MONASH University

The Influence of Social Media in Destination Choice
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Doctor of Philosophy

A thesis submitted for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* at
Monash University in *2016*
Monash Business School

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the influence of social media in destination choice. The evolution of social media within tourism has provided further impetus towards destination information search and image formation. To this end, existing studies have presented the influence of social media at destination micro-levels, such as accommodation and restaurants. At a macro-level, some studies have investigated the influence of social media on a destination. However, current scope is limited to a particular type of tourist visiting specific destinations. The extant literature has suggested that social media influence in destination decisions has occurred across a continuum from being highly influential to having no influence at all.

Furthermore, each destination decision varies due to other contextual factors such as travel purposes, composition of travel party and budget considerations. Yet, against such a backdrop, little is known as to what contextual factors account for social media influence in destination choice. Such a knowledge gap has provided a timely justification for the conducting of this research.

Derived from the knowledge gaps is the main research question:
- What are the contextual factors characterising the various levels of social media influence in destination choice?

A total of 39 semi-structured interviews with destination decision-makers were conducted. The findings suggested for most participants, social media appeared to be utilised in support of a pre-selected destination. The findings illustrated that social media use and influence are contextual and appear to be reflective of participants' social media involvement levels. In addition, the outcomes of the research suggest that experiences characterised by the need for extensive planning and coordination are more likely to be linked to social media use and influence. Social media influence occurs across a continuum from being highly influential in some cases, having no influence in others, with many the participants reporting moderate influences levels to validate a pre-selected destination.

The thesis makes four theoretical contributions to destination choice. First, social media engagement is an indicative antecedent to distinguishing levels of social media influence in destination choice. Second, levels of destination familiarity and planning complexity should be considered when analysing for social media influence. Third, social media exhibits varying levels of influence due to perceived levels of credibility. Fourth, the research showed how six different criteria were employed to assess for social media credibility. These were volume of information, recency, valence, visuals, perceived similarity and need for elaboration.

Collectively, the thesis demonstrated that social media influence should be understood within the composition of individual characteristics, purpose of travel and destination types. The contribution that this thesis makes to existing destination choice models is to integrate the role of contextual cues to conceptualise social media influence. The practical outcomes of the research elucidate that social media's influence in destination choice should be framed across a continuum, with each facet of high to low influence each having distinguishing characteristics to guide future studies.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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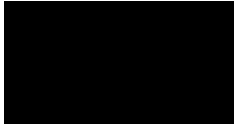
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Date: November 2016

Publications during enrolment

Tham, A., Croy, G., & Mair, J. (2013). Social media in destination choice: Distinctive electronic word of mouth dimensions. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 30*(1), 144-155.

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The undersigned hereby certify that the above declaration correctly reflects the nature and extent of the student's and co-authors' contributions to this work. In instances where I am not the responsible author I have consulted with the responsible author to agree on the respective contributions of the authors.

Main Supervisor signature: ███████ **Date:** 10th November 2016

Acknowledgements

The finish line of my doctoral studies would not have been in sight had it not been for the support I had from these different sources:

First and foremost, both my supervisors Dr Glen Croy and Dr Judith Mair have spent countless hours steering my work to ensure that it is of an acceptable standard of a PhD. Additionally, both of you have exposed me to different academic outlets such as conference attendance, journal publications and university-wide workshops and seminars relevant to my scholarly pursuits. In this regard, I am very grateful for your time and dedication to bring the PhD journey to fruition.

Next, my candidature period was also assisted with various people who supported me where help was needed. At the Berwick campus, Jasmin Bishop, Doug Madic and Rogan Dack. Other campus staff are Jan Pinder (Learning Skills Advisor at Clayton library) and the Higher Degree Research (HDR) administrative team of Liza Binder, Cynthia Kumar and Yana Grevtseva in Caulfield. The author also acknowledges the editing assistance provided by Dr Jeffrey Keddie at Caulfield to proofread the thesis. Dr Keddie gave feedback in the areas of rephrasing/word choice, but had commented on the already solid work that the author had demonstrated prior to the submission of the PhD for examination.

In my home environment, my wife Carol deserves special mention for her selflessness in caring and providing for daily needs (such as lunch packs) and ensuring that my academic endeavours are my priority while she cares for little Gloria and Joseph. Her reassurance and support is deeply appreciated and I owe much of my ability to complete the PhD to her. In addition, our families have provided financial and emotional support over the duration of the PhD. Realising that I had to give up my full-time job to become a student once again, our families chipped in without hesitation, and to this day they have an instrumental role in the completion of the PhD.

Last but not least, a deep sense of gratitude to an almighty God who never fails to amaze and provide for the PhD. Over these years, the same biblical verse continues to ring in my mind: "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11)

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Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
DMO	Destination Management Organisation
EDT	Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory
ELM	Elaboration Likelihood Model
eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
SIM	Social Influence Model
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
TCDM	Tourists' Cognitive Decision-Making
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
VFR	Visiting Friends and Relatives
WOM	Word of Mouth

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Credibility	The level of trust placed in sources or contents
Destination	A place where tourism products and services are experienced
Destination choice	The decision to visit a particular location where tourism products and services are experienced
Destination choice sets	A mental categorisation of destination preferences moving from broad intentions to an eventual selection
Destination image	The perception of a destination held by an individual
Electronic word of mouth	Online contents disseminated by various users across different social media sites
Heuristics	Cues that help to 'shortcut' a decision
Influence	The ability to exert change on attitudes and behaviour
Social media	Web based applications disseminating electronic word of mouth
Vacation planning	A process of deciding whether to go on vacation and the corresponding decisions such as destination choice, transport mode, accommodation and dining

Chapter 1.   Introduction

This thesis researches the influence of social media in destination choice, informed by the perspectives of destination decision-makers based in Melbourne, Australia. An introduction to the thesis is first examined through a discussion of social media as the focus of the research. In this context, social media is defined as a set of internet-based applications built on technological advances, allowing anyone to generate and exchange content online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kasavana, Nusair & Teodosic, 2010). Adopting such a definition of social media is consistent with its role in information dissemination for business or leisure (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Other terms associated with social media include new media and Web 2.0. However, these terms refer to distinctly different objects. For instance, new media are technological advances that develop modern digital communication platforms (Han 2010; Stober, 2004; Wei 2009). Likewise, Web 2.0 refers to the development of the online interface in facilitating greater participation and interaction (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Harnessing the technological advances of new media and Web 2.0, social media is primarily aimed at the promotion of social behaviour within online communities (Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007; Dellarocas, Zhang & Awad, 2007; Dwyer, 2007).

1.1   Overview of social media

Within the online domain, different types of social media sites exist, including blogs, forums, social networking sites and peer-to-peer video broadcast sites, such as YouTube (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In line with rapid developments in technology, the internet has witnessed the explosive growth of social media sites over the last decade (Correa, Hinsley & de Zuniga, 2010; Gilbert, Karahalios & Sandvig, 2010; Wei, 2009). As at March 2016, it was reported that Facebook has more than 1.09 billion active monthly users (Facebook, 2016). TripAdvisor, a

tourism forum for social media users, has also recorded more than 350 million monthly visitors to its website (TripAdvisor, 2016). Similarly, visits to other social media sites have experienced exponential growth over the last decade (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Dawson (2013), Australia possessed one of the highest social media usage rates in the world, with an average of more than seven hours spent per user on social media sites each month. Surprisingly, however, few studies have examined the characteristics of social media users within the country in terms of their patterns of use and online behaviour (Baker & Moore, 2008; Kelly, Kerr & Drennan, 2013; Pelling & White, 2009).

As the focus of this research is social media in an Australian context, it is useful to present some data to better understand its adoption within the country. For instance, a Sensis (2015) survey of 800 social media users found that the vast majority of the sample utilised social media across three platforms of computers/laptops, mobile phones and tablets. In terms of purpose of use, Cowling (2015) highlighted that the primary reason why Australians use social media is for conversing and catching up with family or friends, though following businesses/products and researching for purchase decisions are also prominent purposes for use. These indicators reiterate that social media are an important tool for leisure and businesses, as Tourism Australia would attest to possessing one of the largest social media community following in the world (Karnikowski, 2014).

The growing number of social media users and communities may be explained by their primary purpose of fostering online interpersonal relationships (Molz, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). Social media sites create opportunities to link people with similar interests (Brandtzaeg, 2010; Correa *et al.*, 2010; Gilbert *et al.*, 2010), increase numbers of friends (Correa *et al.*, 2010; Gilbert *et al.*, 2010; Wei, 2009) and allow for interactions to any given event or topic (Chou,

Hunt, Beckjord, Moser & Hesse, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009). Additionally, the social component within social media may be harnessed through different forms of engagement such as text, visuals and videos (Foster, Francescucci & West, 2010; Lee & Lee, 2010; Utz, 2010). Collectively, the dissemination of electronic content within social media is termed electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009), or 'word of mouse' (Sun, Youn, Wu & Kuntaraporn, 2006).

While social media may appear to be a relatively young phenomenon, the origins are not entirely new. For instance, weblogs, better known as blogs, are essentially an online version of a logbook to diarise events and thoughts (Du & Wagner, 2006; Siles, 2011). Similarly, forums are the electronic appearance of traditional forms of a bulletin board (Thurman, 2008). Therefore, the common characteristics of social media are a highly public display of content disseminated electronically. Reflecting this phenomenon, the term 'citizen journalism' has been coined to highlight a wide spectrum of individuals who can participate in contributing towards social media content (Ekdale, Kang, Fung & Perlmutter, 2010; Hermida, 2010; Meraz, 2009; Thurman, 2008).

Social media studies have revealed three dominant themes. These three themes are its use as an informational source, the potential to influence decisions and scepticism about its credibility (Best, Manktelow & Taylor, 2014; Ngai, Tao & Moon, 2015). Each of these themes will be discussed briefly to provide a backdrop to this research. As an informational source, social media can provide timely and accessible information for its users almost instantaneously in a variety of ways. For example, Chou *et al.* (2009) and Hawn (2009) have examined the use of social media in a healthcare setting, where health information may be disseminated to patients

in different geographical locations more readily. Additionally, social media has also been a tool to convey a political agenda to the public (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). It is clear, then, that the use of social media as an information provider may be applied in different contexts and industries. In terms of influencing decisions, studies outside of tourism have demonstrated that social media can exert an influence on consumer preferences. In this respect, different studies have alluded to social media influence in the context of video games (Zhu & Zhang, 2010), books (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), movies (Duan, Gu & Whinston, 2008) and television shows (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004), among other media. Despite the diversity of contexts showcasing the potential influence of social media on decision-making, a third and key theme that has been raised is that of scepticism as to its credibility. As social media content may be disseminated by individuals using pseudonyms or anonymously, content recipients may lack verifiable cues that have resulted in scepticism about its credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010; Westerman, Spence & Van Der Helde, 2012). For this reason, the perceived scepticism about social media remains a key consideration, despite the growing numbers of users around the world. Amidst these considerations, the focus of this thesis is to examine social media in a tourism context in order to advance the understanding of its role in a rapidly evolving environment. The interest to pursue such a line of investigation was also prompted by the inquisitivity of the researcher who utilises a range of social media sites for the past six years and also witnessing a wife who writes her own blog, with contents that often include travel and tourism experiences. These day to day occurrences made the researcher curious in relation to the following questions:

- Who reads the social media postings?

- What are their responses to our social media postings?

- To what extent do these social media postings influence others in terms of their tourism decisions, such as destination choice?

1.2   The destination concept

For tourism experiences to materialise, a core component is the destination and its role in facilitating or inhibiting tourism (Buhalis, 2000; Murphy, Pritchard & Smith, 2000). To this end, different definitions of a destination have been proposed (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Eraqi, 2007; Framke, 2002; Murphy *et al.*, 2000; Nicolau & Mas, 2006). According to Eraqi (2007), destinations are defined as locations that provide products and services for tourism consumption over the length of a tourist's stay. Similarly, Smith (1994) denotes that a destination is where tourism products and services are supplied for tourist consumption. Gunn (1972) argued that the destination concept is a highly evolving one and that traditional zoning of regions provides just one perspective. Framke (2002) adopts a comparison viewpoint of a destination from a business-related perspective and a socio-cultural approach. His work shows two contrasting views but each having a specific purpose. A business-related perspective is associated with governance of demarcated regions and facilitates tourism policy and planning. In contrast, socio-cultural approaches to a destination concept serve as a means of building networks between a tourist and communities at a destination. The different approaches are by no means an attempt at preferring one approach to the other, but rather highlight the very loosely held destination concept in literature. As Pearce (2014) suggests, the destination concept entails an intricate relationship of institutions and actors engaging within physical and virtual spaces in a marketing context for mutual goals. Hence, it is evident that no fixed definition of a destination exists because of the multiple facets comprising the tourism experience. Instead, a destination may be conceptualised as having several layers of offerings, from a macro-destination through a meso-destination to a micro-destination perspective (Eraqi, 2007; Murphy *et al.*, 2000). For example, a macro-destination may be a country like Australia, which contains meso-destinations such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Within

Melbourne, micro-destinations can also be identified, such as the Great Ocean Road and Phillip Island. Despite definitional differences, a common feature among these definitions is the notion of a temporal and physical space where tourism occurs. Under such conditions, it may be concluded that, in the absence of a destination, tourism does not exist.

