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Impact of Social Media Influencers on the Portuguese Tourism and Travel industry in a Covid-19 era

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Abstract. The way society communicates with each other has gone through huge changes during the years. This has led to a revolution on the process of gather and exchange information by the consumers regarding brands, products, and services. Nowadays, any person can express their opinion on their social media accounts and share it with whoever he/she wants on a global scale. It's here that Social Media Influencers (SMIs) appear, anyone with a considerably large audience on social media has the ability to influence many others to take an action. Currently, the Tourism & Travel (T&T) industry is facing unprecedented challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic, being one of the biggest sectors worldwide, driving socio-economic development and job creation is vital for this industry to recover as faster as possible. Many actions are being done to make that happen and one possible great tool are SMIs. Shortly, this research aims to understand if SMIs can boost the T&T industry by showing that a destination and its tourism services/products are safe in this time of fear of travelling due to the pandemic.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Influencers, Travel & Tourism, Travel planning, Covid-19.

1 Introduction

Year after year, both the number of internet users and the number of social media users are significantly growing. In 2021, the number of internet users reached 59.5% of the total population (4.66 billion users, with a growth of 7% from the last year) and 53.6% of the society has an active social media account (4.20 billion of active social media users, with a 13.2% increase versus 2020). Not only the number of users is growing but also the time these users spend online, in 2021, the average amount of time that an internet user spends daily is six hours and 54 minutes. From those hours online, in average, two hours and 25 minutes are spent on social media networks [1]. Thus, nowadays, the internet and, more specifically, social media networks make it easier to express an opinion about something and share it with who you want on a global scale in a matter of seconds. People with a considerably large audience on social media can influence many others to take an action.

To attend the consumers' needs, numerous sectors are diving into the online world, and, more specific, into social media networks, Travel & Tourism (T&T) industry is not an exception. T&T is considered one of the biggest sectors worldwide, driving

socio-economic development and job creation (accounts globally for 10.3% of the global GDP, totaling \$8.9 trillion) [2].

Presently, the society is leaving a never seen reality, the outbreak of COVID-19 has hit all countries around the world at different times, in different ways and in varying degrees. Globally, the response to control the pandemic was made through national lockdowns, a wide-ranging enforce of travel restrictions and shutdown of borders making T&T one of the hardest-hit sectors. Thus, T&T is facing unprecedented challenges, with the unprecedented projected losses for 2020 of \$2.7 trillion and 100.8 million job losses. Nonetheless, it is a sector with the major losses, T&T will be an important sector in driving the recovery of the global economy post COVID-19 by generating new jobs and driving people back to destinations [3].

Currently, the society is living in a time where fear doesn't allow many people to travel and plan holidays away from their homes. The first step to boost T&T sector is managing this fear and stigma, associated with the infomedic. Along these lines, the key to boost T&T sector is by rebuilding confidence of the public that they can travel safely once the restrictions are lifted, and it's allowed to. In order to do that, many governments around the world are developing and implementing initiatives to restart tourism and promote domestic demand [4]. One of these initiatives is digital promotion with the use of social media networks.

Shortly, the present study aims to understand in which degree Social Media Influencers can stimulate people to travel by showing people through their social media accounts how and where is safe to travel in this uncertain pandemic times (this being our research question). Additionally, analyze if people trust them and follow their advices and suggestions, this regarding places, products, services, or activities related to travelling.

More in detail, the study aims to comprehend the following aspects, divided by 4 objectives:

- Objective 1: Comprehend how frequent Portuguese people travel and understand their travel patterns pre-Covid-19 and now, in a Covid-19 era.
- Objective 2: Apprehend the Portuguese tourists' planning process and the changes occurred due to Covid-19.
- Objective 3: Understand how much people use social media and if they use them for traveling planning.
- Objective 4: Comprehend how people perceive SMIs and to which degree they can be a valuable tool for tourism industry.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Social Media Influencers

The Internet is at once a worldwide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for dissemination of information, as well as an intermediate for collaboration and interaction between individuals without regard for geographic location [5]. Therefore, Web 2.0, and the resulting digital revolution, provided the conditions for individuals to connect, communicate, and interact across social media platforms. Users have the power to co-create

potentially engaging and therefore strongly influential content [6]. Nowadays, with social media networks, the communication between people and the exchanging of information is effortless process.

