trust is not passively granted but actively constructed through assessing transparency, relatability, and peer validation within digital narratives, rather than simply accepting information at face value (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This contributes to understanding digital literacy and consumer behavior in online environments.
- **Negotiated Sustainability Practice:** This contribution illuminates the complex process where young travelers balance ethical aspirations with practical constraints (cost, convenience, accessibility). It reveals that sustainable behavior is often a dynamic negotiation rather than a fixed ideal, underscoring the gap between intention and action in pro-environmental behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). The emergence of local support as a key actionable element provides a more nuanced understanding of sustainability as a context-dependent practice.
- **Platform-Enabled Responsible Tourism:** This concept posits that digital platforms are not merely tools but active agents capable of shaping responsible travel behaviors. It highlights their potential to guide travelers through strategic content promotion, algorithmic adjustments, and community empowerment, thereby fostering more sustainable tourism flows and practices (Gössling et al., 2018). This extends the understanding of platform responsibility beyond content moderation to active behavioral influence.
- **The Digital Sustainability Dilemma (Green Travel Paradox):** As an overarching theoretical construct, this encapsulates the fundamental tension young travelers face: being inspired by digital platforms towards sustainability, while simultaneously being influenced by those same platforms towards unsustainable practices like overtourism. This paradox underscores the critical need for ethical responsibility in digital content creation and platform governance, urging a balance between inspiration and a clear commitment to promoting sustainability and responsible tourism (Font & McCabe, 2017). This new construct provides a comprehensive lens through which to view the challenges and opportunities at the intersection of digital media and sustainable travel.

7.2.3. Practical Contributions: The findings offer actionable insights for various stakeholders, aiming to bridge the gap between digital inspiration and sustainable action:

- **For Digital Platforms & Content Creators:** There is a clear imperative to move beyond purely aesthetic portrayals. This includes emphasizing authenticity and transparency, showing both positive and challenging aspects of destinations, amplifying authentic local voices, and integrating practical sustainability tools (e.g., filters for eco-friendly options, real-time crowd meters, ethical warnings). Platforms should consider algorithmic adjustments that promote diverse, less-overtouristed destinations and responsible travel behaviors.
- **For Destination Management Organizations (DMOs):** DMOs should actively collaborate with digital platforms and content creators to ensure accurate destination portrayals. This involves promoting lesser-known areas, implementing effective visitor management strategies to mitigate overtourism, and ensuring that digital narratives align with on-site realities and genuinely benefit local communities. Investing in digital infrastructure that supports sustainable visitor experiences is also crucial.
- **For Tourism Businesses:** Prioritizing genuine sustainable practices is no longer just an ethical choice but a market demand for young travelers. Businesses should communicate their sustainable efforts transparently (avoiding greenwashing), make eco-friendly options more accessible and affordable, and integrate them seamlessly into the travel experience. Supporting local supply chains and community initiatives can also enhance their appeal to conscious travelers.
- **For Travelers:** Fostering greater media literacy is essential. Young travelers are encouraged to critically evaluate online content, cross-reference multiple sources, and actively seek out authentic, locally impactful experiences. This involves a conscious effort to move beyond trend-driven travel and prioritize responsible choices that align with their values, even when faced with convenience or cost considerations.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is subject to certain limitations that should contextualize the findings and guide future research efforts. The **self-selected nature of the survey sample** and the **relatively small qualitative sample size** limit the generalizability of findings, particularly to youth travelers outside the European context or less digitally connected populations. The **reliance on self-reported data** in both methodologies introduces potential

for social desirability and recall bias, implying a possible discrepancy between stated intentions and actual practices. Furthermore, the **rapidly evolving nature of digital media** and the **broad age range of the 'youth' demographic (16-31 years old)** mean that findings represent a snapshot in time and may not capture all internal heterogeneities or future shifts. The study's primary **focus on traveler perspectives** also limits insights from content creators or industry stakeholders, potentially overlooking critical viewpoints on how digital storytelling is shaped or monetized. Finally, despite rigorous analytical steps and reflexivity, the **interpretation of qualitative interview data remains inherently subjective**, representing constructions formed through the researchers' analytical lens.

Future Research Directions

Building on these limitations, several recommendations for future research are suggested. Expanding the **geographic and demographic scope** to include non-European youth or underrepresented communities, alongside **comparative cross-cultural studies**, would provide a more comprehensive global understanding. **Longitudinal research designs** could track evolving digital behaviors and sustainability practices over time, particularly as new technologies like virtual reality emerge.

Future work should also incorporate the **perspectives of key stakeholders** such as content creators, social media influencers, platform engineers, and tourism policymakers. Understanding their motivations and ethical considerations would enrich knowledge about digital storytelling's impact on tourism patterns and sustainability outcomes. Additionally, **intervention-based research** (e.g., exploring the effectiveness of digital nudging tools, algorithmic reforms, or sustainability filters) and **experimental studies** testing different content formats could provide practical guidance for platform design and policy development.

Lastly, adopting **interdisciplinary approaches** (media studies, tourism research, behavioral science, environmental ethics) is crucial for a holistic understanding. Integrating **large-scale quantitative data analytics** with in-depth **qualitative ethnographic methods** would provide richer, more actionable insights to inform policy and industry practices aimed at fostering responsible and sustainable travel among young people.

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Appendix

Declaration of Generative AI Use

This appendix outlines the extent and manner in which generative artificial intelligence (GAI) services were utilized in the preparation of this Master's Thesis. This declaration is made in accordance with the guidelines set forth by Aalborg University, emphasizing the principles of honesty, transparency, and accountability in academic practice.

Declaration of Use

Generative AI services, specifically large language models (LLMs), were employed during various stages of this project work. The primary tools used include *Google Gemini*, and *OpenAI's ChatGPT*.

Purpose and Extent of GAI Use

The GAI services were primarily leveraged for the following purposes:

- **Idea Generation:** Brainstorming initial concepts, brainstorming of potential research questions, and structural outlines for different sections of the research.
- **Information Searching and Synthesis:** Assisting in identifying key themes, summarizing complex information, and providing potential researches to analyse.
- **Drafting and Language Refinement:** Generating skeleton flow drafts (for clarity and flow), and assisting with paraphrasing/ translating to improve linguistic expression while ensuring the original meaning and source attribution are maintained.

It is crucial to note that GAI was used as a supplementary tool to enhance efficiency and explore ideas, not as a substitute for original thought, critical analysis, or comprehensive research.

Adherence to Good Academic Practice

In utilizing GAI, strict adherence to the principles of good academic practice – *honesty, transparency, and accountability* – has been maintained. The guidelines outlined in the *Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2014)* have informed the approach to integrating GAI-generated content.

- **Honesty:** All ideas, arguments, and conclusions presented in this report are ultimately the intellectual property of the authors, developed through independent critical thought

and research. GAI outputs were never presented as original insights without further validation or integration into the author's own analytical framework.

- **Transparency:** This declaration serves as a transparent disclosure of GAI usage, ensuring that the readers are aware of its role in the masters's development.
- **Accountability:** The authors retain full accountability for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of all content within this master's thesis.

