

**Experience Sharing on Social Networking Sites:  
A Glimpse into the Process, Benefits, and Drawbacks of Curated Experiences**

By

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to gain a greater understanding of why individuals choose to share the select experiences that they do on social networking sites and how the sharing of such experiences shapes their overall personal brand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 individuals who identified as being from either the Millennial or Generation Z cohorts and who had travelled outside of their home province in the last two years. These interviews were then analyzed using an interpretivist epistemological approach. Impression Management Theory, Personal Branding Theory, and Critical Visual Methodology Theory, as well as well-known constructs such as ‘staged authenticity’ and the framing of images were used to identify important themes and categorize processes. The findings suggest that the process of posting involves all four sites of Critical Visual Methodology Theory (the site of production, the site of the image itself, the site of circulation, and the site of audiencing) and that picture preferences on social networking sites are strongly influenced by the original photography themes introduced by Kodak. It was also found that image-based platforms such as Instagram, function as a digital passport where individuals use the photos that they share on Instagram from different marker locations as a virtual travel stamp providing photographic evidence that they have been to a particular location. The concept of tourism ‘catfishing’, that is, tourist destinations that lure people into visiting through the means of over exaggerating their appeal online, is explored as well as the negative impacts that it has on a destination. Professional benefits to posting tourism related experiences included job offers, improved portfolios for applications in the marketing field, and the ability for individuals to further build their professional networks, while personal benefits included reconnecting with friends while travelling, meeting new friends online from

anywhere in the world with similar interests, and being invited to more exclusive group settings from within their existing social circles. The ability to select what is shared and what is not shared online can also help to maintain an existing persona. Drawbacks included assumptions made by relevant others without context as well as damage to an individual's reputation. To conclude, there is a discussion of the research limitations as well as suggestions for future research ideas related to experience sharing on social media.

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## Chapter 1: Social Networking Sites and Society

*"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"  
- A philosophical thought experiment*

### Why Social Media?

In today's day and age, if you did not take a picture, then how will others know if the experience really happened? Approximately 85% of Americans own a smartphone, meaning that they have uninterrupted access at all times to a high-quality camera ready to capture an image at any given moment (Pew Research Center, 2021). Not only do individuals have access to smartphones, but they also have the ability to share these images to the world immediately at their fingertips. The onslaught of social networking sites (SNS) continues to evolve as this study is being written; there are constantly new websites being created and applications being developed to serve different markets and audiences, however, one of the things that all of these platforms have in common is their ability to allow an individual to share their experiences with a selected audience.

Since the introduction of the first SNS in 1997 known as *Six Degrees* and the first widespread usage in 2006, with Facebook and Twitter being made available to users around the world, the popularity of all SNS has grown exponentially with projections of 257 million social network users in the United States by 2023 (Hendricks, 2021; Tankovska, 2021). In the early days, SNS were used for the purpose of making connections with others online in your social circle. The original use of Facebook, or "The Facebook" as it was known back then, was to allow Harvard students to use their '.edu' email addresses and photos to connect with other students at the school. Then-student Mark Zuckerberg foresaw a way of bringing the existing social

experience of college onto the Internet. He wanted to create a place that could help college students connect with one another (McFadden, 2020).

Flash forward to today and the average person living in the United States has not one, but multiple social media accounts across various platforms that they can access on any number of the devices in their home or on the go whether it's with their desktop, smartphone or tablet. Both the Millennial (1981 to 1996) and the Generation Z (1997 to 2002) cohorts are avid users of SNS with 84% of those aged 18 to 29 and 81% of those aged 30 to 49 using at least one social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2021). Millennials use SNS as an addition to their existing relationships, a space where they can foster additional relationships and share portions of their lives with relative ease. Generation Z, the digital natives, see SNS as an integral part of the relationships that they form as they were born into a world where these platforms already existed and dominated the Internet, however, they appear to be more concerned about their online security than previous generations (Acer for Education, 2019).

When scrolling through the average Millennial or Generation Z newsfeed on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or whatever SNS of their choosing, these individuals are bombarded with the information shared by their peers. These platforms provide individuals the autonomy to draft, create and curate the content of their choosing to share with their selected audience. For some, their audience is simply their family and close friends, for others this audience may be limitless, with the hope that their content will resonate with audiences both locally, domestically, or internationally depending on the relevance and scope of their content. From this point going forward, the term individual refers to anyone in the Millennial or Generation Z cohort unless otherwise specified.

Individuals choose to share a wide range of content to their social circles everyday ranging from images of their morning cup of coffee or breakfast to photographs taken by a professional photographer at a milestone event such as a graduation or wedding. Travel or tourism photography has also entered this space, with individuals going out of their way to go to specific destinations to get the perfect picture to fill their social media feeds and 97% of Millennials sharing photos to social media during their travels (CrowdRiff, 2018). This poses the question, “How do individuals determine what they want to post?” or more specifically, “What experiences from an individual’s life do they determine worthy enough to be shared online?”

### **The Research Questions**

The primary goal of my research is to gain a greater understanding of why individuals choose to share the select experiences that they do on SNS and how the sharing of such experiences shapes their overall personal brand. In this project I will:

- 1) Gain a greater understanding of the specific intentions behind why individuals in the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts share the experiences that they do on SNS in the context of tourism.
- 2) Create a model that outlines the process that people go through when preparing the images of tourism-related experiences that they share in relation to the four sites of critical visual methodology.
- 3) Analyze the benefits and/or drawbacks received from sharing different types of experiences in an individual’s personal and professional lives.
- 4) Gain a greater understanding of the professional value that Millennials and Generation Z gain from sharing their experiences of participating in experiential travel.

- 5) Explicate how Millennials and Generation Z utilize their tourism experiences when creating their personal brands online.

By exploring these objectives, the goal is to gain further insight into the process of experience sharing and how the selected travel experiences and curated content that is shared online help to form the personal brand of individuals. Furthermore, I am looking to understand what individuals are hoping to gain by taking the time to curate the images and experiences that they choose to share online and how these selected experiences allow individuals to either consciously or subconsciously create their unique personal brand in the online world.

### **Thesis Structure**

My thesis begins by providing a thorough review of the existing literature including an overview of both the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts in terms of their values and life circumstances, since they are the sample groups from which data for this thesis is drawn. Next, I discuss the concept of personal branding, the practice of photography and the tourist gaze, social media's effect on tourism, and social media as a travel planning tool. Next, I provide an overview of Impression Management Theory, Personal Branding Theory and Communication Theory which is used when analyzing the primary data I have collected. Following this, the methodology used in my research is described in detail, specifically my epistemological approach and the critical visual methodology framework used to analyze the images provided by participants as well as how this methodology relates to the conversations that were had. Next, I provide an overview of the research design including the suitability of the method selected as well as who the participants were, how they were recruited and my social location in relation to my participants. The data analysis approaches and tools are discussed next; this chapter provides an overview of the preliminary analysis done and how the coding was conducted. The findings of

the analysis are then discussed in detail. I provide a detailed model of the process of posting, types of experiences that were shared, engagement, the trip planning process, tales from the bloggers themselves, the concept of tourism catfishing, picture preferences, intentions behind posting, personal branding, and the role of impression management as well as the benefits and drawbacks of posting and the reasons why individuals choose not to share experiences on social media. Following the analysis, I conclude with a discussion of how these findings are relevant and who would find this information of interest as well as any limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: What We Already Know**

*“We should be able to enjoy an ideal image without regarding it as a false picture of how things usually are. A beautiful, though partial, vision can be all the more precious to us because we are so aware of how life rarely satisfies our desires.”*

- *Alain de Botton & John Armstrong, Art as Therapy*

To grasp why it is important to gain a greater understanding of why individuals choose to share select curated experiences on SNS and how the sharing of these experiences shapes their personal brand, it is important to review the previous research that has been conducted in the field. This section begins by providing an overview of how the literature review was conducted. Then I provide a review of the use of social media in the context of tourism. A summary of what the literature currently tells us about the concepts of photography and the tourist gaze, more specifically what is currently known about tourism and staycations, the evolution of the tourist gaze, Kodakization, staged authenticity, markers and signifiers, identifies the key constructs that will be used to analyse and interpret the data collected.

### **Conducting the Literature Review**

Marketing and consumer researchers have been studying the online environment since at least the mid-1990s (Hoffman et al., 1995), producing a large and growing literature on consumer habits, preferences and how marketers might best serve their needs. Much less has been written on consumer curation of their experiences, especially within the realm of travel and tourism, and how they use social media and social networking sites in particular to represent themselves to others.

A search was conducted using the MacOdrum Library Summons, Science Direct, and Business Source Complete database, and the search terms: social media, social networking sites, consumer, experience, curation, tourism, personal brand, personal branding, online persona, photography, tourist gaze, staged authenticity, markers, image meaning, Kodak, impression

management, social media reputation, and travel blogging were used. Industry sources such as the Pew Research Centre and Passport Database were also used as well as industry reports created by large consulting firms and relevant trade associations.

## **Personal Branding**

One of my research interests is to gain an understanding of what the personal and professional impact posting curated experiences on SNS has on an individual's personal brand.

### *What is a Personal Brand?*

Individuals possess an intrinsic personal branding as a result of personality qualities, past experiences and development as well as through communication (Rangarajan et al., 2017). The concept of a personal brand has been attributed to consultant and writer Tom Peters (1997), writing in a *Fast Company* article. In one widely quoted excerpt, Peters insisted that:

“As of this moment, you're going to think of yourself differently! . . . You don't 'belong to' any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn't to any particular 'function.' You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description. Starting today, you are a brand.”

Peters's idea has been picked up and developed over the past 20 plus years in both academia and industry. Both students and professionals alike are encouraged to develop a personal brand for a variety of purposes, including job seeking (Hu, 2016).

A widely understood definition of the term personal brand is that it is a largely recognized and largely uniform perception or impression of an individual based on their experience, expertise, competencies, actions and/or achievements within a community, industry, or the marketplace at large. Personal branding is the conscious and intentional effort to create and influence the public perception of an individual by positioning them as an authority in their industry, elevating their credibility, and differentiating them from the competition, to ultimately

advance their career, increase their circle of influence, and have a larger impact on their selected audience (Personalbrand.com, n.d.). A personal brand differs from simply being a reputation as a personal brand is controlled and crafted by the individual themselves, whereas as a reputation is conferred onto an individual. Personal branding aligns well with impression management theory, in that individuals use personal branding theory to manage the impressions that are formed about them by others.

### *The Personal Brand and Social Networking Sites*

With SNS, individuals have the ability to curate an idealized version of themselves in the online world and by developing a personal brand, an individual may know which aspects or qualities they want to portray and then consciously or subconsciously match these up with images or text that portrays those elements of their personal brand. Personal branding helps individuals grow their brand in both their personal and professional lives. There are many benefits to personal branding in the online world. Having a strong personal brand helps you stand out from the crowd whether it's during a job search, building a business or attracting potential future partners, having a unique presence allows you to differentiate yourself from others. Using SNS, you can select the highlights that you want to share with your audience, meaning that you don't have to disclose all of your information or experiences (Billingsley, 2016).

### **Social Media and Marketing**

The term social media includes blogs and microblogs, social networking sites, collaborative projects, content community sites and sites dedicated to feedback (Sotiriadis, 2016). Social media has been largely realized as an effective mechanism that contributes to a firms' marketing aims and overall strategy, especially in relation to customer involvement, customer relationship management and overall communication (Alalwan et al., 2016). Social

media provides a platform for users to create their own content, further elevating electronic word-of-mouth recommendations. Social media channels have established an interactive channel of communication offering a space for tourists to express their desires and requirements while giving tourism providers a tool to gather customer feedback (Sotiriadis, 2016). In recent years, the Internet has become the first choice when searching for tourist related activities and has thus become an important tool for marketers to utilize when developing their marketing strategies. The existing literature suggests that social media platforms play a significant role in consumer behaviour, marketing, and communication/interaction with tourism consumers as well as managing business functions and processes. Post-experience behaviour takes the form of the level of the tourist's engagement in electronic word-of-mouth such as their willingness to share their tourism experiences on the Internet, thus contributing to the existing content of a specific destination (Sotiriadis, 2016). Without information generated by consumers and the market, business functions and planning are likely to become guesswork (Law et al., 2014). Thus, it is important for businesses to understand how the user-generated content being shared benefits the individuals who share experiences on social media and the impact that these images can have on the business itself.

In an extensive review conducted by Sotiriadis (2016), it was found that social media platforms have fundamentally changed the way in which tourists research and distribute information about tourism providers and destinations. There is a relationship between information from online reviews and offline hotel performance which has been identified and validated. This is of interest to my research as it showcases the relationship between the online world and offline performance, which I believe occurs with tourism destinations in general.

## **Tourism, the Tourist Gaze and Photography**

With the continuously improving camera quality of smartphones, there has never been a more accessible time for individuals to capture content on their own endeavours to either keep for themselves or to share online to the SNS of their choosing.

### *Tourism and the Staycation*

Most individuals are familiar with the basic concept of tourism: the activities of people traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for leisure, business or other purposes for not more than one consecutive year (BC Tourism Industry, 2021). Tourism is the business activity connected with providing accommodation, services and entertainment for people who are visiting a place for pleasure (Oxford Literary Dictionary, 2021). The act of tourism typically occurs while on a vacation, which is colloquially known as an extended period of leisure and recreation. At some point in the majority of individuals' lives they have taken on the role of a tourist, whether it was on a family vacation to Europe or simply a day trip to a nearby town with a lively arts and culture scene.

In recent years, the concept of a staycation has evolved from the term vacation which was most commonly associated with spending recreational leisure time away from one's home. A staycation refers to recreational leisure activities that are local to the area in which an individual resides (OED, 2021). Staycationers are often looking for a break for their normal routine activities without taking a large amount of time off work, incurring additional travel-related expenses or simply are unable to travel outside of their home area due to circumstances outside of their control. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of being a tourist in your own city or neighbouring cities has grown in popularity due to on-going travel restrictions (Government of Canada, 2021).

### *The Evolution of the Tourist Gaze*

In Urry's and Larson's *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (2011), the concept of the tourist gaze is thoroughly dissected as it is a phenomenon that has been present over the past few centuries, long before the existence of cameras. During the 18th century, a specialised visual sense developed based upon the *camera obscura*<sup>1</sup>, the Claude glass, the use of guidebooks, the widespread knowledge of routes, the art of sketching and the availability of sketchbooks, the balcony and so on. Claude glasses were significant in this shift. Named after the painter Claude Lorraine, they were lightweight, mobile convex mirrors that fitted into a (male) pocket and quickly became standard equipment among pre-photographic tourists in Europe (Andrews, 1989; Ousby, 1990; and Lofgren, 1999).

To use a Claude glass, the gazer stood with their back to the scene and consumed it through the petite mirror in which the reflected landscape was neatly trimmed and recomposed in accordance to the eye's movement. Special light effects *à la Lorraine* were also created through the use of filters. These glasses were believed to have perfected nature (Andrews, 1989; Ousby, 1990). Thus, even before the invention and popularisation of cameras, seeing was mediated by hybridised and prosthetic technologies and the image that was seen was being 'framed'.

The concept of 'framing' predates the invention of photographs and can be seen in the framing of artwork throughout history in a wide variety of mediums including paintings and sculptures. In the mid nineteenth century, hotels began using windows to frame the guests' view from their rooms, even going so far as to place work areas out of the way of these views so as to not disrupt the scene (Larsen, 2006). Houses were also being built with the locations being

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<sup>1</sup> Analogous constructions such as a box or tent in which an exterior image is projected inside. Camera obscuras with a lens in the opening have been used since the second half of the 16th century and became popular as aids for drawing and painting. They were later used as the basic concept for the development of photographic cameras in the first half of the 19th century.

selected in regards to how well situated they were for their views (Wordsworth, 1984). This same ideology was used when reconstructing major cities such as Paris, France in the mid-1800s (Berman, 1983). The nineteenth century development of the railway further mobilised the tourist gaze; from the railway carriage the landscape came to be viewed as a series of swiftly passing framed panorama views which is known as the ‘mobility of vision’ (Schivelbusch, 1986; LeBlanc, 2003). Figure A provides an example of the concept of the tourist gaze and the mobility of vision.



**Figure A: The Mobility of Vision**

*Image by Amine Rock Hoovr via <https://unsplash.com/photos/ZUMuU3aFc5k>*

Photography was invented around 1840 with Fox Talbot's and Daguerre's almost simultaneous announcement of the negative/positive process and the Daguerreotype, however, the scientific knowledge needed to create the device existed long before its invention. Humans simply needed a reason to want to be able to capture images in the ways that we do today (Gernsheim, 1982). The multiplication of photographs took off after the invention of the half-tone plate which made it possible to reproduce photographs in places such as newspapers, books,

and advertisements (Urry and Larsen, 2011). The later nineteenth century conceived and arranged the world as an exhibition through the widespread use of illustrated papers and prints; this era set the world up as a picture and arranged it before an audience as an object to be displayed, viewed, investigated, and experienced (Mitchell, 1989).

Photography became strongly associated with consumer capitalism and the world was able to be captured and distributed in ways that had not previously been imagined. Photographs eventually became less expensive to capture and it became inexpensive to mass-produce objects that made the places they captured appear aesthetic and desirable (Sontag 1979; Tagg, 1988). Instead of seeing photographs as reflections or distortions of a pre-existing world, they can be understood as a technology of world-making as they are part of a practice that individuals use to establish realities (Crang, 1997).

It can be argued that a photograph's realism can invoke a sense of the audience 'being there' when looking at a photograph, having the audience being transported 'back' to the scene that is pictured and activating an imaginative journey (Barthes, 2000). Photography is a way of transcribing reality, offering the audience pieces of the world and miniature slices of reality (Urry and Larsen, 2011).

Through the lens of a camera, photographers are able to highlight certain features they find beautiful and turn a blind eye to others, framing the scene at hand to become an idealized version of the actual destination. Thus, photographs are the outcome of an active signifying practice in which photographers select, structure and shape what is going to be captured and shown. In particular, there is the attempt to construct idealised images which beautify the object being photographed (Urry and Larsen, 2011). Thus, the concept of framing images and applying

filters to enhance the natural beauty of what the naked eye and camera can capture is not a concept that is exclusive to the digital day and age.

Touristic photography has always involved the idea of ‘framing’ as the camera can only capture a specific snapshot in time of what an individual sees as part of their ‘tourist gaze’ and experiences when travelling, so individuals have the freedom to pick and choose what portions of an experience they feel are worth documenting and later sharing with others, framed in the way that they see fit. One of the current trends on SNS is to add a filter on an image which modifies the appearance, with applications such as Instagram even having the filter option built into the application itself.

### *Kodakization*

Many of the photographs that are shared today on SNS are still based upon the marketing tactics of the first widely accessible cameras for the middle-class audience produced by Kodak. It was in the late 1880s, when Kodak launched its first user-friendly lightweight and inexpensive Brownie camera, that photography undertaken by tourists themselves was born. Before cameras were accessible to the general public, photography was something that was typically consumed rather than produced (Slater, 1999).

The most significant event in the history of amateur photography was the introduction of the Kodak #1 camera in 1888 which was invented and marketed by George Eastman. Through the simplification of the apparatus and processing film for consumers, he made photography accessible to millions of casual amateurs with no particular professional training, technical expertise, or aesthetic credentials. Eastman’s initial marketing strategy featured women and children operating the camera, and coined the memorable slogan: “You press the button, we do the rest” (Fineman, 2004).

In the U.S.A. and Europe, Kodak marketed photography as a leisurely family centered performance, thus creating tourist photography by developing a new system in which an individual's social relations were materialized or brought into a more structured, concrete form (Urry and Larsen, 2011). Through these targeted advertisements, Kodak was able to stimulate the demand for individuals to capture and print photographs of their experiences such as Christmas Eve or a day by the lake, thus turning these social activities into a tangible item or memory to be kept long term. By 1910, one-third of American households owned a Kodak camera making cameras mundane and photographing part of an emerging tourist habit. Through new packaging and technological evolution, Kodak was able to make photography a straightforward practice.



**Figure B: The Kodak Girl**

From left to right: The iconic Kodak girl, in her blue and white striped dress, became synonymous with Kodak products; “Keep Christmas with a Kodak!” 1922 advertisements (accession number: 2005.001.1.1); “The snapshots you want tomorrow, you must take today!” 1939 advertisements (accession number: 2005.001.1.7); and “She’s a Girl Watcher’s Dream!” Ads from 1952 and 1964 Kodak dealer circulars, showcasing the kinds of in-store display items available to help summer film sales (accession number: 2005.001.6). All images are from the Kodak Corporate Archive and Heritage Collection at Ryerson University Library and Archives. Retrieved from: <https://library.ryerson.ca/asc/2013/10/the-kodak-girl-women-in-kodak-advertising/>

Through marketing, Kodak created the need to capture moments that normally would have been passed by. Kodak decided to target the new middle-class families and those interested in tourism as the areas where they could produce ‘Kodak moments’ and ‘Kodak families’ as seen in Figure B. Kodak’s goal was to teach people and families to ‘apprehend their experiences and memories as objects of nostalgia’, especially avoiding painful and unpleasant experiences (West, 2000). Thus, acts of overlooking and forgetting the negative experiences became integral to the capturing of photographs, and nostalgia became a defining characteristic (Taylor, 1994). The ‘Kodak Girl’, who was in their advertisements for almost 80 years, was seen driving, riding on trains and gazing upon extraordinary landscapes, promoting the sheer pleasure and adventure of taking photographs; she promoted cameras as standard equipment for touring and photographing as the touristy thing-to-do. Kodak also introduced the idea of photographs being superior to the human memory with the slogan, ‘Let Kodak Keep the Story’ allowing families to ‘story’ their experiences for later. Essentially, Kodak taught modern Americans how to see, remember and love (West, 2000). Kodak effectively marketed the idea that photography immortalizes the highpoints of an individual’s life, effectively leading to what we know today as the ‘highlight reel’ that individuals have been socialized to portray in the online world.

### *Staged Authenticity*

The idea of ‘framing’ is common within the world of photography and puts a limit around what is captured leaving some aspects of an experience unseen. The concept of staged authenticity occurs inside the frame of such photographs and refers to tourist experiences that appear to be ‘authentic’ to the culture of origin, but in fact are a product created for the enjoyment of outsiders and is what tourists are encouraged and expecting to see. This idea has

been on-going for centuries and is especially common in tourism where settings, events, and interactions that are unnatural to the host community or environment are contrived to represent what tourists desire (Phelan, 2015).

The tourism industry has constructed tourist locations in such a way as to structure the location in the eyes of the Western traveller and portray what the West wants to see from such locations, regardless of whether this is the reality of the said location. This has been seen throughout history as photographers framed and represented locations strategically to align with the views Westerners had created in their imaginations. For example, by erasing contemporary signs, modern humans and connections elsewhere, western travel photography imprisoned the Orient in a timeless ancient space of architecture and monuments to produce the desired authentic Orient (Schwartz, 1996; Osbourne, 2000). This same concept is seen today on social media, where locations are framed in such a way as to preserve the “authenticity” of the image that we have shaped in our heads.



**Figure C: Staged Authenticity in Tourism Experiences**

*Images by Sophie via <https://thirdevetraveller.com/tips-visiting-the-pyramids-giza-egypt/>*

This can be seen in modern day photographs that are shared of well-known locations around the world such as the Giza Pyramid Complex in Egypt. In the image on the left, the pyramids are portrayed in images in a way that makes them appear as if they are located in the middle of the desert away from civilization, even having tourists arrive on camelback, preserving the authenticity of the time period in which they were built. However, as seen in Figure C, they are situated in the Greater Cairo area, a developed city centre that had a population of 20.9 million people as of the end of 2020 (World's Capital Cities, 2021). It is to be assumed that the tourists posting these photos are themselves aware of the staged authenticity of these experiences as they are surrounded by a large capital city that is full of modern-day amenities, however, the audience viewing this picture online is not privy to this information unless they themselves have been there, done research on the location or have had this information shared by the poster<sup>2</sup> themselves. It is important to note that the term 'tourist', as opposed to 'traveller', is increasingly being used as a term for someone who seems content with their obviously inauthentic experiences (MacCannell, 1999). In the photo on the right, the image provides slightly different context of what the Greater Cairo area is like and is framed in such a way to showcase the Pyramids in the background while also including the branding of the Pizza Hut logo while picking up a slice of pizza and staging the photograph to make it look as if they are just about to take a bite. This experience, while still staged, provides a different perspective to the audience of what travelling to the Giza Pyramid Complex would be like.