Even though there isn't a consensus and formal definition of the term "Social Media", there are numerous definitions from different scholars, and many complement each other. Berthon (2012) says Social media "is the product of Internet-based applications that build on the technological foundations of Web 2.0" [7]. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) highlighted the functionality of social media as an information tool, defining as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" [8]. Mangold & Faulds (2009) added that social media have become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behavior including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, and post-purchase communication and evaluation [9]. Accordingly, 'Social Media' can be generally understood as Internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers" [10].

In 2021, there are 4.20 billion of active social media users (accounting for 53.6% of the total population and with an increase of 13.2% compared to 2020). The age group with more social media users is from 25-34, followed by the 18-24 years old age group, both groups together account for 57,4% of the total of social media users [1]. Regarding the most use social media platforms worldwide, Facebook is the leading the social media platforms for years, with 2.740 million active users in 2021. In second place is YouTube, with 2.291 million active users and after are placed the chat social platforms WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger with 2000 million and 1300 million active users, respectively. In fifth place is Instagram with 1221 million active users [1]. Although Instagram is in fifth place relatively to the number of users, Instagram was ranked the most important influencer marketing channel [11]. Instagram is a free photo and video sharing app. People can upload photos or videos to the network and share them with their followers or with a select group of friends. They can also view, comment and like posts shared by their friends on Instagram [12]. YouTube ranks second as the most important influencer marketing channel [11].

The popularity of social media networks led to the emerge of Social Media Influencers. Nevertheless, the term 'influencer' and 'opinion leader' are no phenomenon of nowadays, people have been influenced by others for many years now. For years, opinion leaders have been generally defined by different authors as individuals who influence other people in their immediate environment. These individuals can be found in different areas of interest such as beauty, sports, travel, or politics, between others. With the arise of social media platforms these opinion leaders are more and more present on social media.

With a quick navigation through Social Networks, the increase in the relevance of influencers for brands becomes noticeable. Through partnerships with them, whether offering products/services or even a monetary value, these influencers share with their followers their opinion about a particular product/service [13]. Consequently, with this

change of environment were born a new term for these key opinion leaders, Social Media Influencer (SMI). Through Social Media, SMIs engage in a personal relation with their followers displaying to them their personal and everyday lives. Doing this, SMI have the ability to affect attitudes and behaviors of others, such as help potential customers make a purchase decision [14]. Thusly, a SMI can be defined as an individual with the ability of inspiring or guiding the actions of others, someone who can generate interest in something, e.g. a location, by posting about it on social media [15]. Hence, SMIs can be spokespersons of a tourist destination. They contribute to elevate the image of the place, increasing the likelihood of people visiting a particular destination [6].

2.2 Travel & Tourism industry

Travel & Tourism (T&T) can be well-defined as “the activity of travelers on trips outside their usual environment with a duration of less than one year”, involving all the economic activity related to such trips [2]. T&T is now one of the biggest sectors worldwide, driving socio-economic development, prosperity, and job creation [2]. The sector accounts for 10.3% of the global GDP (totalizing \$8.9 trillion) and 330 million jobs in 2019. Furthermore, in 2019, the T&T sector had a GDP growth of 3.5%, a higher rate than the global economy (2.5%) for the ninth consecutive year [2].

Even though countries usually focus on international tourism, in 2019, domestic travel generated most of T&T expenses, accounting for 71.3% of total global spending. Thus, domestic tourism must be considered as much powerful as the international tourism, even more now, with the outbreak of the pandemic. The “domestic tourism will likely be a key driver in the sector’s initial recovery from Covid-19” [2].

