



The Influence of Social Media on Tourist Destination Choice

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Abstract. This work is based on a survey to study the influence of social media on tourist destination choices. By examining four major aspects—i.e., the influence of social media content, the desired information on travel, shared online experiences, and the match between real experiences and social media expectations—the results highlight the significant role of social media in shaping travelers' choices and motivations. Visual and sensory material play a very important role. The study, which focuses on Morocco, provides insights into the nuances of social media use in a developing country with a flourishing tourism economy and a high internet penetration rate.

Keywords: Destination choice, Experiential content, Moroccan tourists, Social media, Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, researchers like Decrop (2010), Karl et al. (2015), and Moscardo et al. (2015) have focused on understanding tourist destination choices, driven by increasing competition among destinations. Early studies emphasized rational decision-making, with the concept of "choice sets" central to discussions. Travelers begin with an "awareness set" of known destinations, narrowing to an "evoked set" aligned with their travel goals before selecting a final destination based on available information (Crompton, 1992; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Mohsin & Ryan, 2004; Nyman et al., 2018).

Recent research highlights the context-dependent nature of decision-making, considering factors like destination characteristics, tourist attributes, and travel objectives (Keshavarzian & Wu, 2017; McCabe et al., 2016; Lamsfus et al., 2015). Context shapes and limits destination choices, revealing that decisions, while seemingly rational, are strongly influenced by contextual elements (Beritelli et al., 2019).

The impact of social media on destination choices operates within such contextual frameworks, yet its role across diverse travel contexts remains underexplored. Future research should delve into the specific contributions of social media to destination decision-making (Singh & Srivastava, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Impact of Social Media on Tourists' Destination Choice: Understanding the Role of Context Destination Choice

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2.1.1. The Role of Social Media in the Tourism Industry

User engagement with social media varies by country, age, and gender (Albarq, 2014; Cox et al., 2009; Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013). These platforms, driven by electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), provide personalized information that enhances tourist engagement and decisively influence travel decisions at all stages—before, during, and after the journey (Bakr & Ali, 2013).

Before departure, social media facilitate information gathering, justify destination choices, and reduce post-purchase dissonance (Liu et al., 2013; Tussyadiah et al., 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2012). During travel, they enable experience sharing, enhance social image (Wu & Pearce, 2017; Osei et al., 2018), and improve safety by updating loved ones (Hernandez-Mendez et al., 2015). Post-travel, they serve as platforms for sharing experiences, aiding others or reflecting on personal journeys (Fakharyan et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2014).

The table below summarizes the critical factors and roles of social media in the tourism industry, highlighting key points such as variations in user engagement based on demographic factors, the importance of information search and decision-making before travel, and the influence on destination promotion. Specifically, the table underscores how social media can assist travelers by reducing post-purchase dissonance, enabling experience sharing, ensuring safety, and facilitating post-travel reflection. These aspects demonstrate the multifaceted utility of social media platforms across various stages of a tourist's journey, reinforcing their indispensable role in modern tourism strategies.

Table 1: Summary of the Role and Impact of Social Media in the Tourism Industry.

Aspect	Key Points
Factors Affecting Engagement	Engagement with social media varies based on factors such as the user's country of origin, age, and gender (Albarq, 2014; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, and Bultjens, 2009; Dionysopoulou and Mylonakis, 2013).
Role of Social Media in Decision Making	Social media play a central role in forming tourists' preferences and in their decision-making throughout the different stages of their journey: before, during, and after the trip (Bakr and Ali, 2013).
Information Search Before Travel	Before traveling, tourists use social media to gather tourism-related information and accelerate their search (Liu, Norman, and Pennington-Gray, 2013).
Reducing Post-Purchase Dissonance	Engagement with social media helps tourists justify their choices and reduce post-purchase dissonance, particularly regarding destination choice (Tussyadiah et al., 2018).
Challenges in Destination Decisions	Destination choices are sensitive to dissonance due to a delay between purchase and consumption and the limitation of opportunities to discover destinations in advance (Jalilvand et al., 2012; Rathonyi, 2013).
Sharing Travel Experiences	During the trip, tourists use social media to share their experiences, allowing the virtual participation of others and shaping their image (Wu and Pearce, 2017; Osei, Mensah, and Amenumey, 2018).
Ensuring Safety During Travel	Social media are used to inform others about the traveler's location, especially considering growing concerns about safety (Hernandez-Mendez, Munoz-Leiva, and Sanchez-Fernandez, 2015).
Post-Travel Reference for Experiences	After the trip, social media serve as a repository of contributions from various tourists, sharing their preferences and reviews of experiences (Fakharyan et al., 2012).
Contributions to Travel Planning	Some tourists altruistically share information on social media to help their fellow travelers plan their journeys (Lee, Reid, and Kim, 2014).
Reflection and Sharing Memories	Other tourists interact with social media after the trip to reflect and reminisce about their personal experiences.
Influence on Destination Promotion	Social media are an effective tool for promoting destinations, as they can influence tourist arrivals and encourage repeat visits (Zhang et al., 2018).
Gaps in Research	Although there is extensive research on social media in tourism, studies often only skim the surface regarding the specific circumstances in which decisions are made.

