

Are Influencers influential?

Importance of Influencer Marketing for Austrian Winter Tourism.

Master Thesis

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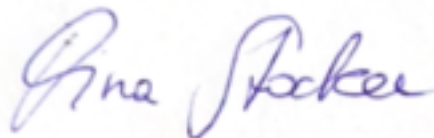
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Abstract

Are Influencers influential?

Tina, STOCKER

This study investigates the impact of influencer marketing on winter tourism in Austria. The main objectives were to determine whether influencer marketing affects the decision-making process of tourists and whether trust in influencers affects destination choice and leads to changes in travel behavior. The study also aimed to investigate the influence of authenticity, empathy, and closeness on trust in influencers. The data was collected by means of a survey distributed via QR codes in ski resorts. The study used binary logistic regression analysis and linear regression analysis to analyze data collected through a survey. The results suggest that trust in an influencer is an important factor in travel destination choice, but the results were not statistically significant. Overall, this study offers insights into the role of influencer marketing in winter tourism and highlights the importance of trust in the decision-making process of tourists.

Keywords: influencer marketing, Austrian tourism, tourism influencer, tourism marketing

Zusammenfassung

Are Influencers influential?

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Diese Arbeit untersucht die Auswirkungen von Influencer Marketing auf den Wintertourismus in Österreich. Die Hauptziele waren, festzustellen, ob Influencer Marketing den Entscheidungsprozess von Touristen beeinflusst und ob das Vertrauen in Influencer die Wahl des Reiseziels wichtig für die Entscheidung ist. Außerdem wurde der Einfluss von Authentizität, Empathie und Nähe auf das Vertrauen in Influencer untersucht. Die Daten wurden mit Hilfe einer Umfrage erhoben, die über QR-Codes in Skigebieten verteilt wurde. Zur Analyse der Daten wurden eine binäre logistische Regressionsanalyse und eine lineare Regressionsanalyse verwendet. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass das Vertrauen in einen Influencer ein wichtiger Faktor bei der Wahl des Reiseziels ist, aber die Ergebnisse waren statistisch nicht signifikant. Zukünftige Untersuchungen könnten eine vielfältigere Stichprobe und zusätzliche Faktoren, die das Vertrauen beeinflussen, einbeziehen.

Schlagwörter: Influencer Marketing, österreichischer Tourismus, Tourismus Influencer, Tourismus Marketing

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Introduction

The widespread use of mobile technologies and high-speed internet has led to a rapid increase in the use of social media platforms (Kemp, 2023). Nowadays, social media platforms are convenient and easily accessible, which made them the preferred channel for communication and information sharing. These platforms have a central impact on people's daily lives and significantly affect how people interact and communicate with each other, and search for information about a brand, products, and services. (Alalwan et al., 2017). Social media platforms have also had a profound impact on the travel industry, as social media is fundamentally changing the way how people search for, find, and read information about destinations and travel suppliers. Additionally, social media platforms are changing the way industry players communicate with their customers, and people can share their travel experiences through various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, thus achieving enormous reach (Christou, 2016, p. 1).

Not only has the use of social media changed the way tourists search for information, but also tourist behavior has witnessed a significant change over the past years. Tourists tend to stay shorter and plan their trips more spontaneously than in the past (Statistik Austria, 2023). As a result, competition in the travel industry has become even more intense, and understanding the factors that influence the decision-making processes has become critical for companies in this sector. In this context, a deep understanding of the journey of tourists and the role of the information is essential for companies to develop effective marketing strategies and deliver personalized experiences to their customers. Therefore, exploring the factors that influence the tourists' decision-making process is critical to the growth and success of the travel and tourism industry (Briandana & Dwityas, 2017, p. 193).

However, there is a gap in the marketing literature in terms of research on the application of influencer marketing in the tourism industry (Abdullah et al., 2022a, p. 52). The focus of this paper is therefore to fill this gap and to investigate the role of influencer marketing in the context of tourism, especially Austrian winter tourism.

This study aims to understand and explain the relationship between influencer marketing and the tourism decision-making process, with a particular focus on winter tourists in Austria. The goal of this thesis is to investigate whether influencer marketing influences the tourist decision-making process of Austrian winter tourists. Another aim of the study is to examine the role that trusts in an influencer plays in tourists' travel decisions. Furthermore, the study identifies the factors that could strengthen tourists' trust in influencers and subsequently their recommendations. The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on influencer marketing in the tourism industry and to provide insights that can support the development of effective marketing strategies in this sector.

Based on the above problem statement, the following initial research question was formulated.

→ *Does influencer marketing influence Austrian winter tourism?*

Structure of the work

The thesis can be divided into two main parts and consists of a theoretical part and an empirical part. Both parts together are needed to be able to answer the main research questions, which have already been explained in the previous chapter.

The first part of this paper, the literature review, will provide an overview of existing literature on tourism in Austria, social media, and its effect on tourism. Furthermore, influencer marketing and the concept of trust will be described in more detail. These topics

will be explained to make them more understandable and provide a basis for research. The quality of this work is highly dependent on the reliability and validity of the sources used for the literature analysis. Therefore, the used literature mainly consists of scientific journals and articles that have already dealt with the topics mentioned above.

The second part of the paper first deals with the conceptual model, which was developed based on the literature review. After explaining the model, the main objectives, the research questions, and the resulting hypotheses will be discussed in more detail. Subsequently, the methodology used to investigate the research questions, the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures used to collect and analyze the data will be described. The methodology will also detail how the study will measure the impact of influencer marketing on the decision-making process of winter tourists in Austria.

The final part of the paper presents, and afterward, discusses the results of the empirical study, including the impact of influencer marketing on the decision-making process of winter tourists in Austria and the role of trust in an influencer in travel decisions. The findings will also identify the factors that can improve trust in an influencer and provide recommendations for tourism businesses.

Finally, the limitations of the work are discussed and possible topics for future research are defined.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

In the first chapter of this thesis, an overview of existing literature on tourism in Austria, social media, and its effect on tourism will be provided. Furthermore, the term influencer and influencer marketing, as well as trust in an influencer will be described in more detail.

1.1. Austrian Tourism

For more than 60 years, tourism has been one of the most important and fastest-growing industries in the world (World Tourism Organization, 2017). The Austrian economy is dependent on the tourism industry as it is an important source of income and contributes more than 7.5% to the gross domestic product (GDP). Before the Covid-19 crisis, tourism recorded a positive increase in arrivals. Austria became more and more popular as a vacation destination. In 2019, Austria recorded 46.2 million visitors, which spent more than 37.7 billion euros. However, the crisis stopped the emerging trend and the number of domestic and foreign guests decreased. In 2021, Austria welcomed 22.1 million guests, less than half the number of guests in 2019 (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, 2022). Nevertheless, tourism is still very important for the Austrian economy, especially in the alpine regions (Gühnemann et al., 2021, p. 2).

In the last decades, the tourism industry in Austria has undergone major changes regarding the length of stay. In the 1970s, guests' average length of stay in Austrian accommodations was just under 7 nights for foreign guests and 6 nights for domestic guests. In recent years, however, a clear shift towards shorter stays can be observed: The average length of stay is now just under 3.5 and 2.8 nights for international and domestic guests respectively (BMLRT, 2021, p. 30). The trend toward shorter travel times can be observed

internationally (Gössling et al., 2018, p. 2087). Due to the decrease in the lengths of stay, the number of arrivals at accommodations has tripled, and the number of overnight stays has risen by more than 50% (Statistik Austria, 2023).

One of the reasons that Austria is such a popular tourist destination is because it offers a lot of different and diverse regions, like cities, rivers, lakes, alps for hiking and winter sports, and a lot of history and culture (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, 2022). Due to the diverse national landscape regions, which include the high alpine mountains, crystal-clear lakes, rolling hills, and green meadows Austria offers a wide variety of tourism motives and types. The natural diversity provides a range of opportunities for outdoor activities such as skiing, hiking, climbing, cycling, and water sports.

Tourism in Austria is varied and multifaceted, with many different types of tourism experiences available to visitors. One way to classify tourism in Austria is based on the number of tourists, whether someone travels alone or in a group. Another way to categorize tourism is based on the length of stay, with some tourists staying for just a few days while others may stay for several weeks or even months. Furthermore, tourism in Austria can be differentiated according to where a tourist is staying, i.e., whether they are traveling within their home country or abroad. Additionally, tourism can also be categorized according to season, with many tourists visiting during the winter months to take advantage of the ski resorts, while others visit during the summer months to enjoy scenic landscapes and outdoor activities (Schulz et al., 2020). Since the focus of this paper is primarily on winter tourism in Austria, a more detailed description of it will be provided in the next chapter.

1.1.1. Austrian Winter Tourism

Austria is becoming increasingly popular as a winter vacation destination. For several years already, one of the most important sources of income in Austria is winter tourism. In 2010, the industry turned over just under 11.4 billion euros, whereas in 2019 the turnover was already more than 14.9 billion euros (Statista, 2022). In the winter season 2021/2022, 52.7 million overnight stays and 13 million arrivals were recorded in Austria (Statistik Austria, 2022). Furthermore, almost half of the annual overnight stays (44%) are attributable to winter tourism. The importance of winter tourism for the Austrian economy is even higher than assumed since winter tourists spend more money by day than summer tourists (Steiger et al., 2021, p. 2).

The winter tourism season starts on November 1st and goes until April 30th. In this season winter sport plays a very important role which is reflected by the number of overnight stays. More than 66% of overnight stays are recorded in ski resorts (Fleischhacker, 2018). According to statistics, Austria is with 253 ski resorts one of the countries with the most ski resorts in the world - a very high number, considering that Austria is a very small country (Statista, 2020).

As mentioned above, the tourism industry is expanding rapidly and significantly contributes to the global economy. Therefore, it is essential to gain an understanding of the interest, preferences, and decision-making process of tourists (Abdullah et al., 2022b, p. 50). A better understanding of the decision-making process of tourists can lead to higher customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability for companies in the tourism industry. Hence, a detailed description of the tourist decision-making process is provided in the next chapter.

1.1.2. Tourist decision-making Process

Tourism activity starts with the travel decision, which is influenced by the motivation and purpose of tourism, tourists' psychological expectations, the type of destination, and the characteristics of different tourism activities. A tourist making a decision goes through the following four stages: producing tourist motives, information collection and analysis, decision-making, and evaluation (Liu et al., 2015, p. 2). However, not everyone goes through all the stages of the process, and some may skip certain stages (Comegys et al., 2006, p. 337).

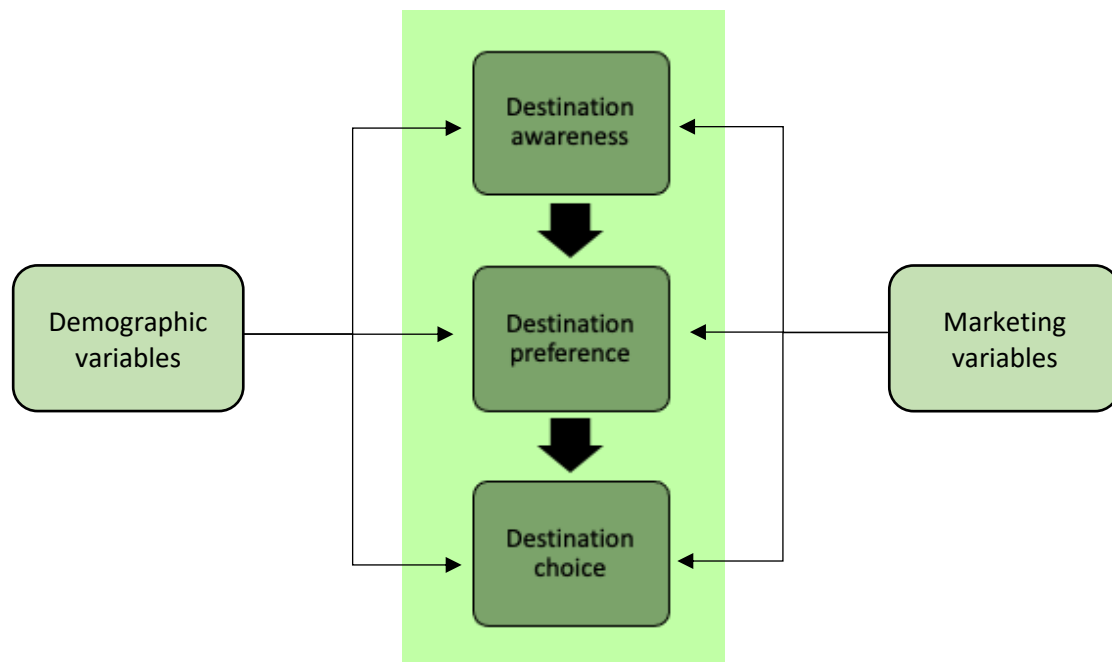
Tourism customers make several crucial decisions that include, where to travel, whether to travel, what to do when to travel, how long to stay, and how much to spend (Nuraeni et al., 2015, p. 313). A final choice of destination is made after tourists go through a series of steps, the so-called decision-making process (Nuraeni et al., 2015, p. 313). This process describes the factors influencing the choice of a vacation destination. During this process, travelers complete a comprehensive information-gathering process before making a final decision to purchase travel-related products. The reason for this immersive information collection is that most tourism products have an experiential nature, which means that there is some risk associated with their purchase. Therefore, travelers often try to reduce the potential risk by gathering as much information as possible about the desired destination, accommodation, transportation, and activities (Roque & Raposo, 2013).

Although destination marketers are interested in understanding how customers make all decisions, the most important decision is where they want to travel, which is the choice of destination. Once a tourist has decided on a destination, they can focus on deciding what kind of experience they want to have during their visit. The mental image a tourist has of a particular area, considering their interests, beliefs, and attitudes, plays a significant role in

choosing a destination (Obenour et al., 2005). The focus of this paper is also the destination choice.