Critical Evaluation and Plagiarism Mitigation

All content generated by GAI was subjected to rigorous critical evaluation for accuracy, relevance, and bias. Direct use of GAI-generated text was minimized (e.g. for translation) and specific attention was paid to disciplinary rules regarding plagiarism, ensuring that the project report reflects original synthesis and analysis.

Study Board Guidelines

This use of generative AI has been conducted in accordance with the general permissions granted by the university and, where applicable, any further specific guidelines stipulated by the Tourism's Study Board regarding the use of generative AI in project work and examinations.

Authors' Responsibility

Despite the assistance provided by generative AI services, the ultimate responsibility for the content, arguments, conclusions, and overall academic integrity of this master's thesis rests solely with the authors.

Interviews Questions & Summary

1. Can you describe a time when your perception of a destination changed after visiting? What caused the shift?
2. What specific details make you trust or doubt what you see in travel content (e.g., visuals, captions, comments)?
3. What does 'authentic travel' mean to you, and how do you judge if online portrayals feel genuine?
4. How do interactions with other travelers (comments, reviews) influence your view of a place?
5. How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in practice, and what barriers make it hard to prioritize?
6. Tell me about a time you wanted to choose eco-friendly options but couldn't. What happened?
7. How do you decide between supporting local businesses versus international chains when traveling?
8. How should platforms address overtourism, and what role do travelers play in this?
9. Many people value sustainability but prioritize budget. How do you balance these competing interests when traveling?
10. What would make you decide to skip a popular destination you saw online?
11. If you could redesign social media to improve travel culture, what would you change to promote responsible travel behaviors while keeping content engaging?
12. What systems could be implemented to let travelers flag misleading content or overcrowding concerns?
13. Should platforms require sustainability disclosures for promoted travel content, and what information would be most useful?

Interview with Luca conducted by Mattia in videocall (recorded and transcribed, then translated from italian into English)

Mattia: "Hi Luca, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today. To start, could you tell me a bit about your own travel habits?"

Interviewee (Luca, 27, Italian, living in Denmark): "Ciao! No problem, happy to help. Yeah, I try to travel as much as I can, especially to Asia. It's a bit of a passion for me, the culture, the food, everything. I've been living in Denmark for 2 years now, so travel is definitely a way to connect with different parts of the world. I mean, after the survey, you know I travel pretty often, probably 3-4 times a year, sometimes more if I find good deals. I guess you could call me a cultural explorer, but also definitely a budget traveler. That's always a big factor for me."

Mattia: "That's great. So, thinking about your travels, particularly to Asia, how do you typically discover new places or get inspiration for your trips?"

Luca: "Honestly, mostly social media. Instagram, but TikTok is the best one for sure. You just search "7 days in Seoul" And then you see these amazing places, or someone doing something cool. YouTube is also huge for me, especially for vlogs. I'll watch someone's whole trip to Vietnam, for example, and just write down the places to go. Sometimes it's specific influencers, but often it's just random users, regular people sharing their experiences. It feels more... real, I guess."

Mattia: "You mentioned 'real.' That brings me to my first question about perception. Can you describe a time when your perception of a destination totally changed after you actually visited it, compared to what you saw online? What caused that shift?"

Luca: "Oh, for sure. So many times. I think one big one was Bali. Online, it's all perfect beaches, yoga retreats, serene rice paddies, quiet temples, right? And yeah, those things exist, but when I got there, especially around the popular spots like Canggu or Seminyak, it was just... *packed*. So much traffic, noise, trash in some areas, really intense tourist infrastructure. It was still beautiful, don't get me wrong, but the serene, untouched paradise I saw in those perfect Instagram reels? That wasn't the daily reality for most places. The sheer number of people, the mopeds everywhere – that was the biggest shock. It made me realize how much those platforms filter out."

Mattia: "That's a very common observation. When you're scrolling through content, what specific details, or lack thereof, make you trust or doubt what you see online? Like, visuals, captions, or comments?"

Luca: "Good question. I think I trust candid videos more than super polished photos. If it's a quick TikTok or an Instagram Story where someone's just showing what they're doing in real-time, even if it's shaky, it feels more authentic than a perfectly edited, color-graded picture with a super generic inspirational caption. And comments are huge. If there are a lot of comments, especially people confirming what the person is saying, or asking specific questions about prices or crowds, that makes me trust it more. But if it's just like, 'OMG so beautiful!' and a bunch of emojis, I'm like, 'Okay, this is just for the likes.'"

Mattia: "That leads us nicely to authenticity. What does 'authentic travel' truly mean to you, personally? And how do you try to judge if online portrayals of a destination feel genuine, or if they're just a 'masque,' as some survey respondents put it?"

Luca: "For me, 'authentic travel' is about trying to experience a place as closely as a local would, or at least understanding their perspective. It's about connecting with people, trying local food that isn't just for tourists, seeing the actual daily life. It's not just about the pretty sights. Online, it's really hard to judge. Like, if an influencer is just showing off a fancy resort and never leaves it, that doesn't feel authentic to me. But if someone is showing how to use public transport, or eating at a tiny street food stall, or explaining a local custom, that feels more genuine. I try to look for content that isn't just about showing off the 'perfect' shot, but about sharing an experience, even if it's messy. The 'masque' idea is so true – it's like they show you the best, most Instagrammable corner, but hide everything else."

Mattia: "That makes sense. And speaking of interactions, how do comments, reviews, or even online communities influence your view of a place or how you decide what to do there?"

Luca: "They're incredibly influential. Online reviews, especially on Google Maps or even Facebook, are my go-to for restaurants and smaller attractions. If a place has consistently high reviews from different people, I'm more likely to try it. For big attractions, it's more about tips on how to avoid crowds, or what time is best to visit, that kind of practical advice. And if someone mentions a specific local business that's off the main street, I'm definitely going to check that out. It's like crowd-sourcing reliability."

Mattia: "Moving to sustainability, which you also expressed some care for. How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in your own practice? And what barriers sometimes make it hard for you to prioritize those choices?"

Luca: "For me, 'sustainable travel' means minimizing my negative impact and trying to leave a positive one. So, that's things like using public transport, trying to reduce plastic waste, being mindful of water usage, and definitely supporting local businesses – that's a big one for me, trying to put my money directly into the local economy. But the biggest barrier, honestly, is almost always cost and convenience. For example, I really want to take more trains for long-distance travel, but flying is often so much cheaper and faster, especially from Denmark to, say, Southeast Asia. Or finding truly eco-friendly accommodation that's also within my budget can be tough. Sometimes, the information about truly sustainable options isn't as easily available or as well-promoted as the cheaper, less sustainable ones."

Mattia: "Can you tell me about a specific time you wanted to choose an eco-friendly option but couldn't? What happened?"

Luca: "Yeah, there was this one time in Thailand. I was trying to find an ethical elephant sanctuary – you know, where they don't ride them. I did a lot of research online, and I found a few that seemed genuinely good, but they were significantly more expensive than the ones that still offered riding. And because I was on a tight budget for that trip, I ended up going with a less ideal option, which I still regret a bit. Or trying to find accommodation with truly sustainable water and waste management in some rural areas of Asia – it's just not always an option. You want to, but the choices just aren't there, or they're too far out of reach financially."