Guided and packaged tours<sup>3</sup> have become common in the tourism industry and are an integral part of the experience for locations such as wineries, museums, various historical locations and major factories to name a few. The tour is characterized by social organization

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'poster' refers to the person who is posting or sharing images online.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Cook initiated the package tour (Butler and Russel, 2010).

designed to reveal the inner workings of the places visited, on the tour, outsiders are allowed further in than regular patrons normally would be. When visiting a brewery for example, visitors get to smell and touch the barley and hops that are the key ingredients in their favourite beer. However, there is a staged quality to this proceeding that lends them an aura of superficiality, but the superficiality is not always perceived by the tourist themselves. These types of experiences are produced to be a space for outsiders who are permitted to view details of the inner workings of institutions that normally would be off limits. These carefully curated experiences allow adults to have an experience that returns them to a childlike mental state where they are able to learn about something new for the first time in a structured environment (MacCannell, 1999). Although these experiences are not the authentic backroom experience, they are staged in such a way that appeals to the tourist and makes them feel as if they get an authentic experience similar to what those who work in the backroom experience daily and have the tourist leaving with a sense of satisfaction.

### *Markers*

When looking through the different photos that tourists take during their travels, the selection of the background becomes a key component of the images that they choose to share and the significance behind them. When in a city such as Paris, France tourists tend to select images to share online that have the Eiffel Tower in the background as this signifies to the audience that this photo was taken in Paris without having to explicitly state the location. It is assumed that the audience understands that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris, thus, the photo shared with the Eiffel Tower in the background is in Paris unless it is otherwise explicitly stated. The same can be said for other major landmarks around the world; it is assumed that a photo with the

CN Tower in the background was taken in Toronto, Ontario and that a photo with the Taj Mahal in the background was taken in Agra, India.

Usually, the first contact a sightseer has with a travel destination is not the site itself but some representation of it. Traditionally a ‘marker’ in a touristic context is restricted to information that is attached to or posted alongside the site such as plaque, however, MacCannell (1999) expands the use of the term to include any information about a sight including that found in travel books, museum guides, stories told by persons who have visited it, art history texts and lectures, and so on. For the sake of my research and the analysis done in this study, I expanded the meaning of ‘marker’ to also include any images that are shared on the Internet and on social media as both the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts use SNS as a guidebook while planning their tourism experiences (CrowdRiff, 2018).

Tourists will commonly make the statement that they saw a city, but tourists, especially those on ‘packaged’ tours, do not “see” a city, they visit various sites in the city such as a specific bridge, landmark or stores. They visit the elements that are in the set of experiences or individual places that we call a city. Each of these individual experiences or elements is a *symbolic marker* and each element also requires a marker of its own such as the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. These attractions are then either seen as a piece of information about the city or location as a whole that the sightseer must possess in order to have completely seen the city or the sightseer perceives the attraction as a small piece of the city itself and does not find the attraction worthy of attention (MacCannell, 1999). For example, one may say that you have truly not seen Paris until you have visited the individual sights of the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre Museum, the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, and the Champs-Élysées. Each of these individual sights or symbolic markers is what some believe constitutes “seeing”

Paris. These experiences may not individually be of interest, perhaps the tourist has no real interest in visiting the Louvre, but they will do so anyways because they believe it is a key aspect of visiting the city of Paris. I expect to see that many of the marker sites that constitute seeing a particular city will be present in the photos selected to be shared online.

### **Social Media and Tourism**

On social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram that have a strong image-based component, it is common to see photos from vacation destinations shared by members of your personal network as well as by influential figures or companies that you follow. With the increase of influential figures or “influencers” as they are known colloquially, companies have been providing compensation either monetarily or through the gifting of various experiences such as vacations, specific excursions, or other free products as the company deems necessary based on the number of followers and level of engagement received by the specific influencer in question (Chen, 2020). However, individuals are also influenced by their peers and the photographs, videos and general experiences that they choose to share from their various travels whether it’s a weekend trip, a beach vacation or a back-packing excursion, with 30% of travellers in the United States turning to social media for trip inspiration, 52% of Facebook users being inspired by photos of their friends’ travels and 40% of Millennials in the UK taking into consideration how “Instagrammable” a place is while planning a trip (CrowdRiff, 2018).

#### *Aspirational Instagram Tourism Marketing*

On a platform such as Instagram, individuals have the opportunity to share their experiences in the form of snapshots, which they are able to curate into the aesthetic vision of their choosing. Previous research on luxury travel sharing highlights how when positive travel experiences are shared on social media by a friend who is perceived as being similar to oneself,

participants with lower trait self-esteem tended to show a higher visit intention to the destination if it is portrayed as a luxury travel experience (Liu et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2019). Thus, it is in the best interest for tourism-related destinations and attractions to stage specific parts of their locations or businesses whether it is a wine tour, resort, or restaurant to take aesthetically pleasing images to be shared online. Users are posting content both during and after their vacations, with 97% of Millennials sharing photos to social media during their travels (CrowdRiff, 2018). As long as the images shared online look “amazing”, then the general consensus of those who view the images online and have not themselves been to the location will be to think that the location is in fact “amazing”, regardless if the image shared was the only nice spot at that specific destination.

### **Social Media as a Travel Planning Tool**

Previous research has established that individuals consult social media during their trip planning process (Gretzel, 2006; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). With the onslaught of photographs being shared, geo-tagging of locations, the use of event, location, and activity-related hashtags, as well as posts that lead to personal travel blogs, social media has become a useful tool for those who are looking to share potential travel destinations with one another during the trip planning process. Individuals often solicit user-generated content to gain more insight on a particular location or experience before attending as they believe it will provide a more authentic version of the location they are visiting since it is being shared by ordinary people rather than organizations operating for a profit.

Word-of-mouth, as well as advice from various family members and friends, ranks as one of the most influential sources of pre-purchase information (Crotts, 1999). Word-of-mouth marketing can come in various forms online whether it is information relayed in a public review

of a particular destination on Google Maps, the content shared to a person's Instagram story or a blog post put together after a family vacation. These types of posts are typically aimed towards women who are more active users on social media and make 82% of the travel purchase decisions (TIAC, 2018). It is also important to note that more and more trips are now being booked using mobile devices with 40% of online travel bookings being made on mobile devices and 85% of travellers using mobile devices to book travel activities while on vacation (CrowdRiff, 2018).

### *The Role of Travel Blogs*

Travel blogs have become useful trip planning tools in recent years as they qualitatively cover every aspect of a visitor's trip from the overall experience of traveling, the anticipation, planning, packing, departure, driving, flying, and delays en route with most of the descriptions provided being experiential and subjective in nature (Pan et al., 2007). These blogs are often shared to the personal social media accounts of the author and provide in-depth first-hand accounts of an individual's experience, covering both the positive and the negative aspects as well as everything in between with their audience in mind (Willment, 2020). Thus, consumer-generated travel blogs serve as an opportunity for more in-depth word-of-mouth reviews to be relayed to future buyers as users are not confined to the character limits provided in the review section of crowd-sourced local business review sites. Accompanying text with images allows for a more robust review of a particular location or experience and can highlight both positive and negative aspects that are not captured from photography alone. Furthermore, these platforms allow for readers to digest the information provided in a narrative form, showcasing the entire trip from start to finish rather than simply providing a single review of a specific experience as well as personal details about themselves, their interests and the type of tourist or traveller they

are considered to be which provides additional context to the reader before making a purchase decision.

## **Conclusion**

As both Millennials and Generation Z are active on SNS, they are the producers of their own personal brand that is shared with their selected audiences. Members in these cohorts will most likely not work in the same job at the same company their entire career and must be able to brand themselves accordingly in order to succeed in a world that is becoming more and more digital every day. SNS allows for the ideal opportunity for both of these generations to share their brands with the world, whether it is to attract a potential partner or to grow their online audience and gain credibility.

With an increase in prevalence of image-based SNS such as Instagram, photography and the tourist gaze are taking centre stage. As the cameras seen in smartphones are constantly improving, taking photographs has never been so accessible. Although framing has always been a part of the creation of art, Instagram has provided a platform where individuals share various aspects of their “highlight reel” with their audience, with the majority of users framing the photographs that they share in a more positive and luxurious light (Murray, 2019). Many of the photos shared today on SNS mimic the original photographic concepts introduced by Kodak in the early 1900s. Tourism related industries have taken this opportunity of increased user-generated content and photo sharing to stage portions of their experiences specifically for the purpose of being photographed and shared for social media. Photographs with markers, such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, are commonly being shared to SNS as they provide location context to the images without having to explicitly say where the photograph was taken. As individuals continue to post photographs with staged experiences and markers, SNS has become the go-to

place for aspirational tourism and is being used as a travel planning tool in combination with travel blogs.

## Chapter 3: Theory

*“Every study owes something to the theory that produces its particular viewpoint, that animates the inquiry and the handling of evidence; namely, a return to the theory and a clarification and modification thereof in terms of any new findings that have been produced.”*

- Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*

In this chapter, I provide an overview of impression management theory, personal branding theory and critical visual methodology, the theories that will be used in this research. The relationship between each of these theories and the impact they have on curated tourism experience sharing on social media will be examined in detail.

### Impression Management

Impression Management, or self-representation, is a theory that was first developed in the late 1950s by sociologist Erving Goffman, and stems from the idea that life is like a play and that we perform for each other. It is defined as the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them (Goffman, 1959). With this theory in mind, it can be said that individuals manage their behavior and personal characteristics in the presence of others in an attempt to create a specific impression on their audience. Thus, an individual may seek to create different impressions on different audiences based on their specific goal or the desired outcome of the interaction.

In the online world, SNS provide many opportunities for individuals to selectively self-represent in ways that previously were not possible. Thus, almost every action has the possibility to be used to form an idealized version of the self and portray this idealized version of the self to the world. The nature of a SNS itself provides a platform for self-comparison by allowing others to invite us into what would have been considered the “private lives” of the generations before us. The onslaught of SNS and the ease of sharing personal moments to our network allows for

this comparison to happen at any given moment. Photos and home videos that previously would have been kept in a private album or only shown to those in our immediate family or circle of friends are now posted on the Internet to our entire social network consisting of a much wider audience than these types of experiences would have received in previous generations.

Individuals can now curate the “behind the scenes” portions of their lives into a perfectly curated version that they want others to believe is their reality. As individuals allow more and more people into previously private spaces, there are more opportunities to create supporting evidence for the impressions that they want others to form of them.

Impression management theory will be used as a lens through which the intentions behind the photographs shared on SNS will be analyzed. Impression management has been used in previous studies as a tool to analyze social media and the social context of the posts made (Fieseler & Ranzini, 2015; Richey et al., 2016). Thus, impression management theory will be used to identify circumstances in which individuals are actively illustrating an online image for the purpose of managing how they are perceived by others in their social circles. This will be done specifically by analyzing how and why certain experiences were selected to be shared over others, the selection process of said images and experiences, as well as what the poster was hoping that the perception of said experiences would be by their audience of choice.

### *Front, Back and Reality*

Goffman analyzed a structural division of social establishments into what he has termed as the “front” and “back” regions of a specific location, based on a dramaturgical metaphor. The front is known as “the meeting place” where hosts, guests, or customers and service persons interact, such as the front of a restaurant. The back is known as the “retirement place” where members of the home team retire between the performances in the front room to relax or prepare

for the future front room performances such as the kitchen of a restaurant. The role of the back room is to conceal the on-goings from the front room, allowing for a place to hide elements of an experience that would change the audience's image of what is happening in the front room (MacCannell, 1999). The idea of a backroom allows for a place for the behind-the-scenes magic of a specific tourist destination to occur. It is somewhere to hide the parts of an experience that are not glamorous, and that people may not want to see or experience such as hotels hiding maintenance from their guests.

During a tour experience, many times individuals are brought into an “exposed backroom” such as a tap room in a brewery. Although, this may appear to the tourist as the back room, in actuality it is a front region organized to look like a back region. By using this concept, it is possible to stage the area being showcased in a way that appears to look authentic, but in actuality is not. This concept is an example of staged authenticity and can be applied in relation to images as well and will be used to analyze the posts from specific tourist experiences that include “exposed backroom” experiences.

The idea of the structural division of social establishments can also be used in relation to images as a whole. For the purpose of my research, the “front room” images are considered the final product of an image; the image that has been edited and altered to meet the individual’s preferences. The “back room” can be considered the unedited version of the picture, the picture contains content that is not worthy to be shared with others and thus would not be posted, but will be kept for personal use. While the “exposed backroom” images are ones that are not overtly edited, but there has still been some form of curation such as cropping and the staging that was done while the photo was being taken and are posted to social media as “unfiltered photos”, but are still somewhat curated for the appreciation of others.

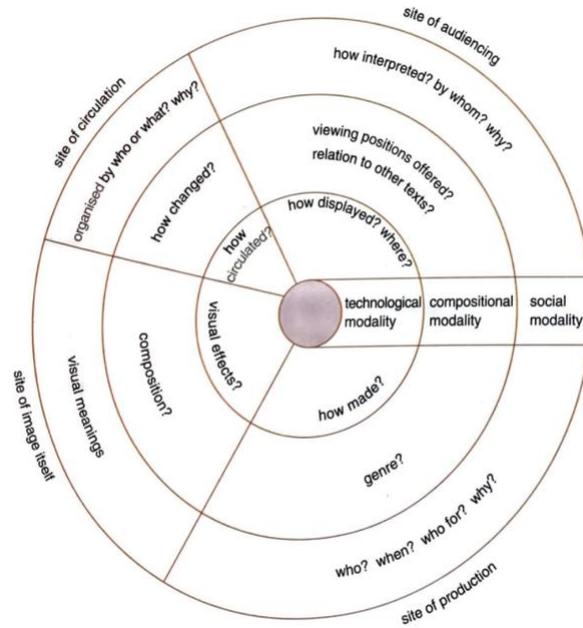
## **Personal Branding Theory**

Personal branding theory will be used to analyze how the experiences selected and the impression created on others through the content shared align with the overall personal brand of the individuals on SNS. The information found online provides a digital footprint that implicitly brands people (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007). As Peters first introduced in 1997, what personal branding really comes down to is the idea that individuals are no longer defined solely by their job titles. Workers no longer stay at the same job at the same company for the entirety of their career. It is quite common for individuals to switch careers, job titles and companies numerous times over the course of their lifetime. Individuals are going back to school at an increasing rate and pursuing additional education in a variety of forms to further grow their knowledge and skill offerings. Individuals are selling their personal brand and their distinctive set of skills and experiences when applying for new roles, branching into entrepreneurship or other opportunities as they arise based on the unique offering of skills and experiences that they have acquired over their lifetime.

The premise of personal branding is that everyone has the power to be their own brand and a person's main job is to be their own marketer (Peters, 1997). The concept of personal branding was once considered a tactic only for celebrities or high-profile figures such as business leaders and politicians, but the platforms provided by SNS have allowed a space for personal branding in the lives of ordinary people. Thus, personal branding theory will be used to further analyze how the images and experiences selected to be shared on SNS align with an individual's online persona. It will also be used to analyze how the sharing of these experiences aligns with an individual's overall sense of self, brand image, and professional goals as personal branding is a tool that allows individuals to manage the ideal impression that they want others to have of them by allowing them the opportunity to create an idealized online version of themselves.

## Critical Visual Methodology

The critical visual methodology framework developed by Gillian Rose (2016) that will be used when analyzing the images collected from my participants is based on the four sites at which the meaning from images is made: the site(s) of production of an image, the site(s) of an image itself, the site(s) of circulation, and the site(s) where it is seen by its various audiences. The site of production refers to the circumstances that surround the production of an image such as the year the photograph was captured. The site of the image itself refers to the formal components captured within the specific image – was it staged or did this photo occur naturally? The site of circulation refers to where an image is being displayed, this could be in person at an art gallery or online on Instagram. The site of audiencing refers to the process in which it has visual meaning renegotiated or even rejected in certain circumstances where people in different places and contexts make different meanings of the images they are viewing. Each of these sites can be further broken down into modalities. The three distinct modalities that contribute to a critical understanding of images are technological, compositional, and social. The technological modality refers to ‘any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the Internet’. For example, a *technical* modality of the site of audiencing would be a platform like Instagram where the photo is being shared to its audience. The *compositional* modality refers to the specific material qualities of an image or visual object such as its genre, composition, and relation to other texts or works of art. It is also related to how images are framed and what the framing itself represents. The *social* modality refers to any range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used. For example, when looking at the site of production, the social modality would include who was there, when the photo was taken, who it was taken for, and why it was decided to be taken in the first place (Rose, 2016).



**Figure D: The Four Sites**

*Source:* Rose, G. (2016). The sites and modalities for interpreting visual material. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. (4th ed.) Sage Publications, p. 25.

All four sites, as seen in Figure D, are of relevance to my research. The images collected from participants will be analyzed through this lens as these sites are used by individuals when creating and selecting images to be posted that align with their personal brand. The four sites also influenced the questions asked in the follow-up interviews with participants which provided more clarity on the images provided by participants during their first interviews. Thus, my research takes into consideration the technologies used to create an image such as an iPhone or a DSLR camera, its genre and social context when analyzing the site of production. It also takes into consideration the visual meaning of the images themselves and their significance, the composition of the images and any visual effects that are apparent in the site of the image itself. The site of circulation and the site of audiencing will be used to analyze the form the images take and how images are circulated on SNS as well as how they are interpreted by their audience.

Using Rose's four sites, I will be able to conduct a critical analysis of the images being presented by my participants.

### **Working Together**

Theory borrowing has resulted in creative and engaging uses of theory. Researchers should not borrow only theories that are consistent with existing research streams in marketing, but instead use critical reflection to probe into the structure of a theory. Goffman's theory of impression management and structural division of social establishment, Peters' personal branding theory, and Rose's theory of critical visual methodology share common underlying themes and theory structures (Murray et al., 1995). I will explain how these theories work together and how I used them in my research.

Impression management theory is based on the concept that individuals perform for each other in an attempt to manage the impressions that others have of them. This same concept of managing impressions is prevalent in personal branding theory. As individuals are selling their personal brand and their distinctive set of skills and experiences, they do so keeping in mind the impressions that others will be forming of them based on the information that they choose to share. Both of these theories were created before SNS was a prevalent part of everyday life and are a reflection of the findings of human interactions in social settings. SNS creates a space to transfer the everyday interactions that would normally occur offline into the online world. Thus, I believe that these two theories are compatible with each other and share similar underlying assumptions (Murray et al., 1995).

Goffman's structural division of social establishments and Rose's theory of critical visual methodology also share similar underlying assumptions when analyzing images of touristic experiences. The structural division of social establishment highlights the different areas of

social settings and how they are displayed to visitors in terms of front, back, and exposed back regions. These touristic experiences are then photographed and become a visual representation of the locations. These photographs can then be further altered using digital enhancements, thus further perpetuating the idea of front, back, and exposed backroom representations of reality and the role of staged authenticity. Using Rose's theory of critical visual methodology, these images can be further broken down and analyzed based on the four sites: production, the image itself, circulation, and audiencing. Rose's critical visual methodology directs attention to what aspects should be considered within Goffman's division of social establishment. Through the analysis of these sites and the modalities of technology, composition, and social impact, these two theories complement each other and allow for a more meaningful analysis of tourism related images.

## **Conclusion**

The theory of impression management will be used to analyze an individual's posts on social media, as they are naturally looking to manage the impressions that others have of them as they curate the content that they post. The ideal self that individuals are looking to portray online becomes their personal brand and is used to market themselves to others for a variety of personal and/or professional reasons. The images that individuals choose to share on their respective social media accounts are analyzed based on the four sites at which the meaning from images are made: the site(s) of production of an image, the site(s) of an image itself, the site(s) of circulation, and the site(s) where it is seen by its various audiences in order to determine the impact that these images may have on their personal brand. Furthermore, I am proposing the idea that images can also be categorized by Goffman's structural division of social establishments and can be organized into the following categories: front room, back room, and exposed back-room images. All of these theories have a common focus of transmitting an individual's ideal personal

self on social media and thus, creating an online brand that can be used to create a meaningful impression of themselves to others in the offline world as well.

## **Chapter 4: Research Method and Methodology**

*“Be methodologically eclectic or, even better, methodologically innovative; but do so bearing in mind the power relations that structure the connections between the different sites and modalities you want to bring together.”*

- Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*

In this study, I analyze the curated travel experiences shared by individuals on their selected SNS accounts using an interpretivist epistemological framework. I conducted semi-structured interviews in a qualitative research setting to gain a greater understanding of why individuals choose to share the select experiences that they do on SNS and how the sharing of such experiences shapes their overall personal brand. This chapter explores my research design and methodology, details the suitability of how my research method applies to my chosen research method, provides information on my participants and the steps taken to conduct my research (e.g. recruitment methods, screening of participants, the research process, etc.), and concludes with a discussion of my social location in relation to the experiences shared by my participants. I also provide a brief background on who Millennials and Generation Z are as individuals, their average education levels, and their financial situations, as well as what is known about their social values and their SNS usage.

### **Epistemological Framework**

The theory of knowledge, especially with regards to its methods, validity, and scope as well as the distinction between justified belief and opinion is known as epistemology (Oxford Reference, 2021). The underlying idea of the interpretivist approach is that the researcher is part of the research, interprets data and as such can never be fully objective and removed from the research (Brown, n.d.). For the purpose of my research, I will be using an interpretivist

epistemological approach as I am a member of the Millennial cohort who is active on various SNS and enjoys travelling. Interpretivism also deals with the concept of social constructivism and epistemic relativism, the view that there is no absolute warrant for any belief; that rational warrant makes sense only relevant to a culture, or an individual or a paradigm (Kukla, 2000). Interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings and instruments (Myers, 2013). With this in mind, I am a part of the research and I am able to interpret the data with underlying subject matter knowledge as I am a Millennial who meets the requirements I have outlined for my participants. However, in order to overcome as much bias as humanly possible, I am exercising self-reflexivity throughout the entire research process.

My research takes a qualitative approach to data collection as it focuses on the personal experiences of my participants and their unique approach to shaping their online personal brands. By using a qualitative approach, I am able to create an atmosphere where individuals get the opportunity to have a meaningful conversation about the various components and thought processes they go through when curating the content they create to be posted online (Myers, 2013). I believe that taking an interpretivist approach for the context of this qualitative study will allow for more meaningful and insightful information to be discovered, specifically in regards to the participants in the Generation Z cohort who have little research currently conducted on their age group. My study gives them an opportunity to use their voices and explain how they really feel about the online experiences they seek out and choose to share.

### **Research Design**

In this study, two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the first round of interviews, the main purpose was to gain an understanding of the different types of

experiences that individuals choose to share while engaging in tourism related activities as well as the benefits and drawbacks they experienced by sharing such experiences. In the second round of interviews, the purpose was to reach out to individuals of interest that required further clarification on the information provided in the initial interview as well as to gather more statistical information and to gain more insight into the select tourism experiences that participants choose to share after the initial interview. The interviews were conducted and recorded virtually using the online conferencing platform of the participants' choice. Each interview was recorded and then later transcribed.

### **Suitability of Selected Method**

Semi-structured interviews (questions can be seen in Appendix A), were selected as the tool for data collection as this format allows for participants to share information in a conversational manner and to not be confined to only answering the questions that they are being asked. This method allows for participants to be able to reflect on their experiences and to be able to share thoughts and opinions as they arise as well as to bring up new topics of conversation that were not previously planned. As semi-structured interviews are conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, they employ a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions. This allows for freedom for both the interviewer and interviewee, instead of strictly adhering to the topics on the agenda allowing the opportunity to touch on previously unforeseen areas of discussion (Adams, 2015).

The type of content being discussed during the interviews are not topics that could get the full range of detail through the use of a survey or in an open-ended written questionnaire. For example, a simple questionnaire response to a question such as "What do you consider to be a

good photo of yourself?” does not allow for the opportunity to ask follow-up questions where we get participants’ reactions in real-time.

## **Millennials and Generation Z**

### *Who are they?*

Millennials (born 1981-1996) are the first generation to come of age during the new millennium. As of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, Millennials became the largest living adult generation in Canada and the United States surpassing both Generation X and the Baby Boomers (Heisz and Richards, 2019; Fry, 2020). Generation Z (born 1997-2012), otherwise known as ‘digital natives’, were born into a world where SNS already existed and is currently the third largest generational cohort (Debczak, 2019 and Dimock, 2019). They are diverse individuals and are on track to be the most well-educated generation yet. They are moving toward adulthood with a liberal set of attitudes and an openness to emerging social trends (Parker et al., 2019).