Woodside and Lysonski developed a model of the destination choice process that emphasizes the central role of perceptions and preferences. Their model suggests that tourists' choice of a vacation destination is the result of a series of explicit and implicit decisions that progress from an initial awareness of the destination's conditions to the development of particular destination preferences and finally to the formation of a travel intention (1989). Figure 1 illustrates their model.

Figure 1: General Model of Destination Choice



Note: Own illustration based on Woodside and Lysonski's General Model of Destination Choice

The first stage in the decision-making process of choosing a vacation destination is the destination awareness phase. During this phase, potential tourists become aware of various destination options and begin to gather information about them. This information can come from various sources, such as word of mouth, advertising, social media, and online research.

The awareness phase is important because it sets the foundation for the rest of the decision-making process, as the potential tourist begins to develop preferences and criteria for their ideal destination based on the information gathered during this phase (Mutinda & Mayaka, 2012, p. 2).

Demographic variables such as age, income, gender, and lifestyle can significantly impact the destination awareness phase of the decision-making process for tourism-related products. These variables play a critical role in shaping a person's interests and preferences and can influence the types of destinations and activities they are aware of and ultimately choose to visit. Additionally, marketing variables such as price, advertising, distribution channel, and other factors can significantly influence the destination awareness stage in the decision-making process. Effective marketing strategies can be instrumental in shaping the perception of a destination (Lang et al., 1997).

Marketing variables also play a crucial role in the destination preference phase and the destination choice phase (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The destination preference phase is the second stage in deciding on a destination for a vacation. Potential tourists assess the different destination alternatives they are now aware of and based on their unique needs and preferences, choose one or more destinations as their preferred travel destinations. In this stage, prospective travelers start to focus on a smaller number of options and consider the distinctive qualities and traits of the places they want to visit. The destination preference phase is crucial because it prepares the ground for the decision-making process's last stage, which is the purchase decision or choice. The purchase decision is a crucial stage in the decision-making process, as it is the point at which potential tourists become actual customers, and it is the ultimate goal of destination marketers (Mutinda & Mayaka, 2012, p. 2).

According to the literature, marketing variables play a very significant role in the decision-making process of tourists. An important impact on the tourism industry has social media, as well as social media marketing, with its influence on all stages of the travel process (Abbasi et al., 2023). Therefore, the following chapters present a comprehensive examination of social media and social media marketing, including a more specific subcategory of social media marketing, known as influencer marketing. This will be followed by an in-depth discussion about the impact of social media on tourism.

1.2. Social Media

Social media is a collective term for internet platforms based on Web 2.0. technologies that are used to communicate, connect, and build relationships (Heymann-Reder, 2011, pp. 18–20). The usage of social media has grown rapidly through the fast revolution of mobile technologies and the expansion of high-speed internet. According to statistics from DataReportal, more than 5.16 billion of the worldwide population use the internet, of which approximately 4.76 billion are active users of social media platforms (Kemp, 2023).

The main purpose of social media is knowledge exchange and not marketing-related purposes (Heymann-Reder, 2011, pp. 18–20). Social media allows networking between companies and social media users, as well as between users themselves (Bruhn, 2014, p. 1041). Companies and users actively and passively share information, opinions, and experiences with certain products and services (Bruhn, 2019, p. 246).

Social media platforms are characterized by the exchange of user-generated content and brand-generated content (Burmam et al., 2012, p. 131). User-generated content is content that is produced and published by unpaid users of social media (Meffert et al., 2019, p. 719), which includes comments, reviews, self-produced pictures and videos, blogs, and

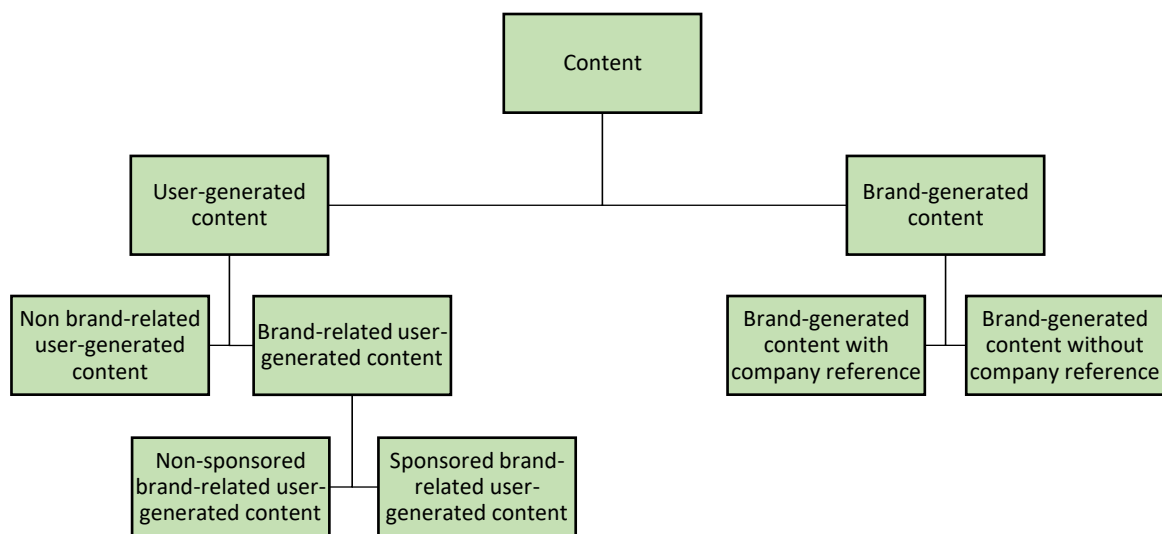
audio files. With this kind of content, social media users pursue different goals, like expanding their network, recognition from others, or gaining new information (Kreutzer, 2021, p. 3). User-generated content can be divided into two categories, which are non-brand-related user-generated content and brand-related user-generated content (Meffert et al., 2019, p. 719–721).

Brand-related user-generated content is created by users and has a reference to a specific company, product, or service. This can be further subdivided into sponsored brand-related user-generated content and non-sponsored brand-related user-generated content. Non-sponsored brand-related user-generated content is created by users independently of the company and completely on their initiative, whereas sponsored brand-related user-generated content is created on behalf of the company, and the users, who created the content, get something in return. This kind of content applies often to influencer marketing (as described in the chapter Influencer Marketing) (Meffert et al., 2019, pp. 719–721).

The main advantage of user-generated content is that it provides social proof and builds trust among potential customers. When users see positive reviews, photos, or videos of a product or service created by real people, it can be more effective in influencing their purchasing decisions than marketing messages coming from the brand itself (Afify et al., 2019, p. 1).

User-generated content is also an effective way for brands to engage with their target group and build up a community around their products or services. By encouraging users to share their experiences and opinions, brands can create a more authentic and relatable image, which can impact the loyalty and advocacy of customers (Meffert et al., 2019, pp. 719–721).

Figure 2: Types of Social Media Content



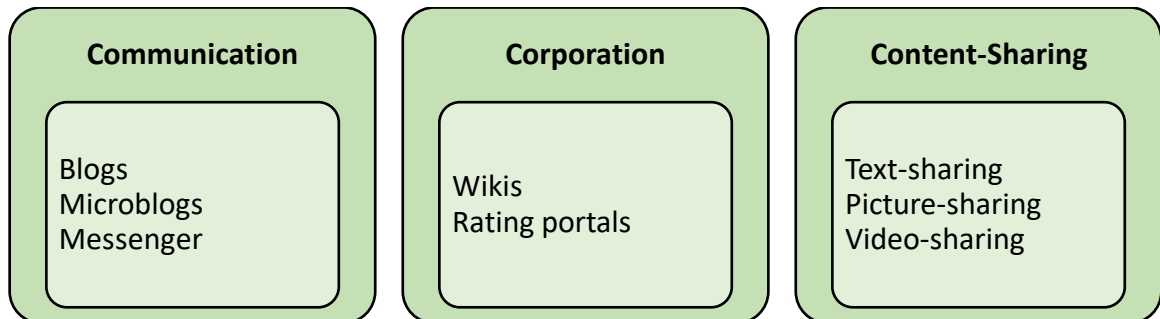
Note: Own illustration based on Meffert et al., 2019, p. 720

Brand-generated content is created by the company. This can include various types of content such as blog posts, social media posts, videos, podcasts, e-books, and infographics. The content can either have a company's reference or not. Content with a reference to the company is usually recommendations of the services or products from the company or product demonstration. Content without reference is used to draw attention to the brand and to arouse interest. The main goal of brand-generated content is to create awareness and engagement among the target group. The content is typically created to showcase the company's unique value proposition, products or services, and expertise in a particular field (Meffert et al., 2019, pp. 720-721).

To share their content users and companies have various social media platforms at their disposal. Based on the literature, social media platforms can be classified according to their

content orientation into the following three categories: communication, corporation, and content-sharing (Kreutzer, 2021, pp. 8–9; Scholz, 2017, pp. 4–13).

Figure 3: Social Media Platforms according to their Content Orientation



Note: Own illustration based on Kreutzer, 2021, p. 9

Even though these social media platforms differ in terms of usage, there are some characteristics that all platforms have in common. They are all known for their fast and inexpensive information diffusion, personal and impersonal communication, and the numerous possibilities for the presentation of content (Bruhn, 2014, pp. 1041-1043).

However, there are of course differences between the platforms, but some social media platforms belong to more than one category. Social media platforms, where communication is the main purpose are blogs, microblogs, social media, and messenger apps. These platforms typically allow users to send messages, make phone calls, and share multimedia content such as photos and videos. Blogs and microblogs are a great possibility to share information about a topic and short messages with the community. Blogs are characterized by detailed reporting, whereas microblogs are limited to a certain number of characters (Meffert et al., 2019, p. 724). Twitter is one of the most popular microblogs, where messages are limited to 140 characters (Wick, 2021). Social media platforms on which real and virtual individuals can network in a virtual environment are Facebook, LinkedIn, and XING. These platforms are

characterized by communication between users. Other social media platforms with a communication focus are messenger app providers like WhatsApp and Facebook-Messenger (Meffert et al., 2019, p. 724).

Another category of social media platforms is focused on facilitating collaboration between individuals. They can collect and compile the knowledge and experiences of individuals, as seen on wiki sites. Another example of this category is rating platforms that allow users to share feedback and experiences with businesses and products, for example, kununu, where employer reviews are given, and TripAdvisor, where users can rate their travel experiences. While these platforms do allow for some interaction between users and businesses, they are primarily focused on providing information and opinions to help others make informed decisions (Kreutzer, 2021, p. 9).

In this thesis, however, the most important orientation is the third, content-sharing. These social media platforms are focused on allowing users to share and discover multimedia content with and from their community such as photos, videos, and articles on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Content-sharing platforms typically use algorithms to recommend content to users based on their interests and past behavior. This makes them an effective tool for discovery, as users can find new content that they might not have otherwise encountered. These platforms can be a very powerful marketing tool for businesses, known as social media marketing. Companies can position themselves very well, place ads, and start a corporation with for example an influencer (Kreutzer, 2021, pp. 9–10; Meffert et al., 2019, p. 724).

A further explanation of social media marketing is given in the next chapter.

1.2.1. Social Media Marketing

Due to the rapid evolution of communication technologies, several social media sites have emerged in recent years, prompting marketers to use them to interact, communicate and collaborate with their customers and interested parties through social media marketing (Ceyp & Scupin, 2013, p. 3; Grover et al., 2019). These fast-paced developments in the internet and information technology offer companies and brands immense opportunities to reach their target audience and strengthen their brand values (Saheb & Hosseinpouli Mamaghani, 2021). Social media marketing is described as communication activities on social media platforms that take place between companies and social media users on the one hand, and between different social media users on the other hand to achieve specific marketing goals. The goal of social media marketing is to effectively interact with a target audience, increase brand awareness, and generate website traffic and sales (Kreutzer, 2021, p. 1; Meffert et al., 2019, p. 718). It is valuable for the marketing activities of a company because the target group can be reached cost-effectively. Furthermore, there are a lot of touchpoints where it is possible to interact with the customers in different stages of the buying process (Tuten, 2017, p. 31).

Social media marketing can be seen as an independent marketing discipline or part of digital marketing. Social media marketing as an individual discipline aims at sharing, communicating, and contacting customers rather than getting customers or prospects to do something, for example, visit a website or buy a product. In contrast, as part of online marketing, social media marketing aims to get customers and interested parties to do a specific action (Lammenett, 2014, p. 244).

According to Bruhn, companies have a choice between different strategic approaches. These approaches can be summarized into three categories: influencing, participating, and

activation. The influencing strategy involves companies exchanging information with (potential) customers, seeking dialogue, and making valuable information available to users. This approach encourages information exchange, and it can be directed by the company. This strategy can be very effective because it can help increase brand awareness, drive traffic to a company's website or social media channels, and ultimately lead to higher sales. The participating strategy involves companies being present on various social media platforms and demonstrating an interest in users' opinions. The company actively engages with customers and participates in online conversations to build relationships and promote the brand. This strategy can take many forms, from responding to customer queries on social media to participating in online forums and communities related to a company's industry or niche. The goal of the participatory approach is to build a sense of community around a brand and establish the company as a trusted and knowledgeable authority in its industry. This can help increase brand loyalty and encourage customers to advocate for the brand and share their positive experiences with others. The activation approach directly encourages customers to take a specific action, such as making a purchase or sharing content on social media. This can take many forms, from offering discounts or rewards for customer referrals to running contests or giveaways on social media. Furthermore, the activation strategy aims to build brand trust and loyalty by encouraging users to recommend the company to others. To achieve this, companies use stimuli intended to generate positive user-generated content from consumers and opinion leaders, for example, influencer marketing (2019, p. 247).

