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NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE: GREEK MILLENNIALS AND THEIR TRAVEL CHOICES IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

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Abstract: Millennials, or Generation Y, born roughly between 1980 and 1994, constitute a distinct demographic cohort characterized by their deep immersion in the digital age. For Millennials, computers and mobile devices are not mere luxuries but integral components of daily life. Social media platforms have particularly gained prominence within this generation, with the average Millennial spending approximately 2 hours and 38 minutes per day on multiple social media accounts.

Concurrently, the tourism industry has witnessed a significant shift in consumer behavior, as travelers increasingly turn to social media for travel-related information and experiences. The Internet and social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the dissemination and planning of travel, granting travelers new avenues for personal expression and communication. This evolution has given rise to profound changes in how consumers seek, evaluate, produce, purchase, and engage with travel-related information, products, and services. Travelers now not only extract information from social media but actively contribute by sharing their personal experiences, opinions, comments, reviews, and recommendations.

Understanding the dynamic relationship between Millennials and the utilization of social media for travel-related purposes is crucial for both academia and the tourism industry. This study explores the intricate interplay between Millennials, their extensive social media engagement, and the evolving landscape of travel information consumption, creation, and interaction.

Keywords: Millennials, Social Media, Travel Information, Consumer Behavior, Digital Age.

1. Introduction

Millennials (also referred to as Generation

Y) are those individuals born between 1980 and 1994, although this birth year range varies among researchers and media. This demographic cohort, which follows Generation X and precedes Generation Z, has been characterized as the first truly digital one as since its advent, a plethora of interactive technological applications accompany it (Duffet, 2015). For Millennials, computers and mobile devices are an integral part of their daily lives, and not a luxury without which they could live (Pinto, Erie, & Mansfield, 2012). Social media appear to be particularly popular among Millennials. According to a recent study by GlobalWebIndex (2018), the average time spent using social media by Millennials every day is 2 hours and 38 minutes. This time is shared on multiple platforms, as the typical Millennial has more than 9 social media accounts.

On the other hand, tourists are increasingly using social media to find travel-related information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The distribution of information as well as the planning of travel has been completely reshaped by the

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Internet and social media (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social media provide travelers with a new generation of personal expression and communication tools and bring about critical changes in consumer behavior patterns in the way they seek, evaluate, produce, purchase and consume travel-related information, products and services. Travelers' use social media to find information, but they also enrich the information available by sharing their personal experiences, opinions, comments, reviews and suggestions (Nusair, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2013).

The intense use of social media among Millennials together with the increasingly important role of social media as a travel-related information source raises the question of whether there is a connection between the two. While there is a growing volume of literature about the level of social media influence on Millennials' travel behavior, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing in the Greek context. This paper comes to partly fill this gap and contribute to the existing literature, as it aims to investigate the influence of social media on Greek Millennials' travel process in three different phases (pre-trip, on-site, post-trip), providing a better understanding of the main features of this type of tourists' online behavior.

2. Literature Review

Social media can be defined as a “*group of Internet-based applications which build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC)*” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, social media are browser or mobile-based applications that allow users to easily create, edit, access and link to content and/or to other individuals (Cabiddu, De Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014). Today there are many different types of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Perakakis, Trihas, Venitourakis, Mastorakis, & Kopanakis, 2016): social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn), social blogging (e.g. Tumblr) or microblogging (e.g. Twitter), social review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Yelp, FourSquare), image sharing sites (e.g. Instagram, Pinterest), video hosting sites (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo), discussion sites (e.g. Reddit, Quora), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) social bookmarking and voting sites (e.g. Delicious, Digg), sharing economy platforms (e.g. Airbnb, Pantheon, Kickstarter), and social knowledge sharing sites (e.g. Wikipedia, Wikitravel). In recent years, human interaction has been greatly facilitated through all these social media (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Trihas, Perakakis, Venitourakis, Mastorakis, & Kopanakis, 2013). To get a picture of the popularity of social media, active social media users have reached 3.80 billion in January 2020 (recording an increase of 9,2% over the previous year), with 3.75 billion of them accessing these platforms through their mobile devices (Hootsuite, 2020).