Mattia: "That highlights the intention-action gap we saw in the survey. What do you think would make sustainable choices easier for you, or for young travelers like you, when looking at digital platforms?"

Luca: "Make them more visible and affordable. Like, if booking platforms had really clear filters for 'eco-certified' or 'local community-run' options that were genuinely competitive on price, I'd probably use them more. And influencers who travel sustainably – not just the ones who fly everywhere and stay in luxury resorts – they can actually make it cool. Like, showing how to travel by train in Europe, or finding amazing local food stalls, or staying in a guesthouse where your money directly supports the family. That's much more impactful than just a 'save the planet' infographic. Maybe the interest is still low...I am not sure to be honest."

Mattia: "Maybe! But, you mentioned supporting local businesses. How do you typically decide between local businesses and larger international chains when you're traveling?"

Luca: "My first preference is always local. I actively seek out local restaurants, guesthouses, and tour operators. I use Google Maps, look for smaller, family-run places with good reviews. I ask locals for recommendations too. International chains, I tend to avoid them unless there's absolutely no other option, or if it's for convenience like an airport hotel. For me, the whole point of traveling is to experience the local culture, and that means supporting the people who live there, not just big corporations."

Mattia: "And thinking about some of the negative impacts mentioned, like overtourism. How do you think platforms should address overtourism? What role do you think travelers themselves play in this?"

Luca: "Platforms could definitely do more. Instead of always pushing the most 'Instagrammable', already-packed places, maybe their algorithms could promote lesser-known alternatives, or off-peak travel times. They could also include 'responsible travel' warnings or tips for popular spots, like 'visit early to avoid crowds' or 'support local vendors instead of street hawkers selling cheap souvenirs.' Travelers have a huge role too. We need to be more conscious. If everyone just goes to the same five spots because they saw them online, those spots get ruined. It's about doing your own research, trying to find unique experiences, and respecting the place. I actively try to avoid places that look like they're just tourist traps."

Mattia: "Finally, a bit of a hypothetical. If you could redesign social media or other digital platforms specifically to improve travel culture, what would you change? What could be adjusted to promote more responsible travel behaviors while still keeping content engaging?"

Luca: "That's a tough one! I think first, more honest content. Maybe a 'reality check' feature where people can upload unedited clips of a place, or more emphasis on user-generated content that shows the *real* conditions, not just the best angle. Like, a 360-degree video that shows the trash cans or the crowds, not just the perfect shot."

I'd love to see platforms amplify local voices more. Not just locals performing for tourists, but real local perspectives. Maybe features where local guides, artisans, or community leaders can share their stories and recommendations directly. That would make it feel so much more authentic and help people connect.

For sustainability, perhaps integrated tools for eco-friendly choices – like, if you search for a hotel, it shows you its water usage or waste management rating directly, not just stars. Or flight search engines suggesting train alternatives with clear comparison of carbon footprint. And maybe, gentle prompts. Like, when you're about to book a flight, a small message pops up, 'Did you know a train could reduce your carbon footprint by X% for this journey?' Not preachy, but informative.

And for overtourism, maybe dynamic 'crowd meter' indicators for popular spots (like the GoogleMaps on busses), or trending hashtags for 'off-the-beaten-path' alternatives. It's about nudging people towards better choices without forcing them. Because at the end of the day, people still want that engaging content, but it can be engaging and responsible at the same time."

Interview with Freja conducted by Mattia by phone recorded and transcribed

Mattia: "Hi Freja, thanks for accepting this phone interview. Could you start by telling me a bit about your travel style?"

Freja (20, Danish, student, active and outdoorsy): "Hey, no worries! Happy to be here. My travel style... hmm. I'm definitely not the 'lying on a beach all day' type. I like active stuff, hiking, snowboarding, exploring national parks. I'm usually with friends, and we look for things to *do*, not just places to *see* for a photo. I travel maybe 2-3 times a year, often shorter trips around Europe, but I've also done a big trek in Nepal. So yeah, experiences over comfort, usually."

Mattia: "That's clear. So, when you're planning these adventure trips, how do digital platforms fit into that? How do you typically discover new places or get inspiration?"

Freja: "Mostly through specific communities. Like, if I'm looking for a new hiking trail, I'll go on Reddit, or specific outdoor forums. Instagram, yes, but often it's less about the big influencers and more about smaller accounts showing a specific trail, gear reviews, or just people who genuinely look like they're out there doing it. YouTube is great for detailed trail guides or 'what to pack' videos. It's very practical inspiration. I need to see if it's actually doable, not just pretty."

Mattia: "That's an interesting distinction – practical versus just pretty. Have you ever visited a place that turned out significantly different from how it was shown online, especially for your kind of travel?"

Freja: "Oh, for sure. The 'most beautiful viewpoint' on Instagram is always packed with people trying to get the same photo. I remember seeing these incredible, serene mountain lakes in Norway on Instagram, and when we hiked there, it was beautiful, but there was a queue of people to get the shot, and drone buzzing everywhere. It wasn't the 'wild, untouched nature' vibe at all. The shift was realizing that the online image sells a fantasy of solitude that often doesn't exist when everyone else sees the same picture and goes there. It makes me a bit skeptical."

Mattia: "So, what specific details, or lack thereof, make you trust or doubt content you see online, especially in your niche?"

Freja: "I trust unedited, random taken videos, or 'behind-the-scenes' stuff. If someone is sweating, complaining about a climb, or showing the messy reality of camping – that makes it feel real. I doubt anything that looks too perfect, too polished, or has someone posing endlessly. If the caption is just a bunch of emojis and no real info, I'm like, 'Okay, you're just showing off, not sharing.' I actively look for comments asking practical questions, like 'How long was the hike?' or 'Was it crowded?' Those reveal the truth."

Mattia: "That's a very practical lens. How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in your own activities? And what barriers might make it hard to prioritize sometimes?"

Freja: "For me, sustainable travel means mostly leaving no trace. So, packing out everything, sticking to marked trails, not disturbing wildlife, trying to buy local food if I can, and definitely reducing flights where possible. I try to be mindful. The biggest barrier is usually just... *knowing* what's truly sustainable. Like, is this 'eco-lodge' actually eco-friendly, or is it just greenwashing? Sometimes the information isn't clear. And yeah, budget. Flights are often cheaper than trains for longer distances, and when you're a student, every krone counts. So sometimes it's a trade-off, unfortunately."

Mattia: "That 'greenwashing' point is crucial. If you could redesign digital platforms to improve travel culture, what would you change, especially to promote more responsible behavior and authenticity?"

Freja: "I'd love to see platforms prioritize content that shows the *process* of travel, not just the highlight reel. More emphasis on 'how to' videos – how to travel low-waste, how to use public transport in a new city, how to pack light. And honest reviews, not just five stars, but specific feedback on things like waste management or local impact. Maybe a feature where actual locals could flag content that misrepresents their culture or promotes disrespectful behavior. And for crowded places, perhaps suggestions for alternative, less-known spots nearby. It's about empowering travelers with better information to make more informed choices, instead of just chasing the next trending spot."