Companies' goals in social media marketing vary depending on the strategic approach they choose. Lammenett suggests that one possible objective is to increase the company's brand awareness through targeted social media marketing. This can be achieved through viral effects when a video is shared among many people within a short period. Another goal could

be to increase sales by engaging customers through successful storytelling, providing excellent customer support, and offering purchase incentives on social media platforms. Social media marketing can also be used for product development by conducting small market research studies or soliciting feedback from social media users on potential ideas. Furthermore, social media marketing can be used to build a positive image by engaging in intensive dialogue with the desired target group. This can also attract potential employees, making it a suitable tool for building an employer brand (Kreutzer, 2021, pp. 26–30; 2021, pp. 430–431).

Especially the two social media platforms Facebook and Instagram have proven to be extremely effective channels for marketing and advertising purposes. A recent international study of marketing experts found that almost 93% of all companies already use Facebook for their marketing campaigns, while 78% use Instagram. These figures point to the immense potential that these platforms offer for companies looking to engage with their target audience and promote their products or services. In addition, the study revealed that the use of Instagram for marketing purposes has increased by 76% year-on-year, which is a significant growth rate. This trend indicates that companies are recognizing the importance of social media to their overall marketing strategy and are taking advantage of the opportunities these platforms offer to reach a wider audience and achieve their marketing goals (Stelzner, 2022).

One of the most important trends over the past decade in social media marketing is influencer marketing. This marketing strategy became an increasingly important part of social media marketing (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020, p. 1). In the next chapters, a comprehensive explanation of the role and impact of social media influencers and influencer marketing will be presented. This includes a definition of the term "influencer" and what that term means in the context of this thesis. Furthermore, an overview of their increasing importance in

today's digital landscape and the various types of social media influencers, and their unique characteristics will be provided.

1.2.2. Social Media Influencer

The term influencer derives from the verb “to influence” which can be described as the ability to impact the character, development, or behavior of someone (Laker & Patel, 2020). “To influence” was defined long before social media even existed but since the establishment of social media, the term has mostly been used to describe people who create awareness in the digital space of self-produced content (Fries, 2019, pp. 5–6). According to Deges, influencers are individuals who create content on a specific topic and share it through internet-based communication channels to encourage interaction with others (Deges, 2018, p. 14). Influencers are normal internet users, who distinguish themselves through many followers on blogs and social media (Abidin, 2015). If most followers are approached via social media, they are referred to as social media influencers (Deges, 2018, p. 14).

Social media influencers give followers daily insights into their life and share experiences with certain products and services they tried (Breves et al., 2019). Influencers produce content with added value for their followers. Successful influencers can expand their community and subsequently also the reach of their content if they convince others with it (Wolf, 2007, p. 46). The influencers’ reach and community building are particularly important, as it is crucial for certain collaborations with companies (Deges, 2018, p. 14). To increase reach, influencers usually produce content at regular intervals on a topic area that interests them and their community. The community often sees the influencer as a trusted authority within certain areas of interest (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

According to a survey from 2021, the most popular influencer topic among social media users aged 15 to 59 is food, followed by fitness, beauty, and travel (Statista, 2021). The community expects specialist information from influencers, as they are often seen as experts in their respective subject areas (Deges, 2018, pp. 14–16). Due to their expert status, they can sometimes even influence their followers about purchasing decisions, lifestyle, or nutritional concepts (Schach & Lommatzsch, 2018, pp. 23–25).

Every social media user can theoretically become an influencer, so this is not a classic job requiring a specific education (Deges, 2018, p. 18), but influencers need to have their skills and requirements, and depending on the skills they take on different roles (Borchers & Enke, 2020, pp. 3–5). The following table shows the different roles an influencer can take on.

Table 1 Role of an Influencer

Input	Role	Output
Content production competence	Content creator	Content
Content distribution competence	Multiplicator	Reach
Interaction competence	Moderator	Interaction
Public person	Protagonist	Personalization

Note: Own illustration based on Borchers & Enke, 2020, p. 4

Depending on the role of the influencer, different skills are required, and different results are achieved. In the content creator role, the influencer needs to know how to produce high-quality content, what trends are hot right now, and what content formats are best suited for each social media channel. Moreover, the influencer needs knowledge about how to distribute the produced content on social media to achieve reach. To promote the interaction

of social media users, and to build relationships with them, influencers should have interaction competencies. Good relationships with the community lead to more likes, comments, and shared content. In addition, as public people, influencers must present themselves authentically and share their opinions and recommendations in a personal and relatable way. This often includes showing their unique personality and lifestyle in their content. Overall, successful influencers have a range of skills and competencies that enable them to connect with their audience, build trust, and promote products and ideas effectively and engagingly (Borchers & Enke, 2020, pp. 3–5; Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90).

Companies are increasingly cooperating with influencers to achieve their corporate communication goals. This marketing strategy is called influencer marketing, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

1.2.3. Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is the targeted corporate use of influencers on social media platforms to achieve marketing goals and company objectives. It is a type of marketing strategy where companies cooperate with influencers who have a large reach on social media platforms to promote their products or services (Meffert et al., 2019, p. 739). In contrast to traditional marketing methods, influencer marketing appears more trustworthy and authentic because the advertisement is often integrated into the influencers' daily posts. Furthermore, it increases the value of the advertising messages and positively influences the buying behavior of the selected target group (Deges, 2018, p. 35).

The use of influencer marketing has become increasingly popular in recent years, as social media platforms have become more relevant, and consumers have become more skeptical of traditional advertising methods. According to a study by Influencer Marketing

Hub, the global influencer marketing industry was worth \$9.7 billion in 2020 and it is projected to grow to \$21.8 billion by the end of 2023. Furthermore, the study shows that the use of influencer marketing continues to be a popular and effective marketing strategy, with businesses spending more on influencer marketing campaigns in 2021 compared to the previous year. The most popular platform for influencer marketing is still Instagram. However, TikTok is gaining more popularity and is the second most used social media platform used for influencer marketing (Geysler, 2022).

The characteristic feature of influencer marketing is that it is not the company itself that sends out the advertising message (Deges, 2018, p. 35), but an influencer who advertises for the company and its products and services on his or her mostly wide-reaching social media channels (Fries, 2019, p. 4). The company is pushed into the background and the advertising message is usually not perceived as advertising by the followers (Deges, 2018, p. 35).

With the help of influencer marketing, the company reaches new (potential) customers and can subsequently increase the awareness of its products and services (Meffert et al., 2019, p. 721).

From the followers' perspective, most brand recommendations from influencers are perceived as electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) rather than paid advertisements (Abidin, 2016). The concept of Word-Of-Mouth has been researched in relation to customers' buying decisions. Influencer marketing is a form of eWOM advertising, where an influencer's endorsement of a product on their social media platform can be compared to a friend or relative recommending a product they have tested and found to be great. In both cases, people are more likely to trust and be influenced by the opinion, making them more inclined to purchase the product. When a real person promotes a product, service, or destination, they have used, enjoyed, or experienced themselves, this is perceived as more authentic and

credible compared to a commercial advertisement where someone is hired to deliver a scripted message. It's human nature to value the opinions of others, which is why social media platforms have become so popular and influential in indirect advertising through influencers and their product recommendations (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 3).

Any positive or negative statement and comment regarding a product or company made by actual, potential, or former customers that is accessible to many people through the internet is a type of eWOM. EWOM is effective if the individuals who are sharing their opinions on social media hold some kind of opinion leader status, which makes their followers value their opinion (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 4). Influencers use their authority and expertise to influence and guide their followers, like the concept of opinion leadership. This concept goes back to Katz and Lazarsfeld's "two-stage" or "multistage communication flow" and is considered the starting point of opinion leadership research. Research shows that interpersonal communication has a greater impact on opinion formation than mass media, with opinion leaders acting as gatekeepers in society by frequently consuming and sharing news and information. They perform a filtering and information function and influence opinions in society through their knowledge and need for communication (Schach & Lommatzsch, 2018, pp. 5-7). This model is the basis of influencer marketing, as influencers are considered experts due to their extensive research on their topics and sharing of information on social media. Their fans see them as digital opinion leaders and recognize their ability to influence attitudes and behavior. The desired relationship between the influencer and the fan is established through communication, which is essential for exercising influence (Duckwitz, 2019, p. 3). As opinion leaders, social media influencers can integrate branded content into their personal stories on social media in a way that seems natural and unforced, thereby influencing a wide range of people to be aware of and possibly buy a particular brand.

By sharing their personal experiences with a product or service, influencers can make it more relatable and trustworthy to their followers, increasing the likelihood of their audience making a purchase (Scott, 2022). When this is the case, influencers can alter their audience's attitudes, decisions, and behaviors in various ways. Furthermore, their followers might share the influencer's message on their own social media platforms, thus significantly increasing the influencer's reach. Traditional advertising methods, such as TV commercials and billboards, are becoming less attractive to customers, who are overwhelmed with these types of ads. Customers increasingly rely on the honest opinions of individuals regarding a product or service, making influencer marketing increasingly popular (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 4).

Even though influencer marketing appears more trustworthy to some customers than traditional marketing strategies, not every person trusts the recommendations of influencers. Trust in an influencer plays a crucial role in influencer marketing. The next chapter gives an overview of trust in general, trust in an influencer, and discusses which characteristics are necessary to build trust.

1.2.4. Social Media Influencers and Trust

Trust is a complex concept that depends heavily on discipline and context. Various disciplines such as communication, marketing, psychology, and politics have dealt with the broad and difficult-to-understand concept of trust (Cowles, 1996; Fisher et al., 2010). In psychology, trust is required to get in touch with a person or a company, and be optimistic about the required service (Link, 2019, p. 49). According to Suchanek & Lin-Hi, trust is an expectation to not get hurt or gain a disadvantage from the action of another person. Trust is the basic requirement for every interpersonal relationship (2018).

However, trust in the context of this thesis will be defined as a party's willingness to accept vulnerability and uncertainty when engaging with another party in situations that involve some degree of risk. This definition of trust can be applied to a relationship between two parties where one party, the influencer, enjoys the trust of the other party, the follower, who has the power to make a choice or decision regarding the influencer. This definition highlights the fact that trust involves vulnerability, and building trust with someone means exposing oneself to the possibility of losing something important. Thus, trust also means taking risks. However, it is important to note that trust does not necessarily mean taking a risk in a literal way but being willing to make oneself vulnerable to someone and taking a chance on that person (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712).

While definitions vary, there is consensus in the research fields that trust is not a state but rather a process within a relationship. Deep trust develops only over time, provided the trust has not been abused (Nieder, 1997, p. 24). Trust is essential in uncertain situations, and it is built on the expertise, reliability, and intentionality of the person or object being trusted. Trustworthiness can be defined as the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence in. In general, trust is the belief that someone or something is reliable and can be relied on without fear of risk (Moorman et al., 1992, p. 315).

If a person trusts another person, it is called interpersonal trust, whereas if a person trusts a company it's personal trust. If, however, a company trusts a person it is defined as organizational trust. What or to whom a person or a company develops trust is very depending on the situation (Fladnitzer, 2006, p. 147; Greschuchna, 2006, p. 75).

To understand why and how followers start trusting influencers and their recommendations about a product, service, or vacation destination, the different characteristics of both parties need to be clarified. Every follower has a different background,

different personality type, and different culture, and all of these factors summarized influence the propensity of a person to trust (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 715). The propensity of a person to trust the recommendations of an influencer is on the one hand depending on the characteristics of the person and on the other hand increases or decreases depending on the price of the promoted product or service. That means, that an influencer who is promoting a cheaper product or service is trusted more than someone who is promoting a more expensive product or service (Vogel et al., 2015, pp. 313–314).

Also, a follower trusting an influencer is not only dependent on the characteristics of the follower and the price of the product and service but also on the influencer's attributes. According to the literature, there are different influencing factors that social media influencers use to build trust. These factors are reflected in how influencers communicate with their followers and build their brands (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 5).

Expertise and trustworthiness are two key variables that were mentioned to be one of the most important variables an influencer should have to be seen as credible by the followers (Lim et al., 2017, pp. 21–22). Credibility can be defined as a precursor of trust. If the information provided by influencers is perceived as credible, it can increase the likelihood that their followers will trust them (Westerman et al., 2014, p. 173).

Expertise in influencer marketing is often referred to the perceived competence of influencers in a specific topic. Therefore, expertise can be seen as the degree to which a communicator is perceived as capable of making accurate statements. An important role plays product-related knowledge and expertise because it leads to more trust and credibility toward the influencer and the brand (Braunsberger & Munch, 1998, pp. 23-24).

Besides expertise also other attributes promote trust in an influencer. Influencers create a personal and friendly atmosphere by addressing followers personally. This is done by

pointing out similarities between the influencer and their followers, such as common interests, characteristics, or attitudes. The more similar a follower perceives the influencer to be, the more sympathetic they are likely to be towards them. This helps to build a connection and sense of closeness between the influencer and their followers (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 5). Influencers try to present themselves as relatable and ordinary people to their followers. They aim to create a sense of closeness and friendship with their audience, even though it is mostly virtual, and they do not know each other personally (Duffy, 2020, p. 2).

Another factor an influencer uses to appear trustworthy is authenticity. The literature on influencer marketing emphasizes the importance of authenticity as a crucial attribute. Studies about influencer marketing have shown, that authenticity is one of the most important factors explaining the greatest variance in consumers' decision to follow social media influencers (J. A. Lee et al., 2022, p. 90).

Customers seek authenticity in products, brands, and the influencers promoting them. Furthermore, being authentic is believed to improve the effectiveness of marketing messages and enhance the perceived quality of the product, which leads to higher purchase intentions among consumers. Authenticity is generally associated with a person's genuine and true nature. Authentic influencers are intrinsically motivated and passionate about the content they create. They tend to specialize in a particular niche or topic, focusing on what they find interesting. In contrast, inauthentic influencers may be motivated solely by external factors such as rewards or punishment. The level of authenticity is determined by the extent to which the influencer's behavior is intrinsically motivated. Authentic influencers and brands genuinely enjoy their work and strive to provide value to their community, which is reflected in their engagement through comments, stories, and other means (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 559).