As a result of broad interpretations of the destination concept, various studies have investigated macro-destinations (e.g. countries) to micro-destinations, such as national reserves (Nicolau & Mas, 2006). The literature suggests that to a decision-maker, the concept of a destination can be broadly or narrowly defined (Eraqi, 2007). Borrowing from Leiper (1979), the research considers a destination to be broadly defined as any geographical region where tourism products and services are experienced. Adopting such a broad definition will provide a nuanced understanding of social media influence within destination choice across different levels of a destination.

Given the diversity of destinations in the world, any potential visitor is likely to have different perceptions and attitudes towards each alternative, and this is better known as the destination image (Chacko, 1996; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999). When motivations for travel are aroused, a decision of where to visit is determined by an evaluation of destination images to identify a suitable destination likely to best meet desired tourism experiences (Armstrong & Mok, 1995; Jang & Cai, 2002; Mansfield, 1992). Importantly, destinations are reliant on the choices of potential visitors, because among other indicators, the socio-economic contributions of tourists are likely drivers of the tourism industry in many countries (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001; Wagner, 1997). As a potential visitor is only able to visit a particular destination at any given time, numerous studies have investigated why some destinations are chosen over others (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Hsu, Tsai & Wu, 2009; Lang & O'Leary, 1997; Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Woodside

& Lysonski, 1989). For this reason, the success of a destination hinges on its ability to attract visitors to choose it over other alternatives (Baker & Cameron, 2008; Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica & O'Leary, 2006; Mazanec, Wober & Zins, 2007; Prideaux & Cooper, 2003).

In the Australian context, most destination decision-makers have chosen domestic destinations, as it is common in most countries. Data from Tourism Research Australia (2015a) revealed that on average, Australians stay 3.7 nights domestically. The top three domestic regions were New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland in descending order. In terms of international destinations, TRA (2015b) statistics showed that New Zealand was the most popular destination with more than 1 million trips undertaken. This was followed by Indonesia (979,000) and the United States (891,000). Freed (2015) explained that Australian travel behaviour preferences towards short to medium haul destinations are prompted by affordability of vacations and also the growing demands of work commitments. This has resulted in the increase in short trips and weekend getaways (Ironside, 2015).

Numerous studies have been undertaken to investigate what influences destination choice (inter alia Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Hsu *et al.*, 2009; Moscardo, Morrison, Pearce, Lang & O'Leary, 1996; van Raaij & Francken, 1984). Collectively, these studies have demonstrated that destination choice is a highly contextual decision. In this sense, destination choice is postulated as an outcome that resonates with travel motivations and composition of travel party amidst constraints such as budgets and time (Decrop, 2010; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). As these distinctive considerations can differ across destination decisions, the importance of contextual factors cannot be ignored (Hyde, 2008; Jang & Cai, 2002).

To guide the investigation of the contextual factors surrounding destination decision-making, the research builds on Chen's (1998) Tourist Cognitive Decision-Making (TCDM) model as the theoretical framework. The TCDM model is a framework seeks to explain the roles of various agents affecting the destination choice outcome. It has five main stages. These are travel intention, problem formulation, information search, evaluation and implementation. The eventual outcome from the model is the selection of a destination. Further, a core feature of the model is to investigate how agents of influence are exerted on the destination choice.

While supporting the notion that destination decision-making is highly cognitive, Smallman and Moore (2010) postulated that contextual and antecedent factors warrant further study. Underpinning the evaluation of destinations is a range of sources that exert their influence individually and collectively towards identifying probable destinations likely to be chosen (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). As destination choice is a contextual decision, different sources are utilised, and interpreted based on what is the strongest motivation for travel at the particular decision point (Decrop & Snelders, 2004).

1.3   Social media in tourism

In addition, a decision-maker also has a range of sources at his or her disposal to collect information about a destination (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983). In the last decade, the internet has provided a wealth of tourism-related information through destination websites, intermediaries and travel operators (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Furthermore, a decision-maker can now access social media sites to obtain other tourists' experiences at a destination (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Despite the growth in academic interest on the social media phenomenon, various studies have commented on the issue of social media

credibility and have suggested a cautionary note about its use (Kusumasondjaja, Shanka & Marchegiani, 2012; Mack, Blose & Pan, 2008). Within this context, destination management organisations (DMOs) have adopted social media to varying degrees (Ketter & Avraham, 2012; Munar, 2011; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). For instance, Tourism Australia has identified that social media will be one of its key strategic thrusts as it attempts to attract inbound tourists in an era of sustained competition among destinations (Tourism Australia, 2013). What remains unclear is the nature of social media returns on investment and, more pertinently to this thesis, whether social media influences destination choice (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009; Milwood, Marchiori & Zach, 2013; Osti, 2009).

In an Australian context, some studies have emerged, though mixed feelings have been obtained regarding the role of social media and their contributions to destination decision-making (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox & Buultjens, 2011; Carson, 2008; Davies & Cairncross, 2013; Syed-Ahmad & Murphy, 2010). In some studies, social media is suggested to raise the awareness of specific destinations to be considered for visitation (Carson, 2008; Syed-Ahmad & Murphy, 2010). Other studies have contended that social media is employed for information search, though their influence is at best, very minimal (Burgess *et al.*, 2011; Davies & Cairncross, 2013). Yet, in these studies, characteristics of the destination decision remained highly implicit.

1.4   Justification for this research

The justification for this research is based on the lack of consideration towards contextual factors within the existing scope of tourism literature. Several scholars have suggested social media as a tool for creating destination awareness and also information search, though its relative influence in destination choice remains unclear (Chen, Shang & Li, 2014; Cong, Wu,

Morrison, Shu & Wang, 2014; Duverger, 2013; Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Leivadiotou & Markopoulos, 2010; Munar, 2011). However, some studies have suggested that social media influences micro-level destination decisions such as accommodation and dining choices (Liu, Norman & Pennington-Gray, 2013; Ong, 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Ye, Law & Gu, 2009). While the literature appeared to support social media influence at a micro-level, the country-level destination decision remains under-investigated (Davies & Cairncross, 2013; Fakharyan, Jalilvand, Elyasi & Mohammadi, 2012; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). Additionally the literature has indicated that social media influence occurs across a continuum. In some instances, social media is suggested to be highly influential, while in others not influential at all. Yet very little is known about how contextual factors characterise the different levels of influence or how they operate. As such, several scholars have voiced a pressing need for further investigations examining the contextual factors (Ku, 2011; Simms, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Responding to such calls, the aim of this research is to extend the understanding of social media influence in destination choice.

Such an investigation is essential because the proliferation of social media sites and users in a tourism context is growing rapidly, whereas their role in an academic environment is only slowly being understood. Prompted by the gaps in the literature is the justification to undertake this research to shed further light on social media influence in a destination choice context.

1.5 Research questions

The main research question as derived from the literature is:

- What are the contextual factors characterising the various levels of social media influence in destination choice?

To help address the main research question, three secondary research questions are identified:

1. What is the comparative influence of social media compared to other agents?

2. What is the relative influence of social media sites?

3. Is influence related to decision-maker or decision characteristics?

1.6   Outline of thesis

Thus far, Chapter 1 has provided the background to situate the research agenda. The remainder of the chapter will provide an outline of the thesis.

Chapter 1 has situated the research within the broad topic of social media and a conceptual framework of destination decision-making. The chapter has also highlighted the growing developments of social media within tourism and the increasing academic attention focusing on its role in information search and image formation. The chapter further identified that there is an implicit knowledge of contextual factors as to how social media influence should be conceptualised in destination choice. This gap lends justification to undertake the research. Research questions are formulated to guide the understanding and approach to the research agenda.

Chapter 2 presents an in-depth review of literature relevant to the field of this research. The chapter will synthesise the concepts of destination decision-making, destination image, influence and the current understanding of social media within these discourses. Gaps in the literature are identified in order to delineate the research questions. The chapter ends with a

theoretical model that has been derived from integrating the literature and locating the research question.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology adopted in order to address the research question. The investigation is exploratory, therefore a justification for qualitative research is presented. Additionally, criteria used in the selection of the interview method are discussed. This chapter also provides details of how the interview guide was structured and the manner in which interview participants were recruited. Pre- and pilot interviews were conducted and tools employed to assist with the analysis are identified. The research was undertaken using semi-structured interviews with 39 destination decision-makers based in Melbourne, Australia. The chapter also presents the coding mechanism used, and discusses an assessment of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 discusses the findings obtained from the interviews. The chapter begins with a discussion of the factors that characterised high social media influence. Next, the findings illustrate conditions where moderate social media influence has been exerted. Following this, the chapter highlights destination decisions where social media have low or almost no influence. The chapter also examines how participants evaluate social media contents for credibility. As credibility is demonstrated to be a core consideration, the relative influence of social media sites on participants' destination decisions is analysed.

Chapter 5 presents contributions to the knowledge of contextual factors that explain social media influence. The chapter also concludes the thesis by drawing out the main outcomes of each chapter and to address the research question. Additionally, managerial implications of the research are presented. The chapter also delineates limitations to the research and suggests

avenues for further studies. Some of the limitations include the caveats placed on an exploratory investigation involving 39 interview participants, carrying out the research using solely Australian decision-makers, and recruiting participants from few social media sites. These limitations notwithstanding, the research has documented avenues for further studies.

Chapter 2.   Literature review

Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature to help contextualise the aims of the thesis to investigate social media influence in destination choice. Destination choice is within the conceptualisation of vacation planning, which is itself within the conceptualisation of consumer behaviour. As such, the literature starts with vacation planning. Then, the scope is tightened to destination choice, before locating social media influence in the literature (Figure 2.1). The scoping of the literature also forms the structure of the chapter.
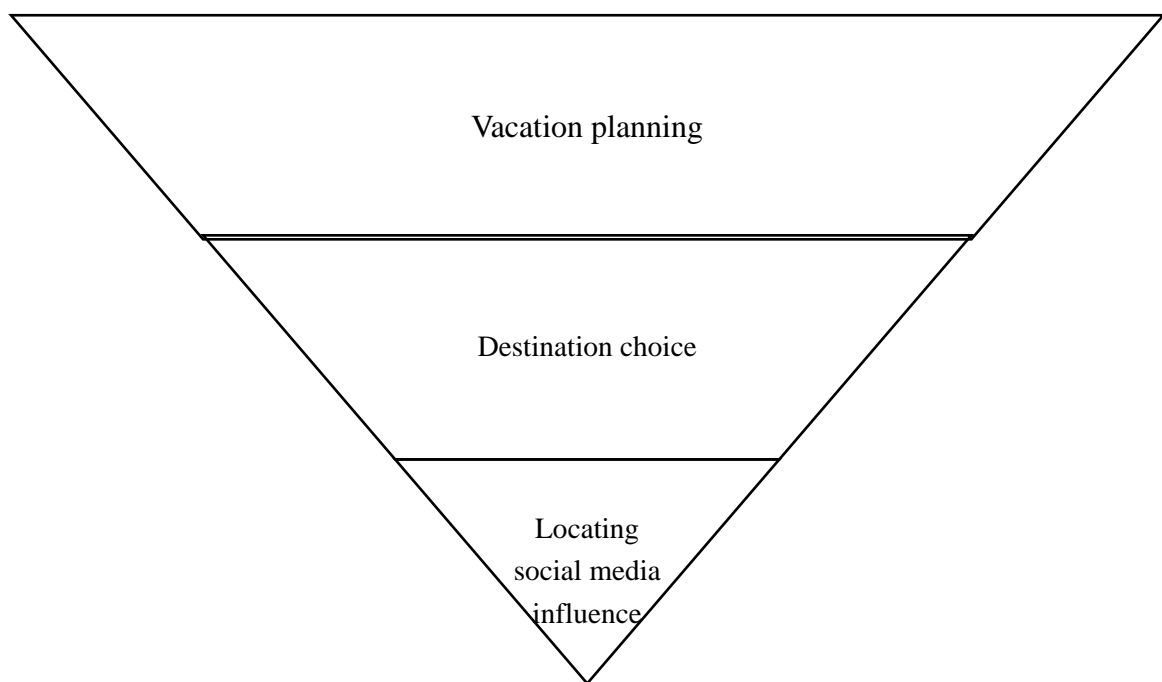
Figure 2.1: Structure of literature review

To achieve this goal, the chapter is divided in the following manner. Section 2.1 synthesises literature related to vacation planning, which provides a framework for destination choice. Next, Section 2.2 is dedicated to the synthesis of destination choice within the vacation planning framework. This section sets the parameters to the research. Following this, Section 2.3 discusses various considerations shaping destination choice. The section highlights the

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contextual nature of destination choice. Subsequently, Section 2.4 reviews the concept of influence. Section 2.5 analyses the scope of existing studies concerning social media influence in destination choice. The scope of existing literature is critiqued and research gaps are derived in Section 2.6. Building on the gaps in literature is the development of a conceptual framework in Section 2.7. Finally, Section 2.8 summarises the outcomes of the chapter.