Interview with Chen conducted by Mattia in videocall (recorded and transcribed, then translated from Mandarin into English)

Mattia: "Hi Chen, thank you for participating today. I am happy to hear about your travel experiences. To start, how would you describe your travel style and how often do you travel?"

Chen (25, Chinese, young professional in tech, enjoys comfort and aesthetics): "Hello! Thanks for inviting me, in this night videocall. I'd say I travel maybe 3-4 times a year, sometimes for work, sometimes for leisure. My style is more about comfort and aesthetics, I guess. I like staying in nice hotels, enjoying good food, and visiting places that are beautiful and, you know, nice to show on WeChat. I'm not really into backpacking or roughing it. For me, travel is about relaxation and enjoying beautiful new surroundings."

Mattia: "That's a clear preference. So, how do digital platforms factor into finding these beautiful, comfortable experiences? What platforms do you mainly use for inspiration?"

Chen: "Oh, definitely XiaoHongShu, TikTok and sometimes luxury travel blogs. I look for visually appealing content – stunning hotel interiors, amazing restaurant dishes, picturesque landscapes. It's about envisioning the whole experience. I also use online travel agencies a lot, like Ctrip, for practical things like booking flights and hotels after I've decided where to go. Sometimes I'll see a specific hotel on tikTok and then go to the booking site directly."

Mattia: "Have you ever visited a place that turned out significantly different from how it was portrayed online, for better or worse?"

Chen: "Yes, definitely for worse sometimes. I remember seeing a very famous beach resort online, the photos were incredible – pristine sand, clear water, no one around. But when I got there, the beach was actually quite small, much busier than it looked, and there was some rubbish in the water near the shore. It was still nice, but the online portrayal was definitely 'enhanced.' It makes you realize that what you see online is very much a marketing tool, showing only the best angle."

Mattia: "That leads to authenticity. What makes travel content feel more authentic to you, especially when you're looking for curated experiences?"

Chen: "For me, it's less about perfect raw footage and more about honesty within the curated content. If an influencer or a travel account talks about the challenges, like 'this place is beautiful but very crowded,' or 'the flight was long, but worth it for this view,' that feels more real. It's about a realistic aspiration. I appreciate high-quality visuals, but I also want to know the truth behind the glamour. Sometimes, seeing people's actual stories in vlogs, even if they're well-edited, helps, because you get a sense of their journey, not just the final perfect picture."

Mattia: "I know for you that sustainability is moderately important but not decisive. How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in practice, and what barriers might make it hard to prioritize?"

Chen: "Sustainable travel, for me, means being mindful, I suppose. Not wasting resources, respecting local rules. But honestly, it's usually not my first priority, I know you guys in Europe are way more careful with plastic compared to China. But generally affordability and comfort come first. If a hotel offers an 'eco-friendly' option that's much more expensive or less convenient, I'm probably not going to choose it, unless the 'sustainable' aspect is a huge part of its luxury branding – like, a truly unique eco-resort that *is* luxurious. The biggest barrier is often the perceived trade-off between sustainability and the level of comfort or convenience I'm looking for. It just feels like it's not always integrated seamlessly into the high-end travel experience yet. I hate when I go to a hotel and they do not provide toothbrush, or slippers using the excuse "we want to be sustainable"."

Mattia: "So, it sounds like if sustainability could be part of a premium or unique experience, it might be more appealing? What changes would you like to see in how digital platforms promote tourism, especially to bridge this gap between aspiration and practical choice?"

Chen: "Yes, exactly. I think platforms should integrate sustainability into the luxury or comfort aspect more seamlessly. Maybe, showing the beautiful design elements made from recycled materials, or how they support local artisans directly, making it part of the luxury story. Less about 'don't travel' and more about 'travel better at this level.'

Also, I'd like to see more transparency from influencers. If it's a sponsored post, make it very clear. And for places that are getting too crowded, maybe platforms could highlight alternative but equally beautiful destinations that offer similar experiences but are less strained, especially in China! We are a lot and we have a lots of beautiful places!. It's about smart suggestions that enhance the travel experience, AI could help so much."

Interview with Oliver conducted by Mattia in English (in presence)

Mattia: "Hey Oliver. Can you tell me a bit about your travel style? Like, where do you usually go, and who do you go with?"

Oliver (19, Danish, high school student, social, goes with friends, influenced by trends):
"Yo, no problem. Yeah, I mostly travel with my friends, sometimes my family too. Usually, we just go to places where there's good vibes, you know? Like, party spots, or places where everyone else is going. Last year we went to Mallorca, it was sick. Before that, maybe something chill in Germany. I guess I travel like, 2-3 times a year? Just for a week or two, usually. It's mostly about hanging out with my mates or boring family trips."

Mattia: "Cool. So, when you're thinking about where to go, or what to do there, what apps or platforms are you usually checking out? How do you get ideas?"

Oliver: "Definitely **TikTok** first. And **Instagram**. That's where you see all the cool stuff. Like, someone doing a crazy jump, or a sick party spot, or a restaurant with weird food. It's mostly just scrolling, then someone posts something, and you're like, 'Yo, we gotta go there next!' My friends and I send each other videos. Sometimes, if it's a real trip, we'll check Google Maps for places to eat, or Booking.com for hotels, but for the vibe, it's all TikTok."

Mattia: "Nice. Have you ever gone somewhere because you saw it online, and it turned out to be totally different from what you expected?"

Oliver: "Uh, yeah, for sure. Like, this one beach club we saw on TikTok. It looked super exclusive and chill, with all these perfect models just hanging out. But when we got there, it was like, *packed* with so many people, super loud, and kinda messy. Not the chill vibe at all. It was still fun, but not like the videos. It just shows they only put the best parts online, you know? Like, the one angle where no one else is in the shot."

Mattia: "Yeah, totally. What makes you trust something you see online for travel? Or what makes you think, 'Nah, this is probably not real'?"

Oliver: "I trust it more if it's someone actually *doing* something, not just posing. Like, if they're showing how to get somewhere, or how much something costs, or if they're struggling a bit, that feels real. I mean, not *too* much struggling, but like, authentic. I don't trust the super edited stuff. If it looks like a magazine, I know it's probably fake. And sometimes, if the comments are all super fake-sounding, like, 'OMG perfect,' then it's probably sponsored or something. I look for comments that are like, 'Is it really that busy?' or 'How much did that actually cost?'"

Mattia: "Moving on a bit, sometimes people talk about 'sustainable travel.' What does that even mean to you? And is it something you think about when you travel?"

Oliver: "Sustainable travel... I guess it's like, not messing up the place? Like, not throwing trash everywhere, trying to be nice to the locals, not using too much plastic? I mean, yeah, I *care* about it, but it's not like the first thing I think about. If there's an eco-friendly hotel that's super expensive, I'm probably not gonna pick it. My budget is definitely the main thing. Like, if I can save money on a flight, I'm gonna take it. Sometimes, it's hard to even know what's actually 'sustainable' anyway. It's kinda confusing."