In some studies, empathy is described as another factor for people to promote trust, enabling them to establish a positive relationship with another human by understanding their emotions and concerns. This factor can also enable influencers to build a relationship and foster a strong connection over time by empathizing with their followers. According to the literature, empathy plays a significant role in establishing trust and building strong relationships, as it allows people to effectively communicate, understand, and connect with others. Empathy enables people to put themselves in the shoes of others and perceive their feelings better. In the context of influencer marketing, an influencer who understands their followers' beliefs, opinions, and concerns can provide content that resonates with them and makes them feel valued. This can increase the brand's credibility and influence followers' purchasing decisions or even destination choices. However, there are not a lot of studies about how empathy enables followers to trust an influencer (Rahman, 2013, pp. 2029–2030).

The trustworthiness of an influencer is evaluated based on certain characteristics they and their follower possess. However, more factors need to be considered to appear trustworthy. The brand they promote and their image, as well as other factors, also play an important role in their perceived trustworthiness. It is crucial to thoroughly investigate the match between the influencer and the brand before collaborating, as followers can quickly notice a mismatch and view the collaboration as purely commercial intent. Therefore, it is essential for companies to select only influencers that align with their values, but also for influencers to carefully choose the companies and only cooperate with them if they fit their lifestyle (S. Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 237).

As mentioned above, influencers must have certain qualities to build up trust. If they can demonstrate these certain qualities, influencers can succeed in convincing followers of

certain products or services as they have a significant influence on the purchase decision process.

1.3. The Role of Social Media in Tourism

Social media platforms have a really big impact on people's daily life. Even beyond their important role in the social context, it has also become extremely relevant in the tourism sector (Zeng, 2013). Tourism organizations use various forms of content on social media to engage and inform potential tourists, increase engagement, and drive users to visit their destinations. However, the effectiveness of such social media activities is constantly being questioned, and marketers face the challenge of making their content valuable and engaging for their customers. Social media content helps organizations achieve various marketing objectives, such as raising awareness, expanding knowledge, shaping perceptions, and persuading potential tourists. Due to its interactive nature, social media content has received a lot of attention from researchers and practitioners (Abbasi et al., 2023).

Social media has not only had an impact on tourism marketing, but it also has revolutionized the whole travel process of tourists by providing travelers with information, which influences their decisions before, during, and after their travels (Mehraliyev et al., 2021). Tourists are looking for a variety of information about their desired destinations or activities. This includes information, explanations, reviews, and pictures, among other things. This first phase of information gathering is commonly referred to as the information acquisition phase and usually takes place before the tourist makes a final decision. In this phase, tourists become aware of the destination and try to gather as much information as possible through research. This is done both offline and online (Lončarić et al., 2013, p. 373). Social media platforms are an important source of information for tourists, as they are

considered reliable and trustworthy. These platforms include travel-specific online communities, travel blogs, and social networking sites that allow tourists to connect with other travelers and share their experiences, comments, and opinions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

But also, the way people make their final tourist destination decisions has been influenced by social media since tourists rely a lot on the recommendations, and reviews they find online. One of the ways social media has impacted tourism is by providing travelers with an abundance of information about destinations. Users can easily find the content of destinations they want to visit and reviews and recommendations from other travelers. The wealth of information on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube has become important for travelers to research and plan their trips. They find inspiration in the postings they see in their newsfeeds, for example on Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok. Furthermore, tourists trust more in user-generated content than brand-generated content, because content generated by other user seem more authentic, and are not seen as an advertisement (Kitsios et al., 2022, p. 4). The results of a study conducted by Sahin & Sengün show that 41.1% of respondents have been influenced by a positive comment about a vacation destination on social media, while 47.8% have been influenced by a negative comment (Şahin & Sengün, 2015).

A source that is deemed trustworthy and knowledgeable is more likely to positively impact an individual's decision to choose a particular destination. To effectively communicate a message that will resonate with potential travelers, the source must be able to provide valid information sincerely. As Bickart and Schindler have suggested, recommendations from users are often perceived as more credible than those from marketers, highlighting the importance of peer-to-peer recommendations in travel marketing. Overall, trust plays a crucial role in

shaping consumer behavior, and marketers need to identify and leverage credible sources in their communication strategies (2001).

Especially since tourism and travel activities are mostly high-involvement products, it is of utmost importance that tourists trust the advertising message.

A high-involvement product is a product where the consumer must make a well-informed and thought-out decision after weighing up various options. In general, consumers have short-term and long-term needs, that need to be fulfilled. Depending on the nature of the product and the consumer's specific needs, the level of involvement in the purchasing decision can vary. The greater the consumers' interest in a particular product, the more involved they will be in the decision-making process. This can lead to a more complex and thorough decision-making process, which is influenced by various factors (Adenan et al., 2018, p. 66). In the context of tourism, a travel experience is often a product that a tourist buys only after carefully considering the options available to them, including destination, type of accommodation, transport, activities, and of course overall cost (Roque & Raposo, 2013).

With the increasing importance of social media in today's digital age, collaborations between tourism organizations and influencers are also becoming more common in the tourism industry. Since influencers have already established themselves as reliable sources of information among their followers, they succeed in leveraging the reach and engagement of their target audience, and tourism organizations can tap into a new and potentially lucrative market. Several scientific papers have already examined the credibility, trust, appeal, and information quality of influencers on social media and their impact on customer travel intentions (Sesar et al., 2021).

The impact of social media on the tourism industry highlights the importance of authenticity and trust in modern marketing (Hautz et al., 2014).

1.4. Conclusion of the Literature Review

The rapid expansion of the tourism industry made predicting the travel behavior of tourists and understanding factors that influence the decision-making process a critical factor for tourism businesses and destinations. Especially when travelers are having way higher expectations than ever before, an effective marketing strategy and developing products and services that create memorable experiences become indispensable (Clements & Josiam, 1995, p. 337).

Nowadays, social media platforms of any orientation play a very important role in the tourism industry and have a significant impact on the tourist decision-making process (Zeng, 2013). With the rise of social media, influencers have become a valuable tool for marketers to reach and engage with potential customers (Sesar et al., 2021). In the travel industry, influencers are often used to introduce destinations, hotels, and experiences to their followers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020, p. 1). This has become an important factor in travel decision-making as consumers increasingly turn to social media for travel inspiration and information (Kitsios et al., 2022, p. 4).

Understanding the effectiveness of influencer marketing in the tourism industry is critical for companies seeking to maximize their marketing efforts. Therefore, the empirical study of this work aims to examine the impact of influencer marketing on Austrian winter tourism and determine if it is an effective marketing strategy to attract customers to destinations.

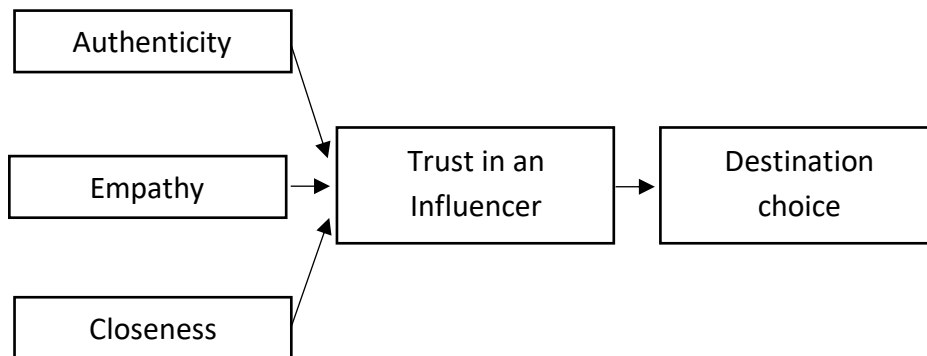
Chapter 2: Theory Construction

In this chapter, the object of the research is clarified using a research model. After analyzing the existing literature, a model was developed that illustrates the connection between influencers' recommendations about a destination and the resulting travel decision of travelers. Based on the literature the propensity of trust in an influencer is a crucial factor in determining whether their recommendations regarding travel are influential. Therefore, the model also consists of three key variables that significantly impact people's perceptions of others. These variables will be investigated to determine how they affect people's perceptions of influencers and whether certain characteristics of these variables can contribute to a more positive perception of an influencer and build trust. The conceptual model below illustrates the relationship between these influencing variables and the level of trust people develop in an influencer. The focus of this work, however, is to investigate the impact of influencers on the destination choice of tourists.

Numerous articles have highlighted expertise and trustworthiness as key factors in building trust between two parties. However, these factors were intentionally not included in the model in this study because their positive effects on trust are well known. Instead, this study aims to explore other variables that have been overlooked in previous studies, but which may be of great importance in establishing an appropriate level of trust. The aim of this study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence trust in the context of influencer marketing.

Destination choice is determined to be an intentional component, which is a downstream construct of the construct of trust. It is assumed that there is a direct influence between trust and destination choice.

Figure 4: Conceptual Model



The paper investigates whether influencer marketing has an impact on the travel decisions of winter tourists in Austria or whether this form of marketing has no influence. If there is a correlation between influencer marketing and the selection of a destination, it will be further examined by the extent of an influencer's trustworthiness and the key factors that contribute to building trust in an influencer will be identified.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

After clarifying the object of research based on the research model, the research question and the hypotheses derived from it will now be defined.

First, the objectives of the thesis are briefly explained, followed by an explanation of the main research question and its sub-questions. In addition, the rationale for formulating these questions is presented as they are intended to help solve the problem presented in this thesis.

The first objective of this thesis is to understand and explain whether influencer marketing has an influence on the tourist decision-making process, with a particular focus on the destination decision of winter tourists in Austria. The objective is necessary because it is

essential information that must be understood before a further investigation can be conducted as it provides the foundation for this research.

The second objective of this thesis is to investigate if trust in an influencer can influence the travel destinations promoted by the influencer and whether such influence can lead to changes in travel behavior. By examining the relationship between trust in influencers and destination choice, this study aims to gain insights into the underlying factors that influence travel behavior and preferences.

After defining the main objectives of this thesis, the research question, the sub-research questions, and the hypotheses can be formulated to achieve the study's goals. As stated in the problem definition, the existing literature on influencer marketing does not provide a clear understanding of whether influencer marketing influences the destination decision of winter tourists in Austria. To fill this research gap and to provide insights into whether influencer marketing is important for Austrian winter tourism, or whether this type of marketing does not yet have any influence on it, the following initial research question was formulated:

RQ1: Does influencer marketing influence Austrian winter tourism?
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The primary objective of this paper is to comprehensively investigate the extent to which influencer marketing affects the tourist decision-making phase of winter tourists in Austria, with a particular focus on destination choice. Before making a final decision, a tourist goes through some stages, called the tourist decision-making process. The tourist decision-making process is a complex and multi-stage process that includes several steps (Liu et al., 2015, p. 2).

Social media has a major impact on the decision-making process and revolutionizes how tourists approach their travel experiences. Social media platforms provide travelers with a wealth of information that influences their decisions before, during, and after travel (Mehraliyev et al., 2021).

In addition, social media has enabled the rise of influencer marketing, where travel brands partner with social media influencers to promote their products and services to a target audience. Influencer marketing has proven effective in reaching potential customers, building brand awareness, and generating positive reviews and recommendations from trusted sources (Sesar et al., 2021). Overall, social media and influencer marketing have changed the way travelers plan, experience and share their travel experiences, creating new opportunities and challenges for the tourism industry.

Based on this literature, this study examines whether influencer marketing has an impact on Austrian winter tourism.

RQ2: How important is trust in an influencer when choosing a destination based on the influencer's recommendations?

The aim of this thesis is to examine if and how trust in an influencer can affect the traveler's decision-making process. Trust is an essential factor in both interpersonal and business relationships as it reduces uncertainty and minimizes the level of risk (Mitchell, 1999, p. 174). According to studies trust that is established between an influencer and their followers can be extended to the brand or product that the influencer is endorsing (Hussain et al., 2020, pp. 474-475). If an influencer is successful in transferring trust from an influencer to the brand they promote, they can have a significant impact on consumers' purchasing decisions, as it not only increases their willingness to buy from the brand but also reduces risk and influences their future decisions. Brand credibility plays a critical role in reducing price

sensitivity, increasing brand loyalty, and improving customer retention. Therefore, building trust with customers is critical to a brand's credibility. Influencer marketing is an effective strategy to leverage the trust that influencers have built with their followers and project it onto the brand to increase its credibility (Hussain et al., 2020, p. 478).

The following hypothesis is based on this and should investigate whether trust in influencers can also influence the decision-making process of tourists.

H1: The more followers **trust** influencers, the more influence influencer marketing has on the destination choice.

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity about what specific characteristics influencers need to have to build trust with their followers. The aim is to identify the specific character traits that influencers should possess and display to build trust with their community.

RQ3: What factors encourage trust in an influencer?
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The first key variable, that will be further explained is authenticity in the context of trust building in an influencer. There are various definitions of the term authenticity, but in the context of this thesis, it refers to whatever is genuine, real, unique as well as true (Ratneshwar et al., 2005, p. 145). Studies on brand authenticity in the context of influencer marketing have shown that an influencer and the brand they promote are more likely to be perceived as authentic by their audience if they remain true to their values and beliefs. The authenticity of both parties plays a crucial role in building trust with their followers and creating a long-term relationship with them. In addition, an influencer's authenticity has a major impact on the success of influencer marketing campaigns, as it helps build a deeper

level of trust and credibility between the influencer and their followers (Ilicic et al., 2019, p. 2).