The development of social media has revolutionized the tourism industry (Matloka & Buhalis, 2010) and many authors have highlighted their impact on tourist behavior. The way travelers seek information about tourism businesses, destinations and attractions, has changed radically (Chung & Koo, 2015). According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), social media serves as a platform for sharing travelers' personal experiences, which can be valuable to other potential travelers. This kind of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) and user-generated content (UGC) is not only a valuable source of information for travelers but also a factor of influencing travel decisions and shaping consumer behaviors (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Kang & Schuett, 2013) as travelers today increasingly trust the reviews and comments of others to better organize their trips (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015). Munar and Jacobsen (2014) argue that travelers share on social media their personal experiences about tourism businesses and destinations, which automatically turn into knowledge for others. Cox, Burgess, Sellitto and Buultjens (2009) suggest that social media can provide travelers with important information during the travel planning stage due to their UGC. Contrariwise, Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012), argue that social media is a tool used not only in the planning phase of a trip but in all stages of it (before, during and after holidays). Their study evidences that travelers use social media before holidays as a source of information for holiday planning, during holidays as means to allow travelers to stay in touch with friends and family, and finally, after the trip for sharing their experiences and photos with friends and/or other travelers. Nevertheless, Kang and Schuett (2013)

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suggest that the success of social media lays solely with the users themselves and their intention to use them to share their experiences and exchange information. For this to happen, social media users must recognize the process of sharing their travel experiences as meaningful, useful and rewarding.

On the other hand, Xiang, Magnini and Fesenmaier (2015), consider that different demographic groups use Internet and social media to a different degree during the planning phase of their travels. While all age groups seem to take advantage of the Internet for travel planning, Generation Y is the one that mainly uses social media right now. Moreover, Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus and Cobanoglu (2013) argue that social media greatly affect Millennials as they embrace the nature of interactive online media. According to Bergman, Fearington, Danenport and Bergman (2011), Millennials' general usage of social media is a sign of the times, but the rise in levels of narcissism among them seems to affect the reasons for their use. Millennials have made a significant contribution to the development of social media as a source of product and service information. Due to their familiarity with interactive digital media, they increasingly base their consumer decisions on online comments and reviews from other users, therefore evolving into a driving force of online communications (Mangold & Smith, 2012). The same conclusion is reached by McCorkindale, DiStaso and Sisco (2013), who state that to a generation that grew up with technology, social media has become an integral part of their lives.

3. Methodology

As mentioned in the introductory section, this paper aims to investigate the role and the influence of social media on the three stages of travel of Greek Millennials, providing a better understanding of the main features of this type of tourists' online behavior. Based on the above, the main objectives of this paper are to:

1. Examine the profiles of Greek Millennials and their online behavior.
2. Examine the degree and reasons for the use of social media by Greek Millennials in the pre-trip phase.
3. Examine the degree and reasons for the use of social media by Greek Millennials in the on-site phase (during the trip).
4. Examine the degree and reasons for the use of social media by Greek Millennials in the post-trip phase.

For the purposes of the research, a self completed structured questionnaire consisting of three sections and twenty-two questions, based on literature review, was designed on the Google Forms platform. In the first section, participants were asked to provide some information about their level of internet and social media use. The second and main section included questions on the use of social media in the three phases of a journey. In the last section, participants were asked to describe their profile, providing some demographic information, i.e. gender, age, education, and occupation. To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with 10 Millennials to test efficacy and clarity. Little modifications were then made based on their recommendations. Then, the method of snowball sampling was used to send the questionnaires. Initially, the questionnaire was distributed via e-mail to the potential participants from the social surroundings of the researchers. Subsequently, the recipients were asked to forward the questionnaire to other potential participants with the desired age characteristics. The survey took place between March, 14th and May, 1st, 2019. A total of 261 completed questionnaires were collected. The collected data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the basic features of the data collected and then cross tabulations were applied to understand the correlation between the different variables.

4. Results

A total of 261 completed questionnaires were collected, and Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. Female respondents dominated with 57.9% versus 42.1% of men. In terms of ages, the highest proportions of participants were 26, 27 and 28 years old (15.3%, 13.4% and 13.4% respectively), with the lowest representation in the sample being respondents 36 years old (3.4%). The educational level of the participants was

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remarkably high, as more than half of them (51.7%) hold a Master's or PhD degree, followed by another 41.4% that are graduates of tertiary (higher) education. Regarding the employment status, 58.2% of the respondents were employees in private sector, 14.6% freelancers, 13.4% unemployed, 8.4% civil servants, and 5.4% of them were students in higher education.