### *Education Level and Financial Situation*

Compared to older generations at the same relative time in young adult life, Millennials have attained higher levels of education, which, for their generation more than others, is tied to higher future earnings and well-being. A Millennial with a bachelor’s degree had median annual earnings valued at \$56, 000 USD in 2018 (Bailik and Fry, 2019). However, the housing bust and the Great Recession which occurred in 2008 just before Millennials entered the housing market has negatively affected their short-term, and potentially long-term, ability to buy homes (Frey, 2018). Millennials have lower home ownership rates than previous generations did at their age. The high interest rates seen before the pandemic, a reluctance to buy, and significant debt or low savings due to their higher education level has prompted many Millennials to live with relatives

longer than previous generations as well as turn to rental housing. Furthermore, Millennials are also slower to marry and have children than the generations before them, thus they are spending more of their time and money gaining new life experiences such as going to concerts or travelling to different parts of the province, country, or city. Thus, they have gained the reputation for their tendency to prioritize experiences over products and have ignited what is known as the “experience economy” (Gherini, 2018).

As a result of Millennials’ inability to purchase homes, higher education levels and waiting longer to get married and have kids, they have more disposable income for experiential purchases. Businesses have realized that Millennials look to spend their money on experiences rather than products because they can capture and share these experiences with their friends online and thus, marketers have adapted the spaces they operate to accommodate this both locally and internationally.

Generation Z was in line to inherit a stronger economy than Millennials did, but this has all changed now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With Generation Z facing an uncertain future and approximately 50% of those aged 18 to 23 having lost their jobs during the onset of the pandemic shutdowns, compared to Millennials (40%), Gen Xers (36%) and Baby Boomers (25%) it is unclear how their future earning potentials will be affected. Despite this, Generation Z is on track to becoming the best educated generational cohort in our history (Parker and Igielnik, 2020). Although it is unclear at this time exactly what their spending habits will be, it is clear that consumers in Generation Z want direct value that is tailored to them individually and the ability to co-create an experience that is uniquely their own (IBM, 2021). Thus, they too are interested in the experiential side of purchases and will value the ability to be able to select and customize tourism experiences in their future travels.

### *Values and Social Networking Sites*

Both generations share common views on social issues like climate change and the role of government in their lives. They are both more likely to choose experiences over material items and are more likely to choose roles that emphasize purpose over profit. Whereas Millennials adapted quickly to the rapid changes in technology, those in Generation Z are digital natives, with little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones or social media (Parker and Igielnik, 2020). Regarding the use of social media, Millennials see social media as an addition to their existing relationships, while Generation Z sees social media as an integral part of their relationships and is more concerned about online security. They prefer to post “stories” that will not be online forever and are more selective about who they share their information with (Acer for Education, 2019).

As both of these generations use social media to add value to their offline relationships with others - they are the creators and followers of the ongoing trends and are aware of how their online presence has an impact on them both personally and professionally. Millennials and Generation Z are, therefore, an ideal group to analyze for the purpose of gaining insight on sharing curated experiences due to their social media habits.

### **The Participants**

Participants were recruited based on meeting the criteria that they were a member of either the Millennial, born 1981 to 1996, or the Generation Z, born 1997 to 2002, cohort, active on social media and have travelled outside of their home province in the last two years. They must have also posted about one of these trips on their respective social media channels.

These criteria are used as it ensures that my participants are in the correct generational cohorts and have relevant travel experience to reflect upon during their interviews. To recruit

participants, I created an advertisement that outlined these requirements using a free graphic design platform, Canva, which can be seen in Appendix B. This advertisement was shared on the SNS accounts of myself and my supervisor. The advertisement was also reshared by those in my network. Informants were also recruited from the Sprott undergraduate student participant pool, by advertising via the Research Participation Credits SONA platform. Students who responded to this invitation received course credit in exchange for their participation in the research study. Furthermore, the Hub for Good at Carleton University wrote an article to advertise the research I was doing and to help me recruit participants which was shared on their website as a blog post as well as on their respective SNS accounts. In total, 15 individuals were interviewed. Demographic information about informants is summarized in Table 1 below. Note that pseudonyms have been used to protect informants' privacy.

*Who are they?*

**Table 1: The Participants**

| <b>Informant</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Generational Cohort</b> | <b>Age Range</b> | <b>Education</b> | <b>Instagram Privacy Setting</b> | <b>Countries Visited</b>   |
|------------------|---------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Angela           | Female        | Generation Z               | 18 - 24          | Bachelors        | Private                          | Canada, Tanzania, China, Korea   |
| Chiara           | Female        | Millennial                 | 30 - 34          | Masters          | Public                           | Canada, Japan, France, Germany, Czech Republic, Greece, United States of America |
| Dennis           | Male          | Millennial                 | 25 - 29          | Bachelors        | Private                          | Canada, Australia, France  |
| Justin           | Male          | Generation Z               | 18 - 24          | Bachelors        | Private                          | Canada, Denmark, Germany, United States of America                               |
| Lawrence         | Male          | Generation Z               | 18 - 24          | High School      | Private                          | Canada, Egypt, Saudi Arabia  |

| <b>Informant</b> | <b>Gender</b>               | <b>Generational Cohort</b>             | <b>Age Range</b>   | <b>Education</b>   | <b>Instagram Privacy Setting</b>        | <b>Countries Visited</b>   |
|------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|
| Lily             | Female                      | Generation Z                           | 18 - 24  | High School  | Public                                  | Canada, Chile, England, United States of America, Peru                           |
| Linda            | Female                      | Millennial                             | 30 - 34  | Bachelors  | Public                                  | Canada, Thailand, Poland, United States of America, Hungary                      |
| Maria            | Female                      | Generation Z                           | 18 - 24  | High School  | Public                                  | Canada, India, South Africa, Spain, England, Scotland                            |
| Shane            | Male                        | Generation Z                           | 18 - 24  | Bachelors  | Public                                  | Canada, Italy  |
| Susan            | Female                      | Millennial                             | 25 - 29  | Masters  | Public                                  | Canada, Monaco, France, United States of America, Ireland                        |
| Tabitha          | Female                      | Millennial                             | 30 - 34  | Bachelors  | Public                                  | Canada, South Africa, Czech Republic, Philippines, Thailand, England, Costa Rica |
| Thomas           | Male                        | Millennial                             | 30 - 34  | Bachelors  | N/A                                     | Canada, Australia, United States of America, Peru                                |
| Tiffany          | Female                      | Millennial                             | 25 - 29  | Bachelors  | Private                                 | Canada, Switzerland, Finland   |
| Vanessa          | Female                      | Millennial                             | 35 - 40  | College  | Public                                  | Canada, Indonesia, Australia   |
| Willow           | Female                      | Generation Z                           | 18 - 24  | Bachelors  | Public                                  | Canada, Tanzania, India  |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>10 Female<br/>5 Male</b> | <b>7 Generation Z<br/>8 Millennial</b> | <b>7 (18-24)<br/>3 (25-29)<br/>4 (30-34)<br/>1 (35-40)</b> | <b>3 High School<br/>1 College<br/>9 Bachelors<br/>2 Masters</b> | <b>5 Private<br/>9 Public<br/>1 N/A</b> | <b>29 Different Countries</b>  |

Overall, the sample group recruited is highly educated, with 86% of them having completed a college diploma/undergraduate degree or higher and the other 14% currently in progress to earning an undergraduate degree. The education level of my participants is higher than the average of the general population, but this is to be expected as the participants were recruited from the Carleton Undergraduate Student Pool and from my personal network on the various SNS accounts that I have (Pew Research Center, 2021). Two of the participants in the Generation Z cohort received course credit for participating in my study. Regarding gender, 66.66% of my participants are female and 33.33% were males. This is to be expected, as women tend to be higher users of SNS with 78% of them using at least one social media platform compared to only 66% of men (Pew Research Center, 2021). The generational cohorts are pretty evenly split overall with 46.66% being members of Generation Z and 53.33% being Millennials. This may be attributed to the fact that I am at the tail end of the Millennial cohort myself, so my social network includes members of both cohorts, especially those who are the beginning of the Generation Z cohort (1997 to 2001). Participants also provided information on whether their Instagram accounts are public or private. This information was collected to aid with the analysis of audiencing of the posts shared online. Those with private Instagram accounts accounted for 40% of participants, while 60% identified that they had public facing accounts meaning that anyone on the Internet can have access to the content that they choose to share. The privacy of the individual's Instagram accounts is of interest as it relates to audiencing and who can see their posts. A private Instagram account is only seen by the individual's followers, whereas a public Instagram account has the potential to reach a much wider audience. Each participant had engaged in domestic tourism in Canada and had visited anywhere from 1 to 7 additional countries. Overall, the informants had participated in tourism experiences in 29 countries.

### *The Impacts of COVID-19 on Tourism*

During the data collection stage of my thesis, the restrictions put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic have severely affected the travel industry, specifically the ability for Canadians to travel both domestically and internationally. There is currently an on-going travel ban on non-essential travel as well as restrictions on travelling and mandatory quarantine periods for those travelling between certain provinces, such as the Maritimes, or upon returning from international travel (Government of Canada, 2021). Due to these restrictions, the scope of tourism to be covered in my research will include previous international travels as well as more recent domestic travel experiences including trips to other provinces, trips within the same province and tourist activities within one's own city.

### **Social Location**

As a researcher and a member of the Millennial cohort who would qualify as a participant in this study if I was not the one conducting it, I do have the ability to provide insight as a member of the in-group. Throughout this project, I have practiced self-reflexivity; the act of self-questioning of knowledge production and research practice - in order to mitigate the effects of my bias on the research and avoid misrepresentation of the participants and the stories they have decided to share in relation to their travel experiences (Reid, Greaves, & Kirby, 2017). Through the use of self-reflexivity, I hope to eliminate as much bias from my research as humanly possible.

### **Conclusion**

An interpretivist epistemological approach is used when analyzing the data gathered as I am a member of the Millennial cohort who is an active user on SNS and enjoy sharing travel

experiences online. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted as they provided an opportunity to facilitate discussion and provides an opportunity for topics of interest to be expanded on. As both Millennials and Generation Z are tech-savvy and active users of social media, they are the best generations to analyze on the topic of experience sharing on SNS.

Participants were recruited based on meeting the criteria that they were a member of either the Millennial, born 1981 to 1996, or the Generation Z, born 1997 to 2002, cohort, active on social media and have travelled outside of their home province in the last two years. They must have also posted about one of these trips on their respective social media channels. In total, 15

participants were interviewed in the first round and 10 were interviewed in the second round.

Each participant had engaged in domestic tourism in Canada and had visited anywhere from 1 to 7 additional countries.

## **Chapter 5: Data Analysis**

*“Travel came to be justified not through science, but through the idea of connoisseurship - 'the well-trained eye'.”*

- Judith Adler, *Origins of Sightseeing*

This chapter details the data collection and analysis processes. The data collection and analysis for this project followed the standard flow model of qualitative data analysis that is used by qualitative researchers across a variety of fields (Schutt, 2009). The first step was to collect and record the data during the data collection period. The second step was to organize the data as well as connect and code it to the existing literature during the data reduction stage. After this stage was completed, the data was then used to create data displays using qualitative research analysis tools such as NVivo and draw.io, a free software used to create online diagrams. The data displays were then used to assist in drawing conclusions and verifying the findings that were made.

### **Data Collection and Preliminary Analysis**

Due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic during the data collection process, the interview data was collected using the digital platform of the participants' choice. The options given were to use either Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Of the 15 participants that were interviewed, only one participant chose to use Microsoft Teams and the rest selected Zoom. All participants consented to being both audio and video recorded on these platforms. During the interviews I took notes on key aspects that were mentioned by participants, any hesitations or concerns that they had regarding questions or the content matter of the interview, as well as their facial expressions and tone of voice. Participants were also asked to select social media posts to expand on during the interviews that contained both text and images. These photos were then emailed to

me after the interview was conducted to be used for reference and analysis while transcribing the interviews and reflecting on the participants' experiences in a specific tourism location. Some participants also chose to share the links to personal travel blogs or travel blog posts that they had written that they believed would add additional value to my research. Select blog posts were read after the first interview and before the second interview that provided additional context to the images provided during the interviews.

After each interview, I transcribed the video recordings verbatim, assigned pseudonyms and added any notes of relevance that were taken during the interview. As I was transcribing past interviews, I was also in the process of setting up interviews with future participants. I found this approach to be useful as the more interviews I conducted, the key themes and trends began to emerge in the data. This process also allowed me to determine what questions participants were responding well to and which questions would need to be restructured or rephrased in the upcoming interviews. The information collected during the transcription phase of the first round of interviews was also used to create a follow-up interview script to pinpoint any topics of discussion that were missed in earlier interviews as well as to expand on topics of interest with specific participants in the follow-up interviews.

All participants were contacted to complete a follow-up interview (see Appendix C for follow-up interview questions) however, only 10 participants agreed to participate. This can be attributed to a variety of factors including participant fatigue, the re-opening of Ontario after the second province-wide lockdown, and the lack of financial incentive to continue participating in the thesis research of a master student. During the follow-up interviews, a baseline of the individual's social media presence and usage was identified. As a form of photo-elicitation, the photos that were sent to me after the first round of interviews were then expanded on to provide

additional detail regarding topics such as who took the image, what device it was taken on, and the story behind the selection of the specific location of said image. The images were sent to me after the first interview through e-mail. The photo-elicitation was done by using the screen sharing function on Zoom. I shared my screen to talk about the photographs that they sent me. I found the screen sharing tool to be beneficial to my research as it provided a higher quality view of the image than would normally be seen in a face-to-face interview if I was simply looking at the participants' images via their smartphones. This tool also allowed for a visual recording of the conversation and provided the ability to be able to point at specific aspects using the cursor of the mouse. As images can be used effectively (1) to create cultural inventories, (2) as projective stimuli, that is, in photo-elicitation, and (3) to examine social artifacts, I felt that it was important to include them in my research (Heisley and Levy, 1991). The photo-elicitation technique was a useful way of providing context to the conversations being had and allowed me to develop many of the questions I asked. This technique gave me the opportunity to learn more about the experiences being shared by my participants than I would have through just an interview. I collected 249 pages of transcription in the first round of interviews, 157 pages of transcription in the second round of interviews and collected 36 photos overall.

During the interviewing process and the on-going COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent travel restrictions around the world, it became evident that a tourist experience could also include activities locally, even in the same city as the participant was currently living, which has come to be known as a staycation (OED, 2021). For the sake of gathering relevant information on the curation of the photographs shared on social media, the concept of tourism for my participants evolved to any touristic experience, including activities in their current city.

## **Data Analysis**

The coding and analysis was completed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software produced by QSR International. The interviews and the images collected were uploaded to the software and organized by participant pseudonyms. Each participant was then made to be a case in order to combine the interviews of those who elected to do a follow-up interview with their initial interviews.

### *Coding and Theming*

The process of coding began by reviewing the six fundamental tasks associated with coding: sampling, identifying, building codebooks, marking texts, constructing models, and testing models (Myers, 2013). I informally had put together a codebook and had begun outlining models based on the general information that had been gathered based on the initial themes that began emerging during the transcription process from both the literature review and through impression management theory, personal branding theory, and critical visual methodology theory. Both the codebook and the initial models were later updated based on the information gathered during the coding process.

Throughout the coding process of my analysis, overarching themes were identified based on the content of the interviews and their relation to the existing literature. The main topics of conversation revolved around the process of posting, types of experiences shared, engagement levels, the trip planning process, Instagram images versus the reality of tourist locations, general picture preferences such as having brighter colours or being captured from the waist up, the curation of memories, personal branding, the role of impression management, and the drawbacks of posting. During the transcription process, I began to identify commonalities between my participants' answers and group them based on the themes that began to emerge. Using NVivo, I

was able to identify key words and phrases and group similar quotes and sections from my interviews together. By going through this process, I was able to identify and analyze the patterns in responses. Throughout the coding process, I was able to compare quotes within the same codes to determine the overarching similarities and differences by interview section. While coding, new themes began to emerge as the interviews continued, which allowed me to revisit my previous interviews and determine if the newly identified themes existed within the previously coded interviews. This process was iterative, having moved back-and-forth between coding and theming. By constantly revisiting and reviewing themes, I was able to determine areas that were missed in the initial interviews in order to create a new set of questions for the follow-up interviews with the selected participants. This allowed me to be able to gain further insight on areas of my research that may have otherwise been overlooked. By conducting my analysis in this way, I was able to transform the data I collected into something meaningful to myself and my intended audience (Myers, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

After conducting a thorough data analysis using NVivo to identify and code the emerging themes that were found during my interviews, I was able to turn these findings into meaningful results. The information collected was then organized based on the themes that emerged in relation to the research questions I identified at the beginning of my research process. In the next chapter, I will go over the findings in detail as well as any models and processes that I have identified along the way.

## Chapter 6: Findings

*“Consider the impulse to take photographs of our families. The urge to pick up a camera stems from an anxious awareness of our cognitive weaknesses about the passage of time: that we will forget the Taj Mahal, the walk in the country, and, most importantly, the precise look of a child as they sat building a LEGO house on the living room carpet, aged seven-and-three quarters.*

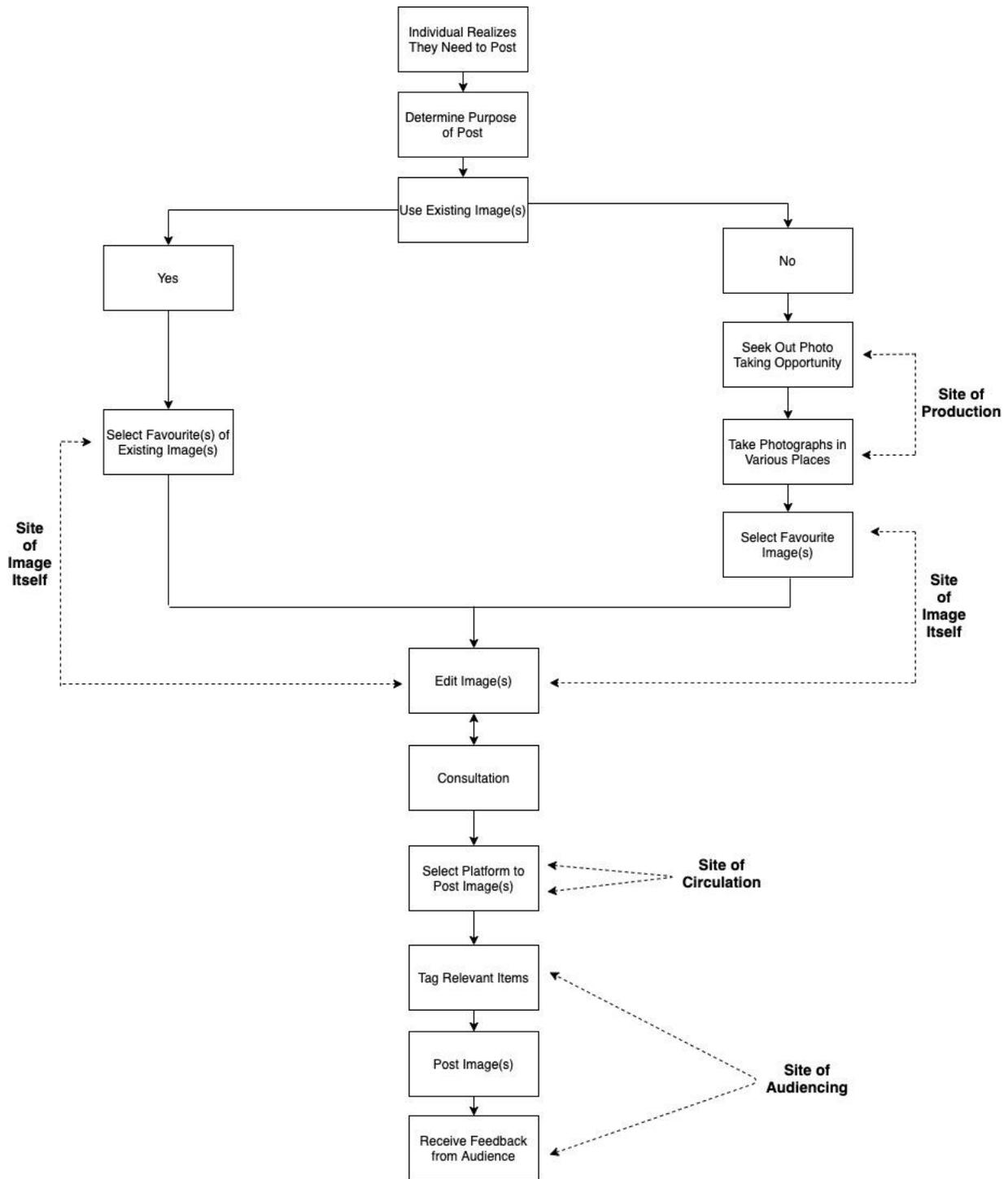
*What we are worried about forgetting, however, tends to be quite particular. It isn't just anything about a person or scene that's a stake; we want to remember what really matters...”*

*- Alain de Botton & John Armstrong, Art as Therapy*

The data analysis conducted provided insight into the thought process of individuals as they curate the content that they share to their various social media channels and how the content shared relates to their overall personal brand. In this chapter, I discuss the key findings in detail organized by the findings in relation to each research question. The findings will not be discussed in order as listed in the introduction, but instead, be described in terms of their relation to one another. I will begin by outlining the model that was created that showcases the processes that individuals go through when sharing tourism related experiences on social media. Then I will elaborate on the specific intentions given behind the posts that were shared. Finally, I will discuss the benefits and drawbacks received from sharing different types of experiences online, the professional and personal benefits that both generations gain, and how these experiences collectively contribute to their personal brands online.

### **The Process of Posting**

One of the main areas of interest during my interviews was the process that individuals go through while selecting and editing images to be later posted on social media. There are existing models available for posting on behalf of businesses, but to my knowledge, there is not an existing model looking at the messaging of the average individuals themselves when sharing their experiences with their selected audiences (Newberry, 2020).



**Figure E: The Process of Posting**

In Figure E, I have created a model based on the results of my interviews that showcases the process of posting on social media. The first step that typically occurred during this process was the realization that the individual has not posted in a while and that they “needed to post” an

image on social media. Next, they determine the purpose of the post. After this realization occurred and the purpose of the post is determined, the individual then selected between one of two options: 1) reuse or “recycle” an existing image or 2) seek out a photo-taking opportunity in the near future which could either be planned for the sake of taking images for social media or align with an upcoming event that would be deemed “noteworthy” or a milestone moment such as a wedding, graduation, or other relevant social event. Shane summarizes this moment of realization perfectly as he walks me through his inner dialogue as he begins to determine what kind of experience he would like to share with his audience in the near future.

Honestly, every once and a while I just kind of think like, ‘Damn, I haven’t posted on social media in a while, and I should probably do that’. And then I go through this process of trying to figure out what would be interesting, but I want to make sure it also aesthetically fits, but with some variation.

- Shane (Generation Z)

If seeking out a photo taking opportunity is selected, this photographic endeavour typically involves taking images in multiple positions, poses, or areas at a particular location. Shane provides us with an example of the photo taking opportunity he sought out upon finishing up his final year at Carleton University and moving out of his student house.

After I left Ottawa it took a long time, but I had recently dyed my hair and it had been a nice day and we did this spontaneous thing at the end of the day. I realized my friend was free and we went to a waterfall and took pictures for 2 hours or something. And like it wasn’t just me or just him, like we were both taking photos for each other.

- Shane (Generation Z)

Once the individual determines if they want to share an existing image or seek out a new photo taking opportunity, they then have to make the decision about which image or images are their favourite(s). This can be done either during the photo taking itself or after the event. Once the individual’s personal favourites are selected, they begin the editing and consultation process. During this process, individuals will begin editing their personal favourite photos to appear in the

aesthetic manner of their choosing and may also choose to consult with a close friend or group of friends to determine which image or images are worthy to be posted on their social media. The editing process can consume a lot of effort from the individual and may involve the use of different photo editing applications and tools to ensure that the images reflect the creative vision that the individual had in mind as well as remove any “blemishes”, “imperfections”, or anything that the individual may be self-conscious about. This stage can also involve a bit of a back-and-forth process with individuals re-editing certain images after receiving the feedback from those in their inner circle.

Shane outlines the process that he goes through as he begins to select his favourite image or images to be later shared on his Instagram page.

Then afterwards I keep all of the photos and when I go home, well usually not right away because at that point I'm usually really tired. I'm not like a huge social media person, so when I do this stuff it actually gets really annoying and I have a really old phone so I might just like leave it and after a while it will tell me that I'm running low on space, so that's my cue to go through and find the best photos and I'll usually pick one from each situation that we were in and then at that point I'll go to my friends and ask them which one did they like the best, just like a little focus group and then I'll pick the one that I like the best and I'll load it into Instagram and if there's really big problems with it or if I want to do one and the lighting just isn't right then I'll throw it into Photoshop first, but most of the times, I just use the Instagram editor.

- Shane (Generation Z)

In some cases, the editing process is longer than at other times and can involve the use of multiple applications in order to create the ideal image they want to share online. Susan provides us with a list of the different applications she uses as she edits the photos she takes to align with her artistic vision.