Mattia: "Can you think of a time when you wanted to choose an eco-friendly option but it just didn't work out?"

Oliver: "Hmm. Not really a specific time. But yeah, like, sometimes I'll see something about taking the train instead of flying, especially in Europe. And it's like, 'Yeah, that sounds cool, probably better for the planet.' But then you check the price, and it's like, three times more expensive and takes way longer. So, then you just book the flight. It's just easier, you know? And it's cheaper for us."

Mattia: "Yeah, totally understand. So, thinking about all these apps and platforms, if you could change one thing about how they promote tourism, what would it be?"

Oliver: "Honestly, I'd want them to show more of the *real* vibes, not just the fake-perfect stuff. Like, content creators should show what it's actually like, with the mess and everything. And maybe, like, less pushing the same five places, so my friends and I can consider something different. Like, everyone goes to this one spot, and it gets ruined. So, maybe show more hidden gems, or just other cool places that aren't already super famous. And if they showed more budget travel tips, or like, how to travel smart without just wasting stuff, that would be cool. But mainly, just keep it real, man. Don't trick us."

Interview with João conducted by Pedro in videocall (recorded and transcribed)

Pedro: "Hi João, thank you for joining me today. I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts on travel. To begin, how would you describe your travel style and how often do you travel?"

João (25, Portuguese, passionate about responsible travel): "Hi Pedro, thanks for having me. I travel a few times a year, around 3-4 trips. It's a mix of leisure and some work trips. My style has changed a lot over time — I used to be all about ticking off tourist spots, but now I focus more on experiencing places authentically. I look for destinations that aren't just about the popular sites, but also those that are off the beaten track. I also care about sustainability, so that's definitely a consideration when I'm booking trips."

Pedro: "That's interesting! You mentioned sustainability — how does that factor into your travel decisions? What platforms do you use to find inspiration?"

João: "Definitely! I use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and travel blogs to get inspiration. But I don't just focus on the pretty pictures. I follow influencers and accounts that highlight both the positives and the challenges of a destination. I also use websites that provide detailed reviews on eco-friendly travel options, like Green Key or EcoTrip. For me, it's about knowing the place inside out, not just looking at Instagram-perfect shots."

Pedro: "Have you ever visited a place that turned out significantly different from how it was portrayed online, for better or worse?"

João: "Yes, I've had that happen quite a few times. I visited a beach destination that was all over Instagram, with photos of pristine sand and clear water, but when I arrived, it was crowded and littered with plastic waste. It really changed my perception of the place — it made me realize that the content we see online is often heavily curated. It's important to do your research and not just rely on pretty images."

Pedro: "That ties in with authenticity. What makes travel content feel more authentic to you, especially when you're looking for curated experiences?"

João: "Authentic travel content to me is all about showing the real side of a destination. It's not just about perfect photos — it's about the stories behind them. I love content that shares the highs and lows, like when an influencer talks about how beautiful a place is but also mentions how crowded it can get or how long the flight was. That feels real to me, and it helps me trust the content more. I want to see the whole experience, not just the glamour."

Pedro: "How do interactions with other travelers (comments, reviews) influence your view of a place?"

João: "I value comments and reviews that are balanced. If someone's review mentions the good and the bad, like how a place is beautiful but can get crowded or expensive, I find that really helpful. I like when travelers share insights on how to navigate the challenges of a destination, like finding local spots or sustainable activities. It helps me make informed decisions."

Pedro: "How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in practice, and what barriers make it hard to prioritize?"

João: "Sustainable travel means minimizing my impact, whether that's staying in eco-friendly hotels, supporting local businesses, or using public transport instead of renting cars. But the barriers are real. Sometimes sustainable options are more expensive or harder to find, especially

in less-developed destinations. It's not always easy to prioritize, but I try to balance it with my need for comfort and convenience."

Pedro: "Tell me about a time you wanted to choose eco-friendly options but couldn't. What happened?"

João: "I tried to book an eco-friendly hotel once, but it was fully booked, and the other options available were either too far away or didn't have the same comfort I was looking for. I had to settle for a less sustainable option, which was disappointing. It's frustrating when the eco-friendly choices are harder to access or pricier, but I try to make the best decision I can with the options available."

Pedro: "What would make sustainable choices easier for you?"

João: "If sustainable options were more affordable and readily available, I'd choose them every time. Platforms could make it easier by showcasing eco-friendly options alongside regular ones, without making it feel like an afterthought. Discounts or incentives for sustainable choices would also help — something to make it feel like a rewarding choice, not a sacrifice."

Pedro: "How do you decide between supporting local businesses versus international chains when traveling?"

João: "I definitely try to support local businesses, especially when it comes to food or experiences. I feel like it has a direct positive impact on the community. But sometimes international chains are more convenient or affordable, so I do end up going with them occasionally. It's all about finding the balance between supporting the local economy and choosing what fits best with my needs."

Pedro: "How should platforms address overtourism, and what role do travelers play in this?"

João: "Platforms have a huge role to play in addressing overtourism. They should promote less-visited but equally beautiful destinations to help ease the pressure on popular spots. Travelers also need to be more conscious of their choices. We should all be open to exploring

hidden gems and respecting local communities. I think there's an opportunity for platforms to guide us towards more responsible choices."

Pedro: "What would make you decide to skip a popular destination you saw online?"

João: "If I found out that a destination was severely impacted by overtourism or that it was harming the environment or local culture, I would skip it. I don't want to contribute to places that are struggling with the negative effects of tourism. I'd rather go to a lesser-known spot that still offers a great experience but doesn't come with the same consequences."

Pedro: "If you could redesign social media to improve travel culture, what would you change to promote responsible travel behaviors while keeping content engaging?"

João: "I would love to see social media focus more on promoting sustainable travel options and responsible behaviors. There's too much emphasis on the 'perfect' destination and not enough on the impact of tourism. I think platforms should highlight the beautiful but also the challenging aspects of travel, showing both sides of the story. Encouraging responsible choices like eco-friendly accommodations or local businesses would make a huge difference."

Interview with Miguel conducted by Pedro in presence (recorded and transcribed)

Pedro: "Hi Miguel, thank you for joining me today. I'm looking forward to learning about your travel experiences. To start, how would you describe your travel style and how often do you travel?"

Miguel (23, Spanish , student, enjoys a mix of relaxation and exploration): "Hi Pedro, thanks for having me! I travel maybe 3-4 times a year, both for work and leisure. I used to be into ticking off the big tourist spots, but now I focus more on enjoying the place itself, relaxing, and experiencing local life. I still like visiting iconic places, but I've become more aware of the impact travel has on the environment and communities, so now I also try to factor in sustainability in my decisions."

Pedro: "That's interesting! You mentioned sustainability. How does it play into your travel planning, and what platforms do you use for inspiration?"