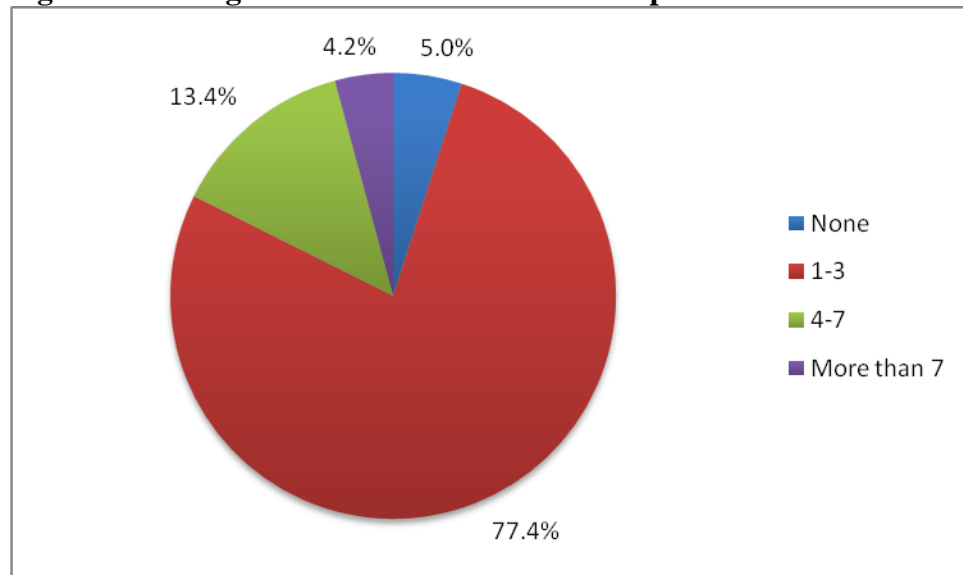
Table 1: Respondents' profile – demographic characteristics

		N	%
Gender	Male	110	42.1
	Female	151	57.9
Age	26	40	15.3
	27	35	13.4
	28	35	13.4
	29	28	10.7
	30	24	9.2
	31	26	10.0
	32	21	8.0
	33	13	5.0
	34	14	5.4
	35	16	6.1
	36	9	3.4
Education	Primary Education	1	0.4
	Secondary Education	17	6.5
	Tertiary (higher) Education	108	41.4
	Master	128	49.0
	Ph.D	7	2.7
Employment status	Unemployed	35	13.4
	Public servants	22	8.4
	Free lancers	38	14.6
	Employees in private sector	152	58.2
	Students in tertiary education	14	5.4
TOTAL		261	100

The vast majority of respondents appear to be experienced travelers, as Figure 1 shows that 77.4% of them take on average one to three leisure trips annually. Even more, 13.4% of respondents take 4 to 7 trips, while a smaller proportion (4.2%) of them take more than seven leisure trips per year. Participants who do not travel reach only 5% of the sample.