**Figure F: Susan on the Beach**

*Image supplied by Susan (Millennial)  
Posted on Instagram*

I will go and try to edit the colours and stuff, like I have a few different apps on photography. I have Canva, I have Remini, I have Facetune, I have Lightroom, Snapseed, VSCO photos and then airbrush and sometimes I will give myself a tan or make myself look better...this photo actually used to have a bunch of people in the back and I didn't want them in my photo, so I basically copy and pasted more sand. I don't do that often, but if there was a first step, that would probably be it. Adjusting like the background or cropping and then I would go to, if I was in it and I wasn't wearing makeup or something I would probably go to airbrush and then if my skin was red I would go in and smooth it out and then I would probably do skin tone alterations and then if I was having a bad day and felt fat I would make myself skinnier too. Then the last step would be VSCO and there I'll play with the contrast, exposure, I like my exposure down a bit and then contrast up a bit, and then a very light, light filter. I want to put in more effort in the future and take a photography course so that if one day I spend a lot of money on a destination that I spend a lot of time in I will be able to get some nice photos to eventually hang in my house and be proud of.

- Susan (Millennial)

Once the photo is in its final form, then it is up to the individual to select the platform that they would like to share the image on. Once the platform has been selected, then the individual will tag the relevant items such as the location, the account of others in the photo, and craft the caption to be shared alongside the image or images. Once the image is posted, then they may receive feedback from their audience on the selected platform.

As you can see in Figure E, the entire process from start to finish can be quite time consuming. The process of sharing an image on applications that are supposedly meant to provide a space to share instantly with friends, has become saturated with content that is far from what was originally intended. I believe that this is due to an individual's need to control their image and manage the impression that others form of them from the content that they share on social media platforms. Platforms such as Instagram were originally designed to be "instant" sharing, but instead are now used as a platform to share one's desired self.

### *The Role of the Four Sites*

When analyzing the stages identified in Figure E using Critical Visual Methodology theory, the four sites can be clearly identified throughout the model.

The site of production of the image in this model occurs while looking for a photo taking opportunity. The site of production takes into consideration the technical modalities such as the camera that was used to capture the image (a smartphone, polaroid or a DSLR camera). The compositional modality of the site of production takes into consideration the genre that the individual is aiming to portray in the images they are taking, for example, are they trying to create an image that could be categorized as street style fashion or are they looking to capture an image that is focused on nature. The social modality of the site of production would take into consideration aspects such as who is in the photo as well as social and political factors - is the individual looking to portray a certain level of wealth through the items of clothing they are wearing or looking to make a political statement? This site is of interest during the stages of "seeking out photo taking opportunity" and "take photographs in various places" of the process of posting model in my analysis. The three modalities provide further insight into the meaning of the site of production of the image and how this influenced their decision to share or not share an

image on social media. For example, one of my participants, Linda, chose not to share an experience at a winery that she was at because of the site of production of the image and the ongoing legal battle that one of her friends was involved in after a car accident. References to that friend at that specific site could not be shared online.

The site of the image itself is seen in the selection of favourite images and the editing process. During this stage of the process, aspects such as the spacing and layout of a photo will be taken into consideration. Questions such as, “Do I look good in relation to the background?” will be taken into consideration at this stage. Regarding the technology, considerations such as “What tools would be best to edit this photo?” are taken. The compositional modality takes into consideration the colours selected for the photo as well as the ideal layout or spatial organization - does the individual want the image that has the purple flowers or the red ones in the background? Do they want to be in the foreground or the background of the image that they post? The social modality takes into consideration the meaning behind the image selected. Is the individual selectively choosing the image with the Eiffel Tower in the background because it is a marker? The three modalities provide further insight into the meaning of the site of the image itself such as political statements made in the image and the choice of using filters or not to edit the photo to determine how this influenced their decision to share or not share a specific image on social media. For example, Susan chose to share images with compositional elements that resemble postcards and applies visual effects such as filters that further resemble the postcard aesthetic.

The site of circulation is seen in the stage of selecting a platform to post an image(s). During these stages, individuals are selecting the platform that they want the image to be circulated on such as Instagram, Facebook, or LinkedIn. Technological considerations such as

the algorithms used by the platforms or file size occur during this stage. In terms of compositional modality, aspects such as whether this is an original picture or a scanned copy of an image such as a polaroid. Social considerations such as the photo's origins and its movement from platform to platform would be considered in these stages. For example, a photo that was originally intended to live on Instagram but was later shared to Facebook as well. This site is of interest during the "select platform to post image" stage of the posting process. Linda, one of my participants frequently does this when sharing images to her Instagram story as travel throwback memories that were previously featured on her blog.

The site of audiencing is seen in the stages of tagging relevant items and the feedback from the audience. In terms of the technological modalities, the concept of tagging items such as the location of an image or relevant others may change the audience to be larger than just the individual's immediate social network depending on the privacy of their account, thus, allowing for a larger audience to potentially provide feedback. In terms of composition, aspects such as the arrangement of an image in a digital photo album may influence who ends up seeing it. For example, if an image is one of 100 uploaded, it may never be seen or simply glanced over. Socially, how the image is interpreted by others and the feedback they provide may also be dependent on the platform selected and the audience associated with that platform. An image could be received strongly on Instagram but deemed too scandalous by the audience on Facebook or LinkedIn. This site is of interest during the "tag relevant items" and "receive feedback from audience" stage of the process of posting of my analysis. For example, this can be seen when Tiffany experiences a high level of engagement from her university graduation photos after tagging her friends in the photos who have a large social media presence.

## **Types of Experiences Shared**

Throughout the interview process, participants shared a wide range of tourist experiences ranging from culinary experiences to experiences that they felt were unique or off the beaten path. For the purpose of my analysis, *culinary experiences* are experiences that involve food where food is the main aspect of the excursion whether it is going out to a restaurant or attending a cooking class, these are experiences that are related to the consumption of food and drinks. *Exclusive experiences* are experiences that are less commonly attended based on a variety of factors such as the ability to access the location where the experience takes place, financial limitations due to the high cost of an experience, or simply just being in the right place at the right time. *Outdoor experiences* are experiences that are nature-based and the main attraction of the experience is visiting a naturally occurring location such as hiking in the Rocky Mountains or a watering hole in Mexico. Experiences that are categorized as *staged authenticity and the tourist package* are experiences that are created to resemble an authentic experience or match the version of a location that visitors expect to see when they arrive based on the images and previous portrayals of the location they have seen in the media as well as experiences that are typical of the location that is visited and are part of the traditional markers that equate seeing said location such as seeing the CN Tower when visiting the City of Toronto.

**Table 2: Experience Types**

| <b>Experience Type</b>                      | <b>Frequency</b> |
|---|------------------|
| Culinary                                    | 11               |
| Exclusive                                   | 5                |
| Outdoors                                    | 4                |
| Staged Authenticity and The Tourist Package | 8                |

In Table 2, the frequency of each experience type is listed. Some informants shared more than one experience. These experiences that have been shared by participants are used to align with their personal brands. When selecting the types of experiences that an individual wants to share, they consciously select the experiences that complement their existing personas and continue to manage the impression that others have of them. For example, Lily, a self-proclaimed "foodie", chooses to share culinary experiences with her audience frequently. If Lily were to instead start sharing more images of being outdoors, her overall personal brand would shift from being a "foodie" to a "foodie + nature lover". By keeping the experiences that she shares consistent, she is furthering her online persona of being a foodie and her audience maintains this image of her in their minds.

*Staged Authenticity Explored in Detail*

When analyzing the types of experiences shared by participants throughout the interview process, many individuals recounted experiences that they stated as "authentic cultural experiences". Many of these experiences reflect the ideas presented by MacCannell in that some tourists do in fact make incursions into the life of the society that they visit and are allowed to peek into the "back regions" as defined by Goffman (1999). However, as participants began explaining in detail the types of experiences that they were referring to as "authentic cultural

experience” it became clear that these experiences were either culinary in nature or part of an experience with components that were staged as authentic as these were created keeping in mind that outsiders would be joining them and looking to gain a sense of their day-to-day life.

Willow describes her experience when visiting Africa to collect research as part of a project she was working on in an undergraduate course.

We took a walk around the grounds to see what it was like, the difference in landscape, to see where they housed young girls who were just about to go into school who were about 13 years of age and in the post you can see that there’s this structure right behind them and that’s where they did all their dishes and washing...It was kind of an eye opener because they would sit down and wash with their hands and sit on a bucket and be hunched over and they would wash their dishes or their clothes or really anything else that needed to be cleaned.

- Willow (Generation Z)

This experience provided value and insight for Willow about the day-to-day life of these women and children, however, it is important to note that this type of experience is what MacCannell would refer to as an “exposed backroom” experience. Willow was allowed a peek into the backroom of the lives of these individuals, but these backroom experiences were put in place knowing that visitors would be interested in learning about them during their two week stay. The walk around the grounds in the form of a tour and the style of cleaning was put on display for them to experience. It is a space for outsiders who are permitted, as Willow was, to view the details of the inner workings of a culture other than hers. By sharing these exposed backroom experiences on SNS, Willow was able to showcase her cross-cultural learning experience to her audience while also managing the impression that she wants others to form of her. By sharing an experience such as this, Willow is able to showcase that she is aware of the customs and norms of other cultures and as well as highlight who is impacted by the research that she is doing.

Many of the culinary experiences described by participants also echoed this idea of staged intimacy described by MacCannell, whether it was the participation in a wine tour or

attending a restaurant that cooked in an authentic and exposed manner. For example, when Linda participated in a wine tour with a group of friends, she toured the exposed backroom areas of the wineries where she was able to experience a controlled snippet of what goes on in the real backroom in the winery. She was given a glimpse into what the backroom activities look like, without experiencing the reality of the backroom itself.

### *The Tourist Package*

Another common type of experience shared by participants were experiences that I refer to as the *tourist package*. The tourist package is constructed by others who are either from the area the tourist is visiting or are quite familiar with that location and contains all the relevant symbolic markers that constitute visiting a particular location. Tabitha describes this concept when she was in the process of travelling around the world over a four-year period.

I find usually, even as a traveler, there's like the little tourist package. And in every location, you know, my first stop after South Africa was Prague. So, you go see the town center and the clock that they used in Harry Potter and you go see the castle and they have a peacock garden. And particularly I was traveling through hostels. So, you go to a hostel and the people who work there, they're like, these are the 10 things you want to see.

- Tabitha (Millennial)

Tabitha describes what an example of a tourist package in Prague, Czech Republic would look like and where she would have obtained this information during her travels. It is important to note, that Tabitha considers herself a traveler as she was away from her home country of Canada for a four-year period and stayed in certain locations for months at a time, but when she is new in a location, she puts on her tourist hat and first acquaints herself with her new location by participating in the tourist package and experiencing the symbolic markers that constitute her new city. Many of the images that she captures during her first few days in a new location include the symbolic markers and are then shared online to her audience. As a traveller, Tabitha

chose to share many of the images that included symbolic markers online via her various social media channels and blog. By including images that have these symbolic markers, Tabitha's audience can immediately recognize what city she is in. The images of symbolic markers complement Tabitha's personal brand and align with the online image that she is portraying to others: that she is well travelled.

## **Engagement**

The term engagement is a catch-all phrase to describe any sort of interaction with the content produced by a person or brand. For most digital marketing practices, engagement refers to clicking on the thing that the marketer wants you to click on (Driskill, 2021). The term engagement means different things to different people depending on the context or if it is in reference to their personal or private accounts, a social media account designed as a public facing blog or an account set up to promote a business of a particular size.

### *The Engagement Hierarchy*

The most frequently listed form of engagement mentioned throughout the interviews was the infamous "like", followed by "comments", and then "shares" as third.

When asked why "likes" were still considered the most popular form of engagement despite Instagram's removal of the feature from personal accounts in 2019 in Canada (Keith, 2019), Willow expressed that her reason for this selection was based on the accessibility of this feature.

Uhm, when I think of engagement, I personally think of likes, just because that's the first thing that someone usually does when they flip through pictures and just to back that up it's the first thing that me or some of my friends do."

- Willow (Generation Z)

This feature appears to be listed first by most individuals due to the quick nature of the engagement. One can simply “like” a photo and move on scrolling through their newsfeed without spending time thinking of an appropriate comment or remark about the photo. There is little effort involved but brings across the sentiment to the poster that they enjoyed the content that was shared.

When it comes to the comment section of a post, this was consistently described as the second most thought of engagement type. Tiffany explains why she considers comments to be the second-most level of engagement based on the simple statements made in the comment sections on the post she shares. Many of the comments made were standard such as a birthday acknowledgement.

I would say comments are second because they are just something simple like someone will say ‘Oh you look great and congratulations or happy birthday,’ and you can just like their comments, it doesn’t elicit a full response.

- Tiffany (Millennial)

The comments left on Tiffany’s posts are often short and sweet. Other participants shared statements throughout their interviews that echoed this sentiment as well. If a conversation is to be had as a result of posting a photograph, it will not occur in the comment section of the image, but rather the messaging portions of the platforms in a more private setting.

“Shares” through the sharing tool on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook were described as third by participants when thinking about engagement on their personal accounts. Sharing someone else's post to your account increases the audience of the post and may introduce new individuals to their profile. For some, this may be a benefit as they may intentionally be trying to grow their audience, while for others, this may feel like a violation of their privacy. By sharing someone else’s content, you are showcasing that you approve of their

post and feel that it is worthy to be shared with others. For example, if you graduate from university and your family shares the post that was shared with their audience, they are showcasing your accomplishment and furthering the reach of this new aspect of your personal brand. Now more people know that you are a university graduate and may reach out to you for future opportunities in your field.

### **High Engagement**

When speaking to participants, it became clear that “high engagement” for an individual differed from person to person based on the reference point of their choosing. For example, someone who normally only gets 20 to 30 likes would find 50 likes to be high engagement, whereas someone who normally gets 150 likes would find 50 likes to be exceptionally poor engagement. When I asked participants to reflect on the types of posts that normally receive higher engagement than others, the most common themes that emerged were posts that were out of the ordinary, posts from milestone moments such as a graduation or anniversary, participating in viral trends, and the inclusion of relevant others, each of which is discussed next.

#### *Out of the Ordinary*

One of the first things that participants mentioned when asked about what types of posts get the most engagement on their personal social media accounts were posts were out of the ordinary, either ones that were shared after a long posting hiatus or images themselves that were very different from what they typically posted such as photos from a different country or images that require more attention to detail than the individual’s regular post. This increase in engagement could be attributed to a wide variety of reasons such as the social nature of humans, the general interest that humans have in the lives of others, as well as the social comparison that

arises when looking at images and posts shared by others (Iacoboni et al., 2004; Bhargave and Montgomery, 2013; Singh and Ang, 2021).

For some individuals, they choose to only share social media posts to their grid when they do something worth sharing, but they will share small daily or weekly updates to their stories that disappear within 24 hours. By choosing to selectively share images from out of the ordinary moments to their grid, they are shaping their online persona to only highlight their best moments and it may appear to others that they live a much more exciting life than they do. When an individual does decide to share an insight into their life after a posting hiatus, this newfound information may be of immediate interest by the individual's social network as they are interested in catching up on what that individual has been doing during their offline time. It is also important to note that many SNS sites do give notifications if someone is posting for the first time in a long time, thus alerting an individual's social network if they have posted through the use of push and in-app notifications (Johnson, 2020).

Vanessa describes the increase in engagement that occurs after she posts an image or group of images after not sharing for a long period of time.

When I do post a picture after a long time, I'll get a lot of likes and comments from my friends and they'll be like "oh my God, cool picture" or something like that and it'll be like a nice photo of me with a good background or a nice outfit or me doing something fun. Like a lot of my Australian pics got a lot of likes and comments because they were like really cool pictures and scenic areas.

- Vanessa (Millennial)

Members of Vanessa's social network engaged strongly with the images that she shared from when she was in Australia as these images were out of the ordinary of what she, as a Canadian, typically would post. Posting tourism related images from an area that many of her followers do not get to experience on an average day may result in feelings of benign envy, thus increasing their interest in potentially going to that location in the future (Liu et al., 2019). These types of

images also contribute to Vanessa's personal brand and showcase her interests and travel experiences to her audience. As she has selectively chosen to not share images to her grid regularly, incorporating pictures from her trip to Australia makes her life appear exciting to her audience, especially if the other images posted to her grid are also from other travels she has been on.

Another out of the ordinary type of post that garnered strong engagement were images that appeared to be taken for professional purposes or were of higher than usual quality and had the poster themselves as the focus. These types of images such as images of individuals dressed up at a destination wedding or from a high-end dining experience require more preparation time and effort such as purchasing a nice outfit, selecting the right location at the right time etc. than an average image would. These types of images expand on what we typically think of as a "selfie". Selfies are defined as self-representational, networked photographs. They are photos that represent yourself, however, your face does not have to be in the photograph itself to be considered a selfie, but the photograph should have the ability to be shared with others in theory (Tiidenberg, 2018). As a social practice, selfies are shared on digital platforms such as Instagram in rituals involving the self, the camera, platform applications and others where the number of likes are quantified (Cambre and Lavrence, 2019). Thus, it is only natural that the combination of the self and a tourist attraction in a higher-than-average quality image would be received positively by the posters audience. One of my participants, Willow, describes in detail what her highest engaged photo is on Instagram and how she believes that the reason for it is the quality of the image and the inclusion of herself.



**Figure G: Willow on the Rideau Canal**

*Image supplied by Willow (Generation Z)  
Posted on Instagram*

I had this photo taken while I was on the Rideau Canal and it looks like a very professional photo. It's an up-close photo of me and the snow is falling and it looks like it could be in a magazine. It got the most likes out of any of my photos. I don't normally post a lot of up-close photos of me so maybe that's why it got a lot of engagement, but also the lighting was perfect and it honestly could have been taken out of a magazine for like coats or hats.

- Willow (Generation Z)

Willow describes how the image she posted on her Instagram while on the Rideau Canal (See Figure G) is similar to one that would be seen in a magazine or an advertisement on social media.



**Figure H: Roots Advertisement**

*Roots Canada. (2021). Winter Sale. Roots.com*

As you can see in Figure H, the outfit and pose in Willow's photograph in Figure G is very similar to a professional advertisement put together by Roots. Willow is not an influencer or affiliated with the company, but the resemblance of her photo to these types of advertisements would garner more engagement as it appears to be almost professionally done with a striking pose as well as good lighting and scenery. Although a selfie by nature, this type of photo tells a story and showcases the Canadian winter and the Rideau Canal as an ideal tourist destination. It also contributes to Willow's personal brand, part of which is being a Canadian as it showcases her in an activity that others would expect a Canadian living in Ottawa to participate in.

### *Milestone Moments*

Another area that participants stated having higher than usual engagement was on photos that were related to the milestone life moments such as a graduation or a work accomplishment. Many of these milestone life moments are the ones that were used in advertisements by Kodak in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are a product of Kodakization (Urry and Larsen, 2011). These congratulatory moments of celebration are translated online with an onslaught of likes,

comments, and shares which would not normally occur on an individual's typical post. Tiffany describes the engagement that she received after posting photos from her undergraduate convocation including messages from friends, family, and previous teachers who had helped her along the way to this milestone.

I posted photos when I graduated from Carleton and those are probably my most interacted with ones because I feel that there were a lot of people that were involved in my life in the journey of trying to get me to university, so it got a lot of engagement in the sense that there were teachers in high school that I now have on Facebook that would have commented or liked it or whatever and like my parents and my family members, it was kind of a big milestone and a celebration, so it definitely got like the most engagement I think.

- Tiffany (Millennial)

Milestone posts are catered to their audience and allow for the opportunity for their audience to share in the celebration of the accomplishment. In Tiffany's case, those who helped her reach her important life milestones were able to share in her accomplishment no matter where they were situated in the world.

The same can be said with big work accomplishments such as an individual getting their first job in their designated field, getting a promotion with a large increase in pay and responsibility or getting an opportunity to travel internationally for a big conference. Thomas, a member of the Canadian military was asked to carry the Eagle Staff, a sacred symbol in Indigenous cultures, in a ceremony abroad in Australia. Thomas reflects on the experience he had abroad while working and how it was well received by his social network based on the cultural significance that the Eagle Staff photos had on his community.

Certainly, anything with the Eagle Staff was really well received by my friends, family and extended network and as well a lot of the trips. I don't post much, but when I do, it's pretty worthwhile and gets decent engagement. The strongest would be the big life events like moving from one city to another and saying we bought a house or whatever, those kind of style of events.

- Thomas (Millennial)

Any of these “big life” events where the work that an individual is doing is providing an impact or representation to a larger audience invites engagement from members of that community.

These types of events are particularly common with members of the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts as they are still in the earlier stages of their careers and have more professional and personal milestones to share (Bailik and Fry, 2019). Furthermore, members of these cohorts understand how difficult some of these big life events such as purchasing a first home are to accomplish, thus members of these cohorts are likely to share these types of accomplishments online and engage with others in their generational cohort when they share these types of accomplishments to join in on the celebration of said milestone. Sharing these big life events on SNS showcases the accomplishments that each person has and helps to form the impression that others have of them. For example, sharing that you bought a house showcases to others that you are financially savvy and have made enough money for a down payment and a mortgage approval. Relevant others who see this accomplishment posted on social media will add this new piece of information shared to their existing opinion of you. This piece of information, being an accomplishment, will most likely strengthen their opinion of you and your overall success in life.

### *The Inclusion of Relevant Others*

A large part of the audience of an image(s) or a post has to do with who has access to seeing the post and the privacy settings on an individual’s account. Depending on the privacy settings on said individual’s account, their posts may be shared with the audiences of relevant others who are tagged in their posts, thus, increasing the audiencing of the post. By increasing the audiencing of a post as well as tagging relevant others who are in the image or were part of the experience increases the potential for engagement and may be higher than it would have been

if it were just the poster themselves in the post. Shane reflects on a photo he had posted with his significant other at the time and the increased level of engagement that it received.

I posted a photo with an ex one time and she was tagged in it and all of her friends commented on it, but usually people don't comment on my photos.

- Shane (Generation Z)

The inclusion of the significant other in the photo allowed for Shane's partner's social circle to participate in the engagement of the photo, which they most likely would not have done if it were not for Shane tagging his partner. Tagging another person provides an opportunity for members of that person's social circle to feel comfortable engaging with the post.

If the person(s) who are tagged have a much larger social media audience than the poster themselves, this will also result in larger overall engagement of the post as multiple social circles are now interacting with the same post and the impression of the poster is being spread across a larger group. Tiffany describes how two of her friends were in some of the photos that she posted when she graduated from university and how these friends with a larger social media presence than her increased the engagement that she received on that post.

Definitely one thing I would say was who was in the photos with me. So, in the photos that I posted, two of my friends were in it and both of them have pretty big social media presences and have pretty big families, like we were all dressed up in the photos and wearing our gowns, so I would say that the two takeaways from that are that the people you have in the photos can definitely influence it if they have a bigger social media presence than you and then the gowns also helped, because again it was something unique. People can't post photos of it every day, so if you are scrolling past it, the gowns kind of catch your eye.

- Tiffany (Millennial)

As the audience for a post increases, so does the potential for engagement and the potential for the poster's brand to be spread to a wider audience, especially when the said post includes relevant others that would be of interest to the poster's social circle.

### *Participating in Trends*

When individuals decide to participate in viral trends or challenges on social media such as the “ALS Ice Bucket Challenge” in 2014 or the “What’s living in your head rent-free?” Tik Tok trend, they open themselves up to a wider audience than themselves. This also showcases that they are aware of the current trends which may be important to maintaining their personal brand. Susan reflects on the first post that she got strong engagement when participating in the ‘Condom Challenge’ on Instagram.

The first time that I ever posted something that got really strong engagement was this thing called the ‘Condom Challenge’ and you fill up one with water and you get someone to drop it on your head kind of thing and it forms this balloon and I went like Instagram viral, not really, but I got like 6,000 views or something and yeah, that was that. Other times, it’s been like when I partake in a challenge or done giveaway posts or like I did a Tik Tok recently where I was jumping on a trend. It was just a song, so I did one and again I got a lot of views.

- Susan (Millennial)

By participating in large well-known challenges that involve tagging or nominating others, it increases the reach of the post itself and solidifies the individual’s brand as a member of the in-group of that activity. It is also important to think about the context of the challenge you are participating in and how this can be viewed by relevant others. For Susan’s personal audience, having her friends see her participate in this challenge would be no big deal, however, having her employer see this challenge might be a different story.