2.1.2. The Influence of Social Media

Qualitative studies on social media's role in travel choices are limited. Social media serve as:

- **Need Generator:** Sparking interest in destinations via shared content (Kim et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020).
- **Supporter:** Offering useful recommendations for trip planning (Chen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019).
- **Guide:** Directing choices by aligning options with user preferences (Chen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019).
- **Validator:** Confirming decisions through user feedback and endorsements (Chen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019).

Their impact varies by trip type, decision stage, traveler profile, platform, and content type (Saravanan et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019). Despite their influence, gaps remain in cross-cultural, qualitative, and longitudinal research. Addressing these gaps can deepen understanding of social media's effect on tourist behavior.

2.1.3. Social Media and Tourist Behavior

Social media have revolutionized travel experience sharing, becoming essential for planning and decision-making (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Hudson & Thal, 2013). They influence destination reputation and play a key role in traveler decisions due to their experiential nature (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012).

These platforms serve four main functions: generating needs, supporting, guiding, and validating choices, increasing visits and strengthening destination branding (Gretzel, Fesenmaier & O'Leary, 2006; Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier, 2002). They also promote ecological awareness and encourage sustainable travel behaviors (Kane, Chiru & Ciuchete, 2012).

Social media shape tourists' perceptions, with "travel photo posters" favoring local specialty purchases (Boley, Magnini & Tuten, 2013). Online community participation positively impacts the intention to use and recommend tourism products (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalú, 2010; Kang, 2011; Nusair et al., 2013; Parra-López et al., 2011).

2.2. The Impact of Social Media on Tourists' Destination Choices

2.2.1. Literature on the Role of Social Media in Tourist Destination Choices

Current research on the influence of social media in travel destination choices is somewhat limited, focusing primarily on micro-level decision-making without providing a comprehensive view of the overall impact of social media (Fileri, Algezau & McLeay, 2015; Tham, Croy & Mair, 2013). Although social media are recognized as a key factor across various cultures, their direct effect on destination choices is often considered minimal, an issue

attributed to the credibility of the sources (Bakr & Ali, 2013; Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2011). These studies are typically confined to specific destinations, a narrow selection of social media platforms, and particular market segments, which limits the ability to generalize the results to other contexts. Lim, Ramayah, Teoh, and Cheah (2017) emphasize the need to explore the circumstances under which social media have a more significant influence. This raises the question of whether a narrow focus on certain destinations or platforms might obscure the potential impact of other channels on destination choices (Book et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Marder et al., 2019).