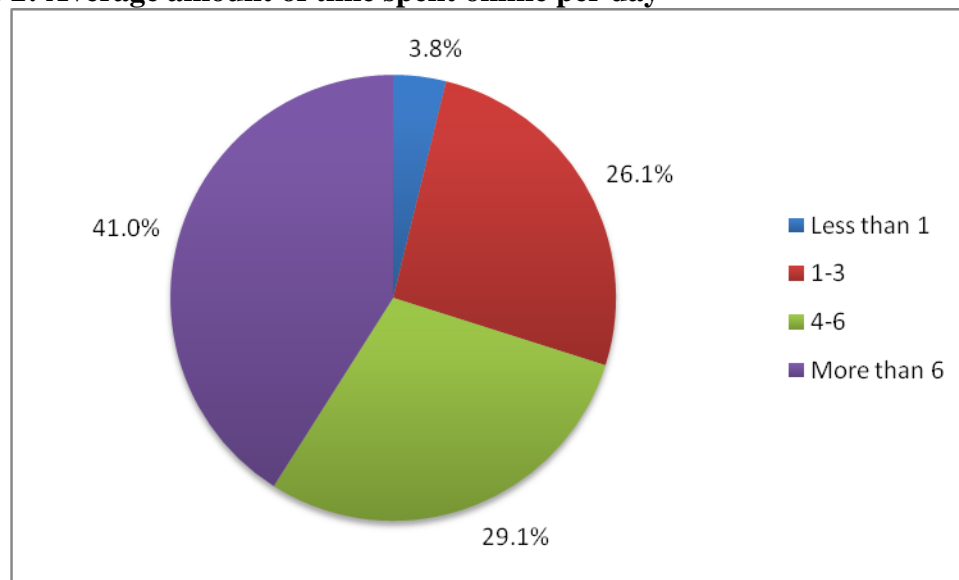
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Figure 1: Average number of annual leisure trips



The results showed that participants are heavy Internet users, with 41% spending more than 6 hours online (Figure 2). In addition, the vast majority of them (96.6%) have an account on at least one social network. They are active social media users, while Facebook is the dominant social network (229 participants use it daily), followed by Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Twitter. Interestingly, 52.1% of respondents stated that they do not follow any page with travel content on social media. Of the rest that follow travel pages, there is a clear difference in favor of women (68% versus 32% of men).

Figure 2: Average amount of time spent online per day



Focusing on the *pre-trip* phase, it seems that friends and relatives play a catalytic role in seeking information about a tourist destination, with 182 respondents saying that they were more or less influenced by them when choosing their last holiday destination. The second most important factor influencing the choice of a travel destination is the photos posted on social media (Facebook and Instagram) by the participants' contacts, with 136

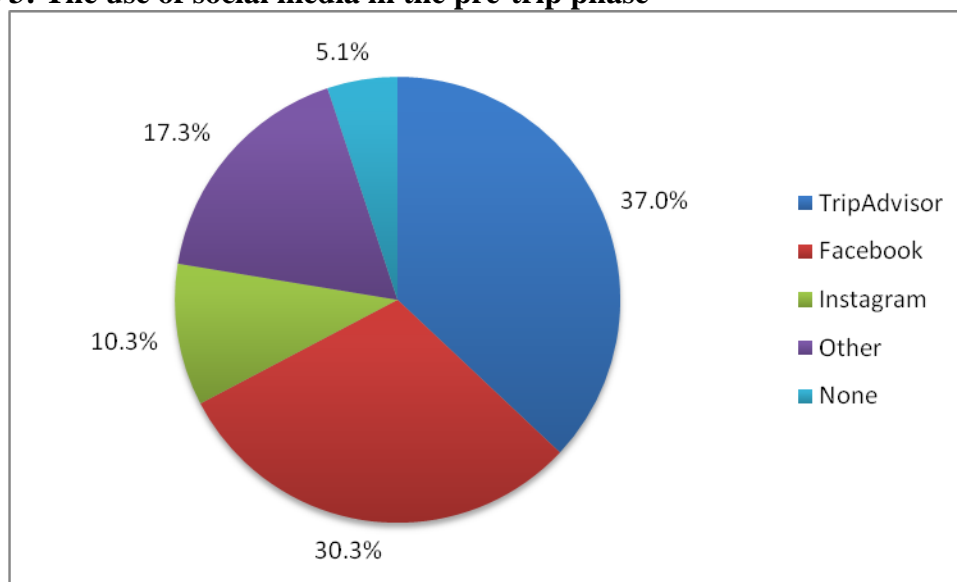
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respondents stating that they were greatly influenced. Reviews of other travelers posted on relevant websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) follow, with 128 users stating that they consult them before choosing the destination they will travel to. Other ways of informing, such as advertisements in traditional media, brochures and travel guides, and official destination websites record lower percentages of participants' preferences and appear to be gradually losing their importance as information sources in the pre-trip phase.

Regarding searching for accommodation information, the primary influential factor seems to be the reviews of previous guests, with 172 respondents stating that they are greatly influenced by them, followed by photos on social networking sites (159 participants) and friends and family (147 participants). In addition, the availability of free wi-fi at the accommodation seems to play an important role in the choice of a hotel, with about half of respondents (132) reporting that they are very much influenced by this factor.