There are also trends that can be considered more personal that receive large amounts of engagement when posted to members of that individual’s social circle. Thomas is an avid collector of LEGO and owns thousands of dollars’ worth of unique pieces. He likes to take his LEGO pieces with him when he travels and will even seek out specific LEGO figurines and order them months before travelling to a specific destination. Thomas takes a lot of time to curate specific scenes for his LEGO figurines when travelling, ensuring that they fit the context

of the country he is visiting and that they are placed in areas that match the sizing of the LEGO so that it appears almost life-like (See Figure I). Although these images are not curated into a separate Instagram account or Facebook album, his social network knows to look for them hidden amongst his Facebook travel albums and they always receive a large amount of positive feedback and engagement from his audience.



**Figure I: LEGO in Australia**

*Image supplied by Thomas (Millennial)  
Posted on Facebook*

If I were to post something about the LEGO people, everybody loves those...I've got like a good collection of the little people where I can pretty much go and do anything. I can go rock climbing and bring like a Spiderman LEGO guy with me or yeah, I remember Hawaii was Lilo & Stitch and some pirates so on the beach it looked pretty cool. I brought a little LEGO monkey to Costa Rica, all sorts of fun things.

- Thomas (Millennial)

In the image above, Thomas has strategically placed his LEGO figurine in an area where the background is in scale and has included relevant animal figurines to help set the stage. These images are known to his followers and become a sort of game where they look for them amongst the images that he shares. Including these types of images on his travels has become a part of

Thomas's personal brand and is almost expected of him when he travels. These posts are fun for Thomas to create and they also are a form of entertainment to his friends. By sharing these posts, Thomas is able to manage the impression that others form of him to include that he has a sense of humour and a creative side.

### **Low Engagement**

Naturally not every image or post can receive high levels of engagement. Some posts that receive low engagement do so as they are simply just not relevant to the audience they are being shared to while others may be more uncomfortable in nature and thus, the audience may not be interested in engaging with the post for a wide variety of reasons.

#### *Lack of Relevance to Audience*

Images that do not include the poster themselves are often of little relevance to their audience. If an individual posts a scenery photo of a landscape in Costa Rica and does not include themselves or something of relevance in the image, then there is little reason for their audience to engage. Susan states this quite plainly when she describes her thought process behind selecting the photos that she chooses to share with her audience.

In the back of my mind, it's like do people really care to see my travel photos or would they go to National Geographic or something and look up a real photographer's photos of a specific location if they were interested? Probably. So, if I'm in it or at least something else is in it they will be like oh look, there she is in this place.

- Susan (Millennial)

Susan makes a strong point in her statement. Why would someone care about the photo of a landscape that she takes using her smartphone when they could go online and see a much higher quality photo taken by someone who takes photographs for a living? These types of images lack relevance to her audience in her personal network and are thus, typically something that receives lower engagement overall. However, it is important to note that these types of images could be of

relevance to future employers as they would showcase that she has travelled a lot and has personal knowledge of other cultures.

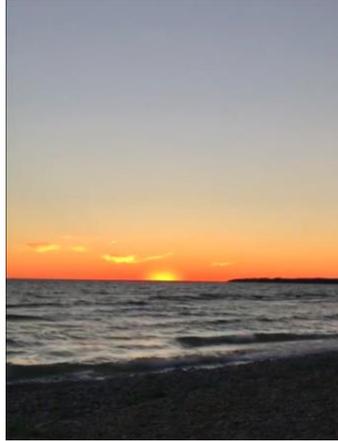
Lily echoes this same sentiment as she talks about why she stopped posting photos of the food that she eats on her Instagram newsfeed. The images of food that she was taking and sharing to her newsfeed were not relevant to her audience. Instead, she has transitioned to posting these types of images and experiences using the story feature on Instagram.

If I post pictures of things that don't have me in it, like I think that's why I stopped posting food pictures on my feed because it wasn't getting enough engagement or if you post a picture of like a monument, people don't really engage as much.

- Lily (Generation Z)

By choosing to share these experiences instead using the Instagram story feature, she has begun receiving more engagement in the form of conversations. By changing the tool or technical modality in the site of circulation that she uses to post experiences that have little direct relevance to herself, she is able to utilize these experiences to start meaningful conversations with her followers through direct messaging instead.

Images or posts that are of seemingly normal everyday experiences do not typically receive a lot of engagement. While many may find a sunset particularly beautiful to experience in person, seeing it photographed and shared to social media multiple times by different individuals who live in the same area as you may not be of particular interest to their audience. Willow describes the low level of engagement that she received when posting an image of a sunset from a memorable night at a cottage she went to with friends in Northern Ontario (See Figure J).



**Figure J: A Standard Sunset**

*Image supplied by Willow (Generation Z)  
Posted on Instagram*

I posted a photo of a sunset, like it was just of a sunset and I didn't get a lot of engagement on it, it was like nobody cared for it. 'Wow, a sunset, cool, I've seen it before,' but it was memorable to me and I took it in a moment where I was 5 hours up north at a cottage and it was a really memorable experience for the both of us, so I kept it up because of that. I think it was received so poorly because it wasn't the most beautiful sunset that someone has seen in their life. Again, this was before, well slightly after my most liked photo, but the camera is kind of off angle and the sunset is a bit crooked, and it's almost gone away, so it's like the sheer last bit of a perfect moment and I didn't have a caption either. I just kind of posted the picture in the moment, so I think that's why it was received so poorly.

- Willow (Generation Z)

Willow comments on the fact that this seemingly average photo was posted after the photo that had received the most engagement that she has ever gotten. Using her previous photo as a reference point highlights the extreme difference in the engagement levels received on the two posts. She also points out how this photo has many small imperfections whereas the photo she described earlier on the Rideau Canal was professional looking and magazine-like. The contrast of the engagement level on these two photos reflects the nature of the content at the site of production and the technical modalities present in the photo quality of the images themselves.

### *The Direct Ask*

Asking others directly for engagement with a post can be uncomfortable, especially when the engagement the poster is asking for involves making a financial donation. Similar to real life situations where individuals are soliciting donations at a shopping mall or in front of a high-traffic business, potential donors may be put off by the direct nature of the ask and choose a different route or blatantly ignore the request by choosing to not engage with the individual attempting to fundraise (Sargeant and Shang, 2017). This same social situation can occur on SNS, especially in recent years as these sites have created built in fundraising components on the platforms themselves as well as the onslaught of use of crowdfunding websites. Dennis describes how he was ignored online when posting a link to an online fundraiser for his team's trip to Australia to represent Canada on the world stage.

When I was going to Australia, we had like a team fundraising thing and it was one of those Crowdfunding things and that didn't perform as well as it needed to get me some cash to go. So, people were like that's cool that you are going to Australia, but when I posted the sponsorship link for that, people wouldn't really engage with it, share it or really help. I kind of said, like even if you can just pass this along to other people, that would also be useful. So, I think the direct ask, people didn't like being asked for money and we were self-funding our trip to Australia, so it was like really important that we could kind of get some of that additional help, so that performed poorly, but that actually kind of mattered because I had to keep finding other ways to get the money to go kind of thing.

- Dennis (Millennial)

Dennis attributes the lack of engagement to people in his social network being put off by the direct ask for money. The lack of engagement he describes had a negative impact on his financial situation as his goal was to obtain assistance funding his trip to Australia. It is reasonable to assume that this online situation emulates what would potentially have happened if Dennis were to have engaged in fundraising efforts by asking members of the general public who do not have a personal connection to him or his cause. Having low engagement on a post that is fundraising for a big trip that you are attending while representing your country has a negative impact on

both your personal brand and your self-esteem. By not having a lot of engagement, this can appear to outsiders that you are not being supported in your endeavours.

### **The Trip Planning Process**

As many things have transitioned to the Internet in recent years, so has the trip planning process. Traditional bloggers and SNS based bloggers and microbloggers have taken on the role of the traditional travel planner who would have operated in a business setting (Reeve, 2021). These platforms provide an opportunity for individuals to describe their first-hand experiences with a larger audience than traditional word-of-mouth marketing and provide a space for these individuals to share any knowledge gained throughout their travels whether that be a “secret” picnic location, an often-overlooked restaurant with an amazing dessert menu, or a location that was child friendly and accessible for young families (Pan et al., 2007). It also provides an opportunity for individuals to continue to build their personal brands online and showcase their knowledge of other cultures to future employers.

### *The Role of Bloggers*

Many individuals choose to follow both macro bloggers who have posts above 500 words in length that link to a blogging website or have large audiences and micro bloggers who have posts shorter than 500 words in length that do not link to a blogging website or have a smaller audience on SNS as well as the personal blogs of individuals found online either through an Internet search or linked through a third-party platform such as Pinterest. Many of these bloggers share various insights into their lives including tips and tricks, restaurant, and recipe recommendations as well as highlights from their various international and domestic tourism experiences. These travel bloggers will continue to post travel related content on all their social media channels and share relevant information in order to secure their position as an expert

within their industry (Willment, 2020). Travel bloggers stage their performances of self to influence their audiences for personal, economic and/or cultural benefit (Duffy and Kang, 2019). The travel blogger's social media accounts become a useful source of information gathering for future tourists to collect information for destination specific activities. Lily explains how she looks to bloggers on Instagram and Tik Tok to find good restaurants to eat at when she arrives at a new location.

I follow a lot of food bloggers on Instagram from different places so I have some for Toronto, some from the UK. For Chile, I went on Google and had to search there because I didn't really know anyone from there, but once I was on it and people who had been there or were there then all my recommendations were from Instagram and sometimes TikTok. TikTok definitely gives a lot of good recommendations, so mostly there and bloggers.

- Lily (Generation Z)

Lily seeks out bloggers who live in the area that she is visiting to get "expert" advice on the best spots to eat while she is travelling. She is looking to these individuals who are actively sharing their previous culinary experiences and recommendations. However, it is important to note that some of these individuals may be receiving some form of compensation in exchange for their "seal of approval." (Regaudie, 2017). Many social media platforms have now put policies in place that make it easier for users to know if a post is sponsored by the organization the blogger is recommending (Gotter, 2020).

Other participants reported seeking out reviews from independent travel bloggers who gave genuine feedback on their past tourism experiences from start to finish, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of their trips. Susan states this quite plainly when asked what sources she uses when planning trips with multiple destinations independently.

I just look at what blogs say honestly and like reviews of places, you can always find independent travel bloggers who will give just genuine feedback and will say like, 'Would I do it again? Maybe.'

- Susan (Millennial)

Reviews from independent travel bloggers are more likely to provide an accurate description of the location and tourism experiences they are writing about than a review or recommendation by someone who has received some sort of financial compensation during their trip (Pan et al., 2007). Thus, the use of independent travel bloggers as a resource for third-party word-of-mouth reviews helps future travellers determine where they want to visit and provide context for their aspirational travels.

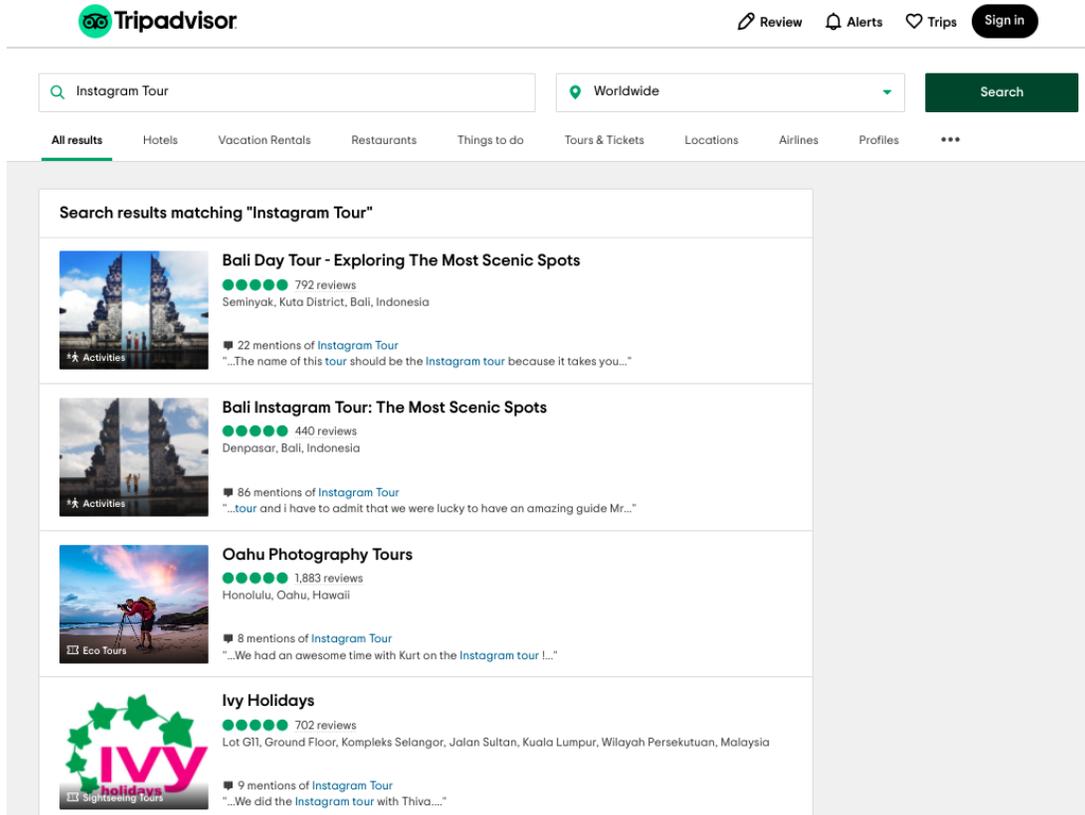
### *The Role of Social Media*

Social media have become centre stage in recent years when it comes to aspirational tourism due to the image and video-based natures of platforms such as Instagram and Tik Tok (Liu et al., 2019). In recent years, companies have begun capitalizing on the desire of individuals to take nice pictures when they travel to be shared on SNS. Maria describes how she searches for places to eat at and visit by utilizing a technical modality, the Instagram hashtags.

I go on Instagram hashtags; they help me discover new places. I like to learn before and then go. I try to narrow it down and then go to the best places.

- Maria (Generation Z)

Instagram hashtags function as a way to categorize posts related to a specific topic and are often used by businesses and other relevant organizations to increase their reach and audience (Newberry, 2020). Individuals who are looking to grow their audience and build their brand will typically try to integrate hashtags into their posts. Another technical modality, the location feature in Instagram also functions in this manner and provides a way for individuals to vet a location before they visit it based on the consumer generated content produced by others who have previously visited the location. This has become so popular in recent years that tour companies have begun offering “Instagram Tours” where the sole purpose of the tour is about taking photos at the most sought after and photogenic locations (See Figure K).



**Figure K: Instagram Tours**

*Tripadvisor Search Results for "Instagram Tour"*

Many of the locations on these tours have been staged to create these picture-perfect moments that Westerners expect to see when travelling abroad (Urry and Larsen, 2011). These locations are what Goffman would refer to as the “front room” of many of these social structures and the images that are seen online from these tours are often enhanced by users, further perpetuating this front room tourism concept to a larger audience on Instagram. Vanessa recalls her experience attending an Instagram Tour in Bali, Indonesia and the process that she went through when vetting the tour in order to ensure that she would get the best photos possible for her Instagram account.

I remember when we were in Bali, Indonesia we did an ‘Instagram Tour’ of all the cool places, so the guide was like listen this is all the cool places where you're going to get the coolest pics at these times. So, he literally based this tour on selling it to a market like myself, a typical white girl trying to get the best quality photos and taking us to the coolest places, so it was cool. We looked it up, we saw all the places, we researched it, we saw all the other posts that were taken and posted on Instagram at that time, and we were like yeah, definitely, let’s choose this tour, so we did that and I remember one of the nights we found this swing set where all the coolest pics were taken, but it was like me and my friend sitting on this swing looking over the water and the sun was setting and that was really cool and we obviously wanted that exact picture at that time and we made sure to fight for the spot and wait in line to get the picture, you know the things that people do for pictures sometimes, and it ended up being really cool.

- Vanessa (Millennial)

Vanessa recalls how she looked up the locations of the tour on Instagram before booking to be sure that she was going to locations where the image quality would be high enough to be featured on her Instagram account. Not only were the locations pre-selected based on their photogenicity, but so were the times of day to ensure the best photo quality as possible. Vanessa also mentions how she had to “fight for the spot and wait in line to get the picture”. This entire tour that Vanessa, as well as the other members of her group, embarked on was for the sole purpose of producing images for Instagram. Much of the behind-the-scenes production of creating these images in Goffman’s “back room” is not captured. These perfectly curated travel images are reproductions of the other images taken at these locations by other tourists. They are the result of meticulously planned itineraries full of location hopping, waiting in lines to have a photo taken at the perfect spot at the location, and having pre-picked the poses that the individuals would like to have captured when their “turn” comes up. This reproduction of images at sought after locations becomes a collection of travel stamps in the form of photographs that are posted online, showcasing the fact that the traveler has been to these locations. The poster is also showcasing that they are up to date with the current trends and part of the in-group, while further recreating these front room locations online for others to see. This is the same concept as

someone who travels for the sake of collecting passport stamps or postcards. These individuals are posting to show that they have been to these locations and got the “perfect shot” to showcase these experiences online. By conforming to these standards, individuals are shaping the impressions that others form of them, leaving their viewers with the impression that they are well-travelled and that they too enjoyed these locations that are highly looked upon highly by others (Goffman, 1959).

### **Tales from the Bloggers**

When speaking to my informants about their travel experiences, many explained that they had created blogs when travelling for longer periods of time in an effort to share their experiences with their families and friends without having to retell each experience individually to each person that inquired about their travels. For some, the creation of their blog was used to share knowledge on topics that their peers would come to them for advice on and for others, the blog served as a place to track their travels and itineraries for their future selves. Some individuals chose to create traditional blogs using templates from blogging websites, while others choose to transform their Instagram accounts into micro blogs.

### *Knowledge Sharing*

Blogs provide an accessible way for individuals to share knowledge with others (Pan et al., 2007). When Chiara began traveling with her three-month-old daughter and posting about her trips on social media, it sparked the interest of many of her peers who began reaching out to her inquiring about the details of her trips. After answering the same types of questions over and over again, she decided to start a blog.

I had started the blog because a lot of people had seen pictures of us travelling with our kids when they were quite young. We started when my daughter was three months and she flew like 25 times before she was two kind of thing. So, people would often write to me and be like, 'Can you give me advice on travelling with an infant? Can you give me advice on going to an all-inclusive? Can you give me advice on sleeping? Or things to do in X place because I know you've been there' or whatever and I found I was answering the same questions all the time of like, 'What do you pack? What do you bring? Where do you stay?' And I was like this would be easier if I just had a link to send people instead of answering the same questions all the time, so I sort of started, that was sort of the motivation, just to answer certain questions that people had about travelling with kids and travelling to certain more popular places, like we've been to Iceland, we've been to Japan, those places that people sort of often go to, so yeah, sort of the end goal was to create helpful content that people could reference back to.

- Chiara (Millennial)

As a mother of three, Chiara has been able to create content that is helpful for others who would also like to travel to popular international tourist destinations with their young families. By creating a space to address frequently asked questions, she is able to save herself time and also share her subject matter knowledge with a wider audience than she would by simply answering questions. Although she does not receive any financial compensation from her posts, she does enjoy the opportunity to reflect on her travels and summarize them into a curated package for the enjoyment of others. Chiara shares her blog posts on her various public facing social media accounts for others to access it. She has become the 'go to expert' within her friend group when it comes to travelling with young children. The more Chiara shares these experiences, the more that this impression becomes engrained into the impression that others have been forming of her as well as her overall personal brand.

Another participant chose to utilize her Instagram account for her personal blogging purposes. As a self-proclaimed foodie, Lily utilizes her Instagram page as a place to share her food recommendations with her followers. Using the Instagram story feature, Lily is constantly sharing her favourite restaurants, take out locations, and budget friendly options with others.

I always liked going out and trying new food places and when I moved to Ottawa I kind of started and then Instagram got that new feature where you could add to your story because before I was doing this on Snapchat before just for like my friends and then Instagram got them and it just kind of ended up like that, I guess. So, I would post and then people would be like ‘Oh you’re here, have you also tried this place?’ and then I kind of just like went, so it wasn’t my intent, it just kind of ended up happening that way.

- Lily (Generation Z)

The use of the story feature on Instagram has provided a platform for Lily to be able to share knowledge and make meaningful connections with her audience through the messaging features. Thus, allowing for further opportunities for knowledge dissemination to occur. By taking on the role of a “foodie” online, she carefully curates the content that she shares in order to align with her overall personal brand as she is taking on the role of being her own marketer within the digital footprint she is creating for herself (Peters, 1997; Lampel and Bhalla, 2007). Lily’s friends now see her as the ‘go to expert’ for anything food related and often ask her for recommendations when they go out to eat.

### *A Public Travel Diary*

The concept of documenting memories in one place to reference later is not a new concept. Traditionally, this was done through the use of photo albums and scrapbooks, but with digital tools such as smartphones and SNS platforms, these “scrapbooks” or “digital photo albums” now have a new home (Tiidenberg, 2018). While blogs are a useful tool to share information with a wider audience, they also offer an opportunity for self-reflection for individuals after their travels on their various experiences as well as a place to document various aspects of their itinerary and expense-related items. Linda describes how her travel blog served a dual purpose when travelling. It was a place where she could easily update her friends and family on what she was doing as well as a personal digital travel diary where she could actively note down the highlights from her travels that she would want to remember in the future.

I feel like most of the people who saw the stuff on Instagram and Facebook saw mostly the photos and I did write what I was doing in the blog, but I feel like it was more for me than for other people necessarily with the blog at the time because I don't think a lot of people had the link. Like I know not that many people were reading it, I think maybe a few, but I mostly just posted photos so people would know what I was doing and I have reposted a lot of photos from that trip on Instagram as memories since then...I do look back at it especially because I actually lost a lot of my pictures from that trip when my hard drive crashed because I took them so big, so they were easier to crash and some of the photos are only there now. Not all of them, but there's a couple of them, so if I'm looking for a specific photo or like a specific memory I'll look there. I also wrote down all the financials, so I'll look back at that too, people always ask me what it cost.

- Linda (Millennial)

Since returning from her travels, Linda's travel blog has taken on a new role in her life. As she is not actively travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic, she uses the blog as a place to relive various aspects of her trip as well as a source for images that were lost when her hard drive crashed. The audience of her blog was mainly close ties, those who were interested in where she was and what she was doing. Linda was also able to increase her audience on the blog posts shared by reposting the images from the blog as memories on Instagram by changing the technological modality of the site of circulation. Tabitha's blog functioned in a similar way for her audience while she was travelling to different countries over a four-year period. Tabitha describes her travel blog as a "public journal for herself".

I started a blog when I first left. So, I do have four years of a blog. And that was nice because it was, again, another way to capture bits and moments that were really important. And, you know, seven, eight years later, it's nice to go back and see the highlights of the trip without me going through the tens of thousands of photos I have at this point. So, the blog was really great, and it was also a way for me to connect with people back home, particularly my mom, without having to do like constant email updates or emailing a whole bunch of different people, all the different things. It was sort of the one central way to let people know I was OK...part of it was like a public journal for myself to remember more of the high level, not the, 'This morning I had a traditional such and such for breakfast.' But we're just, you know, what the places were like, the highlights, who I was meeting, the kind of hostels I was in, you know, knowing that my mom and her friends were probably my main audience.

- Tabitha (Millennial)

When speaking to Tabitha, she described how she would only post the G-rated photos and experiences to her blog in an effort to ensure that her mother would not worry about her while she was travelling. By selecting the experiences that she chose to share with her mother's perception in mind, she was essentially managing the impression that her mother formed from Tabitha's experience abroad.

### **Have I been Catfished?**

As user generated content is constantly being uploaded on SNS in association with various tourist destinations, it can sometimes cause more harm than good. Many users who upload content will alter and frame their images in a way that over exaggerates the appeal of a specific location online which is known as “visual puffery” (Fetscherin and Toncar, 2009; Nicholas, 2019). This may be done intentionally to increase tourist visitation to the location or simply be done by the individuals themselves as they are looking to add their own artistic vision to their photographs and building their brands online. Lawrence had a particularly poor experience when travelling in Egypt with his friends where the expectations they had going into the experience were nowhere close to the reality of what the destination actually was.

Me and my friends took a trip to this place where we had [seen] pictures of it. There were sand dunes and they said you could ski on the sand, you could do that and there were waterfalls and it looked amazing, but when we went there it was exactly like catfishing. There was no, the sand dunes were nothing compared to what we saw. It's exactly just a half-steep hill of sand and you don't even get to ski, you can just walk up and the waterfalls, I don't know it was just bad, it didn't look the same as the pictures and it was a bad experience because we were basing the whole trip on the pictures, we were going to go and it was going to be amazing and we are going to spend the day and see nice sceneries and it was just a different experience... it's not a place where a company is in charge of it, it's a place anyone can go, but the pictures you see online, I don't know if they are professionally taken or by people who just go there or if there are certain people who take the pictures just to make you want to go there, but the pictures were well taken and they were very nice and it looked amazing in the pictures...I haven't been since and we haven't even talked about it since and it's like a bad idea to bring it up. We could have done other things...better things...