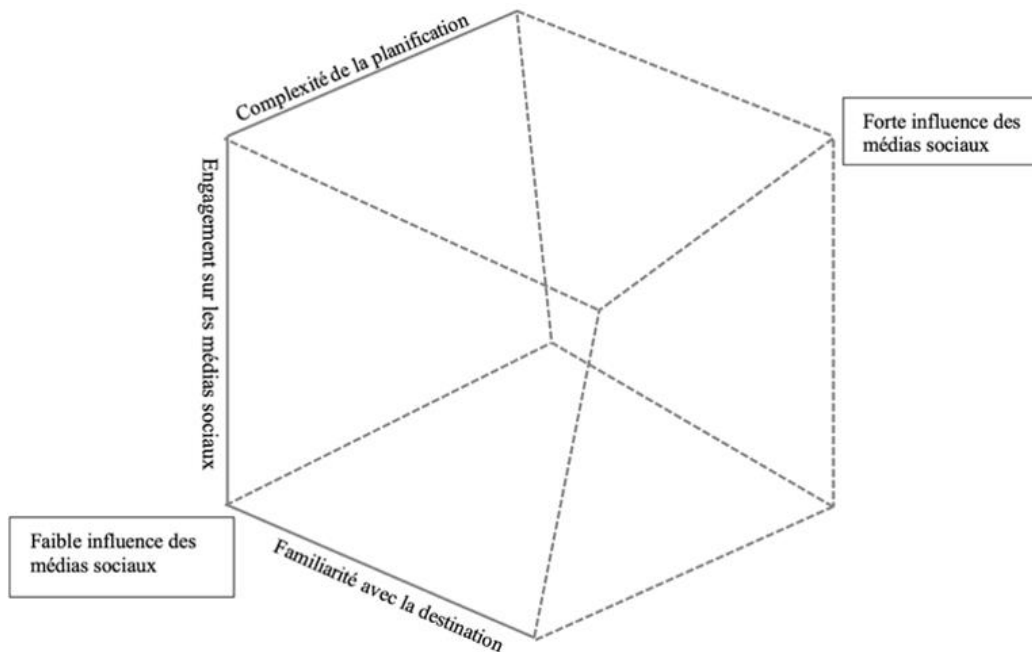


Figure 1: Three contextual aspects of how social media affect destination selection.

Source: Leung et al. (2018).

Tourists frequently use social media to seek information and address doubts post-trip planning, yet the context influencing destination choice remains underexplored. Studies suggest that social media's impact is highly context-dependent (Lee et al., 2018; Marder et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2016). This research investigates contextual factors shaping social media's influence on destination choices, highlighting situations of significant impact and their underlying causes. As illustrated in Figure 1, the influence of social media on destination choices is closely tied to several key contextual factors, such as the complexity of travel planning, engagement on social media, and familiarity with the destination. This diagram underscores how varying levels of these factors can shift the degree to which social media impacts decision-making processes. Influence of social media on tourists' travel choices through different persuasion paths

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) has been employed to examine how social media influence tourists' travel choices through two paths of persuasion: the central route, requiring deep thought, and the peripheral route, based on superficial elements like the source's popularity (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The route taken depends on the recipient's level of involvement; highly motivated individuals favor the central route, while those less involved are more influenced by the peripheral route.

Wang and Yan (2022) found that the quality of information on social networks and factors such as self-congruity and trust affect travel intentions. They highlighted that prior knowledge moderates the impact of information quality on self-congruity, indicating that well-informed people are less influenced by the quality of the information. Kim et al. (2021) explored how user-generated content (UGC) and firm-generated content (FGC) influence the destination image and travel intention, suggesting that UGC has a more significant impact, especially when perceived risk is high.

These studies illustrate the application of the ELM in analyzing the effect of social media on travel decisions, highlighting the importance of various factors such as information quality, self-congruity, trust, and perceived risk. The ELM provides a valuable framework for understanding the cognitive and affective influence of social media on tourist behavior, encouraging further research to explore other models and theoretical perspectives.

2.3. Analysis of a Survey on How Social Media in Morocco Influences Tourist Destination Choices General Overview

This survey investigates how the use of social media affects the choice of travel destinations. It questions participants about various aspects, such as their age, level of education, professional status, the time spent on social media for travel information, their preferred platforms for this information, the frequency at which they

consult travel content on social media, and the impact of this content on their travel decisions. Table 2 provides an overview of the survey responses, summarizing key trends observed among participants.

The collected data will be summarized and analyzed to identify trends and draw relevant conclusions. The final step will involve examining the correlations and patterns among responses from different groups of participants, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of social media on travel choices.

Table 1: General overview of the survey responses from social media users in Morocco.