The Covid-19 pandemic led to national lockdowns and a wide-ranging enforce of travel restrictions and shutdown of borders. As a result, T&T was one of the hardest-hit sectors with the emerge of the COVID-19 pandemic. International tourist arrivals have abruptly declined in the first quarter of 2020 (-22%), with possible scenarios for the year pointing to an annual decrease among 60% and 80% when compared with 2019 figures depending on the pace of easing travel restrictions [16]. These numbers translate the greatest Tourism crisis on record [17]. Even though T&T is suffering these massive losses with the outbreak of the pandemic, the sector will be the key sector in driving the recovery of the global economy post COVID-19 by generating new jobs and driving back to destinations. The sector will have a positive economic domino effect on suppliers across the entire supply chain [16].

With still many travel restrictions in place around the world, consumers are considering destinations closer to home in the early stages of travel normalization. Thus, destinations worldwide are prioritizing domestic travel in order to “boost the restart and recovery of the sector in times of the COVID-19 pandemic” [4]. To meet this goal, many governments around the world are developing and implementing initiatives to restart tourism and promote domestic demand. There are a diversity of initiatives for instance financial incentives, marketing and promotion, product development, partnerships, marketing intelligence and capacity building and training [4]. These are the first steps to restore confidence and reactivate T&T economy.

2.3 Travel & Tourism in Portugal

In Portugal, the importance of T&T sector is even bigger than in the global scale. It represents 16.5% of total economy (34.6 billion EUR), with a GDP growth of 4.2% (vs. 1.6% of real economy GDP growth). It accounts for 18.6% of total employment and it also embodies 23.4% of total exports, with 21.6 billion euros in visitor spend. Contrary to the global trend, Portugal, in 2019, had only 30% of domestic spending and the remaining 70% were with international spending [16]. The trend of growth of tourism in Portugal was still visible in the first two months of 2020, with growth rates compared to the same months in the previous year of 8% and 15%, respectively [18]. Then, the Covid-19 emerged, and the picture changed due to the lockdowns and travel restrictions. In 2020, tourism establishments registered a decrease of 61.3% in guests compared to 2019 (10.5 million guests). Since 1993, that a number as low as this wasn't registered. Also, in 2020, the tourism revenues reached 7 753 million euros, a break of 57.6% compared to 2019, where the number was 18 291 million euros [19].

The recovery of Portuguese T&T sector to the pandemic will be gradual, focusing first on the Portuguese's tourists and closer markets [18]. In order to get travelers to feel safe travelling and reinforce their confidence on tourism, Turismo de Portugal created the 'Clean and Safe' label. The big aim is for consumers to have greater security and confidence in the use of accommodation establishments, in the various tourist services and tourist attractions [20].

A previous study showed that 36% of tourists visited Portugal on the recommendation of friends or relatives and 22% made their decision based on information available on the Internet [21].

3 Methodology

This research study aims to explore the relationship between Social Media Influencers and their followers, more concretely how SMI can be a tool in helping the recovery to the T&T industry in these times of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this aim, it was applied quantitative analysis. Frequently, when doing quantitative research, data is collected using questionnaires [22][23], as they "gather information about the characteristics, actions, or opinions of a large group of people" [24].

Accordingly, data was collected through an online survey. The online survey was made in the platform Qualtrics, an online survey provider, and the questionnaire was available online, with free access, from 22nd April to 29th of April 2021. The answers collected constitute a convenience sample, as the survey was shared on the various social media channels and communication tools by the author of the dissertation e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Additionally, the snowball sampling method was used as respondents share the survey further to other potential participants [25]. Furthermore, the survey was shared in Portuguese because the aim is to have Portuguese residents' respondents and, for this reason, not limited someone participating due to language issues. The questionnaire starts with a concise introduction and after it divides in five blocks, namely: (a) travelling journey information; (b) travelling

planning process; (c) social media use; (d) SMIs' related questions; (e) sociodemographic information.