2.1   Vacation planning

Vacation planning is the starting point for the literature review. This provides a backdrop to understanding destination choice, which is the focus of this research. Vacation planning is dependent on the initial decision of whether to go on vacation or not. No vacation planning is initiated when the decision to travel is terminated. Alternatively, if the decision is positive, then literature has informed our understanding of how the vacation planning process may be framed.

Despite the overall aims of vacation planning, confusion has arisen due to inconsistency of different terms that have been used almost interchangeably with vacation planning. These include tourism decision-making models (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Schmoll, 1977; Wahab, Crampon & Rothfield, 1976) and destination decision-making (Hsu *et al.*, 2009; Mansfeld, 1992; Nicolau & Mas, 2006; Seddighi & Theocharus, 2002; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Tourism decision-making is similar to vacation planning in that the extant models are engineered towards learning about consumer behaviour in a vacation scenario. In contrast, destination decision-making models are explicitly dedicated to deriving the outcome of destination selection. It should therefore be interpreted that destination decision-making is a subset of vacation planning. To ensure consistency in terminology, tourism decision-making will be labelled vacation planning throughout the thesis. Destination choice, as the focus of this

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research, will be further discussed in Section 2.2. Next, the origins of vacation planning in the literature are analysed.

2.1.1   Origins of vacation planning

The origins of vacation planning are located in the broad discipline of consumer behaviour (Moutinho, 1993). Existing literature has positioned vacation planning to be a similar sequence to those found within consumer behaviour studies in reaching a purchase decision. Correspondingly, the decision not to go on vacation means that vacation planning is not undertaken. Specifically, the knowledge of consumer behaviour has contributed to understanding how and why certain purchase decisions occur while others fail to materialise. Consumer behaviour draws from various disciplines, such as economics, psychology and sociology, in order to understand their impacts on choice preferences. Primarily, consumer behaviour is the study of how individuals satisfy their needs through purchases (Hansen, 2005; Pellemans, 1971). In current market environments, a consumer operates in a brand and product proliferated society where numerous alternatives are available (Hunt, 1983; McGee & Spiro, 1988; Wilkie & Moore, 2003). For this reason, studies on consumer behaviour have progressed beyond the simple assumption that decision-makers were focused on purchase decisions that maximised economic returns (Andreasen, 1965; Nicosia, 1966; Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979). The roles of cognition and emotions were subsequently investigated in consumer decision-making (Derbaix & Abeele, 1985; Engel, Kollat & Blackwell, 1973). Cognitive variables include urgency of need, brand awareness and how the product suits the purchaser's image (Rau & Samiee, 1981). Examples of emotional variables are brand attachment, meanings associated with gifts, and others' perception of the individual (Wolfe, 1970). Furthermore, these studies found that the complexities associated with consumer behaviour were embedded within

concepts such as personality, social relations, perception, and learning processes (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1995; Foxall, 1993). Collectively, the literature has shown the integration of product and consumer characteristics to understand choice outcomes, which are also reflected in vacation planning.

Incorporating the various concepts associated with consumer behaviour, several theorists have conceptualised how and why purchase decisions are made (Andreasen, 1965; Bettman, 1979; Engel *et al.*, 1973; Hansen, 2005; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1966). Among these studies, the well-cited works of Nicosia (1966), Howard and Sheth (1969) and Engel *et al.* (1973) have informed other adaptations of consumer decision-making because of their ability to synthesise varying disciplines into integrated frameworks (Arndt, 1993; Bettman, Luce & Payne, 1998; Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001; Rau & Samiee, 1981). However, the works of Nicosia (1966), Howard and Sheth (1969) and Engel *et al.* (1973) were mostly developed as conceptual papers and have been criticised for not having sufficient empirical evidence, as well as having ill-defined variables (Erasmus *et al.*, 2001; Foxall, Goldsmith & Brown, 1998; Lunn, 1974; Rau & Samiee, 1981; Zaltman, Pinson & Angelmar, 1973). Despite their shortcomings, these models contributed significantly to the explanation of consumer behaviour mechanisms in the form of an input-process-output sequence. By conceptualising consumer behaviour as a sequential mode involving input-process-output, a decision-maker is shown to be a problem solver (Bauer, Sauer & Becker, 2006; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Hubert & Kenning, 2008). The input stage identifies various stimuli that generate felt needs. In terms of the input stage, both environmental stimuli (e.g., marketing cues) and personal variables, such as culture and values, have been identified as catalysts for the arousal of needs (Belk, 1975; Solomon, 1983; Watson & Spence, 2007). The presence of such needs will prompt a decision-maker to undertake further action, which is characterised by the process stage involving information

search and the evaluation of alternatives. Finally, the output stage results in the satisfaction of need as an outcome of behavioural response (Foxall, 1993; Mourali, Laroche & Pons, 2005). The following paragraphs will analyse each stage in detail.

Most studies are focused on understanding the process stage of consumer behaviour, which has been described as the 'black box', to reflect the processing of input stimuli to prioritise and explain consumer preferences (Bettman, 1979; Mason, 1993). At the process stage, external information search is conducted when existing product knowledge is deemed insufficient to justify a purchase decision (Pellemans, 1971). Additionally, Howard and Sheth (1969) further distinguished between extensive, limited and routine purchase decisions. Such a distinction provided a more comprehensive basis to understand consumer behaviour in different contexts to address various purchase considerations (Hoyer, 1984; Nedungadi 1990; Shocker, Ben-Akiva, Boccara & Nedungadi, 1991). In relation to vacation planning, the distinction offered by Howard and Sheth (1969) may be understood in terms of distinguishing between familiar and unfamiliar vacation planning. Unfamiliar vacation plans will incur more consideration in comparison to familiar vacation plans, such as repeat visitation.

The output stage results in the choice of a product, and whether purchases materialise (Pellemans, 1971). Non-purchase can be a result of a highly negative evaluation of the product or when the circumstances of the decision-maker change, such as a loss of employment.

Expanding on the output phase, Engel *et al.* (1973) emphasised the purchase decision and described specific outcomes through the consumer's personal evaluation of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The post-purchase is an understandably important aspect of the output phase, in that a favourable post-purchase experience is likely to develop greater trust in the brand for

future purchase decisions (Nicosia & Mayer, 1976). Repeated positive engagements with a brand can then lead to brand loyalty, which has obvious marketing benefits (Derbaix & Abeele, 1985; Kollat, Engel & Blackwell, 1970; Pellemans, 1971). In contrast, when a consumer experiences dissonance with the purchase, he or she may decide not to consider the particular brand or product and may induce others to do likewise (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). Dissonance, in this research, refers to the response of a decision-maker in assessing whether the purchase decision was justified (Santos & Boote, 2003). As it might be expected, the vacation is also likely to be reflected upon: Positive experiences will lead to favourable perceptions, while negative experiences may lead to complaints and potentially, elimination of that brand, product, service, or destination from future considerations.

In summary, the dominant consumer behaviour models have been applied to focus on products that can be compared and differentiated (Hansen, 2005; Wolfe, 1970). Essentially, consumer behaviour models assumed that decision-making is a rational process that can be evaluated based on product attributes. A choice is derived from the evaluation of products, where the purchase decision occurred or failed to materialise. Following the purchase, a consumer evaluates the purchase and consumption experience that is stored in memory to be utilised for future decision-making.

By synthesising the outcomes of consumer behaviour studies, the review has revealed that any purchase decision is considered amidst a range of variables with outcomes leading to satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Consumer behaviour models have since been adopted across many types of decisions, including vacation planning. As vacation planning is the overarching framework for the research, it is necessary to review how vacation planning has been discussed within tourism literature.

2.1.2   Models of vacation planning

This section provides a critique of models of vacation planning to highlight similarities and points of difference. Wahab *et al.* (1976) postulated that vacation planning is an economic outcome based on cost-benefit analysis. The supposition within their model was that a rational approach is undertaken by a decision-maker to determine vacation plans based on alternatives that generated the highest economic returns. While such an approach may be reflective of some vacation plans, subsequent studies have criticised the mechanistic view proposed in Wahab *et al.* (1976). This is because some vacation plans are developed from affective outcomes based on one's feelings and emotions towards particular destinations (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). As such, Schmoll (1977) alluded to the use of travel stimuli in devising travel preferences and choice outcomes. An inherent assumption of the Schmoll (1977) model is that the decision-maker is a passive recipient of vacation cues. However, Mathieson and Wall (1982) argued that the decision-maker adopts a more active approach to vacation planning. In their model, vacation planning is a cumulative outcome derived from individual characteristics and also the situational context to undertake the vacation. Yet, the work of Mathieson and Wall (1982) has been criticised as being very complex and lacking predictive ability (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005).

Arguably, vacation planning models are not a useful predictive tool due to the highly varied nature of the destination decision (Decrop & Snelders, 2004). Rather, vacation planning models may just be descriptions operationalising a five-stage sequence demonstrating the processes leading to choice outcomes (van Raaij & Francken, 1984). These are a generic decision to go on vacation, information acquisition, joint decision-making, vacation activities and satisfaction/complaints. Such a sequence is also similarly depicted in the vacation planning

model conceptualised by Hyde (2008). An underpinning of the extant vacation planning models is that vacation planning is shaped by the characteristics of the decision-maker, which indicates that different individual characteristics are likely to reveal distinctive planning outcomes (Hyde, 2008; Moutinho, 1993; van Raaij & Francken, 1984). However, Hyde (2008) suggests that highlighting the purpose of the vacation can better explain vacation planning. Vacation planning models should therefore be positioned as a tool to understand decision-making rather than predicting choice outcomes.

2.1.3   Characteristics of vacation planning

The characteristics of vacation planning require an adaptation of consumer behaviour models. Such a distinction is essential, as vacation planning differs from the consumption patterns of products. In most product purchases, consumers can pre-test the products before purchases are made and return products deemed unsuitable for refund and exchange after the purchase has been made (Hunt, 1983). However, this is unfeasible for vacation planning because of their highly experiential nature of vacations. For this reason, it is envisaged that other cues are adopted by a decision-maker to assist with the vacation planning process (Sirakaya, Sheppard & McLellan, 1996). This section identifies the characteristics of vacation planning to better understand the research context.

Vacation planning is based on tourism behaviour, which encompasses characteristics of service (Wolak, Kalafatis & Harris, 1998). In this research, four characteristics of services may assist with understanding vacation planning. The four characteristics are perishability, intangibility, variability and inseparability (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). These service characteristics indicate that each vacation plan differs, based on individual engagements, and

involves numerous parties. For instance, a restaurant experience may depend on the diner's mood, menu choices, dining ambience, professionalism of wait staff and meticulous planning in the kitchen. Collectively, service characteristics associated with tourism decisions, including destination choice, mean that a decision-maker relies on their destination image, informed by multiple sources, in order to evaluate potential destination experiences. In addition, there are features that differentiate tourism from other services, such as seasonality. The seasonality of consumption patterns is likely to vary, where a winter or summer destination image appeals to different purposes of travel. Another characteristic of services is that of interdependence (Czepiel, 1990; Larsson & Bowen, 1989; Mahajan, Vakharia, Paul & Chase, 1994). Interdependence occurs when numerous parties are involved in delivering the service. In a vacation context, different stakeholders contribute to the overall destination experience, such as airports, tour operators, accommodation and dining establishments. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), a destination's physical attributes are just one aspect of the entire vacation experience. Therefore, a positive vacation experience relies heavily on human interactions working interdependently to deliver the multi-faceted nature of the experiential engagements (Middleton & Clarke, 2001).