Questions	Remarks
Education Level	Most respondents have a university degree.
Employment Status	The majority of respondents work full-time.
Time Spent on Travel-Related Social Media	Most respondents spend less than 30 minutes per day on travel-related social media.
Favorite Social Networks for Travel Information	Instagram is the most popular platform for travel information.
Frequency of Consulting Travel-Related Content	Many respondents consult travel-related content a few times a week.
Influence of Travel Content on Destination Decisions	Travel content on social media moderately influences respondents' destination choices.
Type of Travel Information Sought	Inspirational photos and videos are the most sought-after content.
Sharing Personal Travel Experiences	A significant number of respondents rarely share their own travel experiences on social media.
Modifying Travel Plans Based on Social Media Feedback	Some respondents occasionally modify their travel plans based on reactions or comments received on their travel posts.
Correspondence Between Travel Experience and Social Media	For many, the reality of their travel experience aligns quite well with what they have seen on social media.

The analysis will then focus on examining the relationships and trends among the participants' responses to identify any significant similarities between the variables. Through the heatmap of the correlation matrix, we will observe the intensity and direction of the links existing between the different survey questions.

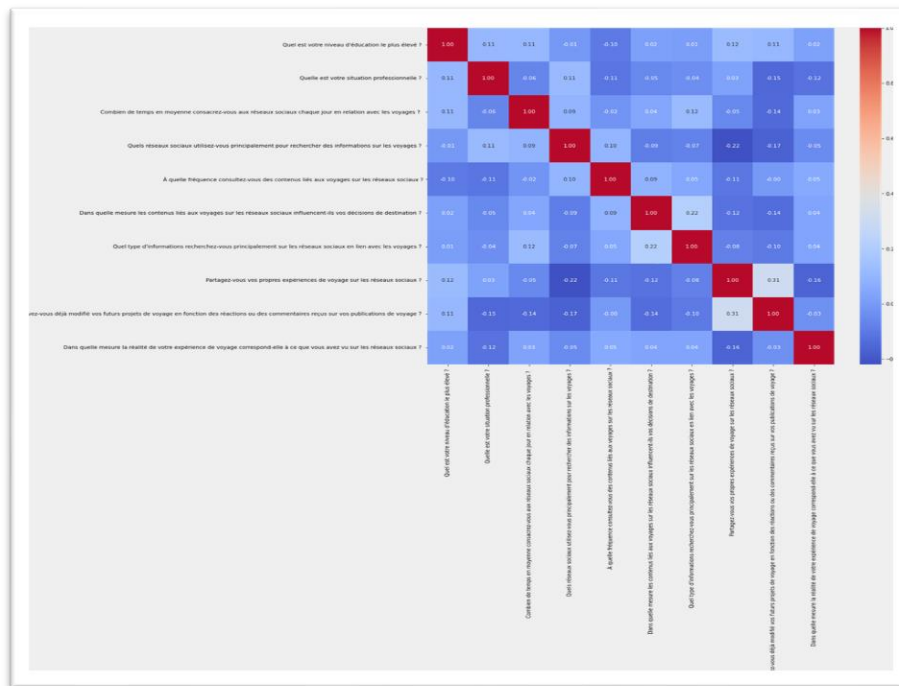


Figure 1: The heatmap of the response matrix.

The analysis shows no significant correlations (above 0.5 or below -0.5) between survey questions, except for perfect autocorrelations (1.0). This suggests relative independence among responses; for instance, time spent on social media for travel doesn't predict content consultation frequency, nor do platform preferences strongly impact sharing behavior. Figure 2 illustrates the correlation matrix of survey responses, highlighting the relative independence among variables. The focus will now shift to identifying trends or patterns within individual responses.

Let's begin by examining the distribution of responses for each question to identify interesting trends.

Quelle est votre tranche d'âge ?