- Lawrence (Generation Z)

Lawrence describes this experience using the term “catfishing” which is typically associated with the process of luring someone into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona. I would like to propose the term, “tourism catfishing” going forward to describe tourist destinations that lure people into visiting through the means of exaggerating their appeal online. This builds on Urry’s and Larson’s (2011) concept of the tourist gaze as tourism catfishing is more than just clever framing of an image, it is a fundamental misrepresentation and is a poor marketing practice.

When Vanessa was in Bali, Indonesia she visited the Gateway of Heaven, where she experienced tourism catfishing firsthand. Rose describes the disappointment she felt when she realized that there was no pool of water in front of the gateway.

So, one of the first temples that we went to check out was called the Gateway of Heaven (Bali, Indonesia)...So, we hike up to this temple and we finally get there and there is like this huge line, it was like an hour and a half wait for the line to get a picture between the Gateway of Heaven and the water was not there and I was like what happened, did they take away the water? What is this kind of thing? So, there was this guy and there’s a huge line up and you get a number and then your number gets called and you get to take the picture and when he does, he takes your phone and he puts the mirror underneath that lines up perfectly with the Gateway of Heaven to make it look like water. When I first got there, I was like this is not what I expected, it looked way cooler online...I was definitely shocked at first and was like what is going on? How are people getting such cool pictures here and then I saw their little trick...there were a lot of other cooler temples to go to that we saw online that were actually in the water where you would have to canoe to sort of thing which would have been really cool as well that were more realistic rather than a fake one.

- Vanessa (Millennial)

Vanessa describes how she was upset to make this discovery as she could have spent her limited amount of time and financial resources while in the country to visit a different location instead, one that actually was a temple surrounded by water. She is not the only one who has experienced this feeling of disappointment at the Gateway of Heaven. In 2019, Polina Marinova, went viral

due to a Tweet that she posted expressing her severe disappointment when arriving at this same location as she too experienced this feeling of tourism catfishing (See Figure L).



**Figure L: Gateway of Heaven Tweet**

*A Tweet by Polina Marinova, Founder & Author of The Profile and Former Editor at Fortune Magazine*

When analyzing the comparison made by Marinova of the image produced by the photographer and the behind-the-scenes image, we can see a clear example of Goffman's structural division of social establishments displayed. The image to the left is the front room, it has been orchestrated in a way that represents the location and the individuals in it, the way that they want others to view them. Whereas in the image on the right, we see the back-room workings that normally would not be shared on social media. When seeing a location portrayed in this way, it naturally makes us skeptical of the images that we see posted by others. However, we do not always get the opportunity to see the back-room process of an image which may lead to a general sense of

skepticism of the content posted by others. Shane explains his skepticism of the posts he views based on his personal practices using social media.

I have been to Europe and I have seen the glamorous side of things and I can speak to how amazing those things would be like, but there are other parts of the world that I haven't seen and I only see what they've given me and I know how I post on social media, so it makes me a little skeptical of what it is actually like.

- Shane (Generation Z)

Shane acknowledges that he only posts the top-quality pictures to his social media channels and uses SNS with the assumption that others post in the same way. When he sees posts shared by others, he is skeptical of the authenticity of the location unless it is somewhere that he has personally been to before and experienced for himself. Shane has a marketing background and is aware of the tactics used by individuals to manage the impressions others form of them through personal branding practices. He also is aware of the types of pictures he prefers to post on SNS.

### **Picture Preferences**

With the endless photo editing apps and video tutorials available at our fingertips, it is no surprise that individuals have formed their own picture preferences and created their own standards for what they decide is worthy to share with their selected audiences.

#### *Instagrammable or Kodakization?*

Individuals have been shaping the types of photos that they take based on the stylistic preferences of influential figures since Kodak first introduced their marketing campaigns targeting the middle class (Urry and Larson, 2011). The original influential images used in advertisements by Kodak portrayed idealistic family events around holidays, vacations, and any moment that could be deemed as a “Kodak moment”. Nowadays, the average person has a much wider net of inspiration for their personal photographs ranging from professional photography exhibitions to their favourite influencer’s newsfeed on Instagram. Many of the modern-day

influences on photography stem from the concept of Kodak moments and many of these fundamental photography guidelines set by Kodak are still seen in images today.

Susan has become more liberal in recent years on what she deems worthy to photograph, especially since she can take as many photos as she would want while using her smartphone camera and cloud storage options compared to tourists in the past who would have been limited to the storage on their film cameras or DSLRs. When Susan travelled in the past, she used to take her DSLR camera with her to marker locations such as the Roman Colosseum in Italy and the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France. Now that the quality of smartphone cameras has drastically improved in recent years, she is more open to utilizing her smartphone camera to take photos while on vacation. For Susan, much of her photographic influence for scenery photos comes from postcards and images that she sees posted online from influential members of society (See Figure M).



**Figure M: Personal Postcard**

*Image supplied by Susan (Millennial)  
Posted on Instagram*

I guess the ones that I post are more postcard-like. The ones that I take can be for all sorts of reasons. I try to be more liberal now with what I take pictures of, without spending too much time taking photos if you know what I mean. The iPhone is great for that...now if I just see anything interesting, see a view or we decide, ‘Wow, this would be a really nice backdrop,’ then we would ask someone to take a photo of us or take a selfie or take turns with your travel partner and you taking photos of one another.

- Susan (Millennial)

By using her smartphone as the technological modality at the site of production, Susan is able to capture a large number of photos, allowing for more opportunities for her to get the “right shot” that aligns with how she would like to frame an experience. The postcard-like photos that Susan captures, similar to the one above of the Eiffel Tower, is a perfect example of an image that is captured using the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011). This image captures Paris in the way that tourists imagine it looks in their head. It aligns with other images that we see of Paris in the media and is aesthetically pleasing. It includes the Eiffel Tower, a marker which immediately informs us where this picture is without having to spell it out to her audience.

Chiara has the same appreciation for the use of digital photography tools, especially when it comes to taking photos where she is trying to frame her images to align with the images she has seen online of a location. When Chiara is taking images to be shared with her respective audiences after her travels, she tries to frame her images in such a way that the backgrounds are not densely populated with tourists, even if it means taking 100 photographs in the same location.

I definitely try to make it look like that we are not in a sea of people especially if it's a more touristy type spot. I'll often wait till people have like moved away or whatever to get a better shot and obviously with digital it's easy to get like 100 shots so that you can pick the best one later and have kids who don't stop moving...When you reflect back on it you typically aren't going to remember that it was filled to the brim with people you are going to remember that oh we were there and that was really special, so yeah, I try not to post pictures that are like me, super frustrated, or of a negative experience that I had because those aren't like the experiences you want to remember for all time. So yeah, I definitely try to pick more of the ideal image and if I don't have one, I probably just wouldn't post one at all of that experience.

- Chiara (Millennial)

This may seem like a lot of work, but Chiara is willing to put in the time and effort to make sure that she gets the right photo of her family when travelling as these photographs become the memories that she will look back on in the future. Chiara knows that when she looks back at

these photos in the years to come that she probably will not necessarily remember how long it took her to get the photo or how frustrated she was during the process, she simply will look back at this ideal image and remember the positive aspects of her experience.

Dennis is familiar with this tactic as well. Dennis acknowledges that people do not often share the process of their tourist journey, they only share the idealized version of the destination that aligns with what the tourist themselves had in mind when deciding that they wanted to travel there.

I think it probably just makes for a better picture in the end. I think most people try and do the same thing; they take a picture of what's in front of the thing that is there. They aren't trying to get the full, you know 'I got there by taking the train and took a bus and then walked up these stairs with all these people around.' You don't see that. You just see the, yeah, the sheer number of people also often gets cut out of pictures and everyone often finds these perfect angles where it looks like nothing is around, but behind them there is like a thousand people doing the same thing, but nobody wants that in their Instagram picture necessarily.

- Dennis (Millennial)

Dennis brings up an interesting point regarding the context of an image. The audience sees what the tourist themselves has decided to share with them. We see only a snapshot of what the photographer experienced at that specific location: an idealized version of reality that is then further edited to align with the specific aesthetic of the individual's social media channel and personal brand.

### *The Aesthetics*

The importance of the aesthetics of photographs that are shared on SNS in recent years on platforms such as Instagram have taken centre stage, with individuals even seeking out specific experiences for the sole purpose of being able to share them online with their social network. Lily describes how she specifically went apple picking so that she would have cute

autumn themed pictures to share on Instagram, despite not actually liking or picking apples for herself (See Figure N).



**Figure N: Fall Aesthetic**

*Image supplied by Lily (Generation Z)  
Posted on Instagram*

I went apple picking for the aesthetic. I don't even like apples that much, but I was like I want to go apple picking. I want to go and I want to wear fall colours.

- Lily (Generation Z)

Lily sees value in being able to share experiences with her audience that are aesthetically pleasing and seasonably appropriate. Participating in this experience provided an opportunity for her to take photographs during the peak fall season that was activity-based.

Aesthetics also play an important role in food choices and seating locations. Susan describes how she selectively picks items that she is ordering at restaurants based on their presentation and aesthetic appeal, even going for a different flavour of ice cream because she wanted her ice cream cone to be pink in the photographs she would later share to Instagram. She also talks about how she specifically chose to sit in a certain area of a park in Paris where she

could get a full view of the marker of the Eiffel Tower so that it would be visible in any photographs she would take during her picnic.

If I'm ordering something like an ice cream, I want to get the one that is most aesthetically pleasing, even if it doesn't taste as great. I remember my ex-boyfriend and I were at an ice cream store and I wanted the chocolate, but I wanted my cone to be pink so I went for the cherry one or the red velvet or something, it was still really, really good, but it more sways my choices than me actively seeking out a spot I'd say. That being said though, we definitely for example, in Paris, wanted to get a place in the park where there was a view of the complete Eiffel Tower, and we definitely wanted that not just for our enjoyment, but so we could take pictures for sure, like our location was sought out.

- Susan (Millennial)

Susan works in marketing and cares about how her personal Instagram feed looks as she feels it is a reflection of her skillset as a marketer. She tailors her posts so that they are reflective of current trends and her in-depth marketing knowledge. When she is picking out certain food items and locations, she keeps in mind how her choices will look online and contribute to her overall personal brand. She makes choices that reflect the minimalist aesthetic that she wants to put out into the world about her day-to-day life in order to be able to manage the impressions that others are forming about her life and her work as a marketer.

Shane has similar standards for the photos that he chooses to share with his selected audience. Shane wants the photos he shares to only be his best photos, leaning into the concept of the highlight reel. He also chooses to only share a limited number of photos with his audience at a time, archiving ones that are no longer relevant or can be replaced by a higher quality version.

Like I want these photos to be high quality, like they shouldn't be blurry. I should be in focus. The colours, like I'm going to adjust the colours because I do some graphic design on my own, so I'm going to adjust the colours so they pop and they are nice and framing wise, everything, but I also want them to be good from a subject point of view. I want to post photos of myself looking happy.

- Shane (Generation Z)

Shane talks about how the images he posts need to be of a certain quality and represent himself looking “happy” to his audience which he typically signals to his audience through the selection of photos that feature him smiling. As Shane does graphic design work, he is also looking to portray his personal Instagram feed in a way that is reflective of the fact that he is knowledgeable about presentation and design features. By keeping his Instagram feed aesthetically pleasing for his audience and maintaining high standards for each photo he uploads, he is contributing to his overall personal brand as an artist. His personal profile can be viewed as a reflection of his work in a way, so it is important for him to manage the impressions others make of him from his profile and their impression of his personal Instagram feed contributes to his overall brand as an artist as well. For individuals in aesthetic-based industries that benefit from having a large social media background and a polished public image, all platforms must align and work together to maintain this image.

### *Capturing for Instagram*

The concept of “doing it for the ‘gram”, the idea of specifically selecting experiences for the sole purpose of posting them to Instagram, has exploded in popularity in recent years (Weisenstein, 2018). Individuals are seeking out experiences that have been specifically staged for the sole purpose of capturing images to be shared online, further perpetuating the idea of these images as a collection to showcase to others. Lily talks about how she specifically selected to visit the Museum of Illusions in Toronto for the sole purpose of capturing cute photos for her Instagram feed (See Figure O).



**Figure O: Interactive Museums**

*Image supplied by Lily (Generation Z)  
Posted on Instagram*

I went to the Museum of Illusions, and like I love museums and it was cool, but the whole point of that museum specifically was to take cute Instagram photos. Like there was one where the room was upside down and I was like that would make for such a cute Instagram photo. Camp Rock was the same thing, we drove like 2 hours to take photos and it took us all of 5 minutes. It was the whole experience, plus the photo was cute.

- Lily (Generation Z)

As seen in the picture above, Lily was able to capture the image that she wanted to share with her Instagram followers. When reflecting on her Camp Rock photos, she talks about how the process of taking those images was an experience in and of itself. Perhaps in this instance, the images themselves are the final destination of the experience.

It appears that more and more often, individuals are choosing to capture images for social media, to be able to share what they are doing with their audience online. Linda reflects on how her photography habits have changed in recent years to capturing less photos for her own enjoyment and instead, captures images with a purpose in mind.

I think I take less photos now and maybe more...I'll take the photo more for putting it on social [media] rather than just taking a photo for myself. When I was younger, I would just take a ton of photos because I would just want to post and just put them all over the Internet for both like travel and personal and now, I'm like a little less, maybe that's just aging, but, or maybe that's just the way we are with cameras now with stories and constant sharing it doesn't feel as purposeful to like take a bunch of photos and upload them later.

- Linda (Millennial)

Linda reflects on how she takes less images now than she did in the past. This could be for a variety of reasons, but I would hypothesise that Linda and others are capturing and uploading fewer photos these days because the technological modality of the site of circulation in which they upload photos has changed. In the past when Facebook was the default medium, individuals would upload entire photo albums from a single trip, whereas on Instagram, there is a 10-photo maximum per post, thus, forcing individuals to be more selective on what they choose to share with their audience. As Instagram has created an environment that forces individuals to upload fewer images than they did in the past on previous social media platforms, they have structured an environment that influences users to only upload top quality content. Because Shane shares such a limited number of experiences on his Instagram account at any given time, he makes sure to only capture and share the content that reflects his desired self-image.

Well, I mean you definitely have to look good. I don't want to post a picture of the long line-up before I get on the plane, but I do want to post a picture of the sunset at the hotel I'm staying at. I want to show the glamorous side of things and I think that's true with a lot of social media.

- Shane (Generation Z)

As Shane has limited opportunities to share insights into his life, he selectively chooses to only share the content that makes his life look good. He is doing so intentionally, hoping to leave the impression on others that he lives a "good life" and contributing to the highlight reel mindset that Instagram users experience (Murray, 2019). For example, as Shane describes above, he would rather post a picture of a beautiful sunset out of his hotel window to let people know he has

arrived in a certain location, than taking a picture at the airport the moment he arrives. Perhaps, if Shane was flying first class or privately he would share this information, but if he is flying coach to his destination, the sunset out of the hotel window makes for a much better image and frames his experience in a more luxurious light.

### **Intentions Behind Posting**

When individuals post on social media, they are very rarely posting without an intention in mind. The intention behind posting can be different every time and depends on the content of the experience that is being shared (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). For some, they may be posting photos with the intention of making others wish they were there too. For others, it is to share their travels while maintaining authenticity and relevance to their audience.

#### *Evoking Envy*

Envy is a common emotion when looking at the lives of others, especially in instances where the other person is showcasing luxurious or luxurious-appearing experiences (Liu et al., 2019). Envy comes in two main forms: benign and malicious. Benign envy is associated with the desire to have what others possess, while malicious envy is the wish for others to lose a comparative advantage (Van de Ven et al., 2009). In the case of my participants, many of them were actually looking to elicit the feeling of benign envy from their audience when posting images of their tourism experiences. Tabitha expresses how evoking these feelings of benign envy in others is a key factor when selecting the images and experiences that she chooses to share with her audience.

Hmm, usually the driving factor is this sounds terrible, but like, 'Oh, how jealous are you that I'm here,' which isn't I mean, it's not a great motivation, but it's wanting to show people this beautiful place that you're in and what an adventure you're on.

- Tabitha (Millennial)

Linda echoes this same concept of wanting to elicit benign envy from her audience when selecting the pictures and experiences they want to share from their tourism excursions.

Most of my travel photos are like a really beautiful vista or like a super nice church that people would recognize or something like that. I'm not necessarily aiming to make people jealous if they aren't there, but almost being like 'Oh, I wish I could go. Look at that place it looks so cool'. I think that's most of my intent.

- Linda (Millennial)

Although Linda states that she doesn't necessarily aim to make her audience envious, she does want to evoke these feelings of benign envy and be an aspirational figure for members of her audience when planning their future travels (Siegel et al. 2019). She selectively picks images that frame her experience in a way that elicits this emotion. Linda also posts images with recognizable symbolic markers in the specific location that she is visiting as it is recognizable to her audience and can further elicit these images of envy if the marker is from a location that her audience would want to travel to.

Tiffany echoes this same statement by posting experiences that are unique to the location she is visiting and can be viewed by her audience as an exclusive experience.

I would say mostly that it's visually appealing to me, so if it's something with bright colours or something that is kind of unique that I don't see people sharing a lot, also if it's something travel related, it's probably something really exclusive that you can only do wherever I'm travelling because it kind of creates that envious feeling to whoever is viewing it on social media.

- Tiffany (Millennial)

The experiences that Tiffany chooses to share must also fit aesthetically into her overall personal brand, while still also creating this sense of benign envy and providing relevance with the posts she shares with her audience. This is interesting as there is a large amount of previous research on the feelings that others have when looking at tourism-related posts, but little research on if this is the intention of the posters themselves (Liu et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2019).

### *Maintaining Relevance to the Audience*

A core component for some participants was ensuring that the content they post is relevant to their audience. This is intentionally done in order to receive engagement from the intended audience of the post. The intended audience could be the entire set of followers that a person has, or it could be their select group of friends and family that actively engage with their posts who are their biggest “fans” or more simply put, those who are frequent and repeat engagers with their content. For Thomas, he keeps in mind what he thinks others would like to see when selecting the images and experiences that he posts on social media.

The general theme is what I think people would want to see, so jokes or pictures that only me or my girlfriend or my friends would get would not be posted to the album, whereas sometimes I curate the hundreds and hundreds of pictures down to the maybe a few dozen of my favourite and then just throw that up there, so people can see what the trip was like.

- Thomas (Millennial)

Thomas specifically chooses not to include images that would not be well received to his wider audience, thus avoiding pictures whose content would not make sense out of context. Instead, he looks to select photos that capture his experiences as a whole and would resonate within his larger following. Thomas also keeps in mind the preferences of his friends and family when selecting the images that he chooses to share and will even go out of his way to ensure he is posting an image that he captures if he thinks a specific family member would enjoy it.

I think what would your friends and family be interested in when you are selecting those things, let's say, for instance, like my sister really likes horses and I happened to be on a farm with a nice horse and take a picture of it, then maybe put that one up there specifically for her. Yeah, kind of more or less just whatever is interesting at the time.

- Thomas (Millennial)

By specifically picking content that will resonate with specific members of his audience, Thomas is able to share meaningful authentic experiences that he knows others will also enjoy (Licano, 2019).

## **Personal Branding and the Role of Impression Management**

When analyzing how Millennials and Generation Z utilize their tourism experiences when creating their personal brands online it often results in receiving both professional and personal benefits. For the purpose of this analysis, the research focuses on gaining an understanding of the professional benefits and personal value received from sharing travel experiences online, the utilization of travel experiences in individual's personal brands, and the drawbacks experienced both personally, as well as professionally, from sharing tourism experiences online will be analyzed together.

### *Professional Benefits of Curated Posts*

When posting on SNS, there are many opportunities to curate and showcase the content that is being shared. For some, the travel experiences they choose to share are only from personal leisure experiences, while for others, they may choose to share travel experiences related to their work and their research. In Justin's case, he chooses to only share his work accomplishments and travel related to his work on his various social media accounts. Justin describes the "bump" this gives him in his career and the impressions that others have formed of him as a result of this.

If you're looking virtually you might have an illusion that I'm doing much more than maybe I do. I mean, I still am doing quite a bit, but I get the sense because all people will see is one accomplishment after the next. I mean, there's not a lot that happens in between that. Yeah. Nobody will ever see unless, you know, we're friends that I'm speaking to you about it. Yeah, but like everybody on my social networks will only see, like, one accomplishment after the next accomplishment. So that itself, the professional kind of bump that gets me is that I come off as action-oriented, which I am. But also, that I, maybe that I never fail, which is just not true. When somebody asks me if I fail, I'll tell them yes, all the time. But if they just go by social media, no, it's like just one thing after the next and it's always upward.

- Justin (Generation Z)

Justin has created this online persona that showcases him as an action-oriented individual based on the various accomplishments he chooses to share with his audience. Because Justin only

chooses to share his professional “highlight reel” with his audience, each post builds on the next and does not show much of his day-to-day experiences or personal leisure travel. As a result of only showcasing his professional highlight reel, he has received professional benefits in the form of job offers based on the expertise he showcases on all his social media accounts in his respective field.

I'll give you a tangible something like LinkedIn. I get LinkedIn. I get people who reach out to me offering me a position or inviting me to apply to their company based on some of the stuff that I do...On Facebook that actually happened a few weeks ago. Somebody who I haven't heard from in like a significant amount of time, I mean, like, I don't know, six years, like a significant amount of time, but we stay in touch on Facebook. So they said, ‘Yes, they've been following my achievements on Facebook and they wanted me to consult on a project that their company was working on’. So, you see, that was a benefit to me, of course, of financial and professional advancement based on the content that I had been providing on the achievements, so-called, because they only saw the achievements that I post on social media.

- Justin (Generation Z)

Interestingly enough, in the situation Justin describes above, the job offer he received was from a personal connection on Facebook, a personal social media account, however, he is also approached on LinkedIn for similar opportunities from those in his professional network or recruiters. As Justin only shares images from international research projects and speaking engagements as well as specific locations he has visited with significance to his research and work, these images have a significant impact on the impressions that others form of him online.

Not everyone chooses to only share professional content on their social media accounts, however, even content from personal leisure travels and day-to-day experiences can provide a professional benefit depending on the field of the individual. As Susan works in marketing, she is aware that even her personal account must reflect up-to-date marketing practices. Susan ensures that she is following the latest trends on her personal Instagram account and has even featured it as part of her portfolio when she is applying for various roles in her field.

I have featured my personal Instagram on applications as well as other Instagram feeds or grids I have done for other work-related things. Like on my personal website I think I have it set up as examples of a business feed and examples of personal feed and you can just see 9 photos from Instagram of each, so I guess yeah because I am in marketing I think we do have to make it seem like that is a skill we have...Something I can point to if someone asked if I was good at Instagram, I could be like yeah, I'm conscious of the trends and aesthetics and what not.

- Susan (Millennial)

By keeping her Instagram feed up to date with the current trends and aesthetics, Susan is able to have pieces of content ready at a moment's notice when applying for roles in her field. By having her profile featured this way in applications, she is also consciously aware of what she is posting at all times and how it will be received by others who follow her on Instagram as well as anyone who is interested in recruiting her for a future job. Susan chooses to only share images and experiences that she would be comfortable with her future or current boss viewing.

Shane also has decided to utilize SNS as a portfolio, but instead has decided to create a separate Instagram account to do so. Shane has a heavily curated personal Instagram account that is open to the public, so anyone can view it. He also has a second Instagram account under an alias that functions as a portfolio for his graphic design work and showcases other pieces of art that he creates.

I have one Instagram that is just me, which is the heavily curated one with the 12 photos ... I have another Instagram which is like an art Instagram which has an alias and is not linked back to my original account, but I do like post it on my account [personal] sometimes in my stories. That one [the second one] is purely an art portfolio and I just like post there, it's not only 12, it's like everything I have done that is good enough to share ... I post links to my music or if I make art to go along with it, it's like a great place for that. All the visual stuff is there and then in the stories, I've been using the Instagram feature where it will play music along with the story and I make these short kind of glitchy videos with like this simple editing thing on your phone where you can take a photo and kind of like vaporize it. I don't know how to describe it or if I'm describing it right, but that's the idea: posting songs that I like and graphics that I think work. It did help me get a job one time, so the right people are seeing it.

- Shane (Generation Z)

Shane's second Instagram account has helped him secure a job in his field. Despite its small audience and the use of an alias, it is being seen by the right people and providing a professional benefit to Shane by allowing him to secure positions in his industry.