For the brand to be perceived as sincere and honest, it must be internally consistent and remain true to its values and beliefs. Transparency in the brand's actions and communications is also important for communicating these values to the outside world. Similarly, the influencer must also maintain authenticity by staying true to their values and beliefs. When both the brand and the influencer show authenticity, a strong connection is created between them and their followers. This connection makes it easier for followers to identify with the influencer's message and the brand they are promoting (Pöyry et al., 2019, p. 339).

According to the literature, authenticity and trust are clearly linked to each other and are closely related. Perceived authenticity can increase the recipient's trust in the sender, which is especially important in situations where trust is required but the recipient cannot be sure how the sender will act in the future. Authentic people tend to behave consistently over time, which allows others to predict their future behavior based on past actions. This consistent behavior reduces perceived risk, increases trust, and strengthens the sender's credibility and integrity (Schallehn et al., 2014, p. 194).

Since there is a clear relationship between the variable authenticity and trust. However, the question arises of how these variables are linked to a relationship between a follower and trust in an influencer. Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses has been developed and will be tested in this paper.

H2: The more **authentic** an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.

Another key variable in the conceptual model is closeness. Closeness is associated with the bond between two people and can be explained by attachment theory. The focus of this theory is on understanding how people bond with each other. Closeness is an important aspect of relationships and can be defined as the extent to which relationship partners are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally interdependent (Collins & Feeney, 2004). In social media marketing, it is very important to understand how followers connect with influencers and build a bond with them (Taillon et al., 2020, p. 771).

In the context of social media, closeness is often described as a bond between individuals. In general, there are two types of bonds, namely weak and strong bonds. Strong bonds refer to close relationships between individuals, such as family members and friends. People feel a close connection to each other. Weak bonds, on the other hand, describe relationships that are not as strong, where people interact occasionally but are not very close and therefore do not have a strong connection. Nowadays, non-close relationships have become the main support system for many people on social media. People often look to social media for social support that they do not receive in their real-life relationships (Carr et al., 2016, p. 386). This leads to those weak connections being perceived as closeness because of the feedback, support, and encouragement they receive on social media. As a result, people are more likely to follow suggestions or prompts made by people on social media. Influencers play a crucial role in this dynamic by suggesting products or services for their followers to review (Tatsukawa et al., 2018, p. 2).

Closeness is also clearly linked with trust. If individuals become closer to each other, they know the other person better and gain a better understanding of each other's behavior. They also become more familiar with each other's values and beliefs, which makes it easier to predict their actions. This familiarity leads to a higher level of trust in the relationship, as

trust means reducing risk and uncertainty about how people will behave in relationships (Acar-Burkay et al., 2014, pp. 10–11). This explanation leads to the following hypothesis.

H3: The **closer** an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.

Empathy is the last variable that will be examined in this paper. Empathy is defined as a human trait that "appears to enable people to relate to others in ways that promote cooperation and unity rather than conflict and isolation" (Konrath et al., 2011, p. 180). It is the ability to feel and understand other human's emotions and feelings and to imagine what someone else might be thinking (Decety & Jackson, 2004, p. 71). In some studies, empathy appears as an important factor in influencing trust building. For some researchers, empathy is even an essential foundation for trust-building (Frei & Morriss, 2020). However, the factor has hardly been researched in the context of influencer marketing (Konrath et al., 2011, p. 180).

Empathy is normally shown and communicated nonverbally and it can be challenging for people to express it on social media. However, it is still possible to build up empathy through social media, using frequent interaction with other people in a similar situation (Hwang & Zhang, 2018, pp. 157–158). Based on the literature and previous studies on trust-building with empathy the following hypothesis was developed.

H4: The more **empathetic** an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.

The formulated hypotheses are tested to verify whether the existing correlations between the individual constructs are valid. This includes a thorough investigation of the

underlying relationships between the constructs as well as the identification of potential confounding factors that could influence the results. The study builds a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between these constructs and their respective correlations, which can serve as a basis for future research in this area.

Chapter 4: Methods

An empirical study will be conducted to research the importance of social media influencers on the destination decision of winter tourists in Austria. An empirical study finds solutions to research problems by collecting and analyzing data (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 187).

The data collection will be done through a quantitative survey. A quantitative online questionnaire is conducted from 20.03.2023 to 06.04.2023. The questionnaire is available online because, as the main topic of this thesis revolves around influencer marketing, the target group of such marketing activities can be best found online. A QR code with a link to the online questionnaire is provided in Austrian ski resorts, in the provinces of Salzburg and Styria.

4.1. Research Design

The research design of a study should identify the methodological approach to conducting the investigation, including the sequence of activities that will be undertaken to find an answer to the research question. This includes a detailed description of the research methodology used, such as the research framework, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and interpretation of results. By clearly outlining the study design and methodology, researchers can ensure the reliability and validity of their findings and allow other researchers to replicate the study in the future (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 181).

To accomplish its objective and to answer the research questions, the research will utilize an explanatory study, which involves testing hypotheses derived from existing literature. The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of influencer marketing on Austrian winter tourism. This particular methodology was chosen since it is possible to deduce an individual's character traits and their impact on specific factors based on other theories. In this thesis, various character traits of an individual were connected to the level of trust they have in an influencer, which was then linked to the decision-making process of tourists when choosing a destination. Using an explanatory methodology is appropriate for this research as it enables the testing of the hypotheses derived from prior theories and literature. Generally, an explanatory study is conducted using quantitative data collection techniques as this methodology allows for the most effective testing of cause-and-effect relationships.

4.2. Collection of Data

To illustrate how the scientific data used in this study was collected, which led to the validation of the hypotheses and research questions, the following briefly describes the data collection methods used. Two types of data were collected: primary data and secondary data. Primary data was collected specifically for this market research study, while secondary data was obtained from existing sources such as journals or books. For this study, secondary data was taken from academic journals, papers, and books that address the topics of tourism, the decision-making process, social media, and influencer. Using this secondary data, various hypotheses were formulated, which were then tested and proven or disproven using primary data collected during the empirical study (Homburg, 2017, p. 285).

Primary data collection is the direct acquisition of information as part of a market research study tailored to specific information needs. In this work, primary data collection

involved the development of a quantitative questionnaire tailored to test the hypotheses. The questionnaire was designed to meet the specific information needs of the study (Homburg, 2017, p. 285).

A questionnaire as the method of quantitative data collection of this thesis was chosen because of the target group of the thesis topic. The questionnaire was completed online so that participants could access it through a web browser and select their responses from a list of options or type them into a text box. Influencer marketing is primarily aimed at people who are familiar with social networks and use them regularly in their free time. Therefore, it would be pointless to ask a person who does not own a smartphone for his or her opinion on influencer marketing, as he or she is not part of the main target group and probably does not have any relevant insights on this topic.

To reach potentially important target groups for this thesis, which are mainly winter tourists, the distribution of the questionnaire directly at the ski areas was considered the best approach. Therefore, a QR Code with a link to the questionnaire was placed in different ski resorts, in ski schools, as well as in the check-in areas of ski apartments in Austria.

4.3. Questionnaire

After an in-depth review of quantitative data from scientific journals, articles, and books, a questionnaire was developed based on the hypotheses to assess the impact of influencer recommendations on the decision-making process of winter tourists in Austria as well as the impact of authenticity, empathy, and closeness on trust in an influencer. Data collection via questionnaires typically follows a quantitative research approach, often using fully standardized questionnaires. Such questionnaires typically contain closed questions and

statements, offering respondents predetermined answers to choose from (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 405).

The standardized questionnaire used the format of a Likert scale, which measures a specific construct at the interval scale level with multiple indicators. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with statements using a 5-point scale. The score was then calculated by adding the averages of the individual responses. This questionnaire format was chosen to test the assumptions of the conceptual model on influencer marketing by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement. Respondents rated each variable separately based on their life experiences.

To ensure that the questionnaire was easily understandable and would lead to valuable results for this work a pretest was conducted. Six participants from diverse age groups were involved in the pretest to ensure that the questionnaire was user-friendly for individuals who are less familiar with digitalization compared to younger generations. Additionally, the language of the questionnaire was another important consideration that made a pretest necessary for this work. The questionnaire was conducted in English to make it accessible to individuals and tourists in Austria. After the feedback from the pre-test that was taking place on the 6th of March 2023, small changes regarding little misunderstandings were made.

Before starting the survey, a short introduction about the topic and a time frame about how long it would take to complete the questionnaire were given. To ensure that only people who use social media and are therefore also target groups of influencers participate in the survey, a note was added to the survey description to only participate if this is the case before someone could start the survey. The main structure of the survey can be divided into three parts:

- General questions about social media behavior and travel decision
- Statements on the different variables about the influencers
- Demographic questions

In the first part, the participants were asked questions about their social media behavior, namely what social media platforms they are using, if and how many influencers they follow. Since the topic of the thesis is about travel-decision, it was also asked, if the participants follow travel influencers and if they have ever seen an influencer promoting Austrian winter tourism. The first part of the survey also included questions that aimed to determine whether individuals had made a purchase, or destination decision in the past based on an influencer's promotion. Furthermore, respondents were questioned whether they have ever chosen Austria as their winter vacation destination because an influencer has promoted it and if an influencer had even influenced the choice of their current ski resort. If the participants have ever taken a winter vacation because an influencer promoted it, the questionnaire continues with the second part. If they have never taken a winter vacation based on an influencer's recommendation, they skip the second part and will automatically come to the third part.

The second section of the questionnaire consists of a series of statements concerning various variables related to influencers and influencer marketing. Respondents were asked to think about the specific influencer, who promoted the Austrian winter vacation and indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement about their chosen influencer. The initial variable examined was trust, followed by authenticity, empathy, and closeness. Trust was one of the central points of this study and was evaluated using several items that centered around influencers and the factors that lead people to trust their opinions and product recommendations.

The last part of the survey focuses on gathering demographic information from the respondents, such as age, gender, and home country. These kinds of questions were asked to be able to separate the participants into groups.

The questionnaire was created with the software Unipark from Tivian. After the survey period, the collected data was exported and evaluated with the program SPSS.

The following chapter presents the most important items since so far only the rough structure of the questionnaire has been explained.

4.4. Measurements

In this chapter, the individual items that make up each variable in the questionnaire will be presented. These items were selected for their relevance to the literature on influencer marketing and their potential to accurately measure the variables of interest.

Table 2: Items Trust

Trust	
Items	Source
I can rely on the influencer's content.	(Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 227)
I believe what the influencer says, and I am sure that he would not try to take advantage of the followers.	
The influencer is straightforward and honest even though his/her self-interests are involved.	
The influencer would not tell a lie even if he/she could gain by it.	

Table 3: Items Authenticity

Authenticity	
Items	Source
The influencer reflects my personal ideas and values.	(Napoli et al., 2016, p. 1224)
The influencer tells a story about who I am.	
The influencer makes me feel like I'm part of a group.	
The influencer is part of how I wish to appear to others.	
The influencer expresses the same values and beliefs.	

Table 4: Items Closeness

Closeness	
Items	Source
The influencer can communicate well.	(Jowett, 2007, p. 503)
The influencer gives me positive support.	
The influencer is caring.	
The influencer is friendly.	
The influencer is competent.	
The influencer seems honest.	
The influencer shows commitment.	
The influencer makes me feel empowered.	

Table 5: Items Empathy

Empathy	
Items	Source
The influencer understands me and my needs.	(Plank et al., 1996)
The influencer really understands my feelings.	
I feel as if I am on the same wavelength as the influencer.	

The influencer has a lot of knowledge about my topic of interest.	
The influencer always understands his/her followers needs.	

4.5. Measurement of Quality Criteria

Empirical research often faces the challenge of measuring and analyzing constructs that cannot be directly observed. In such cases, researchers often use derived items rather than directly measuring the unobservable characteristic that can serve as a reliable indicator of its expression. To ensure that derived items accurately measure the underlying factor of interest, researchers typically observe multiple indicator items and combine their expressions into a unified scale. However, there is often uncertainty about the quality of this scale, particularly how closely each observed characteristic is related to the background factor and how much the scale is affected by random error. Reliability analysis can help assess these qualitative properties of a scale and provides guidance on which items should be included in the common scale (Brosius, 2018, p. 945).

In this study, the reliability of the different items was tested by analyzing Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's alpha is a statistical measure of the internal consistency of a scale that indicates how closely related a set of items is as a group and how well those items measure the same underlying construct or concept. It is a coefficient that ranges from 0 to 1 and indicates the extent to which the items of a scale are related or correlated. The higher the value, the higher the validity of the overall scale. Also, it indicates that the items measure the same construct or variable and represent a similar aspect of the underlying concept. If, on the other hand, the alpha value is low, this indicates that the items are not closely related and may be measuring distinct aspects of the concept or even entirely different concepts. In the

literature, a value of at least 0.8 is often required for a composite scale to be considered sufficiently reliable, but in some cases, a value of 0.7 is also acceptable (Brosius, 2018, p. 951).

4.6. Sample

In most research studies, collecting data from every individual in a population is impossible (McCombes, 2019). Therefore, researchers use a sample, which is a subset of a larger group or population of interest. The population represents the totality of people about whom the researcher wants to conclude, while the sample represents a smaller, more manageable part of that population that can be studied to draw broader conclusions (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 2000, p. 10).

In research, it is crucial to select a representative sample that accurately reflects the elements of the population. Therefore, the selection of an appropriate sample is of utmost importance for the success and validity of the research study (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 2000, p. 13). There are two main types of sampling methods that can be distinguished: Probability sampling and non-probability sampling (McCombes, 2019).

Probability sampling is a method of selecting a sample in which each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected. This method is often used in quantitative research and is considered the best method for obtaining results that are representative of the entire population. However, a non-probability sample was chosen for this study. A non-probability sample is a method of selecting participants for a study based on non-random criteria. Unlike probability sampling, not every member of the population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. While non-probability samples are easier and cheaper to obtain, they carry a higher risk of sampling bias, which can weaken the inferences drawn from the sample about the population. This in turn can limit the conclusions that can be drawn

from the study. Therefore, it is very important to ensure when using this method to ensure that the sample is as representative as possible of the population under study (McCombes, 2019).