115 réponses

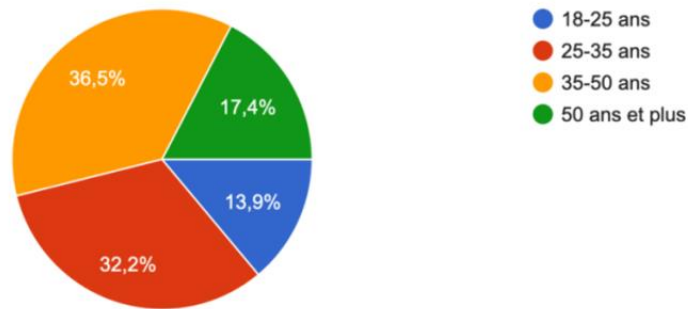


Figure 2: Age Range of Participants.

- The survey includes respondents from various age groups: 18-25 years, 25-35 years, 35-50 years, and 50 years and older.
- The most frequent age group among respondents is the 35-50 years.
- The second most frequent age group is the 25-35 years.
- The age groups 18-25 years and 50 years and older are relatively less represented, as shown in Figure 3, which presents the distribution of respondents' age groups.

Quel est votre niveau d'éducation le plus élevé ?

114 réponses

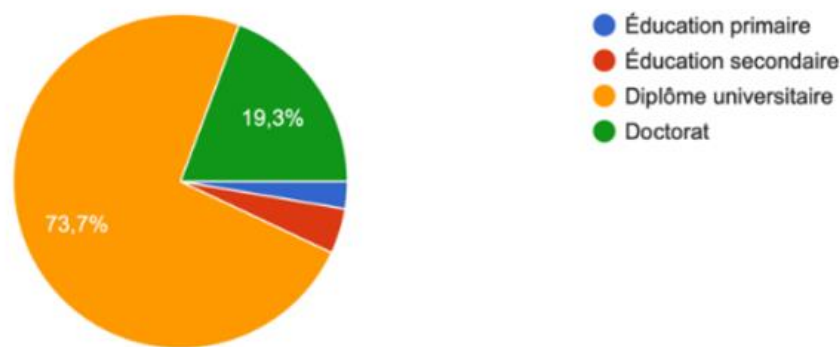


Figure 3: Educational Level of Participants.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the survey collected responses from participants with a wide range of educational levels, from primary education to doctoral degrees, with a predominance of university degree holders. Although doctoral degree holders were significantly represented, their number was less than that of university degree holders. A smaller number of participants had completed secondary education, and only a few had a primary education level. Overall, these data show that the survey participants had varied levels of education.

Quelle est votre situation professionnelle ?

114 réponses

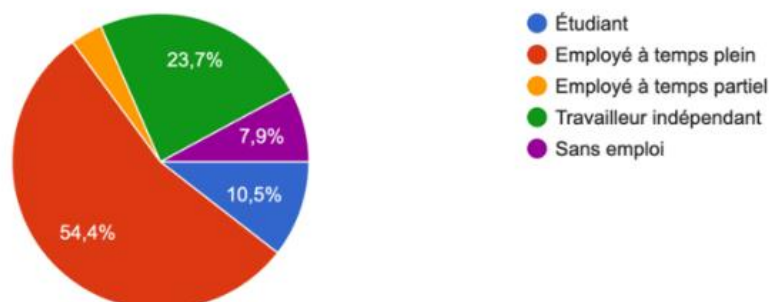


Figure 4: Employment Status.

The survey revealed the diversity of the participants' employment statuses, encompassing categories such as "Full-time employee," "Self-employed," "Part-time employee," "Unemployed," and "Student." The majority of respondents were full-time employees, followed by self-employed individuals, highlighting a significant proportion of people managing their own business. The remaining categories included part-time employees, students, and unemployed individuals, thus reflecting the variety of professional statuses among the survey participants as shown in Figure 5.

Combien de temps en moyenne consacrez-vous aux réseaux sociaux chaque jour en relation avec les voyages ?
113 réponses

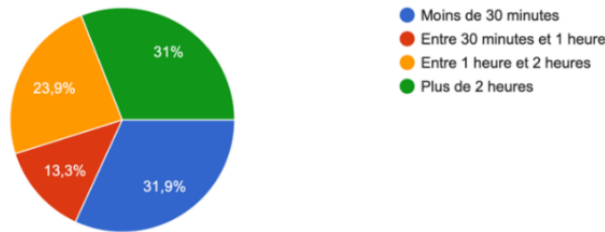


Figure 5 : Average Time Spent on social media.