As for the use of social media in the pre-trip phase, as shown in Figure 3, the largest percentage (37%) of participants use TripAdvisor, followed by Facebook (30.3%), and Instagram (10.3%). However, what is worth noting is that a percentage of 5.1% of the participants stated that they did not use any social media when they planned their most recent trip.

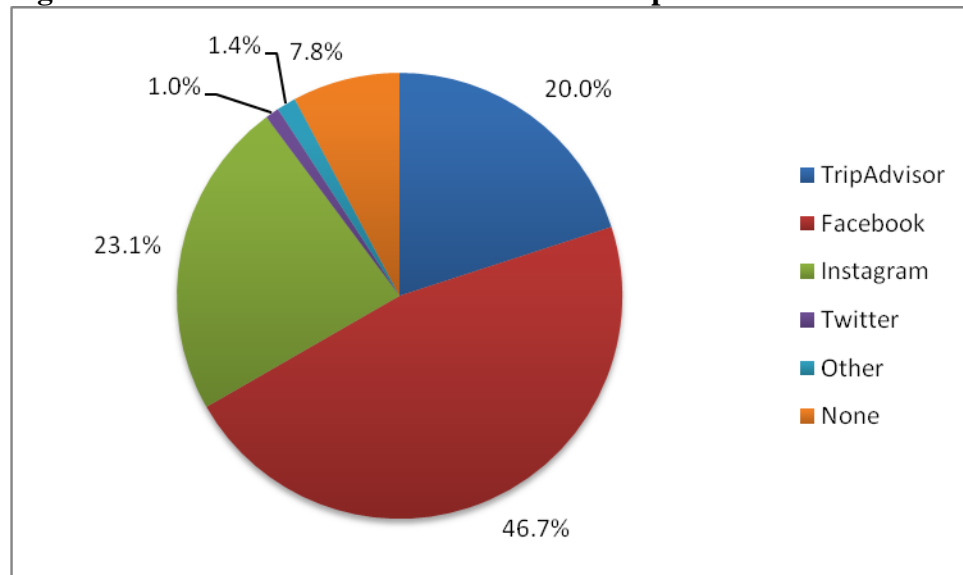
Figure 3: The use of social media in the pre-trip phase



Continuing in the *during-the-trip (on-site)* phase, the majority (55.2%) of participants stated that during the trip, they choose a combination of ways to connect to the internet, both using data from their provider and through free wi-fi. The most widely used social networking site in this phase is Facebook, with 46.7% of participants using it, followed by Instagram (23.1%) and TripAdvisor (20%) (Figure 4). Regarding the reasons for using social media during the trip, it appears that more than half of the participants (51.3%) use them at this phase also to search for information. Then, social media is used to post photos (36.8%) or to check-in (6.9%). Of those who post on social media during the trip, 64.9% are women, proving that women are significantly more “active” on social media at this phase.

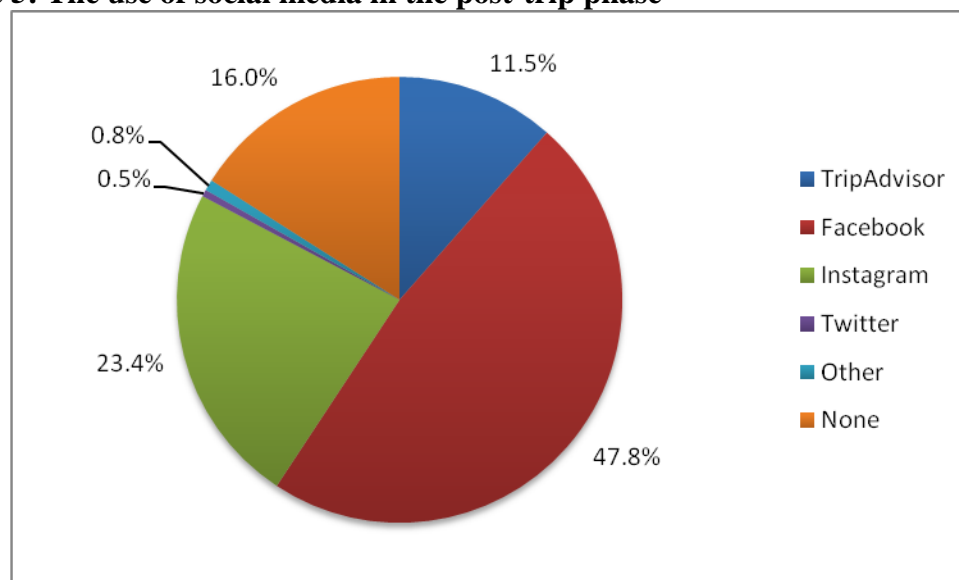
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Figure 4: The use of social media in the on-site phase