There is a wide range of sampling methods for non-probability sampling (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 2000, p. 14). For this research, convenience sampling was chosen to be the most suitable non-probability sampling method. Convenience sampling is a method in which the researcher selects the most readily available participants to include in the study (McCombes, 2019). To gather the data for this research, sample members were chosen based on their accessibility. The questionnaire was distributed in several Austrian ski resorts to which access was granted. However, as the researcher did not have access to all ski resorts, not all tourists had the same chance to participate in the survey. Due to conditional access, not all tourists could be reached. Furthermore, some tourists also take a winter holiday away from ski resorts, such as in cities. This part of the target group was also not reached with the survey.

Another factor that needs to be determined is the sample size (n). The sample size is the number of people you should include in your sample (McCombes, 2019). Determining the appropriate size involves a combination of statistical and practical factors and is a multi-faceted and complex issue that requires careful consideration. Key statistical factors are the degree of variability, precision, confidence, and cross-classification (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 2000, pp. 16–17).

The degree of variability within the population directly affects the sample size required, as a more heterogeneous population requires a larger sample size to adequately represent the entire population. Another statistical factor to consider is the degree of precision sought in estimating population parameters based on a sample. This means the

higher the degree of precision sought, the larger the sample size required. The third statistical consideration that must be considered when determining sample size is the desired level of confidence associated with the estimates made. To be sure that your estimates are accurate, you need a larger sample size to reduce the probability of sampling error. This is because larger sample sizes usually result in estimates that are closer to the true values of the population parameters, which in turn increases confidence in the estimates. The last statistical consideration relates to the planned analysis and how it will be conducted, especially if it involves the use of subsamples for cross-classification purposes or the use of statistical procedures that require a minimum sample size to produce meaningful results. This means that sample size is not the only factor to consider when selecting a sample for the research, the research design and the planned data analysis must also be considered. For example, if the analysis involves comparing subgroups within the sample, a larger sample size may be needed to ensure that each subgroup has an appropriate number of observations. Similarly, if the analysis involves complex statistical procedures such as regression or factor analysis. Then a larger sample size may be needed to ensure that the results are statistically valid and reliable (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 2000, pp. 16–17).

The population of this study consists of all winter tourists in Austria. In the winter season of 2021/2022, Austria recorded 13 million winter tourists (Statista, n.d.). This number serves as the reference value for this study and is therefore used as the population. Therefore, a sample size of 273 individuals is targeted. A QR code was distributed in several ski resorts in Austria to obtain the sample. Not all winter tourists visiting Austria practice winter sports; therefore, the sample cannot be considered representative of all winter tourists. However, since winter sports are an important part of tourism in Austria and the researcher had access to several ski resorts, this sampling method was considered appropriate for the study. The

selection of ski areas for this study was based on the researcher's available access. Of course, there are many other ski resorts with many visitors of different nationalities and characteristics, but access to these ski areas was not available at the time of the study.

4.7. Data Analysis Method

The participants' responses were collected anonymously, and only three statistical data were collected: participant age, participant gender, and home country. Regarding age, the participants could select between six age groups. This information was collected to analyze any differences in social media preferences between different age groups.

As mentioned, the data were collected via the program Unipark from Tivian and the data thus obtained were analyzed using SPSS. The established hypotheses were also tested with this program.

A multilevel approach that included descriptive analysis, logistic regression analysis, and finally linear regression analysis was used for data analysis. At first, a descriptive analysis was conducted. A descriptive analysis is used to summarize and organize the characteristics of a data set and can be divided into three main types:

- Frequency distribution,
- central tendency, and
- variability (Bhandari, 2023).

The frequency distribution is the main method for describing the data set in this thesis. A frequency distribution summarizes the distribution of different values in a data set, and it shows how often each value occurs in the data set. By creating a frequency distribution, researchers can better understand the characteristics of the data set and draw informed conclusions based on the analysis (Bhandari, 2023).

A logistic regression analysis was performed in the second phase of the analysis. This type of analysis is commonly used in cases where the dependent variable is binary, as in this study, where the dependent variable was whether participants had taken a winter vacation based on an influencer's advertisement.

To perform a logistic regression analysis, a study must meet all the following requirements:

- The dependent variable should be binary and coded as 0-1.
- The independent variables should be coded as metric variables or, for categorical variables, as dummy variables.
- For any group formed by categorical predictors, the sample size should be greater than or equal to 25.
- The independent variables should not be highly correlated with each other (UZH, n.d.-b).

It was verified that the study met all the requirements for conducting a logistic regression analysis and it can be confirmed that the study meets all requirements for logistic regression analysis. This means that the dependent variable is binary (0-1 coded), the independent variables are metrically coded, each group formed by categorical predictors has $n \geq 25$, and the independent variables are not highly correlated with each other.

The logistic regression analysis aimed to determine the relationship between the dependent and independent variables, i.e., how important trust was in following an influencer's winter vacation recommendation. The results of the logistic regression analysis provided information about the strength and direction of the relationship between these two variables, as well as the statistical significance of the relationship (UZH, n.d.-b).

A linear regression analysis was performed in the third and final phase of the analysis. This type of analysis is typically used when the dependent variable is continuous, and the goal is to determine the relationship between the dependent variable and one or more independent variables. Regression analysis is a statistical technique for identifying and quantifying the relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. It can provide valuable insight into which variables are most important in predicting an outcome and how they relate. The analysis uses a mathematical formula to estimate the impact of each individual independent variable on the dependent variable while controlling for the effects of other variables. With this analysis, it can be determined which factors affect the outcome and how much influence each variable has. In addition, regression analysis can help determine the strength and direction of the relationship between variables and identify any confounding factors that might affect the relationship (Gallo, 2015).

To perform a linear regression analysis, the data need to fulfill some requirements.

- The dependent and independent variables are measured on an interval scale.
- A linear correlation between the dependent and independent variables is modeled.
- Linearity of the coefficients (Gauss-Markov assumption 1): The regression coefficients are linear.
- Random sampling (Gauss-Markov assumption 2).
- Conditional expected value (Gauss-Markov assumption 3): For any value of the independent variable, the error value has an expected value of 0.
- Sampling variation of the independent variables (Gauss-Markov assumption 4): The values of the independent variables are not constant.

- Homoscedasticity (Gauss-Markov assumption 5): For each value of the independent variable, the error value has the same variance.
- Independence of the error value: The error values do not depend on each other.
- Normal distribution of the error value: The error values are approximately normally distributed (UZH, n.d.-a).

It can be established that all the necessary assumptions for conducting a linear regression analysis are met. These include interval scaled dependent and independent variables, a linear correlation between the variables, linear regression coefficients, random sampling, an expected error value of zero, varying independent variable values, equal error variance for each independent variable value, independent error values, and normal distribution of error values.

In the case of this thesis, the dependent variable is trust and the independent variables are authenticity, empathy, and closeness. Each of these variables was measured using sets of items, which were already described in chapter *Measurements*

Chapter 5: Empirical Study

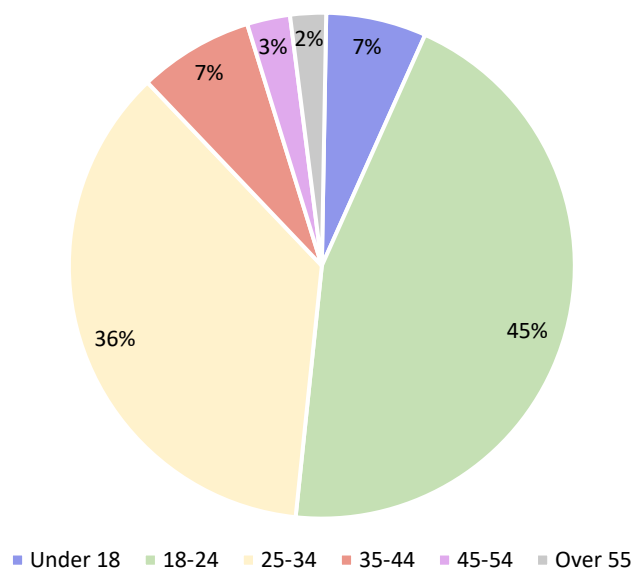
5.1. Descriptive Analysis

As mentioned above a descriptive analysis was carried out to summarize the most important characteristics of the data. The sample questionnaire consisted of 218 participants. As part of the survey, demographic information was collected from all participants, including age, gender, and country. The following diagrams show the distributions based on the various demographics.

Regarding the age distribution, the survey distinguished six age groups. People under 18 years, 18-24 years, 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, and over 55 years. Based on the data, most of the survey participants are relatively young. 98 participants are aged between 18 and 24 and 79 are between 25 and 34. Only 7% of the participants, i.e., 16 people, are between 35-44 years old.

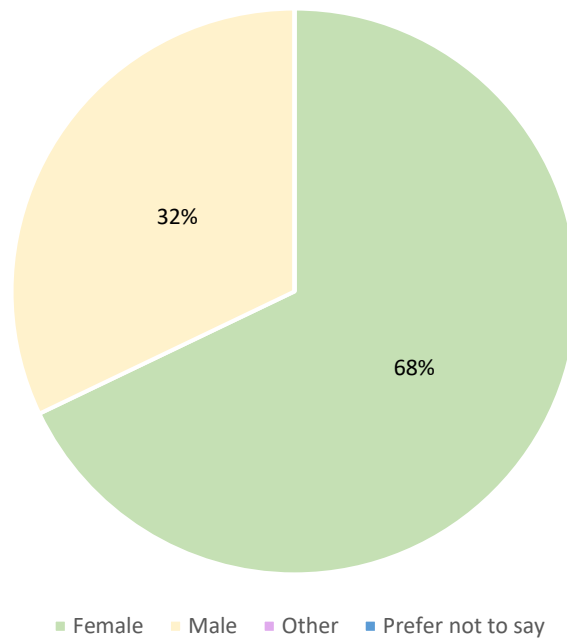
The following figure illustrates the age distribution of the survey.

Figure 5: Age Distribution



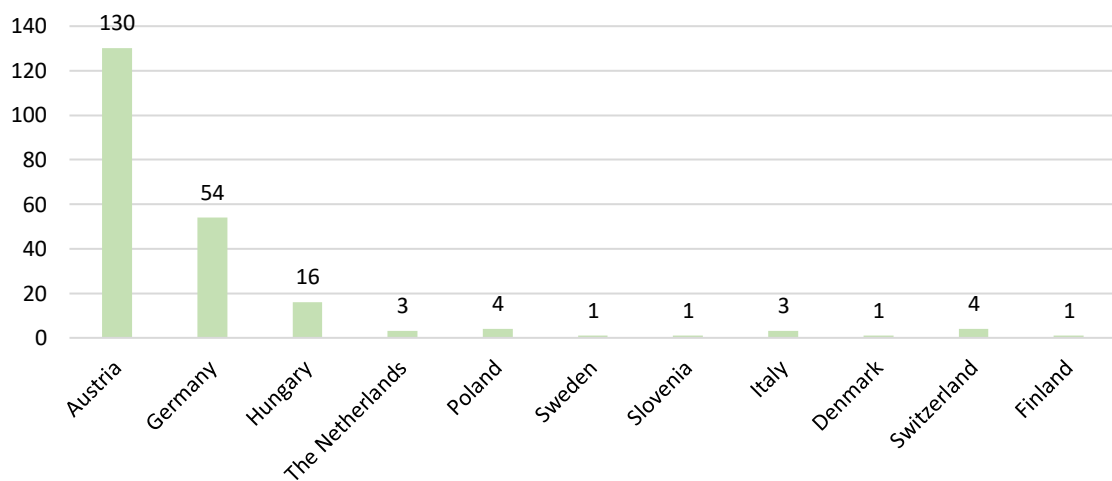
When asked about their gender, participants could choose between four options: female, male, other, and prefer not to say. Of the 218 people who participated in the survey, 148 were female, and 70 were male, representing a percentage of 67,89% female and 32,11% male participants.

Figure 6: Gender Distribution



Since the survey was mainly aimed at tourists, a distribution by country was also made. In this diagram, it is clearly illustrated that most of the participants are from Austria itself. Also, 55 participants are from Germany, followed by 16 Hungarians. Also, some people from Poland, Sweden, Slovenia, Italy, Denmark, Switzerland, Finland, and the Netherlands took part in the survey.

Figure 7: Country Distribution



This chapter mainly addresses the participants' social media use and general questions regarding influencer marketing. Before questions about the variables were asked, the participants answered questions about their social media behavior, like what social media platforms they use, how many influencers they follow, and if they have ever purchased a product that was promoted by an influencer. Furthermore, they were asked, if they follow travel influencers, if they have ever taken a winter vacation in Austria based on an influencer's recommendation, and if they chose their current choice of ski resort because an influencer promoted it.