The survey reveals that the average time spent daily by respondents on social media for travel-related activities varies significantly. The majority of participants spend less than 30 minutes per day on this activity, making this duration the most common response. Nevertheless, a notable portion of respondents, with the second most frequent response, spend more than 2 hours per day on social media dedicated to travel. These data highlight the existence of varied practices among social media users regarding the search for and engagement with travel content as illustrated in Figure 6.

Quels réseaux sociaux utilisez-vous principalement pour rechercher des informations sur les voyages ?
115 réponses

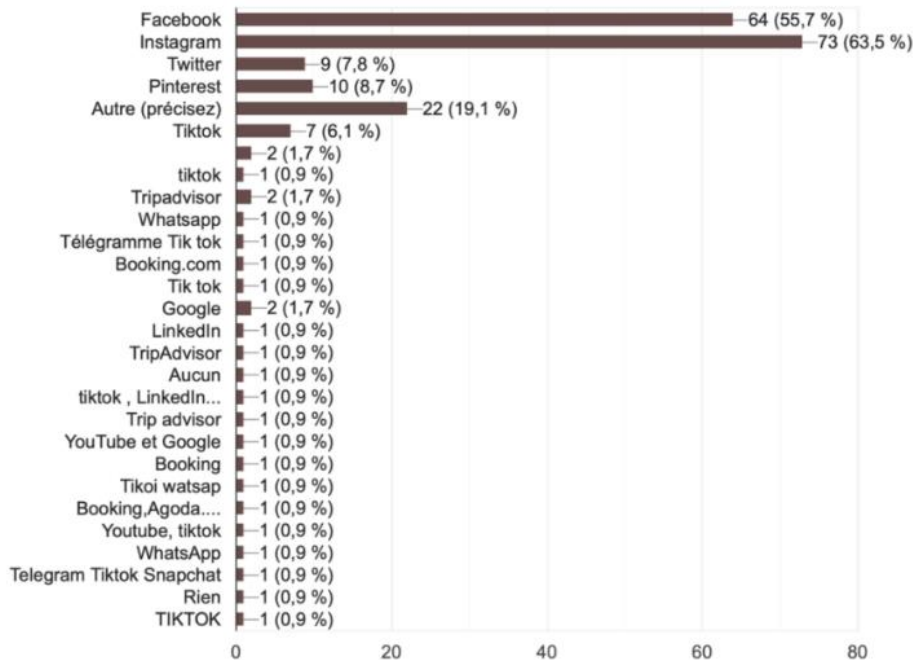


Figure 6 : Most Used Social Networks.

As shown in Figure 7, the survey identified the preferred social media platforms by respondents for searching travel information, including Instagram, TikTok, TripAdvisor, Facebook, Pinterest, Google, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and others. Instagram emerged as the most popular platform among participants. It also appeared that respondents often use multiple platforms to gather travel information, thus reflecting the variety of travel information sources they utilize.

À quelle fréquence consultez-vous des contenus liés aux voyages sur les réseaux sociaux ?
113 réponses

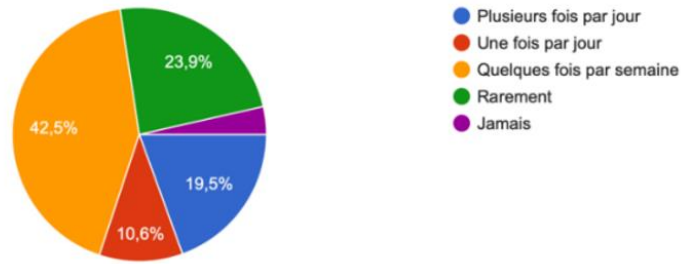


Figure 7 : Frequency of Consulting Travel-Related Content on social media.

The survey explored how often participants view travel-related content on social media, offering options such as "A few times a week," "Rarely," "Several times a day," "Once a day," and "Never." The dominant response was "A few times a week," revealing that the majority of respondents regularly engage with travel content on social platforms. The frequency "Several times a day" was also notably chosen, indicating that a significant segment of participants actively seeks travel information on social media multiple times throughout the day. These results emphasize the diverse habits of participants in consuming travel-related content on social media, reflected in Figure 8.