More in detail, the first part of the questionnaire is related to the participant's travel journey information, it's questioned frequency and company of travelling and also the sense of security while travelling, in Portugal and outside Portugal and before and after the pandemic. The second block asks about the travel planning process, where is examined how people book their trips, the importance of several information sources and if with the emerge of the COVID-19 pandemic they do a more detail research before travelling. The third section enquires about the use of Social Media, it includes how much time people spend on each social media platform and if they use them of travelling planning. Lastly, the fourth segment is related to the SMI, it investigates if people follow SMI, what are the reasons to follow a SMI, how they evaluate the information received by a SMI and if they can affect people' attitudes towards products, services or places. As noticeable, the questionnaire was design to answer the main research question and, subsequently, the four objectives outlined in the Introduction chapter.

The data from the survey was imported from Qualtrics and then, analyzed with the help of the statistic program SPSS, and Excel. First, it was analyzed the number of valid responses and the missing values. Afterward, it was done a descriptive analysis, constructing frequency distributions, measure of location (mean and mode) and dispersion (standard deviation). In addition, it was done a deeper analysis of the data by doing an Exploratory Factor Analysis and a Correlation Analysis using Pearson's Correlation to test the strength of the relationship between the variables.

4 Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1 Sociodemographic profile

The survey had 268 participants but from those 68 answers were considered invalid, as they didn't respond to enough questions to have relevant answers for the study. All participants are Portuguese residents from the diverse Portuguese districts. Out all of the respondents, 42.1% are residents in Lisbon, followed by 15.8% from Leiria and 6.1% from Porto. More than half of the respondents are women (62.3%), most of the participants are single (72.4%) and the majority of the respondents are young adults (<24 years old), representing 61.4% of the total sample. The most common education level is a bachelor's degree describing 38.6% of the respondents and it is followed by high school or equivalent (28.1%) and master's degree (19.3%). Respecting the professional situation, 38.3% are students and 29.4% are full time workers. The most popular answer to the number of members in the household is four (30.7%), followed three elements (20.2%). Lastly, >1000€ until 2000€ is the most popular response to the net household income question (31.1%).

4.2 Travel Journey

To start, the study analyses different aspects of the travelling journey of the respondents. The results show a noticeable difference in the number of trips made yearly before and after the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic the number of trips made yearly by the respondents differ a lot but after the outbreak of the pandemic, the case is not the same, most of respondents only made one trip (62.7%) and 21.5% made two trips. This data confirms a strong decrease in the number of trips made by people due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Another relevant change is that the Portuguese residents are travelling more inside the country since the emerge of Covid-19 pandemic. To the statement “In pandemic times, I travel mostly inside Portuguese borders”, most of the respondents agree with it (57.9% ‘Strongly agree’ and 20.6% ‘Agree’, what totals 78.5% of the respondents).

Regarding the sense of security while travelling nowadays, in Covid-19 era, Portuguese feel safer travelling inside borders that oversea. Only 22.3% of the respondents feel safe to travel abroad (18.4% answered “Safe” and 3.9% answered “Very safe”) and almost half of the participants feel unsafe to travel abroad (46.4%). Inside borders the insecurity is much lower, only 8,3% feel unsafe to travel and the larger part of respondents feel safe to do it (72.2%). Lastly, in this section, people responded they most of the times travel with family and friends and most of them never travel alone (63.2%).

4.3 Travel Planning Process

Concerning the travel planning process, it was asked in the questionnaire “How do you normally book your trips?”, the majority of respondents say they book alone (52.2%) and the next higher value is “through friends and family” (29.4%). Only 2.2% still book through a physical travel agency. Regarding the importance of several information sources when planning a trip, ‘previous own experience’ and ‘friends and family’ take the lead, and, after those, ‘travel websites’ are the tool that people give more importance when planning a trip, followed by Travel Review Sites. In contraposition, the sources that the respondents considered less importance are ‘Travel Agencies’ and ‘Social Media Influencers’. Moreover, it was asked about the changes that may occur in the travel planning process due to the Covid-19 pandemic. People agree that they prefer to take less risks, plan their trip with more detail by doing a deeper research than usual, trying to understand beforehand if the tourist destination is safe and provides safe tourist services.