After the end of the trip and the return of the respondents to their place of residence (*post-trip* phase), we again notice that the use of Facebook far exceeds the rest of the social networks, gathering 47.8% of the participants, a percentage approximately similar to those who stated that they use it during their trip. Facebook is followed by Instagram and TripAdvisor with 23.4% and 11.5% respectively, while at this phase, there were a significant percentage of participants (16%) who did not use any social media for reasons related with their trip (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The use of social media in the post-trip phase



The main reason for using social media at this phase is posting photos, an activity that reaches 61.7% of the respondents (with 62% of them being women). The second reason for using social media, but with a significant difference from the first, is the posting of comments and reviews. These reviews mainly concerned the hotel

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where the participants checked-in (40.5%), followed by the attractions they visited with 31.9%, and the restaurants and cafes with 27.7% respectively.

In the last question, the participants were asked to what extent they believe that the Internet and social media will influence their travel choices in the future. 57.9% of them (151 participants) stated that they estimate that the Internet in the future will greatly affect their travel choices, 37.9% (99 participants) moderate, and 4.2% (11 participants) a little.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The rapid development of social media and UGC has profoundly transformed tourist behavior (Ayeh et al., 2013). From the initial stage of planning a trip to the return of the travelers to their base, the relationship between social media and the tourism industry proves to be inextricable. Even people with low social media activity want to get in touch with their contacts, in order to share their experience, especially when it comes to Millennials who tend to pursue social media interaction more than any other generation. If we take into account the fact that people are gradually coming into contact with the Internet and its applications at an increasingly young age, it is obvious how critical it is to understand the behavior of travelers in social media, as to integrate these tools into the traditional marketing methods of the tourism industry. This fact is reinforced by the growing penetration of the internet and social media into the general population. In Greece, 8.13 million are the Internet users (73% penetration), and of these, 6 million have at least one social media account (54% penetration) (Hootsuite, 2019). From the above, a dominant age group is the Generation Y whose intense use of social media is expected to continue to expand (Mangold & Smith, 2012).

In this context, this paper contributes to the existing literature on the use of social media in the different stages of a holiday trip, focusing on the Generation Y. The results showed that first of all Millennials are characterized by their high educational level. This finding confirms Pendergast (2010) who claims that Generation Y is the most educated generation ever. In addition, it is an age group that is experienced in travel. They are heavy users of internet and social media. The vast majority of participants are active Facebook users which visit every day. This is not surprising, as Facebook is by far the most popular social network in Greece (Statista, 2020), while Generation Y is the dominant age group worldwide using this network (Hootsuite, 2019).

Friends and relatives seem to be the primary factor influencing the choice of a travel destination, with photographs coming second. This finding confirms the results of previous researches (Fotis et al., 2012; Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2015; McCarthy, Stock, & Verma, 2010; Tham, Croy, & Mair, 2013), who argue that word-of-mouth remains a top and trustworthy means for destination choice, as tourists – especially leisure travelers – continue to be greatly influenced by the comments and suggestions of friends and family. Moreover, the significant influence of photos confirms the fact that a photograph can significantly enhance the image that potential travelers form for a destination. White (2010) suggests that images posted in social media can reinforce the travel experiences of the tourist, and furthermore influence the travel decisions of the viewers. When choosing an accommodation establishment, the first influential factor is the reviews of other travelers. In general, “word-of-mouth” communication, either in its traditional form or in its modern expression (e-WoM), seems to play a decisive role for the examined generation. The opinion of third trusted parties, especially friends and relatives, is very important for Millennials (Pendergast, 2010), especially since travel-related products and services by nature are intangible and cannot be tested before buying (Kang & Schuett, 2013), therefore involves a high degree of risk and uncertainty. What is obvious at this stage of the travel process is the fact that traditional sources of information, namely television, brochures and guides, but also official destination websites have almost completely lost their value to the Millennials. The latter once again reaffirms the findings of Fotis et al. (2012) who argue that information provided by other travelers in social media (UGC) is more trustful than official tourism websites, travel agents and advertorials in mass media. Gangadharbatla, Bright and Logan (2014) also