Miguel: "Well, I've started to use social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok more for inspiration, but I'm selective about the content I consume. I'm looking for places that are not only visually appealing but also not overwhelmed by tourism. I also turn to travel blogs and websites that focus on sustainable travel, and use booking sites where I can filter eco-friendly options for accommodations. It's about finding that balance of beautiful places that are not just overrun by crowds and respecting the environment."

Pedro: "Have you ever visited a place that turned out significantly different from how it was portrayed online? What caused the shift?"

Miguel: "Yes, I had a similar experience. I went to a beach destination that looked amazing online — the photos were breathtaking, with pristine sand and calm water. But when I got there, it was a completely different story. The beach was really small, crowded, and there was quite a bit of plastic waste around. It really made me realize how much content online is designed to sell a place, showing only the best parts. It was disappointing, but it also helped me see that online portrayals often leave out the inconvenient truths."

Pedro: "That leads into authenticity. What makes travel content feel more authentic to you, especially when you're looking for curated experiences?"

Miguel: "Authentic travel content, for me, is less about perfection and more about honesty. If someone posts about a destination and mentions the real challenges — like overcrowding or how difficult it is to get there — it feels more genuine to me. I still enjoy high-quality photos, but I appreciate it when people are upfront about the downsides as well. It helps me understand the full experience rather than just a polished version."

Pedro: "How do interactions with other travelers (comments, reviews) influence your view of a place?"

Miguel: "Comments and reviews definitely play a big role in shaping my view. I prefer reviews that are balanced, where people mention both the good and the bad. For example, if someone

talks about a place being beautiful but very crowded, or if they mention how hard it was to find eco-friendly accommodations, that gives me a more realistic idea of what to expect. I think transparency is important, especially when it comes to how sustainable a place is."

Pedro: "How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in practice, and what barriers make it hard to prioritize?"

Miguel: "For me, sustainable travel means making choices that minimize harm — staying in eco-friendly hotels, supporting local businesses, and using public transport when possible. The biggest barriers are often cost and availability. Sustainable options tend to be more expensive or harder to find, especially in certain destinations. While I know it's important, sometimes the convenient or affordable option wins out, simply because it's easier."

Pedro: "Tell me about a time you wanted to choose eco-friendly options but couldn't. What happened?"

Miguel: "I remember wanting to book an eco-friendly hotel once, but when I tried to, it was fully booked or out of my price range. The other options available weren't as aligned with my values. It was frustrating because I genuinely wanted to make the responsible choice, but sometimes the more sustainable choices are either not available or not as convenient, which makes it hard to prioritize."

Pedro: "What would make sustainable choices easier for you?"

Miguel: "I think the biggest thing would be making sustainable options more affordable and easier to find. If I could filter for eco-friendly hotels or services when I book my trip, it would make my decision-making much easier. Additionally, if sustainable options didn't cost significantly more, I'd be more likely to choose them. Incentives like discounts for green travel would also be a great way to make it feel more rewarding."

Pedro: "How do you decide between supporting local businesses versus international chains when traveling?"

Miguel: "I try to support local businesses because I know that helps the community. But honestly, sometimes it's just easier to go with what I know. If I'm short on time or need something quick, I might go to an international chain. I still make an effort to support local businesses when I can, but it depends on convenience and availability."

Pedro: "How should platforms address overtourism, and what role do travelers play in this?"

Miguel: "Platforms should definitely promote lesser-known destinations more, but I think there's still a desire for people to visit the iconic spots. So, it's a balance. Travelers definitely need to be more aware of their impact, and platforms should provide suggestions for less-crowded places that still offer the same kind of experiences. It's about guiding travelers toward responsible choices without completely limiting their options."

Pedro: "What would make you decide to skip a popular destination you saw online?"

Miguel: "If I found out a place was heavily impacted by overtourism or had a significant negative effect on the environment, I'd skip it. I think it's important to prioritize sustainability over simply following trends. But, to be honest, if it's really famous and I feel like I need to see it for myself, I might still go, even if it's crowded. It's a tough balance between the experience and the impact."

Pedro: "If you could redesign social media to improve travel culture, what would you change to promote responsible travel behaviors while keeping content engaging?"

Miguel: "I would love to see more platforms focusing on responsible travel while still keeping things exciting. Instead of just showcasing perfect spots, why not show the challenges too? It would be great to see influencers and platforms talk more about how tourism is affecting destinations and encourage smarter travel choices. Highlighting eco-friendly options and local businesses would be a great start. It's about making responsible travel as engaging and desirable as the luxury experiences."

Interview with Rick conducted by Pedro in presence (recorded and transcribed)

Pedro: "Hi Rick, thanks for joining me today. I'm excited to learn more about your travel experiences. To start, how would you describe your travel style and how often do you travel?"

Rick (21, Dutch, student, enjoys adventure but with a focus on convenience): "Hi Pedro, happy to be here! I travel a few times a year — maybe 3-4 trips, depending on work and personal time. I enjoy exploring new destinations, but honestly, my trips tend to be a bit more about convenience and having a good time rather than going off the beaten path. I like visiting popular spots because they tend to be exciting, but I also enjoy relaxing, not necessarily roughing it or doing super adventurous things."

Pedro: "That's interesting! You mentioned visiting popular destinations. How does online content factor into your travel planning, and what platforms do you use for inspiration?"

Rick: "I mainly use Instagram and YouTube for travel inspiration. The content on there is often polished and shows the most beautiful parts of a destination, which is what draws me in. I like seeing the highlights of places, and I tend to gravitate toward content that showcases beautiful hotels, landscapes, and experiences. I'll also use booking platforms for practical stuff, like finding flights or hotels after I've decided on a place."

Pedro: "Have you ever visited a place that turned out significantly different from how it was portrayed online? What caused the shift?"

Rick: "Yeah, I've had that happen a few times. I remember visiting a beach spot that was all over Instagram with crystal-clear waters and no crowds. When I arrived, though, it was really crowded and a lot more commercialized than I expected. The beach wasn't as pristine as it seemed online, and there was more waste around than the photos showed. It made me realize that social media often highlights only the best parts of a place. I've learned to adjust my expectations, but it can still be a letdown."

Pedro: "That ties in with authenticity. What makes travel content feel more authentic to you, especially when you're looking for curated experiences?"

Rick: "For me, authentic content is less about raw footage and more about being honest in the curation. I want to see content that shows both the good and the bad. For example, if an influencer mentions how beautiful a place is but also points out how crowded it can get, that feels real. I love the high-quality visuals, but I want to know the truth behind the scenes. If it's all about perfection, I get suspicious."

Pedro: "How do interactions with other travelers (comments, reviews) influence your view of a place?"

Rick: "Reviews and comments do influence me a lot. I trust feedback that's balanced — like when people mention the beauty of a place but also point out how challenging it can be, or how it's been affected by tourism. I know some reviews are paid or overly positive, but I still look for genuine insights. I trust recommendations from friends or accounts I follow more than anonymous reviews, though."

Pedro: "How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in practice, and what barriers make it hard to prioritize?"