4.4 Social Media and Social Media Influencers

Regarding the use of different social media platforms, the most used by the respondents are Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube. For all three platforms the most common response from the users was that they spend per day ‘one hour or more’ in these platforms. Furthermore, most of the respondents agree that they spend more time on social media each day due to the pandemic (73.7%). These top three networks are the also the most used to plan trips by the respondents.

The last block of the questionnaire is related to SMIs. The first step is understanding if people follow SMIs on their social media account, thus, to this question 69.3% of the respondents answered that they follow SMIs on their social media. To deeply understand what type of person follows SMIs, it was done a few cross-table analyses. From the female respondents, 82.2% said they follow SMIs, a much higher value than when looking to the male respondents (45.5%). Regarding age, it can be observed that most of the respondents in the age groups of <24 years old and 25-34 years old follow SMIs (80.7%, 75.0%, respectively). Oppositely, most respondents in the age group >45 years old don't follow SMIs. Moreover, most of the respondents that answered that they don't use Instagram or only use, in average, 5 minutes a day, don't follow SMIs (77.8%, 60.0%, respectively). Most of the respondents who answered that they use Instagram, in average, 45 minutes and one hour or more, follow SMIs (79.4%, 86.2%, respectively).

To respondents that said they follow SMIs, several other questions related to SMIs were made, to the ones who said 'No', the questionnaire moved on to the sociodemographic questions. Primary, it was asked why respondents follow SMIs, results show that the bigger reasons of why they follow SMIs are because they are a good 'Entertainment' and 'Inspiration'. Another compelling reason is to receive 'Feedback of brands, products or services'. According to the results, 'Discounts/Promotional Campaigns' and 'Friends follow them too' have low or not importance it all for most of the respondents.

Another relevant aspect to study is how is perceived the information provided by SMIs. In the questionnaire this point was divided in two, information in general and information related to travelling, to understand if there is a difference between the two. Most respondents agree that the information received from SMI is helpful (67.1% regarding information in general and 78.1% concerning information related to travel) and interesting (80.1% regarding information in general and 79.6% concerning information related to travel). The aspect that the respondents have more doubts is impartiality, in both cases the mean doesn't reach the neutral value, therefore, it's a fact that respondents don't think the information received from SMI is impartial. The study also shows that there isn't a big difference between the information received by SMI in general and information related to travel, however, travel related information it has better values than the information in general in all aspects in analysis.

After understanding how information shared by SMIs is perceived, it is also interesting to understand how and to which degree that information affects people. This question was, once again, been divided in two, information in general and travel related information, to comprehend if there is a difference between the two. To do that, 3 statements were done, these are the following: (1) SMIs opinions and recommendations are relevant; (2) SMIs create/increase the desire to purchase a product or a service; (3) Some of my attitudes and purchases are motivated by SMI. According to the results, the majority of the respondents agree with the two first statements made, for both information in general and travel related information. The statement with less agreement is the third, nevertheless, the mean is higher than the neutral value, hence, part of the respondents still agree their purchases are motivated by SMIs. To highlight that the statement where people most agree is the first one (81.7% regarding information in

general and 77.8% concerning information related to travel). Once again, there is a very small difference between the information received by SMI in general and information related to travel.

The next topic approached is what type of information does users' value the most when looking for travel related information through SMIs. The results demonstrate that the aspects the respondents value the most to know are the security, climate, attractions, activities, expenses, and accommodation. It is significant to highlight the respondents place 'Security' as the information they value the most to know (38% say it's 'important' and 36% say is 'very important', the two options represent 74% of the respondents).