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confirmed that Millennials are increasingly relying on social media for information, rather than traditional mass media (press, radio, etc.).

Similar to the research of Fotis et al. (2012), the results of this study show that multiple social media are used by Millennials during all three phases of a holiday trip (before, during and after the trip) however, to a different extent and for a different purpose. This heavy use of social media in all the three phases may be associated primarily with Greek's high level of engagement with these sites. Initially, in the pre-trip phase, Millennials visit social media looking for information that will help them better organize their trip (choice of destination, hotel, etc.). Then, in the during-the-trip phase, they use them to share their experiences with their friends but also to look for additional information about tourism businesses and attractions. Even during the trip, Millennials do not stop looking for information about the destination they have visited, thus confirming the trend that other researchers have described, that is, that many travelers now make important decisions, such as restaurants in which they will dine on when they have already begun their journey (Xiang et al., 2015). Finally, in the post-trip phase, after returning home, they use social media again to share photos from their vacations and to a lesser extent to write a review of the accommodation they stayed in or a sightseeing visit. This fact confirms that sharing the experiences of a trip is essentially based on creating and sharing visual content, and not narrative content (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The indifference of Greek Millennials to post a review, contradicts the findings of Yoo and Gretzel (2011), who argue that individuals start their contact with the online content as simple users or observers, then gradually move on to the next stage of participation and eventually move on to creating content themselves (UGC). Of course, the motivations (Leung & Bai, 2013; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014) and personal characteristics of the travelers also play a key role in their willingness to share content through social media, while significant obstacles are the lack of time and interest.

In all three phases, the three dominant social networks are Facebook, Instagram and TripAdvisor. What is changing is the extent and the purpose of their use per phase, i.e. in the first phase TripAdvisor is widely used, while in the other two Facebook is the dominant platform (Table 2). In the two phases that follow the planning of the trip, the women of the Generation Y seem to be more active in posting on social media.

Table 2: The use of social media by Greek Millennials in the three phases of a trip (in order of use)

Pre-trip	On-site	Post-trip
TripAdvisor	Facebook	Facebook
Facebook	Instagram	Instagram
Instagram	TripAdvisor	TripAdvisor

The presence of tourism companies and destinations in social media is now considered more than necessary, as it would not be an exaggeration to say that without it, they cannot survive in today's competitive environment. Tourism companies and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) should use social media to provide Millennials with all the information they need and search during their trip, easily and quickly, while at the same time encouraging them to share their comments and reviews.

After all, the posting of comments and reviews and the sharing of information, images and videos about accommodation, restaurants and attractions significantly encourages interaction on social networking sites (Nusair et al., 2013), while at the same time they can inspire and motivate friends, relatives, but also strangers or "virtual friends" to visit a destination.

Businesses in the tourism industry should encourage travelers of Generation Y to share their experiences from their trip online, as Murphy, Centeno Gil and Schegg (2010) argue that this will help potential future travelers

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reduce the estimated risk involved in their decision. Smith (2011) suggests that Millennials can be tempted to write a review for a product or service if they are given an incentive, such as a discount or reward.

6. Limitations and future research

This research has one basic limitation. More specifically, the data were collected electronically based on the non-probability snowball sampling method. This means that participants were not chosen but voluntarily participated in the survey (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016), therefore the sample was not random due to the self-response nature of the survey. A new study could be conducted to cover a larger and possibly more representative sample of the Greek Generation Y. Other studies could focus on the online behavior of other age groups (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Z), so that by comparing the results there can be a more comprehensive study of the use of social media for travel and tourism purposes in Greece.

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