The full extent of vacation planning may require much deliberation by decision-makers (Moutinho, 1993; Teare, 1994). In some cases, vacations may be considered a high expense purchase because they involve a large portion of family income (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). In addition, opportunity costs exist when the choice of a vacation type implies that another location is not visited, or that a household purchase is given up (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Goossens, 2000; Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Moutinho, 1993). Other considerations attached to a vacation decision include the choice of a destination, travelling parties, transport modes, accommodation type, activities undertaken, dining options and incidental expenses

(Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Jeng & Fesenmaier, 1998). These decision points show vacation planning to be a highly engaged activity, and one that needs to carefully consider the contexts in which the decision is made. A common feature highlighted within literature is the presence of different stages of vacation planning. For this reason, the research will investigate the roles of each stage to understand choice outcomes.

2.1.4 Stages of vacation planning

This section reviews the various stages of vacation planning to highlight their roles to framing the research. Specifically, the five stages of vacation planning are awareness of need, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase (Moutinho, 1993). While the five stages have been presented as a sequential process, some studies have demonstrated that decision-makers may accelerate their decision-making in bypassing some of the stages, especially when involved with familiar or routine vacation plans (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983). Additionally, for less structured vacations, stages such as information search and the evaluation of alternatives can occur in an iterative manner (Martin & Woodside, 2012). Semi-structured or unstructured vacations are specific types of vacations where the responsibility of travel planning rests with the decision-maker (Decrop & Snelders, 2004). Unlike group package tours where there is a structured itinerary led by a tour guide, semi-structured and unstructured vacations require a decision-maker to invest the time and effort to coordinate almost all aspects of the tourism experience. Despite the differences in terms of travel coordination, both structured and less structured vacations share common stages in terms of vacation planning. Hence, each of these stages will be subsequently analysed for their role in the research.

2.1.4.1   Awareness of need

Awareness of need is the first stage that initiates the vacation planning process. In this research, awareness of need is central to the vacation planning process as subsequent decisions are built on the existence of such a need. Lundberg (1971) provided several reasons as to why vacation needs exist, such as a desire to gain new experiences through visiting different places or learning about cultures. Novelty seeking has also been identified as an important vacation need (Cohen, 1972; Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Plog, 1974; Yuan & Mcdonald, 1990; Zuckerman, 1979). Tourists with a high need for novelty might derive greater enjoyment from engaging in new experiences or taking an unstructured vacation. These tourists may also exhibit characteristics of high levels of risk-taking behaviour (Bello & Etzel, 1985; Elsrud, 2001; Hyde & Lawson, 2003). However, not all tourists derive satisfaction from visiting new destinations. Vacation decisions based on habit are less time-consuming and more risk averse in nature (Bjork & Jansson, 2008; Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). In addition, travel needs can become more sophisticated and a decision-maker's vacation selection criteria can become more refined where the decision-maker has a variety of vacation experiences (Pearce & Lee, 2005).

The awareness of need is related to the concept of travel motivation. A desire to satisfy particular needs leads to one's motivation for travel (Dann, 1981; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). There is a plethora of studies investigating various forms of travel motivation based on actual tourism behaviour (Cohen, 1972; Crompton, 1979; Fodness, 1994; Mayo & Jarvis, 1981; Nicolau & Mas, 2006). Cohen (1972) provided one of the earliest studies investigating travel motivations. According to Cohen (1972), travel motivations were synonymous with purpose of travel. However, Crompton (1979) argued that a distinction between travel motivations and purpose of travel is essential. His investigation revealed that travel was undertaken to satisfy

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certain needs and wants, and such findings were supported by other studies (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002; Mansfeld, 1992). Other authors further postulated that travel motivations are derived from personal values such as freedom and achievement (Dann, 1981; Gnoth, 1997). The extant literature clearly demonstrates that travel motivations are associated with personal needs and values, resulting in the behavioural response of undertaking tourist experiences (Fodness, 1994; Goosens, 2000; Pearce & Lee, 2005). While travel motivation is portrayed as a driver of tourist behaviour, it has also been demonstrated that motivation can arise as an incidental outcome of the actual visitation (Pearce & Caltibiano, 1983). In this sense, the tourist derives satisfaction while undertaking the vacation experience and also develops further travel motivation that results in the propensity towards revisit intentions. A synthesis of the literature reveals that both purposive and incidental travel motivations are inherent to vacation planning. Moreover, each decision point is likely to vary in terms of the composition and intensity of travel motivations, depending on individual and context.

One of the most frequent conceptualisations of travel motivations have been the application of push and pull motivation (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Goossens, 2000; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Push motivation arises from the circumstances of a decision-maker. For instance, feelings of being inundated with work commitments act as a 'push' factor to escape from one's immediate surroundings (Fodness, 1994; Mansfield, 1992). As push factors occur prior to vacation planning, they are considered a primary form of travel motivation (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004; Dann, 1981). Push factors, therefore, occur independently of any engagement with tourism resources. In contrast, pull motivators are associated with destination-specific attributes (Dann, 1981; Fodness, 1994). For example, destination images that show a leisurely pursuit of a holiday resort experience are designed to attract potential visitors, hence the term 'pull' factors (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004; Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002; Mansfeld, 1992). Additionally,

various collaterals can emphasise the safe and tranquil destination environment (Chen, 1998; Wong & Yeh, 2009). Tourism collateral includes brochures, tourist maps, guidebooks and the internet. These various tools show how destinations can devise appealing messages in a variety of ways to attract potential visitors.

Despite the identification of push and pull factors as distinctive motivators, it has been demonstrated that both forces operate concurrently to drive tourism behaviour (Dann, 1981; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Travel motivation varies between individuals and the context for tourism (Currie, Wesley & Sutherland, 2008; Jang, Lee, Lee & Hong, 2007; Lehto, O'Leary & Morrison, 2002). Personal variables such as life experiences, interests and travel experience also act as moderators of travel motivators (Crotts, 2004; Mayo & Jarvis, 1981; Plog, 1974; Hsu, Cai & Li, 2010; Huang & Hsu, 2009). As travel motivation becomes intensified, a likely outcome is the concurrent development of destination images (Gnoth, 1997). Under such circumstances, a decision-maker's disposition to certain destinations is heightened, since they are perceived to be more likely to deliver desired experiences in comparison with other alternatives (Woodside, MacDonald & Burford, 2004). The combination of push and pull motivations is aimed at addressing what Crompton (1979) postulated as a state of 'disequilibrium'. According to Crompton (1979), disequilibrium in the context of tourism is related to the felt tensions that give rise to motivations for travel. The corresponding act of undertaking a vacation experience is to bring the individual back to a state of 'equilibrium' now that the need to travel has been satisfied (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981).

2.1.4.2   Information search

The second stage of the vacation planning process is information search. Information search serves to equip a decision-maker with necessary knowledge for vacation planning (Gitelson &

Crompton, 1983). This is especially the case when a decision-maker contemplates vacation planning involving new destinations or to obtain updated information in existing destinations, such as details of a new theme park. In this respect, both internal and external information sources are available to a decision-maker (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). Literature has shown that the use of internal sources usually precedes external sources of information (Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). This is because a decision-maker is likely to evaluate familiar sources of information through memory about previous vacations before identifying potential information needs for an upcoming vacation. Examples of internal sources of information include past travel experiences and conscious or sub-conscious engagement with autonomous media sources, such as television programs and newspapers. Accordingly, when internal sources of information are not fully sufficient to assist with the vacation planning process, external sources are used. External sources, where a decision-maker can obtain necessary insights from a range of sources, include travel agents, guidebooks, social groups or online. The use of external information adds to internal knowledge to reduce uncertainty in pre-visit planning (Money & Crotts, 2003; Soo, Vogt & MacKay, 2007; Zalatan, 1996). In the pre-visit phase, internal and external information sources may be concurrently utilised for vacation planning in an evolving manner (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Money & Crotts, 2003). In the post-purchase stage, the role of information search is to instil greater confidence in a decision-maker that the selected vacation is highly likely to deliver expected experiences (Snepenger, Meged, Snelling & Worrall, 1990).

However, certain costs are associated with obtaining external tourism information, including time and potentially monetary expenses. Time spent on external information search can be a significant cost as the amount utilised is not the same for every individual (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). For example, time is extremely valuable for individuals with higher opportunity costs

(Cho & Jang, 2008). In addition, monetary expenses such as transport costs and phone calls can be incurred in external information search. As opportunity costs increase, individuals will search for less information if the benefits derived are less than the costs incurred (Carneiro & Crompton, 2010).

Online tourism information search has provided a highly viable alternative for individuals because of its accessibility and customisation (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Li, Pan, Zhang & Smith, 2009; Standing, Tang-Taye & Boyer, 2014). Through online channels such as search engines or DMO websites, a decision-maker is provided with fast and convenient resources specific to individual needs (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). The use of the internet has also increased tourism-related searches through social media (Beldona, 2005; Cox *et al.*, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Despite the prevalence of social media, the main challenge associated with online information search is the credibility of information presented (Mack *et al.*, 2008; Xiang, Wober & Fesenmaier, 2008). The ease of placing content online raises questions as to the credibility of comments and reviews obtained from social media. As Gartner (1993) has indicated, greater perceived credibility of information sources increases the likelihood for use and adoption towards decision-making. Given the importance of the issue of credibility, further discussion is provided in Section 2.4.3. Yet, online information search may not appeal to decision-makers who enjoy being treated as a customer through face-to-face engagements. These decision-makers are more likely to consult a travel agent or tour operator in order to derive service quality (Hui & Wan, 2005). As vacation planning is highly experiential, decision makers may rely on some tangible cues, such as the service provided by an experienced travel agent in order to reduce their uncertainty levels (Heung & Chu, 2000; Leblanc, 1992). The use of travel agents, however, may not appeal to tourists who enjoy planning for their own vacations. These tourists may instead utilise online information search to obtain required insights. The use of

online sources has compressed the temporal and spatial aspects to expedite the information search process (Dickinger & Stangl, 2011).

The various sources indicate the diversity of options available prior to travel to a vacation planner to decide how best to equip him- or herself with relevant and timely information. However, information search can also occur during the on-site vacation experience. Such situations are more reflective of less structured vacations, where a decision-maker has decided to allocate greater flexibility to some aspects of the vacation experience (Martin & Woodside, 2012). This further reflects the potentially non-sequential vacation-planning process for some tourists. At the destination, information search may be supported through sources such as resort tour desks and visitor information centres (Di Pietro, Wang, Rompf & Severt, 2007; Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008; Money & Crotts, 2003; Snepenger *et al.*, 1990). While resort tour desks are often prominently located within proximity of the reception or lobby, Ap and Wong (2001) argued that decision-makers may not utilise their services because of the perception that any travel advice may be incentivised. This may be the case because the resort tour desks are associated with a consortium of tour operators working on a commission basis (Shepherd, 2002). As such, tourists may be inclined to venture on their own to explore the destination or solicit online sources if available to seek alternative plans. In contrast, visitor information centres have been found to be instrumental in assisting with at-destination information search (Mistilis & D'ambra, 2008). This is because visitor information centres are often staffed by locals and volunteers who are perceived to provide timely and less-incentivised information to tourists (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003). However, their perceived utility is contingent on the desire of tourists to deliberately locate and make the effort to engage the services of a visitor information centre (Shi, 2006). The growth of mobile technologies has equipped many tourists with instantaneous access to tourism information while at a destination (No & Kim, 2014). As

such, some services available at the visitor information centre have been replicated within the online domain, such as reservations and maps (Xiang, Wang, O'Leary & Fesenmaier, 2015). In these circumstances, a tourist may not feel that there is value in accessing the visitor information centres.

Overall, the review of the literature has revealed that information search is a highly personal process that is dependent on the decision-maker and the context for tourism (Xiang *et al.*, 2008). The outcome of information search is to distil relevant knowledge about a vacation in order to make informed tourism decisions.