### *Personal Benefits of Curated Posts*

When posting curated posts on social media, there are many personal benefits received by individuals as a result whether this is in the form of reconnecting with old friends, being invited into new social groups or simply just putting out a public persona that they feel represents the best version of themselves to the world. For Lawrence, who has lived in a few different countries throughout his lifetime, he is able to reconnect with friends by sharing a photo of his current location to his Instagram story. By sharing his location when travelling, this lets his audience know where he currently is and provides an opportunity for those who are also in the same location currently to reach out to him and start a conversation which may lead to them meeting up in person at the said location.

I've lived in different places like I've lived in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and then Canada, so sometimes if I visit Saudi Arabia and I take a picture and I post it on a story on Instagram and tag the location then a lot of my friends who live there will reach out to me and be like 'Ok, so you are here, I want to see you, let's go out', so yeah I think sometimes if you put a location [on your story], people reach out and want to know if you are there now and it starts a conversation and then we'll end up going out and they'll ask how long I'm staying for and when I'm leaving. So yeah, I think adding locations sometimes brings up a conversation and helps you socialize.

- Lawrence (Generation Z)

By sharing his current location to his story, this takes the onus off of Lawrence to reach out to each person who he thinks may be in the same location as him and instead allows those who are actually interested in reconnecting with him to reach out. This provides a personal benefit to him as it is less time consuming than reaching out personally to each and every person at the said location and results in social connection with others.

Sharing curated content on SNS can also have impacts in the everyday life of an individual in a social setting such as work or school. When Shane was working two jobs in Whistler for a summer during his undergraduate degree, he was selectively sharing the aspects of his industry-related job to his Instagram story, while choosing not to share the work from his other non-industry related job.

When I was posting on my story when I was in Whistler, I definitely made it look a little more glamorous than it actually was. I was working 2 jobs, one of them was marketing-related and the other job was more labour-related, more grunt work. So, I would post when I was doing something fun or artwork related or more marketing strategy related and I definitely had people, not from a professional network, but more of a personal network like peers and students reach out and be like ‘Oh damn, that looks really cool!’ and I can’t say for sure that that lead to anything concrete, but I know it changed, it must have changed their impression of what I was spending my summer doing, which may have influenced their decision to say join me in a group project or something because I was finishing my last year the next fall.

- Shane (Generation Z)

Although Shane says that he cannot say for certain that it lead to anything “concrete”, he believes that it strongly influenced those who followed him about the work he was doing that summer and provided proof that he was a strong marketer to his peers, which they would have kept in mind when selecting good quality members for group projects in his marketing courses upon his return to school that fall. By selectively choosing to only share the industry-related job to his social media followers, his followers may have had the perception that the marketing role was a full-time internship rather than 1 of 2 jobs. Shane left the impression on his audience that his summer job only consisted of this type of work and the other leisure activities that he shared. It is not unreasonable then to assume that Shane was likely recruited to a higher quality group for school projects based on the experiences that he shared than he would have been from not sharing any experiences from his summer job out of province at all.

When crafting an online image, it is important to feel confident knowing that anyone who views your profile will get a good sense of who you are as a person and as a potential future employee. Lily has an Instagram account that is heavily curated and open for the public to access. Based on the content that she posts, she has been able to make new friends and connections through her Instagram account that she would not have had the opportunity to make otherwise.

I have made quite a few friends on Instagram based on what I post. Whether we know of each other or they are like brand new, we were in the same place at the same time, whenever someone interacts with my stories, we always end up forming a connection based on something that I've posted, so like I said, I post a lot of food stories, so a lot of people who interact with my posts like that same kind of food, so we interact based on that, or if I go somewhere people will interact, so I definitely have made a lot of new friends and new connections based on that, like I know the new thing is making Internet friends with Gen Z and I know our parent's generation was like don't meet people on the Internet, but now everything is online and I have made quite a few Internet friends on TikTok and Instagram and we still talk a lot and have a lot in common, so I feel like that also came about due to my presence on social media.

- Lily (Generation Z)

Being able to foster new relationships with those who have similar interests on social media is a personal benefit to Lily. By posting content that she feels represents her and her interests, she is able to attract high quality friends who already have a good understanding of who she is as a person. This same sentiment is true for Lily in terms of being viewed by potential employers online.

I feel like my Instagram is very curated to where anyone could view it and kind of get a good sense of who I am. I know that Instagram is not supposed to be professional, but everything is very clean, it's pretty colourful and funny so I feel if employers looked at this they would get a good sense of who I am and I don't think they would be turned off by the image that I portray.

- Lily (Generation Z)

By curating all of her posts, Lily is confident that any future employers who view her Instagram account will get a better sense of who she is as a person. This provides a personal benefit to her

in the future, knowing that the employers who offer her jobs feel that she will be a good fit culture-wise within their company and can be a place where Lily will feel confident fostering new professional and personal relationships.

### *Aligning with Persona*

When making the conscious decision to curate posts, one of the benefits of curating is to upkeep your online persona or personal brand. When Thomas was travelling to Peru with a friend of his who suffers from altitude sickness, they selected a hike for Machu Picchu that provided more comforts than Thomas typically would participate in. Thomas is an avid rock climber and enjoys participating in more challenging physical activities.

Me and my buddy, he really wanted to do a hike to Machu Picchu and so did I, but I didn't want it to be like the super easy one. So, I did look into some of the more challenging ones, not necessarily just because it's more unique or luxury whatever, but just because I like the challenge. However, he didn't. So, we wound up compromising. And the tour group that we wound up going with had a cook and a trailer with horses. It all felt like I was being pampered which I didn't necessarily make part of the Facebook post. Like I didn't necessarily want to brag about that aspect of things, especially like a bunch of military guys are my friends on Facebook who want to make fun of you or like it would have seemed to have detracted from the adventure, like from the accomplishment. Like if there are people out doing the same hike with just the backpack on their own back, that's an accomplishment. If I'm getting a horse to carry all of the cooking equipment and my backpack and I've just got my little backpack and a camera. It doesn't seem like as much of an accomplishment and I don't want to broadcast that. However, looking back like there were some pretty sweet meals that these guys would cook up in their like chefs' tent that was with us and I should have taken more pictures of that.

- Thomas (Millennial)

As Thomas would have preferred to do a more challenging hike, he did not feel like the experience he participated aligned with the typical hikes he shares on his Facebook account. Thomas felt like he was being pampered, something that his military friends are not used to seeing him post and would most likely use to poke fun at him. Thus, Thomas selectively chose not to share any content that alluded to the pampering of the experience as this experience did

not align with his personal brand. However, in hindsight, Thomas does acknowledge that he should have taken more pictures of the experience as he did enjoy the experience overall. This could also be seen as a drawback of only taking photos for Instagram or photos that are meant to be seen by others as you lose out on the opportunity of taking photos that could be personally meaningful to you later down the road.

### **Drawbacks of Posting**

There are benefits both personally and professionally from sharing tourism-related experiences on SNS, but there can also be drawbacks such as assumptions being made with context and the onslaught of keyboard warriors. There have also been many situations in recent years where individuals have lost friends, their jobs and have even been “cancelled” (Monkhouse Law, 2020).

#### *Assumptions without Context*

When posting on social media, your audience makes assumptions based on the limited information made available to them. When Susan shared images of her picnic at Trinity Bellwoods Park in May 2020, she received an onslaught of messages about being at the Park on a busy day during the beginning of COVID-19.

I went to Trinity Bellwoods Park on that weekend when it was really packed, so this isn't a gain, more of a loss. We weren't in an area that was busy, like there was like no people within like 8 metres of us, like it was really spaced out and I geotagged Trinity Bellwoods Park and I got like literal hate mail on Instagram, like people were so upset and then eventually I just posted other pictures because I was like 'look how much space is here before you assume everyone was misbehaving'. Do your research kind of thing.

- Susan (Millennial)

Susan describes receiving literal “hate mail” from people she does not know on Instagram. As a result of this negative reaction, she eventually ended up posting other images to her story that showcased the distance that she had from other people in the park. This particular day was

showcased on multiple news networks for the overcrowding and lack of social distancing. By being at the park that day, her audience assumed that she too was not social distancing based on the images shared in certain areas of the park, even including Toronto Mayor, John Tory (Rocca, 2020).

### *Keyboard Warriors*

Susan didn't think too much about posting the picture before it went live on social media. Susan got negative feedback from her family as well as strangers from the Internet known as "keyboard warriors" who found her post on her public facing account through the tagged location.

I didn't think about it when I first posted it, like I didn't think twice. And then I got messages from my family being like 'Why are you there? I can't believe you would go. Everyone is talking about it. Why would you do that?' So I sent them photos circling all the green space around me being like there is no one around me in my photo and I sent other photos showing how far we were away from others and then I started to realize, 'Oh God'. And then I started getting DM's from people I don't know in my requests folder saying like, 'You are stupid. This virus is because of young irresponsible people like you,' that sort of thing and it was a stupid story I posted, not even a post (on my feed). So yeah and then I was like, ok, I agree, but I didn't know there was a party going in because it's a huge, huge park and then I realized that I agree with you that this is a problem, but to go and try to make someone feel bad about themselves or their actions and you don't even know them is also pretty poor behaviour in my opinion. And then I got angry and after like the 20th message I posted being like, 'Do your research, not everyone at Trinity Bellwoods was having an irresponsible party,' and I posted the images where we were.

- Susan (Millennial)

Sharing this seemingly harmless experience of a picnic in a park turned sour quite quickly for Susan. Her family was disappointed in her and she became just another person who was contributing to the crowd at Trinity Bellwood's Park to those who had seen her Instagram story, regardless of whether she was actually socially distanced from others or not. Behind the computer screen, strangers have more confidence to call out others than they would have face to

face and Susan became one of their targets. Although she was able to clarify the facts with her audience, her reputation took a tumble regardless.

### **Not Sharing**

Not every image that is captured is worth being shared on SNS. Images are kept for personal use due to a variety of reasons ranging from the context of the image itself to simply wanting to keep some aspects of your life private.

#### *Being Selective*

For some, the decision not to share comes simply from lack of relevance to the audience. Thomas has described this already previously, but he chooses not to share jokes or pictures that would not be well received by those who do not have the appropriate contextual understanding of the scenario depicted in the image.

The general theme is what I think people would want to see, so jokes or pictures that only me or my girlfriend or my friends would get would not be posted to the album.

- Thomas (Millennial)

This could include content that consists of inside jokes, where only those in the in group would understand, content that may not be appropriate to share publicly, or moments that individuals just want to keep privately for themselves or are sentimental and are kept in their own personal collections. Thomas had a situation similar to this when it came to deciding not to share photos from a particular hike that he went on that caused safety concerns from family members.

I think that the closest to that was when there was almost like a disagreement between me and my girlfriend's parents where they weren't really agreeing with the trip we were going on and I definitely thought twice about posting pics when we were on that trip. We ended up just giving the pictures to the friends that we went on the trip with and we didn't do the big giant Facebook dump of pictures for an album, so that was a time when I wouldn't have posted for sure.

- Thomas (Millennial)

Instead of posting the pictures to Facebook, Thomas instead decided to keep the pictures private and only share with select members of his social circle in order to avoid any friction within his family.

Willow had a similar experience when she was on a school trip in Africa. She became very cautious of what she decided to share on social media and what she thought she should keep to herself.

I always had considered posting more about Africa. I think for me, I get a little bit in my head about things because I was very fortunate to go and I know a lot of other people in my social circle aren't and I know I shouldn't be thinking about this, but I didn't really want to share a lot because it was also a very special moment for me being there and I like to keep that to me and also I didn't want, you know a lot of other people don't get the opportunity to travel and it kind of sucks seeing other people's feed if they're having a great time and the person at home might not be, especially since it was around the time of exam week when we went so it was also the timing, so I think I was a little bit wary about posting more.

- Willow (Generation Z)

As Willow was travelling while her friends were still taking their exams, she was acutely aware of how her posts would come across to others. Due to the timing, she chose to withhold some of the posts that she otherwise would have shared so as to not bombard people and appear as if she was bragging about her trip. Willow decided to wait to make any posts to her Instagram feed till after the trip was completed and only shared a few aspects of the trip to her story, keeping the memories instead for herself.

When Justin began using social media, he made the conscious choice to not share anything personal to his accounts and instead make it focused on his academic and professional accomplishments. As each social media platform gained popularity, he made the choice to stick to the personal brand he created and decided to only share action-oriented posts with his audience.

I'm a relatively private person anyways, but I think it's just, I think it's just about how I work generally. I just thought this was a decision, actually, because, you know, I started when... You know, I remember MSN Messenger and when it first came out and people thought it wasn't going anywhere, people thought it was a dumb idea. And so, I mean, all these sites came one at a time, yeah, and for me, because I wasn't just thrown into it I got to make the conscious decision whether or not if I was going to do this or not, whether or not I was going to sign off on it [sharing personal or private].

- Justin (Generation Z)

Since Justin was able to consciously make the decision about what he was going to post, he decided that being selective with his posting and choosing to maintain a professional presence on all platforms was the right choice for him.

### *Quality of Images*

In some cases, individuals choose not to share certain experiences because of the quality of the images that were captured. They may have enjoyed the experience as a whole, but if the photos are not good enough quality, then they become a missed social media opportunity. When Chiara was at Borderless, an interactive digital museum in Japan, she was disappointed at the quality of the photos she captured and decided to not share as many photos as she otherwise would have as they had turned out blurry due to the low light.

We were in Japan and we were at Borderless, which is sort of an interactive digital museum and it was indoors and it was really dark, so it was hard to get good pictures because it was just very dark and that was part of it because it was a lot of digital images projected onto walls and so in general it was just a very dark atmosphere and it was one of our favourite things and I just felt like I didn't get a lot of good pictures because of the atmosphere to be able to post, so yeah that's probably the only time that I wish I had more pictures, I wish I had better pictures because it was something I would have liked to share more of and it was a memorable experience for us.

- Chiara (Millennial)

Chiara wishes that she could have had better quality photos from that experience to share on social media and to keep for her own memories. Despite having a great time at the museum with her family, she has very few good photos from the experience.

Similarly, when Willow was in Africa, she had a photo taken of her while presenting her research, which she would have loved to have been able to post, however, the quality of the photo was not up to her standards.

I think a photo captures a specific moment and the photos that I captured when I was there [Africa], had to do with the children there and their upbringing, the scenery there, the pictures I took necessarily didn't have to do with a lot of my research. There was one though that my professor took of me when I was presenting my research to the board of the organization and he sent me the picture and I would have loved to share it, but it's super blurry, so you can't really make it out, but if I had taken more pictures of the actual research I had done I would have shared it along with the report.

- Willow (Generation Z)

The photo taken of Willow turned out blurry and was taken on a low-quality camera. This is an image she would have loved to have shared with others to showcase the work she had done as well as to simply keep for herself when she looks back on her memories from her trip in the future, but she chose not to share it as posting a blurry low-quality photo would not have been a strong representation of the research she was conducting abroad. The quality of the photo could be viewed as a reflection of the quality of her trip and could lower the opinion that others have of the trip she went on. If instead, the picture had been taken on a higher quality camera and came out crisp and clear, Willow would have happily posted the image as it was a positive reflection of the quality of the work that she was doing abroad.

### *Dark Tourism Experiences*

Sometimes the political context surrounding a particular experience can cause an effect on the reaction that others will have of a post, especially in regard to Dark Tourism, tourism that is directed to places that are identified with death and suffering experiences (Oxford Languages, 2021). Linda has had the opportunity to travel to many historic sites over the course of her travels and has become more aware of the political and historical significance of the locations

that she is visiting and the impact that these sites have for those who were involved or are descendants of the tragedies.

I think I posted a photo on a trip or something and I got some heat from it. I think it was a bit tactless or I don't know, I don't remember what it was, I just have this memory of like removing it, like taking it down and being like 'that was a bad move' and it didn't stay up for long and I was younger and obviously it didn't make that much of an impact on my life, but I posted it and then I removed it. I think it was when I was in Poland actually. I think I posted a picture or maybe it was a story of like the gate at Auschwitz and then I removed it. Maybe I didn't get any feedback on it, but I just felt, I don't know, sometimes you have to check yourself when you do.

- Linda (Millennial)

Linda decided that she did not want to keep up the post of the gate at Auschwitz due to the significance of the location in relation to the Holocaust. For these Dark Tourism experiences, she doesn't feel the need to photograph and share them to her story, she would rather take the time to learn and appreciate the history rather than share it to her audience online.

### **Sharing Less as Maturing**

A common theme that emerged when speaking with my participants was the idea of sharing less on social media as they aged. As individuals mature, they garner an appreciation for what they like and what they feel is appropriate to share online. This is important to personal branding because it is evidence of becoming more mature with one's outlook. They tend to stop posting as much as their regular routine habits and focus more on sharing big life moments or more unique experiences. Thomas explains how he would rather have someone reach out personally to him for a catch-up conversation rather than sharing all of his updates to his audience on social media as they are happening.

I've garnered an appreciation for what I like personally, like, it has to mean something. So, I guess the routine things which are nice to take pictures of, but other people have that covered and I appreciate that. But just going through the effort of the whole posting and trying to give a glimpse into my life, what I'm doing, I would rather people who are interested in that just reach out, maybe do a Zoom call and find out for themselves. So, I feel like the onus is no longer on me, whereas maybe before I did feel kind of that

responsibility because I was just fresh out of university. Right. And also, like away from my parents, away from family, all of my friends were all across the country. So, sharing in that aspect of our lives. It was kind of fun at first, but it does almost feel like a chore at some point and as soon as it started feeling like a chore and it wasn't as fun to do so, I didn't do it anymore.

- Thomas (Millennial)

The moment that sharing on social media became more of a chore to Thomas than a fun social activity, he decided that it was no longer for him. Being able to have real conversations with his friends and family provides more value to Thomas and takes the onus off of him to have to constantly update his audience with his latest activities.

When Willow looks back at her previous posting habits from when she was younger, she realized that she was posting to get attention from others. As she's gotten older, she does not feel the need to keep up her image on social media that way she used to.

I think for the most part it's about me and what I like, but like when I look back on how I was in high school it was about wanting attention and about what other people thought about me, but as I've gotten older, I've realized that it doesn't really matter what other people think about what I choose to portray my identity as. I really want to post and I continue to really want to post about stuff that reflects me and who I am as a person and I think that goes to show in more of my recent posts. I'll post things about stuff I like to do or people I love around me, anything I think represents me as a person.

- Willow (Generation Z)

Now when Willow posts, she focuses on highlighting the things she genuinely likes and represents her current identity. She wants to be able to post content that reflects her authentic self while still providing relevance to her audience. She is also more selective on what she posts and attributes this to her maturity.

### *Posting Frequency*

The frequency in which posts were shared was the biggest difference between the two generational cohorts reported when participants were asked to self-declare their posting habits.

Generation Z shared content on social media much more frequently than the Millennial cohort did.

**Table 3: Posting Frequency**

| <b>Cohort</b> | <b>Average # of Posts per Month</b> | <b>Average # of Stories per Month</b> | <b>Overall Sharing Average per Month</b> |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Millennial    | 2.667                               | 10.142                                | 12.809                                   |
| Generation Z  | 1                                   | 21.75                                 | 22.75                                    |

As seen in Table 3, Millennials shared more posts to their grid a month than Generation Z did, while Generation Z posted much more frequently to their story. Overall, Generation Z posted much more frequently. This aligns with the idea of sharing less as maturing overall. Members of the Generation Z cohort reported sharing stories almost every day, providing daily life updates to their family and friends from what they were eating for breakfast to how they reorganized their desks. The Millennials, who are more mature, post less frequently and do not feel the need to share these daily life updates to their stories and instead use their stories and posts to share content such as pictures of their animals, families, and activities they were attending.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the various interviews conducted during my study, I was able to address all five of my research questions. I successfully created a model that outlines the process that individuals go through while posting tourism-related experiences to social media in relation to the four sites of critical visual methodology and the lengths that individuals go to when editing the images they have selected to be shared, as outlined in my second research question. I dove into the details of the types of experiences shared to social media and why they were selected.

The types of engagement on social media were analyzed and reasons for high and low engagement were discussed. The trip planning process in relation to social media and bloggers was also discussed in detail. I was able to gain a greater understanding of the specific intentions behind why individuals in both cohorts share the types of experiences that they do on SNS in the context of tourism, as outlined in my first research question. All of the participants who had travel blogs used them for the same purposes: to share information with a large audience at once, to reflect on their previous travel experiences, and to keep a public diary for later use when they want to recall an experience years down the road. By creating a space to share knowledge and document their experiences, they were able to save time and effort as they did not have to answer the same questions over and over again from their audience members.

The findings in relation to my third, fourth and fifth research questions on analyzing the benefits and/or drawbacks received from sharing different types of experiences in an individual's personal and professional lives, gaining a greater understanding of the professional value gained by tourism experiences and how these tourism experiences contributed to the overall personal brand of individuals were analyzed together as much of the content overlapped. It was found that Peters' Personal Branding Theory (1997) and Goffman's Impression Management Theory (1959) worked hand in hand when curating posts that resulted in benefits in both individuals' personal and professional lives. Professional benefits from posting curated experiences included job offers and opportunities for portfolio building. Personal benefits included the opportunity to reconnect with old friends, create new friendships, and change the impressions that their peers had of them. Being able to curate content also helped to keep up an individual's personal brand and ensure that content that did not align with the impressions that others had of them was not to be shared. Drawbacks of posting were that the audience can make assumptions without knowing the full

picture and opening yourself up to the wrath of keyboard warriors. When it came to what an individual chooses not to share on SNS, lack of relevance, awareness of the audience's perception of activity, low quality image content, and Dark Tourism were cited. There was an emerging theme that popped up throughout all of the interviews about sharing less content as an individual matured but having the content that is shared being more purposeful. There were no major generational differences experienced regarding intentions to post, but there were generational differences regarding their frequency of posting and the type of content that was shared.

## Chapter 7: Why is this Relevant?

*“Walker Evans (1903–1975), uncomfortable with the preciousness of much art photography of the day, began to reconsider snapshots, documentary photographs, and turn-of-the-century penny picture postcards, recognizing these unassuming pictures as forms of homegrown American folk art.”*

- Mia Fineman, *Kodak and the Rise of Amateur Photography*

Experience sharing on SNS occurs every single day, whether we choose to participate in it or simply consume the content created by others. Tourism and tourism-related activities are a common subject matter in the experiences that are shared as they are often new and unique experiences for the individuals participating in them. By sharing these new and unique experiences with an individual’s selected audience, they are able to frame and showcase an ideal version of their lives while contributing to their personal brand and the impressions, both good and bad, that others are forming of them. There are many contributions that are made from this research including theoretical and methodological contributions and implications for marketers.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Contributions**

There are many contributions from this research to the field of marketing. I developed a model that outlines the process of posting on SNS, expanded the meaning of Urry’s and Larsen’s (2011) term ‘marker’, expanded on Goffman’s structural division of social establishments role in images, and outlined some of the benefits and drawbacks of using personal branding to create an impression on others.

#### *The Posting Process and the Role of the Four Sites*

When it comes to posting images on SNS, the entire process can be quite time consuming. There is a lot of effort that goes into creating the perfected images that we see circulating on social media. The process model that I created is a theoretical contribution, which I believe will be a useful process model for others studying SNS in relation to personal branding

as I have identified something new (MacInnis, 2011). Rose's Four Sites are outlined throughout the Process of Posting model, adding credibility to each stage of the posting process that I have identified and a methodological contribution. Using Rose's Four Sites within my model helped to inform my analysis by mapping sites of meaning on to the process. By having these sites of meaning integrated within the process, I was able to make sense of how my process fits within the existing methodologies and provided an extra layer of analysis in terms of the technological, compositional, and social aspects of the images being shared online. The site of production of the image in this model is seen while looking for a photo-taking opportunity. The site of the image itself is seen in the selection of favourite images and the editing process. The site of circulation is seen in the stage of selecting a platform to post an image(s). The site of audiencing is seen in the stages of tagging relevant items and the feedback from the audience.

#### *Expanding the term 'Marker'*

While conducting my research, I have expanded the meaning of Urry's and Larsen's term 'marker' to also include any images that are shared on social media as both the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts use SNS as a guidebook while planning their tourism experiences. As social media has become a key part of the trip planning process, it is important to gain a greater understanding of why individuals share the experiences that they do and the benefits that they are receiving by doing so (CrowdRiff, 2018).