Rick: "Sustainable travel means making conscious choices, like staying in eco-friendly hotels, supporting local businesses, and using public transport instead of renting cars. But honestly, the biggest barrier for me is convenience. Sustainable options aren't always easy to find or affordable. I know it's important, but if the eco-friendly option is much more expensive or harder to book, I'm more likely to go with the easier, more affordable choice. It's a bit of a struggle."

Pedro: "Tell me about a time you wanted to choose eco-friendly options but couldn't. What happened?"

Rick: "There was a time I wanted to book an eco-friendly hotel, but it was either fully booked or out of my budget. I didn't have much time to look for alternatives, so I had to go with a regular hotel. I felt bad, but I knew it was the practical choice. It's frustrating when sustainable options aren't easily accessible or when they cost a lot more."

Pedro: "What would make sustainable choices easier for you?"

Rick: "If sustainable options were more affordable or easier to find, I'd choose them more often. I think platforms should make it simple — like offering filters for eco-friendly hotels or travel options. If these choices were just as easy to book and didn't cost significantly more, I'd be much more inclined to prioritize them. Convenience really plays a big part in my decisions."

Pedro: "How do you decide between supporting local businesses versus international chains when traveling?"

Rick: "I try to support local businesses when I can, especially if they offer something unique. But honestly, if I'm in a rush or if an international chain is more convenient or cheaper, I'll often go with that. It's all about balancing the desire to support local economies with the need for convenience. I try to make the right choice, but sometimes it's not always possible."

Pedro: "How should platforms address overtourism, and what role do travelers play in this?"

Rick: "Platforms should definitely highlight lesser-known destinations and help spread tourism around. It's important to promote off-the-beaten-path places to reduce pressure on popular spots. But at the same time, people want to visit iconic places, and platforms need to cater to that. As travelers, we need to be aware of the impact we have and be open to exploring new destinations, but I think platforms should help guide us toward more responsible choices without limiting our freedom."

Pedro: "What would make you decide to skip a popular destination you saw online?"

Rick: "I don't usually skip popular destinations, but if I found out a place was suffering from overtourism or had a significant environmental impact, I might reconsider. If I felt like it was negatively affecting the local community or the environment, I'd probably skip it in favor of a less crowded, more sustainable option. But it would take a pretty big reason for me to change my plans, especially if it's a place I've wanted to visit for a while."

Pedro: "If you could redesign social media to improve travel culture, what would you change to promote responsible travel behaviors while keeping content engaging?"

Rick: "I'd want to keep social media fun and exciting, but also encourage more responsible travel behavior. Social media should showcase the full picture — not just the best, most glamorous parts, but also the challenges of tourism like overcrowding and environmental issues. I'd love to see more content that talks about the real impact of tourism and encourages smart travel decisions. Platforms could do more to promote sustainable travel choices and create awareness about the environmental impact of over-tourism."

Interview with Fenja conducted by Pedro in presence (recorded and transcribed)

Pedro: "Hi Fenja, thanks for taking the time to chat today. I'm really excited to hear about your travel experiences. To start, how would you describe your travel style and how often do you travel?"

Fenja (24, German, working student, prioritizes sustainability and authentic experiences): "Hi Pedro, thanks for having me! I try to travel 3-4 times a year. My style has really shifted over time — I used to focus more on ticking off popular tourist sites, but now I focus on more authentic, local experiences. I still love exploring well-known places, but I try to look deeper and choose destinations that prioritize sustainability and community involvement. I look for places that value both beauty and responsibility."

Pedro: "That's really interesting! You mentioned sustainability. How does that factor into your travel decisions, and what platforms do you use for inspiration?"

Fenja: "I mostly use Instagram, YouTube, and eco-focused travel blogs for inspiration. I follow content that goes beyond just showcasing beautiful destinations and actually focuses on the impact of tourism. I look for content that highlights eco-friendly accommodations, supports local businesses, and talks about the environmental challenges destinations face. It's important for me to choose places that promote sustainability, and I rely on these platforms to get that information. I also use booking sites that allow me to filter for green options."

Pedro: "Have you ever visited a place that turned out significantly different from how it was portrayed online? What caused the shift?"

Fenja: "Yes, I've had that experience. I once went to a place that looked incredible on social media, but when I arrived, it was overcrowded, and the local environment was heavily commercialized. It was disheartening because the photos online showed such a serene paradise, but it felt nothing like that when I was there. This made me realize the power online content has in shaping perceptions, but also how much responsibility creators have to showcase the realities of these places. I try to be more mindful now and do more research into the sustainability practices of a destination before I go."

Pedro: "That leads us into authenticity. What makes travel content feel more authentic to you, especially when you're looking for curated experiences?"

Fenja: "For me, authenticity comes from being transparent. It's about showing the full picture of a destination — not just the glamorous parts. I appreciate content that talks about both the beauty of a place and its challenges, like overcrowding, environmental issues, or the impact of mass tourism. I'm more likely to trust content that shares both sides of the story. If it's all polished and idealized, it just feels too much like an ad campaign to me."

Pedro: "How do interactions with other travelers (comments, reviews) influence your view of a place?"

Fenja: "Reviews and comments play a big role in my decision-making. I rely on them to get a more nuanced view of a destination. I particularly look for comments that mention the reality of visiting a place, like how crowded it is, the sustainability of the activities there, or the local community's experience with tourism. Honest feedback that highlights both the good and the bad helps me make more informed decisions."

Pedro: "How do you interpret 'sustainable travel' in practice, and what barriers make it hard to prioritize?"

Fenja: "Sustainable travel, for me, means making conscious choices that minimize my environmental impact. It's about supporting local businesses, choosing eco-friendly accommodations, and using public transport instead of renting a car. The biggest barrier, though, is the accessibility of these options. They're often more expensive or harder to find,

which can make it difficult to prioritize. But I think if travel platforms and influencers start highlighting these options more, it could create a greater demand and make them more accessible for everyone."

Pedro: "Tell me about a time you wanted to choose eco-friendly options but couldn't. What happened?"

Fenja: "I've definitely run into that situation. For instance, I tried to book an eco-friendly hotel during a recent trip, but it was either fully booked or too expensive compared to other options. I ended up choosing a more traditional hotel because it was available and affordable. I felt guilty about it, but I also felt like I didn't have much of a choice in that moment. It's frustrating when the green alternatives aren't as accessible or affordable."

Pedro: "What would make sustainable choices easier for you?"

Fenja: "If sustainable options were easier to find and didn't cost a premium, I'd definitely choose them more often. It would help if travel platforms offered more filters for eco-friendly options — things like carbon-neutral flights, green hotels, or businesses that support local communities. More transparency about the environmental impact of destinations would also be really helpful. If online content starts focusing more on sustainability, it could help shift the whole industry towards more accessible and affordable eco-friendly choices."

Pedro: "How do you decide between supporting local businesses versus international chains when traveling?"

Fenja: "I always try to support local businesses because I know it helps the community directly. But, if I'm in a rush or need something familiar, I'll sometimes go for an international chain, especially if it's more affordable or convenient. I do try to make decisions that benefit the local economy and minimize my environmental impact, but I think there's a fine balance between supporting local businesses and practicality."