2.1.4.3   Evaluation of alternatives

Evaluation of alternatives is the third stage of the vacation planning process. As the evaluation of alternatives precedes destination choice, this stage is important to this research. In this stage, a decision-maker determines choice outcomes among a few probable alternatives related to the vacation. There may be several decision points within the evaluation of alternatives, include destination choice, accommodation type, mode of transport and places of interest. In tourism literature, the evaluation of alternatives related to destination choice has been framed using choice sets (Crompton, 1992; Decrop, 2010). A decision-maker is presumed to undertake a rational elimination process based on their travel motivations (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, 2002). The selection criteria will be determined by the suitability of a destination to best meet desired experiences, and, in turn, heuristics such as financial budgets and other situational factors will be used (Van Middlekoop, Borgers & Timmermans, 2003). A key assumption of the evaluation stage is that destinations may be compared against one another on certain characteristics consciously or subconsciously (Goosens, 2000). The evaluation stage uses the overall destination image that a decision-maker has of a destination

in perceiving its suitability to deliver expected outcomes. As the focus of the thesis is on destination choice, this stage will be elaborated upon in Section 2.2

Personality traits are of particular relevance to the evaluation of alternatives stage. Beerli, Meneses and Gil (2007) related that the evaluation of destination alternatives to the concept of self-congruity. In a destination choice context, the term self-congruity refers to the symbolic representation that a selected destination possesses an image that suits an individual's self-concept (Chon, 1991; Todd, 2001). In literature, it has been established that destination choice is a decision taken by a tourist on the pretext that desired vacation experiences would be realised. However, self-congruity lends further clarity to the destination evaluation stage by presenting personality traits as indicative antecedents to what destinations are chosen and the types of vacation experience undertaken (Litvin & Kar, 2004). In a study of tourists visiting Las Vegas, Usakli and Baloglu (2011) found that self-congruity has some impact in the favourable consideration of the destination. Incidentally, their study also identified that respondents recognised a destination had some ability to manipulate visitors' destination images to strengthen the effect of self-congruity. Sirgy and Su (2000) term this functional congruity, where destination attributes may be used to modify and reposition a destination favourably for choice outcomes. The synthesis of the literature has demonstrated how destination choices may be devised from a combination of personality types that are matched to destination attributes. However, some scholars caution against being overly reliant on using self-congruity as a sole predictor of destination choice (Boksberger, Dolnicar, Laesser & Randle, 2011). In an investigation of Swiss travellers, Boksberger *et al.* (2011) found that while more than half their respondents reportedly associated with the concept of self-congruity in their destination decisions, other factors such as vacation types and socio-demographic variables were limited in their ability to operationalise the effect of self-congruity. By analysing

the literature on self-congruity, it can be concluded that self-congruity is one approach to understand why some destinations are preferred over others. However, the role of other factors such as travel motivations and the context for travel are also likely to shape the eventual choice of a particular destination (Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007). For this reason, destination choice is an integration of several considerations that operate in a highly sub-conscious manner within a decision-maker.

2.1.4.4   Purchase

The purchase stage is the fourth stage of vacation planning. Unlike product purchases where a decision-maker obtains a tangible product, vacation purchases are more often evidenced by experiential consumption, such as visiting a wildlife park or staying in a resort. Furthermore, vacation-related purchases may be considered over a varied period of time (Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983). For instance, a cruise package may be purchased a year in advance of travel, but last-minute vacations may also be considered by the same decision-maker at a different time. Therefore, vacation planning has a temporal dimension that may give rise to different decision points required for the experience (Dellaert, Ettema & Lindh, 1998; Hyde & Lawson, 2003). Other incidental purchases can include items such as travel insurance and medication that would not be considered if the purchase decision did not materialise (Vickerman & Barmby, 1984; Wood, 2005). Additionally, more consideration is given to purchase decisions when more people are involved in the vacation experience, such as an entire family unit (Hawks & Ackerman, 1990; Therkelsen, 2010; Wagner & Hanna, 1983).

To facilitate vacation-related purchases, several options are available to a decision-maker. For instance, visiting a travel agent, phone or online reservations are common outlets for tourism purchases (Card, Chen & Cole, 2003; Clemons, Hann & Hitt, 2002). Despite the notion that

vacation plans are selected on the basis of best meeting desired tourism experiences, the *modus operandi* within the tourism industry has often been characterised by price wars between competing providers (Campo & Yague, 2007; Crouch, 1992). It is for this reason that some studies have contended that the presence of low prices increases the propensity for last-minute vacation decisions (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Dacko, 2004; Godfrey, 1999). Low prices are driven by the underlying principle that vacation experiences cannot be stored for future consumption. Therefore, different tourism providers (e.g., tour operators or accommodation) utilise price discounting to entice price-sensitive visitors towards a particular type and choice of vacation, especially during off-peak seasons of travel (Campo & Yague, 2007; Perdue, 2002). Some exemplars may also be found on the internet, including Groupon deals and intermediaries such as Wotif.com (Heung & Chu, 2000). In addition, purchases may occur at a destination, as in the case of semi-structured vacations (Martin & Woodside, 2012). Synthesising the literature, it may be proposed that a range of considerations affects the purchase decision and that vacation plans can be planned or spontaneous. Vacation planning epitomises the interaction between characteristics of the decision-maker and the context for travel.

In some instances, the purchase decision is aborted. Factors that influence such a decision could be a change of circumstances (e.g., sudden illness), a change in motivation (e.g., priority in buying a home), new information that has surfaced (e.g., implementation of new travel visas) or the unavailability of the destination (e.g., natural disasters). Overall, it may be concluded that no particular sequence may exist for vacation-related purchases, as the needs of each experience are considered specifically within its context (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004; Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Hyde, 2003; Martin & Woodside, 2008; Woodside & King, 2001). Each vacation plan will incur a different pool of considerations for the decision-maker.

2.1.4.5   Post-purchase

Post-purchase is the final stage of vacation planning. The focus of the post-purchase stage is the evaluation of how the vacation experience has delivered the expected outcomes for the decision-maker (Lounsbury & Hoopes, 1985; Zalatan, 1994). However, the post-purchase stage has been conceptualised to comprise two distinct temporal phases. The first is the period of time that exists between the vacation-related purchases and actual visitation of a destination. The second phase occurs after the decision-maker completes the vacation experience and returns home. Existing studies have focused on the post-visit phase as the decision-maker is most likely to recollect the vacation experience for evaluation in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007; del Bosque & Martin, 2008). In this context, satisfaction occurs when the destination experience delivers expected outcomes. As tourism is a highly experiential activity, a decision-maker may draw satisfaction cues from engaging with different aspects of the vacation, such as the friendliness of service staff (Lam & Zhang, 1999; Millan, 2004). In contrast, dissatisfaction results when the vacation experience does not meet the decision-maker's expectations, and this could occur for foreseeable or unforeseeable reasons. For instance, inclement weather may result in the cancellation of a trekking expedition and cause dissatisfaction. A decision-maker can then respond to dissatisfaction in several ways (Zins, 2002). The most common response is for a consumer to seek a refund from the service provider. Alternatively, the consumer may voice comments through third-party sources (e.g., newspapers, online forums or tourism associations). The consumer may choose not to voice dissatisfaction but decide never to purchase from the provider again. In addition, the consumer can also influence family and friends with negative WOM (Leblanc, 1992; Shankar, Smith & Rangaswamy, 2003).

While most scholars have focused on the post-visit phase, few studies have examined the post-purchase, pre-visit phase (Sanchez, Callarisa, Rodriguez & Moliner, 2006; Woodside & King, 2001). The lack of engagement may be attributed to different studies adopting an inclusive view of purchase behaviour prior to visitation (Bigne, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2001; Cai, Feng & Breiter, 2004). In these studies, the purchase stage is extended to semi-structured or unstructured destination decisions where a decision-maker may decide on some aspects of the vacation experience to accompany the primary expenses (e.g., flight reservations). During the period of time that may exist between the vacation purchases and the actual travel undertaken, a decision-maker is presented with an opportunity to further explore potential choices. Accordingly, information search may be subsequently conducted in a more detailed manner to identify suitable options that fit the vacation experience, while maintaining flexibility for destination on-site decision-making (Martin & Woodside, 2012; Moutinho, 1993). However, what is known about the post-purchase, pre-visit stage is that a decision-maker evaluates the purchase experience (e.g., service of a travel agency staff or ease of payment options) for satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which in turn, contributes to the overall vacation experience (Sanchez *et al.*, 2006). A positive pre-vacation evaluation of service then primes the decision-maker in anticipation of favourable vacation experiences.

Therefore, the post-purchase stage is considered an important aspect of vacation planning as a highly satisfied visitor is more likely to consider repeat visit intentions (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Oppermann, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). To a DMO, repeat visitors have obvious benefits, as studies have shown that the management of loyal customers requires less money and time (Chi & Qu, 2008; Oppermann, 2000). Similarly, the accumulation of less than desired experiences is likely to have a detrimental effect on a destination's visitor market share (Neal & Gursoy, 2008; Weiermair & Fuchs, 1999; Yuksel, 2001). Overall, the post-purchase stage should not

be viewed as the end of a linear sequence, but rather a reinforcement loop to complete the vacation planning process, as the outcomes are likely to inform future decisions (Master & Prideaux, 2000; Moutinho, 1993; Woodside *et al.*, 2004).

In summary, this section has evaluated the characteristics of vacation planning. An appraisal of vacation planning models has found very broadly held views of vacation planning. However, the examination of the extant models has revealed that five key stages are present in vacation planning. Whilst the identification of the five stages is useful to operationalise vacation planning, there is a strong likelihood that no two vacation plans will be identical. A synthesis of the literature also revealed that vacation planning is shaped by a variety of factors related to the decision-maker and the context for travel. Figure 2.2 presents a pictorial representation of this conceptualisation of vacation planning.

Awareness of need
- Prompted by push and pull motivators

Information search
- Moderated by time, effort and level of decision complexity

Evaluation of alternatives
- Assessed by weighing outcomes against desired experiences

Purchase
- Generated out of the best perceived vacation value

Post purchase
- Used to reflect on vacation outcomes and stored in memory for future decisions
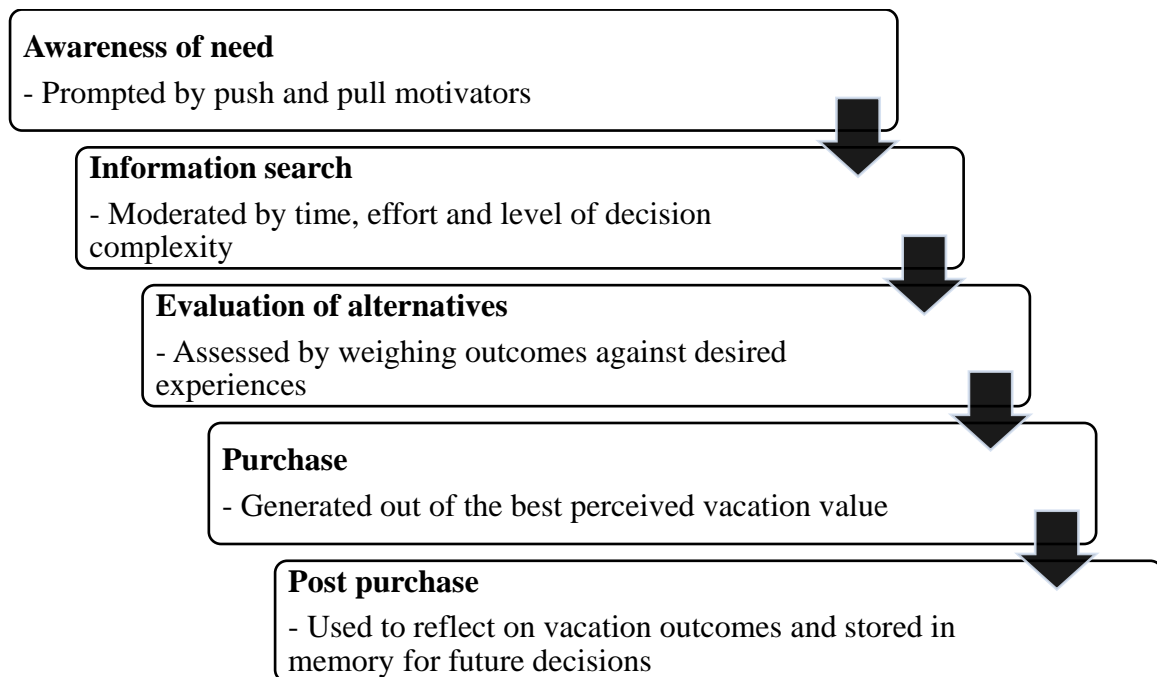
Figure 2.2: Conceptualisation of vacation planning

2.2   Destination choice

In this research, destination choice is related to the decision of selecting a destination from alternative options, if any. Destination choice, therefore, is the outcome of the evaluation of alternatives stage as one of several decisions that a decision-maker will need to determine (Section 2.1.3). As vacations take place at a particular destination, destination choice is an integral decision that gives rise to other associated decisions such as accommodation and transport. Furthermore, the choice of a destination results in other alternatives being de-selected. Given the importance of destination choice to a vacation, this section will analyse the literature to frame this research. The section first analyses models of destination choice to show how different scholars have approached destination selection outcomes. Next, destination choice sets are discussed to reveal a sub-conscious elimination process. Following this, a conceptual framework is derived from synthesising the outcomes of the literature.