Lastly, it was asked the respondents to express their level of agreement with a statement related to the likelihood of SMIs boosting the T&T industry. The statement is the following "In these times of pandemic, if a SMI travels to a destination and shares their trip through their social networks, showing that it is safe, would this increase the desire to visit this destination?". According to the results, 62.1% agree with this statement (42.4% of the respondents 'Agree' and 19.9% 'Strongly agree' with the statement) and only 14.3% of the respondents disagree with this statement. Thusly, for most of the respondents, SMIs increase the desire to visit a destination.

Table 1. Correlation Analysis using Pearson's Correlation

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Valued information related to travel	1									
2. Trust in SMI	,264**	1								
3. Purchases	,383**	,402**	1							
4. SMI contents are attractive	,596**	,577**	,522**	1						
5. Comprehensive travel information	,547**	,244**	,472**	,364**	1					
6. Influence of SMIs in consumers' travel related decisions	,570**	,511**	,583**	,662**	,392**	1				
7. Destination and products/services comparison	,621**	,281**	,387**	,440**	,484**	,447**	1			
8. SMI experience while travelling	,554**	,363**	,396**	,494**	,483**	,488**	,475**	1		
9. SMIs are funny	,355**	,251**	,546**	,464**	,358**	,482**	,211*	,270**	1	
10. Destination sight	,403**	,290**	,259*	,324**	,360**	,338**	,539**	,405**	0,206	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

After, it was done a correlation analysis using Person's Correlation to the further understand the relationship between variables in the questionnaire (Table 1). A few relations stand out from the others. The most significant correlation was between the variables "Influence of SMIs in consumers' travel related decisions" and "SMI contents are attractive" with a positive correlation of 0.662. Furthermore, these two variables present a good correlation with most of the other variables and, therefore, a strong positive relationship with most of the other variables. For instance, SMI contents being attractive and the influence of SMIs in consumers' travel related decisions has a positive correlation with the Purchases ($r=0.522$; $r=0,583$). Other significant relationship is between "Trust in SMIs" and the "Influence of SMIs in consumers' travel related decisions" ($r=0.511$), meaning that one is positively correlated with the other.

5 Conclusion

This study has gone through several phases in the pursuit of the clarification of the role that Social Media Influencers can have on boosting T&T industry in today reality, the covid-19 pandemic. As observed, T&T is one of the biggest sectors worldwide, and it had a huge negative impact with the emerge of Covid-19 virus worldwide, its recovery is essential for the global economy to prosper.

In order to understand how can SMI affect people's travel decisions, the research started by studying the travel journey of the respondents pre-Covid-19 and now, in a Covid-19 era. The results of the survey support the United Nations World Tourism Organization reports on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on people travels. Most people did less trips in 2020, within those trips most were made domestically, and less outside Portugal. Moreover, people feel safer travelling inside the country than outside. As follows, the study confirms what was said in the Literature Review that the recovery for the Portuguese T&T sector to the pandemic will be focusing primarily on the Portuguese's tourists and closer markets.

Regarding the planning process of a trip, the present study discloses that most people now (in a COVID-19 era) do a deeper research than normal trying to understand if the destination and the tourist services are safe. But, according to the results, most of the respondents don't consider SMI the most important source of information, on the contrary, they are considered the less important information source from the ones presented. People consider Travel Sites and Travel review Sites the most important information sources, next to their own experience and opinions from friends and family.

However, even though SMIs are not considered as one of the most valued travel information sources, SMIs are a form of entertainment and inspiration and provide helpful and interesting information to their followers. The study also verifies that for the majority of the respondents, SMIs opinions and recommendations are relevant, and they create/increase the desire to try products/services, meaning that they are stimulated by SMIs. Moreover, the study shows that when people look for travel information through SMIs the information they most value to know is about security. Along these lines and adding the fact that 62.1% agree with the statement "In these times of pandemic, if a SMI travels to a destination and shares their trip through their social

networks, showing that it is safe, would this increase the desire to visit this destination?”, it is possible to affirm that Social Media Influencers can stimulate T&T industry in these times of Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, the study achieved its main goal, answering to all 4 outlined objectives.

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