Dans quelle mesure les contenus liés aux voyages sur les réseaux sociaux influencent-ils vos décisions de destination ?
113 réponses

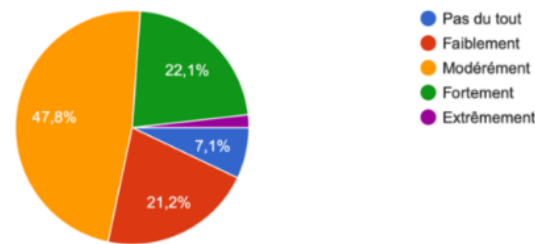


Figure 8: Extent to Which Social Media Content Influences Destination Choice.

As shown in Figure 9, the survey assessed how travel content on social media affects respondents' destination decisions, with options ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely." The majority indicated a "Moderate" influence, meaning that travel content on social media plays a moderate role in their destination choices. A significant portion also chose "Strongly," revealing that for them, this content has a major influence on their travel decisions.

Quel type d'informations recherchez-vous principalement sur les réseaux sociaux en lien avec les voyages ?
113 réponses

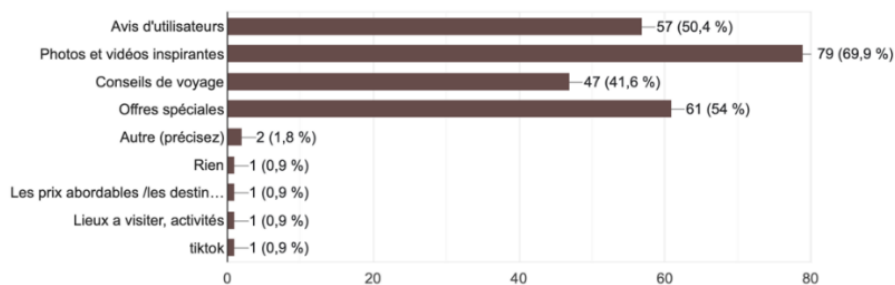


Figure 9: Types of Information Sought by Respondents on Social Media.

The survey reveals the types of information that participants look for on social media for their travels, including "Inspirational photos and videos," "User reviews," "Travel tips," and "Special offers." The most common responses show that respondents prioritize a variety of information, ranging from inspiring visual content and reviews to practical advice and promotions. Some participants also highlighted their interest in more

specific information, such as suggestions for places to visit and activities, or the use of particular platforms like TikTok for their travel-related research, demonstrated in Figure 10.

Partagez-vous vos propres expériences de voyage sur les réseaux sociaux ?
114 réponses

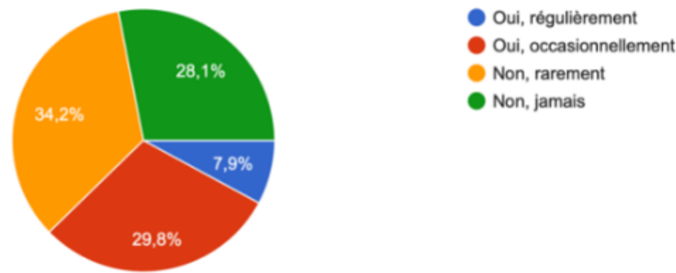


Figure 10: Frequency of Sharing Travel Experiences on Social Media.

The survey examines how often respondents share their travel experiences on social media. The possible responses were "No, never," "Yes, occasionally," "Yes, regularly," and "No, rarely." The predominant response "No, never" reveals that a majority of participants do not share their travel experiences on social media. "Yes, occasionally" is the second most common response, indicating that some do share their travels on these platforms, but only sporadically as illustrated in Figure 11.