2.2.1   Models of destination choice

Three different approaches exist within models of destination choice. These are an economic approach, a process approach and a cognitive approach. Adopting an economic approach, Seddighi and Theocharus (2002) conceptualised destination choice as an outcome derived from monetary trade-offs involving price, distance and activity types. Based on a survey of tourists in Cyprus, Seddighi and Theocharus (2002) argued that destination choice could be distilled to objective attributes that can then be used when comparing one destination to another. In particular, their findings highlighted the role of safety as a consideration when their respondents chose Cyprus. It is reasonable that tourists will incorporate safety as a consideration for travel, because few are willing to compromise their personal well-being during a vacation.

The process approach characterises the use of specific attributes as a key driver of destination choice, which is evident in other studies (Hsu *et al.*, 2009; Moscardo, *et al.*, 1996; Nicolau & Mas, 2006; Woodside *et al.*, 2004). Moscardo *et al.* (1996) postulated that destination choice is derived from an assessment of travel motivations and how activities and the image of a destination are perceived to deliver desired outcomes. Nicolau and Mas (2006) adopted a similar approach to conceptualising destination choice, but emphasise the role of distance and prices as moderators of the selection criteria. Hsu *et al.* (2009) further posited that destination choice is an aggregation of internal and external considerations that feature an array of activities on offer at a destination. Woodside *et al.* (2004), however, expressed activities as an outcome of a pre-selected destination rather than a pre-cursor to destination choice.

The cognitive approach instead showcases the relationship between an input-process-output flow to derive a destination choice. As the research aims are to examine the contextual cues characterising social media influence in destination choice, this is the approach that is best suited to conceptualising influence. The cognitive approach facilitates the exploration of social media influence throughout the vacation planning process without being inhibited by pre-conceived hypotheses. Cognitive approaches have a choice set component. The thesis will now investigate choice sets and their role in destination decisions.

2.2.2   Destination choice sets

Destination choice sets have been utilised to help conceptualise how decision-makers choose among alternative destinations. Choice sets have been adapted from consumer behaviour to explain how a large initial group of destinations is reduced to a few probable alternatives before a final decision is made (Jang *et al.*, 2007; Smallman & Moore, 2010). Choice sets present

decision-making as a cognitive appraisal of alternatives based on certain attributes (Narayana & Markin, 1975; Shocker *et al.*, 1991). To this end, choice sets have been viewed as a funnelling process, where the decision-maker works through several decision points, eliminating options before reaching an outcome (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Shocker *et al.*, 1991). Through the funnelling process, a decision-maker moves from broad intentions towards specific and targeted outcomes. In the operationalisation of destination choice sets, several limitations exist. First, it is assumed that there are alternatives for any destination decision. However, for example, in the case of religious tourists, there may be only one choice in the decision to go on a pilgrimage. Likewise, tourists visiting friends and relatives may have very little discretion on their choice of a destination. Second, choice sets have primarily been investigated in the context of a single destination, and have generally ignored multi-destination vacations. Third, the rationality of choice sets appears to undermine the effect of hedonic and emotional involvements in decision-making (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Crouch, 1992; Um & Crompton, 1990). However, despite these limitations, choice sets are relevant for understanding how decision-makers choose from among all conceivable destinations in the world, under various constraints, such as time and money. Hence, in this research, destination choice sets provide a useful basis for examining destination choice.

One of the earliest applications of the destination choice set process was the work of Woodside and Sherrell (1977). The context for their investigation was visitors to a tourist information centre within the USA. In examining destination choice sets, the authors argued that decision-makers were rational individuals who eliminated destinations based on specific criteria, such as cost and activities available. Drawing on the work of Woodside and Sherrell, subsequent studies that adopt choice set mechanisms have emerged within destination decision-making (Crompton, 1992; Decrop, 2010; Jang *et al.*, 2007; Pearce, 2005). Early studies by Woodside

and his co-authors (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977) framed choice sets as a 'funnelling' sequence where a decision-maker moves from broad intentions to specific and targeted outcomes before the eventual selection of a destination. Later work by Woodside and Lysonski (1989) was dedicated to an empirical investigation of New Zealand university students and their international destination choice. A major distinction in Woodside and Lysonski's (1989) study was to clarify the types of situational constraints that affected the type of destination selected. Additionally, the application of situational constraints in Woodside and Lysonski (1989) was conceptualised to occur as a separate stage immediately prior to destination choice.

A second wave of studies investigating destination choice sets included Crompton and his co-authors. Five papers between 1990 and 1999 were developed by this group of authors. Two papers, Crompton (1992) and Crompton and Ankomah (1993) were developed as conceptual work. The remaining three papers had empirical findings, in particular Um and Crompton (1990), Ankomah, Crompton and Baker (1996) and Botha, Crompton and Kim (1999). These empirical studies differed from the works of Woodside in examining how destinations progress from one set to another through a measurement of decision-maker attitudes. For instance, Um and Crompton (1990) found in their longitudinal study that attitudes were paramount in shaping a destination from an evoked set to the eventual choice. Ankomah *et al.* (1996) corroborated these outcomes in a US-based study when they found that the eventual choice of a destination occurred when the cognitive distance of a destination was highly congruent to the desired vacation type. In other words, when a destination appears highly favourable, then a decision-maker is more likely to select the destination over other alternatives. Botha *et al.* (1999) added that destination preferences are also shaped by both passive and active information search in

their investigation. This outcome provides further evidence that destination choice sets are a highly dynamic process and can be impacted by a range of considerations.

Subsequent papers investigating destination choice sets were conceptualised through the addition of decision-makers to the decision point. For instance, Jang *et al.* (2007) found for 100 Korean honeymoon couples, destination choice was at times a challenging process because there was the need to appease spouses to determine a mutually agreeable outcome. In his longitudinal study of Belgian vacationers, Decrop (2010) likewise postulated that destination choice is a highly iterative process and one that is driven by constraints and opportunities. These studies reflect the highly evolving nature of destination decision-making that can be modified at each stage, up to the point when a decision is made.

Whilst there is overall agreement about mental evaluations of destinations, different terms have been utilised across the various studies, as illustrated in Table 2.1. Table 2.1 illustrates existing literature pertaining to destination choice sets in a chronological manner to establish trends in choice set terminology that have developed since the work of Woodside and Sherrell (1977).

Table 2.1: Choice set terminology within destination decision-making literature

Terms	Woodside & Sherrell (1977)	Woodside & Lysonski (1989)	Um & Crompton (1990)	Crompton (1992)	Crompton & Ankomah (1993)	Ankomah *et al.* (1996)	Botha *et al.* (1999)	Pearce (2005)	Jang *et al.* (2007)	Decrop (2010)
Aware/ Unaware	✓	✓	✓	✓ (Initial consideration)	Early consideration	Initial set	✓ (Initial consideration)	✓	Early consideration	Consideration
Available/ Unavailable	✓	✓								Constraints
Evoked	✓	✓ (Consideration)	✓	✓	Late consideration	Late	Late consideration	✓	Late consideration	Evaluation
Inert	✓	✓		✓		✓				
Inept	✓	✓		✓ (Reject)		Reject				
Action/ Inaction				✓	✓	✓				
Interaction/ Quiet				✓						
Dream										✓
Choice	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The table suggests that there is a common understanding of destination decision-making. Despite the array of terms used, it may be suggested that some of these terms describe similar conditions. For instance, the terms early or initial consideration sets (Botha *et al.*, 1999; Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Jang *et al.*, 2007) are called an awareness set by other authors (e.g. Pearce, 2005; Um & Crompton, 1990; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). In some studies, the early or initial consideration set comprises destinations that a decision-maker is possibly considering to visit (Botha *et al.*, 1999; Crompton & Ankomah, 1993). However, adopting the notion of an initial consideration set is vague, as it has been further argued that a decision-maker's destination preferences lie on a continuum moderated by contextual factors for destination decision-making (Ankomah *et al.*, 1996). Other studies, however, have utilised the term 'awareness set' as the existence of a destination must first be known to a decision-maker in order to be considered for selection (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993).

In terms of its composition, an awareness set consists of potentially numerous destinations (Um & Crompton, 1990). Accordingly, destinations that a decision-maker is unaware of will be eliminated from further consideration. Previous studies have postulated that a decision-maker is made aware of destinations from internal sources of information (e.g., past experience) or incidental engagement with external sources such as WOM and autonomous media (Ankomah *et al.*, 1996; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Additionally, the awareness set of destinations may also be enlarged when groups are involved in destination decision-making (Di Virgilio & Di Pietro, 2014; Jang *et al.*, 2007). For this reason, the ability to recall a potential destination is the preliminary phase to further determining selection processes (Crompton, 1992). Favourable attitudes towards a destination have been demonstrated to be a predictor for a destination moving from the awareness set to the latter stages of consideration (Um & Crompton, 1990).

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In some studies, destinations from the awareness set progress to a categorisation of available or unavailable (Botha *et al.*, 1999; Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Decrop, 2010; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977). Whilst the explicit identification of the available or unavailable set was not widely evident in Table 2.2, this could be explained by the treatment of situational inhibitors of the destination decision (Jang *et al.*, 2007; Decrop, 2010). For instance, cost may be a factor to consider in eliminating some destinations (Wong & Yeh, 2009; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). In addition, safety concerns such as terrorism or natural disasters may also suggest unavailable destinations (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977). Different authors have positioned situational inhibitors at various points within choice set literature. In some studies, available destinations are determined in the earlier stages of consideration (Pearce, 2005; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977). However, others have contended that the availability of destinations occurs immediately prior to destination selection (Botha *et al.*, 1999; Jang *et al.*, 2007; Decrop, 2010). Inability to determine the exact period where destinations are categorised into available or unavailable sets is perhaps a reflection of the contextual and sub-conscious nature of destination decision-making (Ankomah *et al.*, 1996). Nonetheless, a central theme in the literature surrounding the composition of the awareness set is destination image. Specifically, the literature has suggested that destination image raises the awareness of destinations through a combination of both personal variables and environmental stimuli (Costley & Brucks, 1992; Zinn & Manfredo, 2000). Furthermore, the destination image is likely to evolve over time, and, accordingly, exert an influence on destination preferences. Collectively, a decision-maker evaluates the suitability of various destination options in order to identify several probable outcomes, along with specific selection criteria, such as affordability or the availability of family-oriented activities.

The late consideration set consists of destinations that are highly likely to be selected by a decision-maker (Botha *et al.*, 1999; Jang *et al.*, 2007). Such a set is likely to include few destinations, of which one will be ultimately chosen (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993). The late consideration set has also been termed differently: it has also been known as an evaluation set (Decrop, 2010). Existing studies have demonstrated that the average number of destinations in the evaluation set is between one and five (Perdue & Meng, 2006; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). It is also essential to note that the evaluation set further categorises these few destinations into three subsets. These three subsets have been referred to as the evoked, inert and inept set (Crompton, 1992; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977). The evoked set includes destinations that decision-makers have positively evaluated to meet desired tourism experiences (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). In contrast, destinations in the inert set have been evaluated neutrally to meet travel needs and are thereby eliminated (Ankomah *et al.*, 1996). Similarly, destinations in the inept set are also eliminated because they are perceived as being unable to meet travel needs (Woodside & Sherrell, 1977).

While the literature has appeared consistent in the identification of an evoked set, little research has investigated the elimination process of destinations into an inert or inept set (Lawson & Thyne, 2001; Perdue & Meng, 2006). According to Lawson and Thyne (2001), destinations are categorised in an inept set where they present an imminent threat to physical safety. While perceived risks provide some understanding of the destination elimination process, another key reason is that destination preferences are based on perception constructs that are difficult to assess (Hong, Kim, Jang & Lee, 2006; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Hence, a decision-maker may focus on a single destination that is perceived to best meet desired tourism experiences and sub-consciously eliminate other alternatives instead (Oppermann, 1998; Pike, 2006; Zalatan, 1996). Despite its shortcomings, the evaluation set is highly important, because any

subsequent purchases by a decision-maker are related to the choice of a destination from within this set. Some other terms have been proposed as occurring following the evoked set of destinations. These include the action and inaction set, the interaction and the dream set (Ankomah *et al.*, 1996; Crompton, 1992; Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Decrop, 2010). The limited literature investigating these terms suggests that the specific circumstances of their occurrence may be located within a decision-maker's memory and such destinations are instead stored to be evaluated for future decisions (Moutinho, 1993). Overall, it may be concluded that choice sets are the outcome of a mental appraisal of a preference towards some destinations and the propensity of a decision-maker to visit a particular destination (Ankomah *et al.*, 1996).

The analysis of choice sets has provided a basis to understand how an elimination process is devised to reduce a potentially large number of destinations to a few highly favourable alternatives. Destinations that have progressed to become part of the evaluation set are strongly perceived to fulfil desired experiences and, as such, are more likely to be selected over others. Choice sets may also be represented as a process that is shaped by personal preferences and destination attributes. This symbolises that destination choice may be adapted and repositioned differently in various contexts. A synthesis of the literature has revealed that an array of terms exists and has led to the complexities of comparing between studies in what appears to be a dynamic decision-making process (Crompton, 1992). Amidst the potential confusion of terms among similar characteristics, some models have emerged to illustrate how destination choice can be derived. The thesis will now assess the merits of varying models of destination choice, to select a theoretical framework that facilitates the examination of social media influence in destination choice.