Table 6: Social Media Platforms of Participants

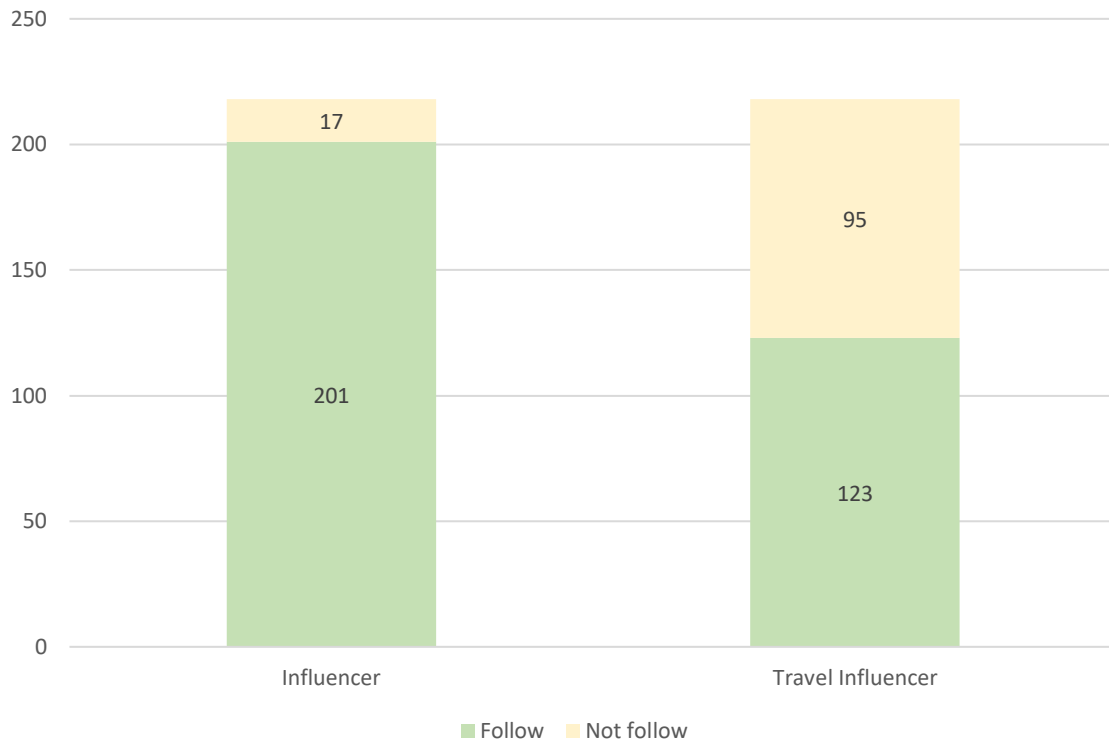
Which social media platforms do you use?		
Instagram	204	93,6%
TikTok	136	62,4%
Facebook	101	46,3%
Snapchat	108	49,5%
Twitter	14	6,4%
Pinterest	44	20,8%
LinkedIn	34	15,6%
Others	2	0,9%

Of the 218 participants, Instagram was found to be the most used social media platform by a wide margin, with 204 respondents in the survey answering that they use Instagram. TikTok is used by 62.4% of participants, while Facebook and Snapchat are each used by nearly half of the respondents. The other social media platforms played a rather subordinate role among the respondents. Of the participants, only two mentioned social media platforms other than those mentioned in the survey. These platforms were VSCO and YouTube.

The participants were also asked if they follow influencers and travel influencers on social media. 201 out of the 218 participants stated that they follow at least one influencer

on social media and 123 responded that they also follow travel influencers. The following diagram illustrates the distribution.

Figure 8: Influencer Distribution

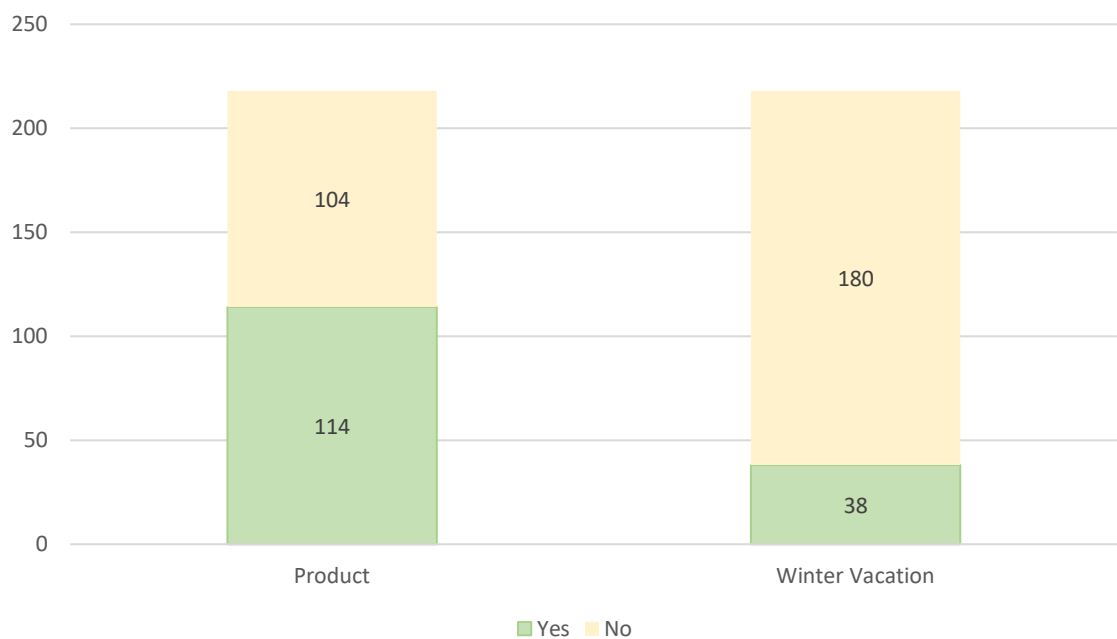


According to the survey results, more than half of the participants - 114 respondents - said they had purchased a product promoted by an influencer. Based on this, it can be assumed that influencer marketing can effectively promote commercial products and is a powerful tool for brands to increase sales and new audiences. Only one person does not follow an influencer but has still purchased a product promoted by an influencer. This means that a person does not necessarily have to be an active follower of an influencer to be part of the target group of the influencer's promotional post.

In comparison, out of the 218 survey respondents, 38 respondents took a winter vacation in Austria based on an influencer's recommendation, as the next diagram shows. This corresponds to 17.43% of the respondents. This indicates that influencer marketing

indeed impacts the travel decisions of winter tourists in Austria. Most of the respondents have not yet taken a winter vacation based on an influencer recommendation, although 141 participants can recall seeing an influencer promoting Austrian winter tourism. The exact reasons for this are unclear, but it could be due to a variety of factors, such as budget constraints, individual preferences, or lack of interest in the destination.

Figure 9: Product vs. Winter Vacation based on Influencers' Recommendation



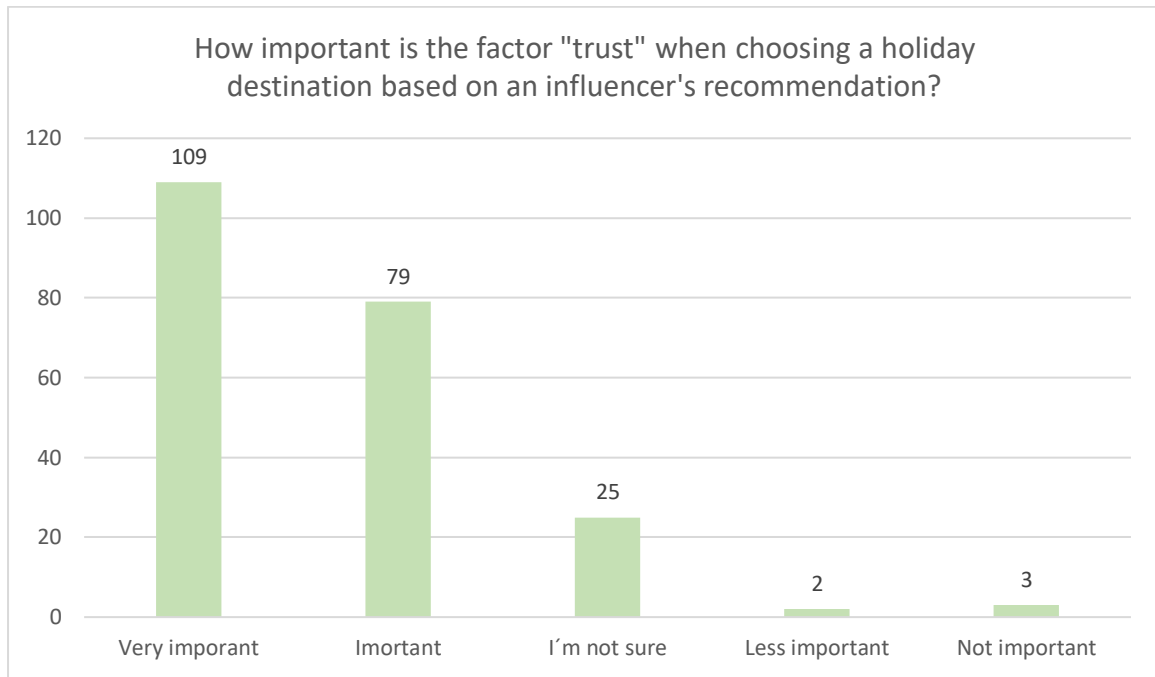
Out of the 38 people who answered the preceding question with “yes”, 34 also follow travel influencers on social media. This could be because “non-travel influencers” are promoting winter tourism in Austria or the people accidentally saw the advertisement.

Since the questionnaire was distributed at ski resorts, it was also asked, if the current choice of ski resort was influenced by an influencer. 37 out of the 218 people stated, that they chose the ski resort because an influencer promoted it.

Furthermore, the participants were asked, how important it is for them, to trust influencers when following their destination recommendation. 109 participants think trust is

essential when choosing a holiday destination based on an influencer's recommendation. 79 people also think trusting an influencer is important, 25 were unsure, two think it is less important, and three stated that trusting influencers is unimportant. However, 86% of the respondents agreed that it is important or even very important.

Figure 10: Importance of Trust



5.2. Reliability Analysis

As mentioned earlier, a reliability test is carried out for the scales used. This tests how reliable the individual scale items are. This step is necessary because the individual values of the ratings are grouped into an overall value to ensure higher reliability of the measurement of the variable. Before grouping into an overall scale, however, the items must be subjected to a reliability test. For this purpose, the most common reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, is calculated.

Table 7: Cronbach's Alpha

Construct	Cronbach's alpha
Trust	0,756
Authenticity	0,737
Closeness	0,600
Empathy	0,817

The values from the variables trust, authenticity, and empathy are all > 0,7 and can therefore be combined to form a scale that represents the underlying construct being measured.

Since Cronbach's alpha value for the construct closeness is below 0,7, the data were analyzed further to examine whether the value can be increased as soon as an item is removed. The following table illustrates Cronbach's alpha value after an item was removed.

Table 8: Cronbach's Alpha Closeness

Items Closeness	Cronbach's alpha after item removed
The influencer can communicate well.	0,566
The influencer gives me positive support.	0,479
The influencer is caring.	0,565
The influencer is friendly.	0,579
The influencer is competent.	0,564
The influencer seems honest.	0,629
The influencer shows commitment.	0,566
The influencer makes me feel empowered.	0,565

As shown in the table, the value increases to 0.629 when the item “The influencer seems honest” is removed. However, Cronbach’s alpha from the construct closeness does still not reach the minimum value of 0,7. As the value is very low, this may indicate that the different items, that were tested, are not closely related, and may be measuring distinct aspects of the concept or even entirely different concepts. However, it may still be acceptable in some cases and may not significantly affect the validity of the study. Therefore, despite the lower alpha value, it is still appropriate to use the scale as it is not considered to be overly problematic or detrimental to the research findings (Cronbach, 1951, as cited in Raharjanti et al., 2022).

5.3. Hypotheses Testing

The chapter *Descriptive Analysis* presented the descriptive data of the survey participants, which provided an overview of their demographic data and their social media behavior. This chapter addresses the main research topic of this master's thesis, which is to test the hypotheses developed during the process of creating the conceptual model. Specifically, the correlations between the variables will be tested according to the assumptions of the conceptual model.

5.3.1. Logistic Regression Analysis

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to analyze whether trust in an influencer has a positive impact on the decision-making process of tourists in Austria.

H1: The more followers **trust** influencers, the more influence influencer marketing has on the destination choice.

The following table shows the results of the logistic regression analysis with one independent variable (the Likert scale, which measures the importance of trust when

choosing a destination based on an influencer's recommendation) and one dependent variable (whether the participant has ever taken a winter holiday because an influencer promoted it).

Table 9: Omnibus Test

		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	2,287	1	0.13
	Block	2,287	1	0.13
	Modell	2,287	1	0.13

The first block of output provides the chi-square test of the overall significance of the model. The value of 2.287 is the chi-squared statistic for the test, with one degree of freedom and a p-value of 0.130, suggesting that the model may not be statistically significant at the conventional $p < 0.05$ level.

Table 10: Modell Summary Trust on Destination Decision

Step	-2 log-likelihood	Cox and Snell R-squared	Nagelkerke R-squared
1	199.431	0.10	0.017

The model summary provides two measures of the goodness of fit of the logistic regression model. The first is the -2 log-likelihood, which is a measure of how well the model fits the data. The lower the value of the -2 log-likelihood, the better the fit. In this output, the -2 log-likelihood is 199.431.

The second group of measures in the model summary are the Cox and Snell R-squared and the Nagelkerke R-squared. These are measures of how well the model explains the

variation in the dependent variable. The Cox and Snell R-squared is 0.10, which means that the model explains about 10% of the variation in the dependent variable. The Nagelkerke R-squared is 0.017, which means that the model explains only a small part of the variation in the dependent variable.

Table 11: Coefficients of Trust on Destination Decision

Coefficients	Std. Error	Df	Sig.
0,363	0,253	1	0,151
0,974	0,427	1	0,022

Based on the coefficients given and their significance levels, it can be interpreted that the variable "How important is trust when choosing a destination based on an influencer's recommendation" is statistically significant in predicting the likelihood of a winter holiday based on an influencer's promotion.

The coefficient for the independent variable 'trust' is 0.974 with a significance level of 0.022. This means that for every unit increase in the importance of trust in choosing a destination based on an influencer recommendation, the probability of taking a winter holiday based on an influencer advertisement increases by a factor of $\exp(0.974) = 2.65$, holding all other variables constant.