Avez-vous déjà modifié vos futurs projets de voyage en fonction des réactions ou des commentaires reçus sur vos publications de voyage ?
113 réponses

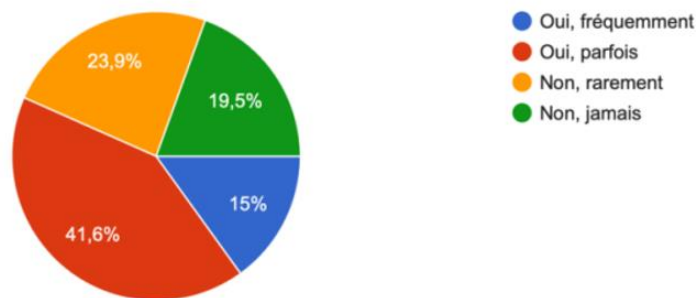


Figure 11 : Changing Destination After Consulting Social Media.

Demonstrated in Figure 12, the survey asks participants if reactions or comments on their travel posts influence their future plans. The responses ranged from "No, never," "Yes, sometimes," "Yes, frequently," and "No, rarely," with "No, never" being the dominant option. This indicates that a considerable majority do not let feedback on social media guide their future travel decisions. "Yes, sometimes" follows, revealing that some take into account the reactions received when planning subsequent trips.

It emerges that many make their travel choices independently of the feedback received online, while a variable number of respondents consider this feedback, but with different frequencies. This observation raises questions about the influence of user-generated content on social media in the travel decision-making process.

Dans quelle mesure la réalité de votre expérience de voyage correspond-elle à ce que vous avez vu sur les réseaux sociaux ?
114 réponses

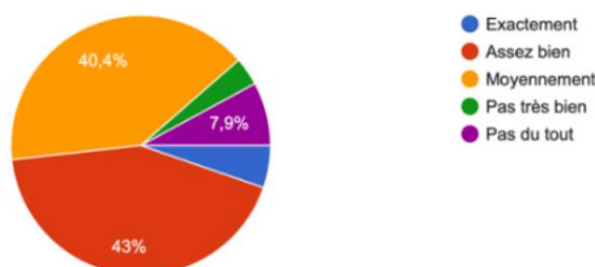


Figure 12 : Correspondence Between Actual Travel Experiences and What is Seen on Social Media.

As shown in Figure 13, the survey examines the alignment between participants' travel experiences and the representations seen on social media, offering response choices such as "Quite well," "Moderately," "Exactly," and "Not at all." "Quite well" emerges as the preferred option, indicating that many respondents find a good match between their actual travels and the images perceived online. "Moderately" follows, revealing a moderate correlation for some between the lived experience and the expectations raised by social media.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

These results highlight variability in how social media content aligns with real travel experiences, ranging from precise matches to more moderate alignments. This diversity of perceptions illustrates the different levels of impact that social media can have on the anticipations and evaluations of completed trips, underlining their role in shaping expectations and post-trip appraisals.

The survey examined the impact of social media on travel decisions among Moroccans, focusing on destination choices, information search, experience sharing, and alignment between expectations and reality. Social media significantly influence destination choices, particularly through visual and experiential content like photos, reviews, and travel tips. While many participants prefer to keep travel experiences private, others find social media helpful in setting realistic expectations. These findings emphasize the importance of user-generated content in shaping travel preferences and highlight challenges regarding authenticity and content quality.

4. DISCUSSION

The results align with studies by Kim et al. (2015), Leung et al. (2013), and Munar and Jacobsen (2014), which demonstrated social media's role in awareness, branding, satisfaction, and loyalty, while noting gaps between expectations and reality. However, limitations such as a small sample size and self-reported data suggest caution in generalizing findings. Future research should use larger, more diverse samples and detailed demographic data.

5. CONCLUSION

This article explores the influence of social media on the travel destination choices of Moroccan travelers, through a survey focusing on the impact of social media content, the information sought, the sharing of experiences, and the alignment between expectations and lived realities. It emerges that social media significantly shapes travelers' preferences and motivations, influencing their anticipations and evaluations post-travel. The importance of visual content and shared experiences is emphasized, revealing the opportunities and challenges of social media as marketing tools for tourism.

This study enriches the existing literature by focusing on Morocco, a context not widely studied despite its growing tourism industry and a high internet penetration rate. It provides insights into the specific attitudes of Moroccan travelers towards social media, offering valuable insights for tourism stakeholders and researchers wishing to understand and leverage the potential of social media in this sector.

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