2.2.3   Selection of theoretical framework

Thus far, the review of literature has provided an understanding that vacation planning occurs in five stages, and that destination decision-making provides further detail to one of the vacation planning stages. Literature has also presented that this process is a highly individualised one, depending on the context. Furthermore, destination decision-making is largely sub-conscious and where existing models appear potentially limited in their ability to predict choice outcomes.

Building on the analysis of the literature in the previous sections, it is thereby essential to select a theoretical framework to inform how social media influence in destination choice should be conceptualised. Two main considerations were used to select a theoretical framework for this research. One, the selected model should be focused on arriving at a choice outcome. Two, the model has to explicitly include influences on the decision outcome. Social media, as the focus of this research, can then be adapted to the selected model to assess its influence in destination choice. Two destination choice models appeared to meet the criteria for the thesis. Specifically, these are the work of Woodside *et al.* (2004) and Chen (1998). Each of these models will be subsequently discussed in terms of which is best suited for the thesis.

Woodside *et al.*'s (2004) nine-stage model of destination choice is derived from a grounded theory perspective based on leisure choices. The first five stages of their model investigate the pre-visit vacation plan, where destination choice is suggested to be influenced from external and internal agents such as WOM and also past experience. Furthermore, the model highlights the purposes of travel in determining choice outcomes. However, the last four stages of Woodside *et al.*'s (2004) work is focused on the at-destination experiences of tourists. In

particular, the authors aim to determine if tourist satisfaction will lead to positive WOM and re-visit intentions. While such a model lends a temporal perspective of destination choice, it is implicit as to where the influences on destination choice are, and how one should investigate the different influences over the vacation planning sequence. For this reason, the model proposed by Woodside *et al.* (2004) is de-selected for this research.

In contrast, the Tourists' Cognitive Decision Making (TCDM) Model proposed by Chen (1998) is aimed at understanding the role of agents of influence towards choice outcomes. Figure 2.3 depicts the TCDM Model that shows the links between choice set literature and locating influence towards destination selection.
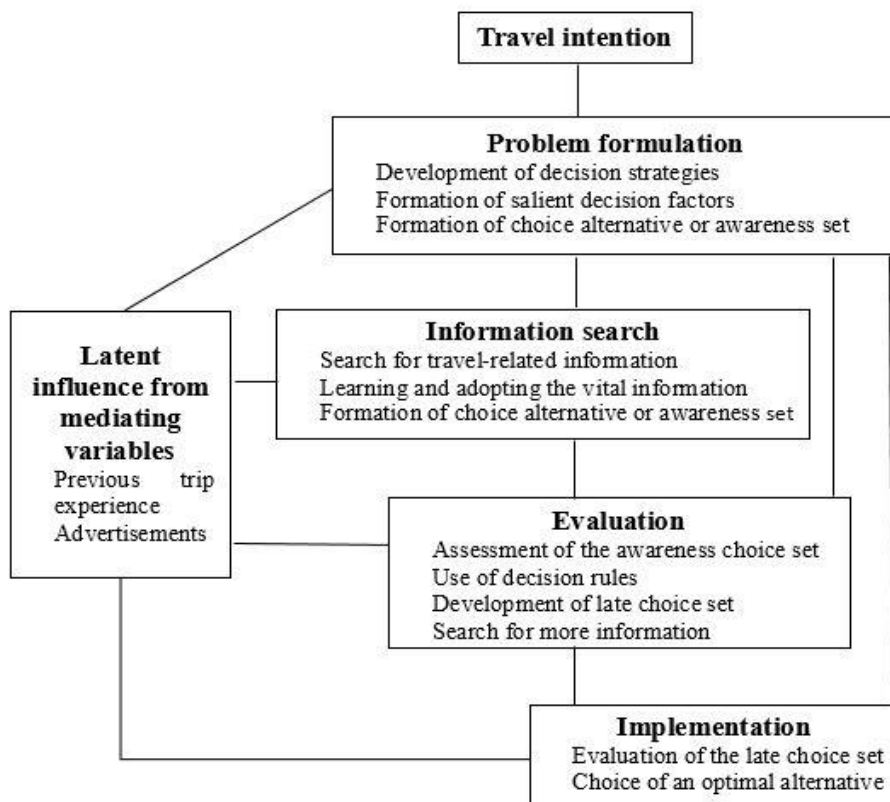
Figure 2.3: The Tourists' Cognitive Decision Making (TCDM) Model

Adapted from Chen (1998)

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As is evident in Figure 2.3, the TCDM model is based on the sequential stages of destination decision-making moving from broad intentions to targeted outcomes. In tourism literature, the TCDM has been tested in different contexts. When concurrent agents of influence were present, Chen and Gursoy (2000) found that their European sample identified past experience to be the main influence on their destination decisions. The TCDM model also revealed specific contextual cues in other studies. For instance, Mohsin (2008) reported that demographic variables affect the choice of a destination. In contrast, Chen, Kerstetter and Graefe (2001) ascertained that agents that heightened particular tourism interests had greater influence on destination choice. An example of this within tourism literature is word of mouth where fellow campers may elevant one another's propensity to select a camping destination due to favourable past experiences. Interestingly, Lo, Cheung and Law (2004) did not find significant differences among agents of influence between first time and repeat Chinese visitors to Hong Kong. Potentially, such an outcome may be explained by the greater familiarity and proximity to the destination, as proposed by Chen and Gursoy (2001).

Despite its benefits, the TCDM model is not without its limitations. For instance, the model may not apply to all types of destination decisions. Serendipitous destination decisions can be undertaken outside of the prescribed cognitive processes within the TCDM model (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Furthermore, different agents of influence may be more prominent at different stages in the model, as contended by Smallman and Moore (2010). Notwithstanding these limitations, TCDM model is useful to understand relative influence and also across several decision contexts. As the model was developed in 1998, social media is conspicuously absent. Nonetheless, the model provides a clear representation of how destination choice is undertaken in a rational manner. Applying the TCDM model to this research will help narrow the focus towards destination choice, instead of the entire vacation planning process.

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In summary, the different interpretations used to conceptualise the "destination" have given rise to broad perspectives of examining destination choice within current literature. These approaches use a broad adaptation and interpretation of destination choice models that can be targeted at a national level or at much smaller levels of regions and cities. Clearly, the appraisal of the literature has demonstrated a very inclusive approach to destination choice. Despite the lack of a uniform approach, the section has synthesised key factors leading to destination choice. Destination choice is derived from a cognitive assessment that considers factors such as personal characteristics and destination attributes. Choice set literature has also shown that destination choice occurs in a funnelling manner that invokes a mental categorisation of destinations.

Destinations are moved to an evaluation set before one destination is chosen based on individual or group preferences. Therefore, understanding what influences destination choice becomes critical for destinations in engaging and inducing potential visitors towards their eventual selection. Moreover, it is noticeable that the vast majority of destination choice studies were developed almost three decades ago. Destination choice has since been transformed with the speed and nature of engagement that also features social media. As Hudson and Thal (2013) have argued, there is a need to establish what the nature of social media influence is within an evolving landscape of destination decisions. Chen's (1998) TCDM Model has been selected as the most appropriate conceptual framework for this research.

2.3   Considerations shaping destination choice

From undertaking a review of tourism literature, eight considerations were found to have shaped destination choice. These are destination image, level of familiarity, risks, involvement,

travelling party, planned and unplanned decisions, heuristics and constraints. Each of these considerations will be discussed in light of their role in shaping destination choice. The review of these considerations will then be integrated into the conceptual framework.

2.3.1   Destination image

Destination choice is heavily influenced by perceptions, and thereby justifying the need for a review of destination image. Destination image has been a well-studied topic in tourism literature (Bigne *et al.*, 2001; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Gartner, 1993; Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007; Tasci, Gartner & Cavusgil, 2007). As previously noted, destination image has roles in vacation planning and destination decision-making. Specifically, Poeisz (1989) emphasised the importance of image to consumer psychology by associating the purchase decision of a product or service such as tourism with the satisfaction of personal needs. In a tourism context, purchase decisions relating to air travel or accommodation have often been determined through brand images of quality and service (Back, 2005; Chen & Tseng, 2010; Chiang & Jang, 2007). Likewise, destination choice, in most circumstances, is determined from the perception that a destination is most likely to deliver desired vacation outcomes. For this reason, an analysis of destination image is pivotal to the understanding of destination choice.

Despite numerous studies investigating the role of destination image in tourism, it has been noted that no single definition exists (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Tasci *et al.*, 2007). The challenges in defining destination image are related to the multi-dimensional attributes it encompasses, as well as the complexities surrounding measurement of its variables, as noted by Pearce (1988). Different definitions of destination image have been proposed. For instance, destination image has been defined as a cognitive appraisal of a

destination (Crompton, 1979). In another definition, destination image comprises a composite perspective of an assortment of product and service attributes at a destination (Gartner & Hunt, 1987). Despite these definitional differences, common characteristics may be observed, in that destination image consists of attitudes and beliefs about a given destination. Based on these common characteristics, this research reflects a broadly inclusive viewpoint in adopting the definition that destination image is to be understood as the collective perceptions of a destination held by an individual (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1993). Given that destination choice is intricately linked to destination image, it is necessary to understand the core features of destination image and its impact on decision-making. Across numerous studies, a positive destination image has been demonstrated to increase the perception that desired tourism experiences are more likely to be realised (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Chon, 1991; Jenkins, 1999; Pike, 2002; Sirakaya *et al.*, 1996). Hence, the thesis will now discuss how destination image is formed and the composition of destination image.

2.3.1.1 Destination image formation

Understanding the destination image formation process is essential to reveal the process in shaping how a decision-maker perceives any destination. Destination image has been shown to evolve over time (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; San Martin & del Bosque, 2008). Several studies have provided a conceptual understanding of how destination image may be formed to comprise an overall perspective held by a potential decision-maker. One of the earliest works investigating destination image formation was Gunn (1972). In her seminal work, Gunn (1972) postulated that there are two categories that drive destination image formation. The two categories are organic and induced image agents. Other studies have since built on these two categories of image agents in order

to further examine their distinctive roles for destination image formation (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Jenkins, 1999; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997).

Organic agents are the collective group of non-tourism information sources accumulated over a decision-maker's life through conscious or sub-conscious engagement (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972; Tasci *et al.*, 2007). Examples of organic agents include news articles, books and television programs that result in further knowledge of a particular destination. Additionally, personal tourism experiences, also known as 'real' experiences, can also form part of the knowledge base to develop organic destination images. In contrast, induced agents refer to tourism-specific information sources that a decision-maker can acquire about a destination (Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972; Tasci *et al.*, 2007). Examples of induced agents include word of mouth (WOM), tourism collaterals and online sources, such as DMO websites. Gunn (1972) hypothesised that destination image is primarily developed through organic agents, because a decision-maker is likely to consciously or subconsciously become aware of a destination prior to any cognitive appraisals for destination choice.

However, the role of induced agents provides further clarity as to how destination preferences may be modified. Through different stimuli, a decision-maker can obtain necessary information to process and prioritise which destination, among others, is more likely to meet their desired tourism experiences. Whilst the identification of organic and induced images is useful to operationalise destination image formation, studies have suggested that destination decisions are an outcome of the intricate relationships developed in combination when engaging with both categories, as well as the moderating roles of individual variables such as age, education and travel motives (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). However, a core distinction may be found as to the level of control a destination has over organic or induced

sources. As organic sources are less likely to be moderated by a destination, they are perceived to have relatively higher credibility.

Reflecting that different image agents have varying credibility levels, Gartner's (1993) typology comprising eight types of image formation agents has presented a useful basis to understanding how these agents are adopted for corresponding destination decisions. In his typology, Gartner postulated that image formation agents possess varying levels of credibility and, as such, are likely to influence destination image formation to different extents. One major distinction of the agents is the term 'organic' to symbolise actual visitation and 'autonomous' to represent information from news, movies and television programs. Table 2.2 illustrates the eight types of image formation agents ranked in terms of high to low credibility levels.