#### *The Front, Back, and Reality*

Goffman's structural division of social establishments is reflected in many of the images that we see circulating around social media today. Previous research has looked at how professional travel bloggers use self-presentation and performances to remove the back-regions of their work from the public eye (Willment, 2020). My research builds on this to include non-

professional travel bloggers and the uses of the spaces that businesses create to be photographed. Businesses have created “front room” areas that are designed to be photographed and shared with a larger audience online. Oftentimes, users replicate images they have seen uploaded by other individuals online, even using similar editing processes which further creates this idea of a “front room” image. These images often include elements of staged authenticity and are meant to reflect what Westerners want to see from the locations they are visiting (Urry and Larsen, 2011). “Back room” areas become captured as well in some cases, such as in behind-the-scenes photographs or videos, areas that were not designed to be photographed. The “exposed backroom” areas such as wine tours or cooking classes have also grown in popularity and were some of the experiences that were shared by my participants.

#### *Using Personal Branding to Create a Lasting Impression*

Through the use of effective personal branding, individuals were able to successfully control their online narratives and manage the controllable factors of their lives to create the impression of themselves that they want others to perceive. SNS provides an opportunity for individuals to control the narrative of the content that they share - they have the opportunity to frame the experiences they share in the manner of their choosing and are able to select what content will appear in these frames and what content will be overlooked. This helps marketers to better understand the online behaviour of both of these generational cohorts as it provides insight into the relationship between how these cohorts use personal branding and impression management to shape the experiences that they share with others.

#### *Benefits*

Having the ability to select what is and is not shared online can have positive outcomes in both an individual's personal and professional life. Individuals described how they were able to

selectively post content that matched their idealized self which led to professional opportunities such as job offers, improved portfolios for applications in the marketing field, and the ability to further build their professional networks. By sharing experiences on personal social media accounts, individuals were able to reconnect with friends while travelling, meet new friends online from anywhere in the world with similar interests, and be invited to more exclusive group settings from within their existing social circles. The ability to select what is shared and what is not shared online can also maintain an existing persona. By selectively choosing not to share experiences that contradict an individual's personal brand they are able to maintain their status and continue managing the impression that they want others to perceive of them (Goffman, 1959; Peters 1997).

#### *Drawbacks*

Not every curated post that is shared is received positively by the audience. Some posts that are shared lead to assumptions being made about the poster without the full context of the situation. This can cause the audience to make the wrong assumption or to simply assume the worst and can lead to negative effects both personally such as losing friends or upsetting family and professionally such as losing your job and ruining your reputation.

#### *Best Practices*

After conducting my analysis, I would like to propose a few ways that individuals can increase their impact when posting. First, use relevant tags when sharing content, whether this is tagging your friends with a larger social media presence than you or making use of hashtags, geotagging locations or other avenues that increase the overall audience of the post. Secondly, ensure relevance to the audience within your post whether that is including yourself in an image or crafting a caption that is of relevance when you are sharing a scenery or landscape

photograph. Higher quality images, whether this is camera quality or putting more thought behind an image, also appears to receive stronger feedback overall.

### **Implications for Marketers**

A variety of implications for marketers arose throughout my research and analysis process that related to markers on social media and picture preferences. My research also provided an opportunity to gain insight into the Generation Z cohort. Aspirational tourism and the trip planning process was further explored. Lastly, I am proposing the idea of ‘tourism catfishing’, Instagram as a passport, and the concept of sharing less as one matures.

### *Image Manipulation on Social Media*

It was found that individuals are aware of the manipulation of images and the framing of experiences of others and thus are skeptical of the user-generated content that is posted with some users seeking out images that provide more context on the reality of the locations that they are planning to visit. This is of interest to those in the tourism marketing industry as they create spaces that are to be used for the sake of photographs to be shared on SNS such as Instagram. Individuals reported feelings of disappointment when they arrived at locations that were not reflective of the images that they saw online. Previous research has shown that high levels of customer satisfaction result in higher firm financial performance, thus, lower levels of satisfaction will result in lower firm financial performance (Sun and Kim, 2013). If tourists continuously are disappointed by an experience or location, then eventually the negative word of mouth reviews both in person and online will cause significant damage to the organization in charge of the site.

### *Picture Preferences*

It was found that individuals still use many of the elements introduced by Kodak in their first marketing campaigns when crafting their Instagram photos (Urry and Larsen, 2011). Many of the images selected by participants to share on their respective social media accounts aligned with images that they deemed as postcard-like or idealistic or “front room” images, further contributing to Urry and Larsen’s concept of the tourist gaze. Aesthetics also play an important role when posting to SNS, with some individuals planning activities or picking particular items of food with the sole purpose of capturing photos to be shared to Instagram. Individuals are also picky about the quality of images that are shared, even choosing to not share photos from a particular memorable location or life event if the quality of the images is not up to their standards. This is of interest to companies in a variety of sectors and showcases the importance of having good quality photography equipment available at all times and the importance of creating spaces that are equipped to take high quality photographs. If images taken at a location are not being shared online due to something that is in the control of the business, then they are missing out on an opportunity for user-generated content to be used as a form of marketing.

### *A Glimpse Behind the Generation Z Veil*

As Generation Z is now entering the workforce and gaining a greater amount of disposable income than they previously had, there has never been a more important time to gain an understanding into what they look for from tourist activities both locally, nationally, and internationally. As they are a new generation, there is little previous research that has been conducted on their tourism habits, thus, my thesis provides a strong preliminary look into their travel-related social media sharing habits (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

By gaining a further understanding of what Generation Z looks for when planning various experiential tourism activities and the type and frequency of experiences they choose to share, marketers get a greater understanding of how they should be marketing specific destinations to them whether it's a restaurant, day trip or overseas getaway. Lily, one of my Generation Z participants, took the opportunity to speak for her generation on the habits and lifestyle of her cohort as well as the process they go through when selecting the types of experiences they want to engage in.

I'm like a Gen Z who lives on the Internet and I'm like early Gen Z, but definitely one aspect of Gen Z is getting everything that we do off of online. Like all the things that we do, we discover online first. We hardly ever go places to eat because we are hungry. We are going out because it's cute and we can get cute photos. Like when Riverdale came out they did a Pop's booth and we waited an hour and a half in line just to sit there to get that photo.

I feel like my generation specifically looks to get that perfectly curated photo and half of that is just to share the experience with someone else because we know that they enjoy that and just because we like to post and have this perfectly curated image of ourselves, because employers will see us and see our Instagrams and I think that my social media presence reflects on what I want people to see of me. I don't think it's a bad thing because every generation has their thing and I think posting like curated images and while it's bad for our mental health, like I do compare myself to people online and if I don't get that perfect shot then it feels like a day wasted, but I think for me, having this access to social media gives me better experiences over all because I can get more ideas of what I want to do and where I want to go.

- Lily (Generation Z)

Lily describes how her generation does not just do an activity for the sake of doing an activity, they pick activities that will also look good if they are shared online. Part of the value of an experience for Generation Z are the images that are captured. The activity they are doing has to look good. Generation Z is aware that their social media accounts are synonymous with themselves and will be looked at by friends, family, and future employers. Having grown up using social media, they are constantly aware of the image they are curating of themselves for the world to see. Although Lily acknowledges the negative effects that social media can have on

her mental health, she still strongly believes that she is getting more memorable experiences overall because of it.

Even if it was the worst day ever, it never is the worst day ever. Like with Camp Rock, we got the perfect photo, but the day, like we had to park on the side of the highway, walk an hour to get there, trespass, all to get this photo. So, I think it's both. You go there for one thing and you leave with a memorable experience, not always a great experience, but always a memorable one.

Like people will always say, 'Why can't you just see the Eiffel tower? Why do you need a picture? Well I want that picture to be like ok, 'I was here, this is for my memories,' but also to let people know that I have been there and it was awesome, 'You should go'. Like a lot of the times I go back through and look at my pictures and my stories when I'm feeling down to remind myself of all the cool things I've gotten to do and I get to relive these memories and that's just kind of like, I don't post things that will make me feel bad. I don't need that negativity in my life. It's half for me to look back on and half for me to show who I am to the world and especially right now, I don't see anyone and it's a way to feel connected to those around me.

- Lily (Generation Z)

Even if an experience is not all that it is cracked up to be, Lily believes that the story behind the image is a valuable memory to her and will continue to be in the future. She believes that Generation Z values being able to share the experiences that they have with others and that by doing so, everyone is able to have better overall experiences based on the online word-of-mouth reviews.

The information that I have gathered on the Generation Z cohort would be of use to those in the tourism marketing industry whether that is local, provincial or national. Generation Z is an emerging market who will soon have access to more disposable income as more and more of them are turning 18 everyday (Pew Research, 2021). Having had their international travel experiences halted since March 2020, this data will be useful when marketing to this group post-pandemic.

### *Aspirational Tourism and the Trip Planning Process*

Social media has become a place for tourism inspiration, with users using platforms as a tool to conduct research on the places that they would like to visit on their future travels (Gretzel, 2006; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). It is already known that when positive travel experiences are shared on social media by a friend who is perceived as being similar to oneself, participants with lower trait self-esteem tended to show a higher visit intention to the destination if it is portrayed as a luxury travel experience (Liu et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2019). Although there are many travel bloggers with large audiences and sponsored posts, it was found that individuals preferred looking at independent travel bloggers sharing non-sponsored posts on leisurely trips paid for out of pocket where they give honest reviews about the sites they visited and their recommendations for a specific area.

Tourism marketers are aware of the lure of providing Instagrammable locations to their consumers, with some tour companies even basing their entire business around this concept. In recent years, Instagram Tours have been introduced into the tourism market space, as they provide an opportunity to create the perception of having a well-travelled and eventful day on Instagram, even though the tour exists solely for the purpose of capturing Instagram photos with days consisting of location hopping and waiting in line to get the right “shot” at a desirable location for an individual’s Instagram feed.

### *Tourism Catfishing*

It is known that some individuals who participate in creating user-generated content will alter and frame their images in a way that exaggerates the appeal of a specific location online which is known as “visual puffery” (Fetscherin and Toncar, 2009; Nicholas, 2019). The concept of tourism catfishing was introduced to describe tourist destinations that lure people into visiting

through the means of over exaggerating their appeal online. Tourism catfishing builds on Urry's and Larson's (2011) concept of the tourist gaze as tourism catfishing is more than just clever framing of an image, it is a fundamental misrepresentation. This concept is of relevance to future consumers of locations and may be used to help raise awareness of locations that are fundamentally different from what they are portrayed as online.

### *Instagram as a Passport*

Throughout my research process, the idea of Instagram as a virtual travel passport or collection of passport stamps has emerged. Individuals use the photos they share on Instagram from different marker locations as a virtual travel stamp providing photographic evidence that they have been to a particular location. The more locations that are shared on an individual's profile, the more well-travelled they are, even though some of these locations were only visited for a brief moment to get the "perfect" picture to add to their online image collection. In this sense, capturing these photos for Instagram functions in the same way as collecting postcards or other marker-related items when travelling, but instead of showcasing a collection of location-based mugs in the privacy of their home, the individual can point to their Instagram to show they have visited the same locations. Angela states this quite clearly when she describes her Instagram feed as an album of her life, reminiscing over her past travel photographs and travels the same way in which one would flip through their passport stamp collection or a printed-out photo album.

My Instagram feed feels like an album of my life and like the best moments of my life, so sometimes I do go back and look at them and reminisce and be like 'oh, I wish I could go back here, I wish I could do this, and go back'.

- Angela (Generation Z)

This is of relevance to marketers in the tourism industry, giving them a greater understanding of the function that these images have in the lives of their consumers.

### *Sharing Less as Maturing*

The concept of sharing less on social media as one gets older and is a sign of maturity within one's personal brand. This is of interest to marketers in the tourism industry, as it means that the locations that they are representing must be worthy of being posted by tourists and provide a space that is worthy for a more mature audience to want to capture and share online.

### **Benefit of my Social Location for this Research**

As a Millennial who has travelled outside of their home province in the last two years, I would technically qualify to be a participant in this study. Being in the same demographic segment as the participants provided advantages to my research as I was able to relate to my participants and have an existing understanding of the in-group language. Many of the interviews turned into more relaxed conversations where participants began sharing information that they may have not shared with a researcher if they did not have that level of comfort and familiarity. Although it is impossible to be completely unbiased, I have done my best to do so throughout this project by practicing self-reflexivity through the form of journaling (Reid, Greaves, & Kirby, 2017).

### *Personal Reflection*

Throughout the process of conducting the research for this project, I was able to gain a greater appreciation for the experiences that I both produce and consume. In terms of my personal social media use, I became more aware of who I wanted to allow to be in my online audience. I also found myself more aware of the type of content I wanted to share with my audience. I noticed that I started posting less frequently and spent more time selecting the images that I wanted to share. As I became more selective with the quality of the images being shared, I also found that I was spending less time participating in the editing process, and was actively

selecting images that didn't need to be "touched up". While conducting my research, I journaled out ideas as they came to me using both Microsoft Word and the Notes application on my phone. I often found myself reflecting on my role as the researcher in relation to the experiences of my participants, working to the best of my ability to acknowledge my assumptions and preconceptions about the content being discussed in my interviews as well as discussions around locations that I have visited.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Throughout the process of conducting my research, COVID-19 was not a topic that could be avoided in conversation. With the constantly changing restrictions in the province of Ontario, many of my participants were limited in the local tourism experiences they were able to participate in as well as the international travel ban on non-essential travel for the country (Government of Ontario, 2021; Government of Canada, 2021). COVID-19 was brought up in every single interview by participants, particularly as they reflected on their past tourism experiences and were unsure of the ability for them to participate in future tourism experiences, specifically anything international. I believe that the travel experiences shared by participants would have included more international experiences if my research was conducted either pre-pandemic or post-pandemic, but I think that the overarching findings would have been the same. I also think it is important to understand the types of local travel experiences that have been shared throughout the pandemic. Many of the participants discussed more recent local tourism activities instead of international ones as I originally had planned for my thesis before the pandemic began. My research would have further benefited from interviewing a larger group of participants, but as a master's student, I am limited by the lack of financial incentive I am able to

offer participants during the recruitment stages as well as human resource wise being only one person.

In the future, a longitudinal study looking at the professional and personal benefits that individuals have received over the course of 5 to 10 years would be interesting and help to solidify the relationship between curating content of tourism experiences on social media and the tangible outcomes it leads to in an individual's life. Going forward, more of an emphasis needs to be placed on understanding Generation Z and their tourism preferences and their social media habits. It would be interesting to look further into the role of blogs over time and to get a greater understanding of the reflection process that happens during the composition of the blog post. It would also be interesting to consider the "evolution" of a traveller and how their habits and tastes change based on many places they have visited. Conducting a study on how migration status affects the selection of travel locations as well as social media use would also be an interesting avenue for future research. In regards to the idea of sharing less as maturing, an avenue for future research would be to examine the relationship between Adult Development Theory and posting on social media. Lastly, another area for future research would be to determine if there is a specific set of brands that individuals identified with, such as being a "Foodie" or "Traveller" using a larger data set.

## **Conclusion**

The research that I have conducted has provided both theoretical and methodological contributions to the marketing field as well as highlighted implications for marketers in the tourism industry. My research showcases the importance of the social media practices of both the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts in the context of tourism and provides us with a greater

understanding of why individuals choose to share the select experiences that they do on SNS and how the sharing of these experiences shapes their overall personal brand.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

*Thank you for your participation.*

*This study seeks to gain an understanding of the experiences that individuals choose to share on social media and the benefits they obtain from doing so. With your permission I would like to record this interview. I will also be taking notes as we talk. This recording will only be accessible to this research team and interviews will be transcribed. Your answers will be confidential, and your identity will be protected. If you are uncomfortable answering any questions, please let me know and we can skip them. You can stop the interview at any time, for any reason, and we'll remove your responses from our data at your request.*

*Do you have any questions for me before we begin?*

[Turn audio recording on]

#### **Screening Question**

1. Have you ever shared a post on a social media platform related to a trip you have been on?
2. Are you a Gen Z or a Millennial as defined by the PEW Research Centre? Which gender do you identify as? Are you working or in school? What is your highest level of education received to date?

#### **Intentions Behind Posts**

1. I want you to think about your favourite travel related post on social media that you have shared on your account. What made it so memorable? Why is it your favourite?
2. When you choose to share travel experiences on social media, what makes you determine what you want to post?
3. When you post travel related content on social media, do you take time to consider how the post will look with

the rest of your “grid”?

4. Has there ever been a travel related experience that you wanted to share on social media, but couldn't be due to circumstances out of your control? How did that make you feel?
5. How would you feel if you paid for a luxurious experience and found out that you wouldn't be able to share the experience later with your peers? Would you regret the purchase?
6. Can you tell me about a time that you specifically selected a travel related experience such as eating at a particular restaurant or going to a particular area to visit because you thought it would make for a “cool” photo to share online?
7. When you are taking photos that you want to later share on social media, do you selectively try to take angles that make your experience appear more luxurious? If so, is there a specific reason why you do this?
8. Have you ever arrived at a location that was extremely different than what you expected it to be based on the images you saw on social media? If so, why do you think that other people portrayed the location in this way? Would you feel like it is your duty to showcase the reality of this location or would you too try to showcase this location in a more positive light?

### **Professional Value**

1. Have you ever experienced any professional gains from posting a photo of a luxurious appearing travel experience online?
2. Tell me about a time when you saw a post on LinkedIn that showcased someone travelling for either work or pleasure. How did you feel about this?
3. Would you post a photo of an international travel experience abroad on your LinkedIn from a personal trip if it was related to your field of work or industry?
4. Do you use your Instagram account for professional reasons? If so, do you use it to showcase travel experiences? Why/why not?

### **The Process of Posting**

I will ask participants to share 2 to 3 posts from social media accounts, ideally one from Instagram and one from LinkedIn to use as reference during the first two questions.

1. When you go to share a post or story on Instagram what is the process that you go through? Can you please describe from start to finish, with the “finish” referring to the post being published?
2. When you go to share a post on LinkedIn what is the process that you go through? Can you please describe from start to finish, with the “finish” referring to the post being published?
3. What is the process you go through when you add a temporary post that disappears in 24 hours to your story? Do you use the highlight feature to keep these posts accessible in the future?
4. Do you always go through the same process when you post? Are there certain types of posts that you put more effort into than others? Why? Which ones?

### **Benefits and Drawbacks of Posting**

1. Tell me about a time that you posted something on social media and it got strong engagement. What do you think made it so successful?
2. Did you learn something from this experience that you continued to do in the future?
3. Can you tell me about a time that you posted something on social media that was received poorly? Why do you think it was received so poorly?
4. Can you think about the last time you saw a post go viral for being inappropriate or in poor taste? What do you think led that individual to originally share the post?

[Turn audio recording off]

*Thank you for participating in this study, do you have any questions for me?  
Please feel free to email me with any questions or with any additional  
information.*

## Appendix B: Advertisement

### **STUDY: EXPERIENCE SHARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

We're looking for people born between **1981 - 2002** to participate in a **study** on the **benefits** and **drawbacks** of sharing **curated travel related content** about experiences outside of their home province on **social media**

#### **What's required?**

**1 hour interview (phone or online)**

**Follow-up interview if necessary**



**Help shape our knowledge on this important topic!**

Contact [sophia.krystek@carleton.ca](mailto:sophia.krystek@carleton.ca) to participate!

Carleton University Research Ethics Board Clearance Number # 114643

## Appendix C: Follow-Up Interview Questions

### Statistics

1. Age range
2. Highest educational level to date
3. The social media questions really confused me. Am I supposed to add up the per day and per week to get the per month number? Should you ask the question another way?
  - a. What is the frequency that you post on social media?
    - i. Daily
    - ii. Once/Week
    - iii. Several times/week
    - iv. Monthly
4. What is your favourite social media platform and why? Which is your least favourite?
5. Can you rank the following image/video-based social media platforms in order from favourite to least favourite?  
Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok
6. How many followers do you have on each of your respective social media platforms? (Please round to the nearest 10)
7. How many people do you follow on each of your respective social media platforms? (Please round to the nearest 10)
8. Can we go through in depth of 4 to 5 photos and break down the story behind it

## Appendix D: Ethics Clearance



Office of Research Ethics  
4500 ARISE Building | 1125 Colonel By Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6  
613-520-2600 Ext: 2517  
[ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)

### CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS CLEARANCE

The following research has been granted clearance by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (CUREB-A). CUREB-A is constituted and operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

**Ethics Clearance ID:** Project # 114643

**Project Team Members:** Ms. Sophia Krystek (Primary Investigator)  
Leighann Neilson (Research Supervisor)

**Study Title:** Experience Sharing on Social Media: A Glimpse into the Process of Curated Experiences

**Funding Source:** (If applicable):

**Effective:** November 11, 2020

**Expires:** November 30, 2021

#### **This certification is subject to the following conditions:**

1. Clearance is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Any modification to the approved research must be submitted to CUREB-A via a Change to Protocol Form. All changes must be cleared prior to the continuance of the research.
3. An Annual Status Report for the renewal or closure of ethics clearance must be submitted and cleared by the renewal date listed above. Failure to submit the Annual Status Report will result in the closure of the file. If funding is associated, funds will be frozen.
4. During the course of the study, if you encounter an adverse event, material incidental finding, protocol deviation or other unanticipated problem, you must complete and submit a Report of Adverse Events and Unanticipated Problems Form.
5. It is the responsibility of the student to notify their supervisor of any adverse events, changes to their application, or requests to renew/close the protocol.
6. Failure to conduct the research in accordance with the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans 2nd edition* and the *Carleton*

*University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research* may result in the suspension or termination of the research project.

**IMPORTANT: Special requirements for COVID-19:**

If this study involves **in-person research interactions with human participants**, whether on- or off-campus, the following rules apply:

1. Upon receiving clearance from CUREB, please contact your Dean's Office for prior approval of the research. Please contact your Dean's Office for information about obtaining their approval. See [Principles and Procedures for On-campus Research at Carleton University](#) and note that this document applies both to on- and off-campus research that involves human participants.
2. You must submit a copy of that approval to the Office of Research Ethics prior to starting any in-person research activities.
3. If the Dean's approval requires any significant change(s) to any element of the study, you must notify the Office of Research Ethics of such change(s).

Upon reasonable request, it is the policy of CUREB, for cleared protocols, to release the name of the PI, the title of the project, and the date of clearance and any renewal(s).

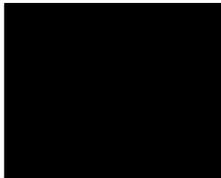
Please email the Research Compliance Coordinators at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca) if you have any questions.

**CLEARED BY:**

**Date: November 11, 2020**



Bernadette Campbell, PhD., Chair, CUREB-A



Natasha Artemeva, PhD, Vice-Chair, CUREB-A

## Glossary of Terms

**Audience:** the viewer of an image.

**Benign Envy:** occurs when people believe the envied individual deserves their advantage (vacation or tourism experience).

**Dark Tourism:** tourism involving travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy.

**Engagement:** the measurement of comments, likes, and shares.

**Instagrammable:** visually appealing in a way that is suitable for being photographed for posting on the social media application Instagram.

**Keyboard Warrior:** a person who makes abusive or aggressive posts on the Internet, typically one who conceals their identity.

**Kodakization:** photographs that are based upon the marketing tactics of the first widely accessible cameras for the middle-class audience produced by Kodak.

**Marker:** an object used to indicate a person, place, or route. It is the first contact that a sightseer has with a sight, which is usually not the sight itself but some representation of it. In a touristic context a marker is restricted to information that is attached to or posted alongside a site such as plaque.

**Macro Blogger:** traditional bloggers with posts over 500 words being shared to a large audience.

**Micro Blogger:** content shared to social media that is under 500 words being shared to a small audience with a closer tie to the individual.

**Personal Branding:** the conscious and intentional effort to create and influence public perception of an individual by positioning them as an authority in their industry, elevating their credibility, and differentiating themselves from the competition, to ultimately advance their career, increase their circle of influence, and have a larger impact.

**Staged Authenticity:** tourism that appears to be ‘authentic’ to the culture of origin, but in fact is a product created for the enjoyment of outsiders, has been on-going for centuries and is especially common in tourism where settings, events, and interactions that are unnatural to the host community or environment are contrived to represent what tourists desire.

**Staycation:** recreational leisure activities that are local to the area that an individual resides.

**Social Media:** websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

**Social Networking Site:** an online platform which people use to build social networks or social relationships with other people who share similar personal or career interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections.

**Tourist:** a person who is visiting a place for pleasure or interest. They are typically shorter-term visitors at a location and are interested in seeing the “big attractions”.

**Tourism:** the commercial organization and operation of vacations and visits to places of interest.

**Tourist Gaze:** the set of expectations that tourists place on local populations when they participate in heritage tourism, in the search for having an "authentic" experience.

**Traveller:** a person who is making a journey or a person who travels frequently. They typically stay at a location for longer than a tourist and are interested in immersing themselves in the local culture.

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