Pedro: "How should platforms address overtourism, and what role do travelers play in this?"

Fenja: "Platforms should definitely promote lesser-known destinations more and encourage travelers to explore places that aren't as overrun. They should highlight hidden gems that are still sustainable and have a lower environmental footprint. As travelers, we also need to be conscious of our choices and try to diversify our destinations, especially since overtourism is damaging many popular places. I think platforms can play a key role by showcasing alternative, sustainable options."

Pedro: "What would make you decide to skip a popular destination you saw online?"

Fenja: "If I found out that a destination was suffering from overtourism or had a significant environmental or cultural impact, I'd reconsider visiting. I think it's essential to be mindful of how tourism affects the local community and the environment. If a place is struggling with overcrowding or damage, I'd much prefer to visit somewhere less popular that still offers a great experience without the same strain."

Pedro: "If you could redesign social media to improve travel culture, what would you change to promote responsible travel behaviors while keeping content engaging?"

Fenja: "I'd love to see more content that encourages responsible travel behaviors. Social media is great for showcasing beautiful destinations, but it should also acknowledge the environmental impact of tourism. I'd like to see influencers and platforms show both the breathtaking and the challenging aspects of destinations — like the effects of overtourism, waste, and the importance of sustainability. It would also be great if platforms highlighted sustainable travel options and gave them more visibility."

Survey: Digital Platforms and Youth Tourism Narratives ➡ 📱🌴

Welcome to our survey on Digital Platforms and Youth Tourism!

We are two master's students in Tourism at Aalborg University (Denmark), conducting research for our thesis on how (and if) digital platforms shape youth travel experiences, cultural perceptions, and sustainable behaviours.

This survey takes **about 5 minutes** to complete, and your responses will remain anonymous. Your insights will help us better understand the role of digitalisation in tourism and its potential for positive change.

Thank you for your time and contribution! 😊

Mattia Marziale // Pedro Paixão

* Indicates required question

1. Age: *

Mark only one oval.

☐ 16-20

☐ 21-25

☐ 26-30

☐ 31+

Demographic Information

2. Nationality (E.g. Italian, Spanish, Danish, German, etc.) *

3. Highest level of education completed/attending: *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ High school
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree or higher
- ☐ Other: _____

4. How often do you travel? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ More than 5 times a year
- ☐ 3-5 times a year
- ☐ 1-2 times a year
- ☐ Less than once a year

5. What type of traveller do you identify as? (Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Backpacker
- ☐ Cultural explorer
- ☐ Sustainable traveller
- ☐ Digital nomad
- ☐ Conscious Explorer
- ☐ Adventure traveller
- ☐ Other: _____

Digital Media Consumption & Drive

6. **Which digital platforms do you mainly use for travel inspiration? (Select all that apply)** *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Social Media (e.g. Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc.)
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Travel blogs
- ☐ Online travel agencies
- ☐ Streaming service (e.g. Netflix, HBO, Amazon Prime, etc.)
- ☐ Travelling Websites
- ☐ None, I do not use digital platforms
- ☐ Other: _____

7. **How often do you engage with digital content about travel (e.g., watching videos, reading blogs, following influencers)?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ A few times per week
- ☐ A few times per month
- ☐ Only when preparing for a trip
- ☐ Never

8. **Have you ever considered a travel destination based on digital content (e.g., social media posts, TV series or movies, travel vlogs, influencer recommendations, Youtube videos, etc.)?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, multiple times
- ☐ Yes, once or twice
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ Never

9. How much do you value sustainability while travelling? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important

What factors drives your travel decisions the most?

10. Online reviews and ratings (e.g. from websites, YouTube, etc.)

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important

11. Social media reviews/recommendations *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important

12. Word of mouth (e.g. from friends/family) *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important

13. Sustainability and ethical concerns *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important

14. Affordability *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important

Digital Narratives and Destination Representation

15. Do you think digital platforms (TikTok videos, Insta Stories, TV, blogs, etc) accurately represent the cultural and social aspects of the destinations they showcase? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, most of the time
- ☐ Sometimes, as we can see the real time videos/contents
- ☐ No, they often present an unrealistic picture
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Other: _____

16. **What type of travel digital content do you find most engaging?** (Select up to three) *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Personal travel experiences and storytelling
- ☐ Sustainable travel tips and eco-tourism content
- ☐ Budget travel guides
- ☐ Luxury travel experiences
- ☐ Local cultural insights
- ☐ Adventure and extreme sports travel
- ☐ Other: _____

17. **Have you ever visited a place and found it significantly different from how it was portrayed online?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, in a positive way *Skip to question 18*
- ☐ Yes, in a negative way *Skip to question 18*
- ☐ No, it matched my expectations *Skip to question 19*
- ☐ Not sure *Skip to question 19*

18. **If yes, kindly explain how** *

Sustainable Travel Behaviours & Social Change

19. **Have digital platforms influenced you to adopt more sustainable travel practices?** (e.g., choosing eco-friendly accommodations, reducing plastic waste, supporting local businesses) *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, significantly
- ☐ Yes, somehow
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ No, not at all

20. **Do you believe digital platforms can be used as a tool for social change in tourism especially for young generations** (e.g., promoting responsible tourism, advocating for local cultures, reducing over-tourism)? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

21. **What sustainable travel practices have you adopted due to digital content?** (Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Avoiding over-touristed locations
- ☐ Choosing eco-friendly hotels and accommodations
- ☐ Supporting local businesses and artisans
- ☐ Minimizing plastic waste while traveling
- ☐ Using public transport more
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other: _____

22. **What is this digital content that influenced your sustainable practice?** *
(influencer name, platform name, content type, etc.)

23. **Would you be more likely to support or book a travel experience if it was:** *
(Select all that apply)

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Run by locals and supports the community
- ☐ Suggested by a sustainable travel advocate/influencer
- ☐ Certified for sustainability (e.g., eco-lodges, responsible tours, ISO certification)
- ☐ Promoted by mainstream travel media or advocates/ influencers
- ☐ None

24. **Have you actually supported/booked a travel experience for one of those reasons?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes *Skip to question 25*
- ☐ No *Skip to question 26*

25. **If yes, kindly tell us a bit more about it** *

26. **Would you be willing to actively engage in online discussions or campaigns about responsible travel and sustainability?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, I already do, I am part of the change *Skip to question 27*
- ☐ Yes, but I haven't yet, I want to be part of the change *Skip to question 27*
- ☐ No, I'm not interested. *Skip to question 28*

If yes, would you like to have an interview with us on this topic? 😊🙏

We are Mattia Marziale and Pedro Paixão, from Aalborg University in Denmark. Feel free to check our LinkedIn!

27. **Please write your Whatsapp number or your email. We will reach out to you** *
to fix a fast interview 😊

Open-Ended Questions

28. **In your own words, how do you think digital platforms influence young travellers' perceptions of destinations and travel behaviours** (both positive and negative)? *

29. **What changes (if any) would you like to see in the way digital platforms promote tourism?** *

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