Since the significance level for the coefficient is below 0.05, we can conclude that the variable "trust" is statistically significant in predicting the dependent variable.

5.3.2. Linear Regression Analysis

To test the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable a linear regression analysis is used. In this thesis the dependent variable is trust, and with the help of

regression analysis, the effect of authenticity, closeness, and empathy on trust should be examined.

H2: The more **authentic** an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.

Table 12: Modell Summary Authenticity on Trust

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0,501	0,251	0,230	0,48307

Table 13: ANOVA Authenticity on Trust

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1					
Regression	2,810	0,1	2,810	12,040	0,001
Residual	8,401	36	0,233		
Total	11,211	37			

Table 14: Coefficients of Authenticity on Trust

Modell	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1					
(Constant)	0,724	0,288		2,519	0,016
Income	0,499	0,144	0,501	3,470	0,001

Based on the results, there is a positive relationship between authenticity and trust. The coefficient for authenticity is 0.499, which means that for every unit that authenticity increases, trust is predicted to increase by 0.499 units.

The overall significance of the model is confirmed by the ANOVA test, which shows a significance of 0.001. This means that the linear regression model is statistically significant, and the results are unlikely to have arisen by chance.

The R-squared value of 0.251 also indicates that 25.1% of the variance in confidence can be explained by authenticity. This means that authenticity is a moderately strong predictor of trust, but there may be other factors that also contribute to trust.

It is important to note that regression analysis can only establish a correlation between variables and does not prove causality. Therefore, it is possible that other variables influence both authenticity and trust or that the relationship between authenticity and trust is influenced by other factors. Nonetheless, your results provide evidence for the hypothesis that the more authentic a person is, the more likely it is that someone else will trust them.

In summary, the regression analysis suggests that authenticity is a significant predictor of trust and that there is a positive relationship between the two variables.

H3: The **closer** an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.

Table 15: Modell Summary Closeness on Trust

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0,341	0,116	0,091	0,52468

Table 16: ANOVA Closeness on Trust

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1					
Regression	1,300	1	1,300	4,723	0,036
Residual	9,910	36	0,276		
Total	11,211	37			

Table 17: Coefficients of Closeness on Trust

Modell	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1					
(Constant)	0,960	0,344		2,792	0,008
Income	0,461	0,212	0,341	2,173	0,036

Based on the results of the regression analysis, there is a positive relationship between closeness and trust. The coefficient on closeness (b) is 0.461, which means that for every unit increase in closeness, there is a predicted increase in trust of 0.461 units.

The overall R-squared value of 0.116 indicates that 11.6% of the variance in trust can be explained by proximity. This means that proximity is a relatively weak predictor of trust and that there are likely other factors that also contribute to trust. With a significance level of 0,03, the ANOVA test indicates that the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is statistically significant, suggesting that the independent variable may have a real effect on the dependent variable.

In summary, the regression analysis suggests that closeness is a significant predictor of trust and that there is a positive relationship between the two variables. However, the strength of the relationship is relatively weak, and there may be other factors that contribute to trust.

H4: The more **empathetic** an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.

Table 18: Modell Summary Empathy on Trust

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0,555	0,309	0,289	0,46403

Table 19: ANOVA Empathy on Trust

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1					
Regression	3,459	1	3,459	16,064	<0,001
Residual	7,752	36	0,233		
Total	11,211	37			

Table 20: Coefficients of Empathy on Trust

Modell	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1					
(Constant)	0,868	0,217		4,001	<0,001
Income	0,451	0,112	0,555	4,008	<0,001

The regression analysis showed that there is a positive correlation between empathy and trust. The coefficient on closeness (b) is 0.461, which means that for each unit increase in closeness, confidence will increase by 0.461 units. The more empathetic a person is, the more likely it is that another person will trust them. The ANOVA test confirms that the results of the linear regression model are statistically significant. The significance level of 0.001 indicates that the probability of obtaining these results by chance is very low, suggesting that the observed relationship between empathy and trust is likely to be real and meaningful.

The strength of the relationship between empathy and trust was moderate, with empathy explaining about 31% of the variation in trust. This means that while empathy is an important factor in predicting trust, other factors also likely contribute to trust.

5.4. Summary of the Hypotheses Testing

In the previous chapter, a regression analysis was performed to test the hypothesis about the relationship between two variables. The results of this analysis were discussed in detail, including the coefficients for the independent variables and the dependent variable, as well as other relevant statistical values.

In summary, the analysis demonstrated a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Specifically, the results indicate that with an increase in the independent variable, an increase in the dependent variable is also predicted. This relationship was statistically significant, suggesting that it is unlikely to be due to chance.

In addition, the R^2 value of the analysis provides information about the proportion of variation in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables. This information can be useful for understanding the strength of the relationship between the

variables and for making predictions about the dependent variable based on the independent variables.

Table 21: Summary Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Confirmed/rejected
H1: The more followers trust influencers, the more influence influencer marketing has on the destination choice.	Confirmed
H2: The more authentic an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.	Confirmed
H3: The closer an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.	Confirmed
H4: The more empathetic an influencer is, the more a follower trusts him/her/them.	Confirmed

Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, the outcomes of the research will be summarized and analyzed.

The master thesis deals with the topic of influencer marketing and its effect on the decision-making process of winter tourists in Austria. Additionally, the study aims to identify the key factors that encourage building up trust in an influencer, as trust is a crucial factor in influencer marketing, as evidenced by previous research.

The results of the survey suggest that influencer marketing plays an important role in the decision-making process of Austrian winter tourists. In particular, the finding that 38 respondents booked a winter vacation in Austria based on an influencer's recommendation highlights the influence that social media influencers have on consumer behavior in the travel

and tourism industry. These results highlight the importance of understanding the influence of social media influencers and their potential to influence consumer attitudes and behavior toward winter travel destinations. This answers the initial research question of this thesis, as influencer marketing influences Austrian winter tourism.

RQ1: Does influencer marketing influence Austrian winter tourism?

The results of the binary logistic regression analysis indicate that trust is an important factor when it comes to choosing a destination based on an influencer's recommendation. The coefficient for the variable measuring the importance of trust was positive, meaning that as the perceived importance of trust increases, so does the chance of taking a winter holiday based on an influencer's promotion. However, the p-value for this coefficient was insignificant ($p=0.151$), indicating insufficient evidence to conclude statistical significance for this relationship.

Overall, while the findings suggest that trust is an important factor in holiday decisions based on influencer advertising, further research is needed to confirm this relationship and explore other potential predictors of this behavior.

RQ3: How important is trust in an influencer when choosing a destination based on the influencer's recommendations?

During the hypothesis testing, some of the assumptions were confirmed. The results show that an influencer's authenticity has a significant positive impact on the trust that their followers place in them. This suggests that followers' perception of authenticity is a crucial factor when it comes to trusting an influencer. These findings are in line with existing literature that highlights the importance of authenticity, as it is considered a key factor in how people perceive a brand. The more authentic a brand is perceived, the higher the quality of

its products is rated, which can positively impact consumers' purchase intentions (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 559).

Furthermore, the results of the analysis indicate that there is a positive relationship between closeness and trust in an influencer, as shown by the positive coefficient in the linear regression model. However, it should be noted that the relationship is relatively weak. These results suggest that although closeness may have some influence on trust, it is not the strongest predictor of trust in an influencer. Other factors, such as authenticity, have a greater influence on trust, as indicated by the higher coefficients and stronger correlation in the regression analysis of authenticity and trust.

A positive correlation was found between empathy and trust, suggesting that individuals who exhibit higher levels of empathy tend to be more trusted by others. That means, the more empathetic an influencer is perceived to be, the more likely it is that others will trust him or her. The strength of the relationship observed in the study was moderate, suggesting that empathy is an important factor in building trust, but not the only one. Other factors may also play a role in shaping trust perceptions. Nonetheless, the findings provide valuable insights into the role of empathy in building trust and demonstrate the importance of considering this dimension when developing effective interpersonal communication strategies. This finding also supports the notion that empathy is an important factor in building trust and forming positive relationships, and it can have implications for a wide range of social and professional contexts.

Thus, the analysis of these three variables answers the following research question posed in this thesis.

RQ3: What factors encourage trust in an influencer?

The literature review conducted as part of this thesis found that among the characteristics of influencers, two categories are important to followers. These categories are expertise and trustworthiness. While expertise has been widely researched in terms of trust in an influencer, this thesis focused more on the second category of trustworthiness and the specific characteristics an influencer should possess to be considered trustworthy. The three variables analyzed in this study were chosen for their relevance to trustworthiness in the context of influencer marketing. However, it should be noted that there are many other characteristics in the literature that can influence trust in an influencer. Due to the scope of this paper, it was not possible to examine all these characteristics. Nevertheless, even with the three attributes analyzed, it was found that not all attributes are perceived as equally important or similarly significant by followers.

Chapter 7: Limitations and Future Research

This chapter first discusses the limitations of this thesis and then clarifies possible future research topics.

One of the main limitations of this study is the lack of representativeness of the sample. The QR code used to access the survey was only distributed in some ski resorts, which means that the sample may not be representative of all winter tourists. There are likely to be many winter tourists who do not visit ski resorts, e.g., those who travel to city areas or engage in other winter activities, and these individuals may have different travel preferences and behaviors. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to the population. In addition, the study may have suffered from selection bias due to the method used, which may have resulted in a sample that is not diverse enough to be representative of the population.

Furthermore, the lack of statistical significance of the results must be considered a limitation. Although the analysis showed a positive relationship between trust in influencers and the likelihood of taking a winter holiday on their recommendation, the p-value was not significant.

Based on the limitations, possible future research topics can be derived. As mentioned earlier, the current study had a limited sample distributed only in ski resorts. Future research could focus on obtaining a more representative sample of winter tourists from a wider range of locations and backgrounds.

Another possible area for future research would be to investigate other factors that might influence people's trust in influencers' recommendations for destinations. By examining more factors, future research could help clarify the role of trust in travel decisions and provide additional insights into how individuals evaluate and respond to influencer marketing.

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Back matter

Fragebogen

1 Introduction

Dear Participants,

my name is Tina Stocker and I am currently studying Digital Marketing Management at Campus 02 University of Applied Sciences in Graz. I am inviting you to participate in this research by completing the following survey. The aim of this research is to investigate the effect of influencer marketing on winter tourism in Austria. Throughout the whole survey, the term influencer is used to describe people who create awareness in the digital space with self-produced content.

The following questionnaire will require approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Please only continue with this questionnaire, if you use social media and have social media accounts.

Thank you for taking part!

Sincerely,

Tina Stocker
E-Mail: s50801@edu.campus02.at

Information about data protection:

On the following pages, you will be asked for your thoughts on the topic "Are Influencer influential?". In principle, we do not wish to collect any personal data for this purpose, but questions will be asked about your impressions and assessments. Registration or providing your name is not required for participation, which is why it is generally not possible to draw conclusions about individuals or identify you or other participants in the survey. Furthermore, the results of this survey (e.g. final reports, etc.) will be processed exclusively in aggregated and anonymized or pseudonymized form.

Your participation is voluntary.

For more information about processing your personal data, please visit www.campus02.at/ds-umfrage.

2 Seite 1:

Have you ever taken a winter vacation in Austria because a social media influencer promoted it?
Please select the answer that applies to you.

- Yes
-
- No

Has an influencer's recommendation influenced your current choice of ski resort?

Please select the answer that applies to you.

- Yes
-
- No

How important is the factor "trust" when choosing a holiday destination based on an influencer's recommendation?

Please select the answer that applies to you.

- | | Very important | Important | I'm not sure | Less important | Not important |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Select your answer here. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

3.1 Trust

Now please think of this specific travel influencer. Do you trust recommendations of him/her/them?

Please select the answer that applies to you.

- Yes
-
- No

How much you can agree with the following statements about this specific influencer.

Please select the answer that applies to you.

- | | Strongly agree | Agree | I'm not sure | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I can rely on the influencer's content. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| I believe what the influencer says and I am sure that he would not try to take advantage of the followers. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The influencer is straightforward and honest even though his/her/their self-interests are involved. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The influencer would not tell a lie even if he/she/they could gain by it. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

3.2 Closeness

How important are the following characteristics of your specific travel influencer?

Please select the answer that applies to you.

	Very important	Important	I'm not sure	Less important	Not important
He/She/They can communicate well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They give/s me positive support.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They is/are caring.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They is/are friendly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They is/are competent.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They seem/s honest.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They show/s commitment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
He/She/They make/s me feel empowered.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.3 Empathy

Do you think the influencer is empathic?

Empathic is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Please select the answer that applies to you.

Yes

No

Indicate how much you agree with the following statements about your chosen travel influencer.

Please select the answer that applies to you.

	Strongly agree	Agree	I'm not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The influencer understands me and my needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer really understands my feelings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel as if I am on the same wavelength as the influencer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer has a lot of knowledge about my topic of interest.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer always understands his/her/their followers needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.3.1 Authenticity

Do you think the travel influencer is authentic?

A person is authentic when he/she/they is/are genuine or real.

Please select the answer that applies to you.

Yes

No

Indicate how much you agree with the following statements about your chosen travel influencer.
Please select the answer that applies to you.

	Strongly agree	Agree	I'm not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The influencer reflects my personal ideas and values.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer tells a story about who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer makes me feel like I'm part of a group.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer is part of how I wish to appear to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer expresses the same values and beliefs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer is a reflection of who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The influencer helps me get in touch with my inner self.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.3.2 Empfehlung

How important was the influencer's recommendation for your destination decision?

Please select the answer that applies to you.

Very important	Important	I'm not sure	Less important	Not important
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4 Demographic Data

What gender do you identify as?

Please select the answers that applies to you.

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Which country are you from?

Please write your answer in the text field.

What is your age?

Please select the answer that applies to you.

Under 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

Over 55

5 Endseite

The survey ends here. Thank you for your participation!