Table 2.2: Image formation agents and their respective credibility levels

Image agents	Examples	Credibility
Autonomous	News, movies, television programs	High
Organic	Actual visitation	High
Solicited Organic	Solicited information from family or friends	High
Covert Induced II	Second party endorsement through relatively unbiased reports (e.g., newspapers)	Medium
Overt Induced II	Tour operator information	Medium
Unsolicited Organic	Unsolicited information received from family or friends	Medium
Covert Induced I	Second party endorsement in advertisements	Low/Medium
Overt Induced I	Traditional advertising	Low

Adapted from Gartner (1993)

Gartner's (1993) work is ranked in Table 2.2 in order of three levels of credibility (high, medium and low). Three agents have been identified to be highly credible. These are organic, solicited organic and autonomous agents. High credibility may be attributed to the information obtained from sources that are perceived to be less likely provided with vested interests

(Westbrook, 1987). At the other end, lower credibility is associated with overt induced agents that are characteristic of traditional advertising. In this sense, Gartner (1993) offered a greater distinction of Gunn's (1972) terminology to provide a more nuanced approach in understanding image agents and their credibility levels. Gartner's (1993) propositions have similarly been supported in other studies (Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Jenkins, 1999; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Additionally, these subsequent studies exemplified that different image agents can be juxtaposed to supplement informational gaps towards developing an overall destination image (Snepenger *et al.*, 1990). For example, the absence of actual visitation experiences can be compensated for in terms of other credible sources such as autonomous agents or solicited information through family and friends (Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). Credibility is an important component in this thesis as decision-makers are likely to prioritise the relevance and importance of information for destination choice. It is highly probable that greater emphasis is paid towards more credible information sources in consideration of any destination decision – this will be discussed further in Section 2.4.3.

While destination image formation may be developed through various routes of information processing, some authors have raised the complexities associated with measuring destination image (Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005; White, 2004). This is because destination image may be derived from the engagement with several agents, each possessing different credibility levels and can be used in various combinations (Gartner, 1993; Son & Pearce, 2005). Hence, there has been an emphasis on the need for eclectic approaches to better understand destination image and its full complexity (Driscoll, Lawson & Niven, 1994; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Yau & Chan, 1990). Notwithstanding such concerns, the analysis of destination image is central to this research because an understanding of its formation and composition is essential to inform how a decision-maker may assess the suitability of a destination.

2.3.1.2   Composition of destination image

The composition of destination image is an area that has achieved widespread interest (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Chon, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1993; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Pike, 2002; Tasci *et al.*, 2007). These studies examined how destination image may be operationalised in explaining perceptions and the likely consequences for tourist behaviour. Differences in approaches may be observed. For instance, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) used an experimental technique to assess what the key relationships are within destination image composition. In contrast, Chon (1991) utilised surveys to measure the components of destination image of overseas tourists to a less familiar destination. Furthermore, Pike (2002) conducted an extensive review of 142 destination image studies and found that a variety of measures have been undertaken to understand the multi-faceted composition of destination image. Collectively, the studies revealed that destination image is a holistic perception, rather than a summation of its individual components, such as physical attributes and emotional attachment to a destination (Crompton, 1979). Nonetheless, different studies have proposed that destination image is made up of cognitive, affective and conative components (Chi & Qu, 2008; Frias, Rodriguez & Castaneda, 2008; Kim, 1998; Prayag, 2008; Yilmaz, Yilmaz, Icigen, Ekin & Utku, 2009).

Cognitive images are associated with the physical attributes of a destination (Gartner, 1993; Kim & Youn, 2003; Pike & Ryan, 2004; San Martin & del Bosque, 2008). For example, a cognitive image of Melbourne is its location in Australia. Cognitive images are less likely to be modified over time because the physical attributes of a destination remain fairly stable, such as its geographical location and environmental settings (Alcaniz, Garcia & Blas, 2009; Dann, 1996; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter & Hou, 2007). As cognitive images are highly tangible, Echtner and Ritchie (1991) explained that destinations could then be compared based on common or

unique attributes to determine preferences based on functional or psychological attributes (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Adopting Echtner and Ritchie's (1991) conceptualisation, Alcaniz *et al.* (2009) empirically found that both functional and psychological components exerted strong influence on overall destination image. As vacations are highly experiential in nature, it is likely the case that cognitive images serve to provide tangible cues in order to undertake an initial assessment of a destination (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Qu, Kim & Im, 2011).

In contrast, affective images are more likely to be related to the emotional attachment that a decision-maker has to a destination based on individual travel motivations (Currie *et al.*, 2008; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Sirgy & Su, 2000). An example of an affective image is the effect that a picture of a calm river has on evoking peace and tranquility. In this sense, affective images are expected to change, depending on what is the strongest motivation for travel at the decision point. Therefore, in engaging with affective images, a decision-maker can have positive, negative or neutral dispositions when selecting a destination, where this process is seen to be based on individual perception rather than objective reality (Chon, 1991).

Despite the contextual nature of affective images, several studies have examined the role of affective images towards decision-making (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hong *et al.*, 2006; Lin *et al.*, 2007). In some studies, affective images were found to be influential on destination decisions when viewed in tourism stimuli such as brochures and postcards (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Yuksel & Akgul, 2007). Other studies have contended that affective images are strongly influenced through instances of previous travel, because these are based on 'real' destination experiences (Lehto, O'Leary & Morrison, 2004; Phelps, 1986; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Sirgy & Su, 2000). In circumstances where the travel experience was highly positive, it is suggested that affective images exert the strongest

influence for repeat visit intentions (Beerli & Martin, 2004). All the same, a destination manager has greater control over inducing affective destination images. This is because a destination can customise and stimulate interest towards particular destination experiences that cater to specific needs of tourists, such as spa treatments (Lee, Ou & Huang, 2009). In contrast, the cognitive image that focuses on the physical attributes of a destination is less likely to evolve significantly over time. To a decision-maker, tourism collaterals can enhance against any pre-held notions of a destination in order to determine if such a location is likely to satisfy travel motivations. Therefore, it can be concluded that affective images are built on existing cognitive images in order to derive an overall pre-visit image of a destination (Kim & Youn, 2003; San Martin & del Bosque, 2008).

Conative images are more likely to be expressed as behavioural responses that signal the intention to visit a destination (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Gartner, 1993; Pike & Ryan, 2004). In these studies, conative images are developed as an outcome of cognitive and affective images to determine the likelihood of destination visit intentions. Similarly, conative images turns a place image into a destination image held by a decision-maker.

Cognitive, affective and conative destination image components combine to formulate complex destination images upon which to base decision-making (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Complex images are a substantial destination image of what a destination can offer in terms of meeting travel motivations and expectations (Carl, Kindon & Smith, 2007). Furthermore, complex destination images act as a reinforcement loop to equip the decision-maker for future destination decisions.

Overall, this section has provided an understanding of the composition of destination image across the vacation planning stages. The literature has revealed that destination image changes and becomes more developed over time (Etchner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1993). Factors instrumental to the formation of destination image also subsequently influence the nature of destination choice (Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1995; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Obviously, more opportunities exist to influence a decision-maker when the destination image formation is at an initial phase rather than when it becomes complex, which then becomes more difficult to change (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Hanlan & Kelly, 2005). To a decision-maker, a complex destination image instils greater confidence that a destination is able to meet the desired vacation experiences (Baloglu, 2000; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000). In this respect, a highly favourable destination image offers significant opportunities for a destination to be chosen by a decision-maker.

2.3.1.3   Social media in destination image

The role of social media in destination image has received growing academic interest (Alcazar, Pinero & de Maya, 2014; Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini & Manzari, 2012; Syed-Ahmad, Musa, Klobas & Murphy, 2013). Most studies are in agreement that social media is a powerful medium assisting with destination image formation because of the ease of disseminating contents over a global online audience (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin & Backman, 2010; Carson, 2008; Munar, 2011). Such interest is reflective of the developments of social media as an informational channel influencing destination image formation (Leung, Law, van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As its characteristics suggest, social media may be applied to a tourism context for decision-makers to better understand if a destination is suited to deliver expected tourism experiences. However, studies have shown some points of difference in examining the role of social media towards destination image formation at a pre-

visit or post-visit stage (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2011; Jani & Hwang, 2011; Mack *et al.*, 2008; Shreekala & Hemamalini, 2013).

In a pre-visit phase, social media enable a destination decision-maker to review other tourists' experiences at a destination. In this sense, social media facilitate the dissemination of destination-related information from two different agents identified by Gartner (1993). For instance, social media can appear to enhance the dissemination of content from *Covert Induced II* or *Unsolicited Organic* agents when destination experiences are provided by enhancing the dissemination of other tourist-created contents through various social media sites. In addition, social media can also reduce the time required from *Solicited Organic* agents to obtain word of mouth insights. This occurs in circumstances when decision-makers purposefully source information from social networking sites, such as Facebook. The literature has further expanded on various roles of social media as a mediator of image formation. An examination of the use of social media for the Vancouver Winter Olympics found that social media did not appear to heighten destination image of the event at a pre-visit stage (Banyai & Potwarka, 2012). It may be the case that the appeal of mega-sporting events such as the Olympics was sufficient to induce some tourists to choose the destination regardless of their social media engagement. In other studies, social media was found to exacerbate negative eWOM related to a destination (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2012; Wang, 2012), thereby portraying a particular destination as a risky decision. However, social media was also observed as a moderator of destination image perceptions through the narratives offered by other tourists, in contrast to official tourism discourses (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012; Syed-Ahmad *et al.*, 2013). It appears that social media may have the ability to reposition a destination to be considered for future decisions.

Collectively, the pre-visit phase raises both opportunities and challenges for social media to form destination images. Whilst there is a range of social media content to equip a decision-maker by informing destination decisions, the valence of information has created a dilemma as to whose view of a destination to accept and the potential credibility of electronic Word of Mouth, better known as eWOM (Jani & Hwang, 2011; Mansson, 2011). In this research, valence is defined as the direction of eWOM contents that can be positive, neutral or negative (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Melian-Gonzalez, Bulchand-Gidumal & Lopez-Valcarcel, 2013). Despite the concerns with social media content credibility, studies have identified that at the pre-visit phase, social media foster the development of both cognitive and affective destination images in combination with other sources, such as brochures and guidebooks (Banyai & Potwarka, 2012; Cakmak & Isaac, 2012). However, social media has been argued to offer more targeted images, especially when the online communities feature contents where members share similar interests (Grieve, 2013; Wang, 2012). Under such circumstances, engagement with social media is postulated to further fuel favourable dispositions towards visiting particular destinations (Alcazar *et al.*, 2014; Jalilvand *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, Govers *et al.* (2007) posited that social media could be the first point of engagement between a decision-maker and a destination. Hence, the awareness and interest to particular destinations are then likely to steer further information search and favourable evaluations towards the choice outcome (Alcazar *et al.*, 2014; Ghazali & Cai, 2013).

Post-visit destination images may similarly be disseminated through social media on-site contents (Bosangit, Dulnuan & Mena 2012; Carson, 2008; Fotis *et al.*, 2011; Neuhofer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2012). As social media can function as a repository of destination experiences, the retrospective views of other tourists may serve to reinforce or alter the cognitive, affective and conative images of a destination for both the decision-maker and the content provider (Banyai

& Potwarka, 2012; Mansson, 2011). Additionally, the post-visit phase provides further opportunities to develop a complex destination image, and it has been suggested that the willingness to disclose social media content is a likely predictor of revisit intentions for content providers (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012; Jani & Hwang, 2011). However, the literature has also highlighted that social media content providers are a specific segment of the tourist population (Fotis *et al.*, 2011; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). Disclosing destination experiences through social media has been associated with individuals more willing to vocalise via eWOM, which may not reflect overall sentiments of other tourists about a destination (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2012; Syed-Ahmad *et al.*, 2013; Wang, 2012). Despite such limitations, the post-visit destination narratives posted on social media are an outlet to voice tourist satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Jani & Hwang, 2011; Mansson, 2011). Such outcomes are reflective of respondents who were providing their destination experiences on a retrospective basis (Leung *et al.*, 2013). However, such an outcome appeared to be within the scope of social media content providers, rather than individuals who read posted contents. Potential visitors embarking on their first time visit to the destination are likely to rely on a combination of sources of information to determine their choice selection, which may involve the use of social media. Nonetheless, social media present a timely and accessible source of tourism experiences to guide the destination image formation process for decision-makers willing to engage with such contents (Grieve, 2013).

This section has demonstrated that destination image is an integral part in destination choice. This role is a highly dynamic one, where image is composed of cognitive, affective and conative components. Furthermore, several different agents have been identified to shape destination image. Destination image has also been demonstrated to be a temporal development where pre-visit to post-visit experiences further refines the perceptions of a destination.

Overall, this section has synthesised as to how social media has featured in destination image literature, which serve as a basis to further assess its influence in destination choice. Condensing the outcomes of the review of destination image has led to further understanding of how social media informs destination choice. The role of destination image in destination choice may be represented in Figure 2.4.
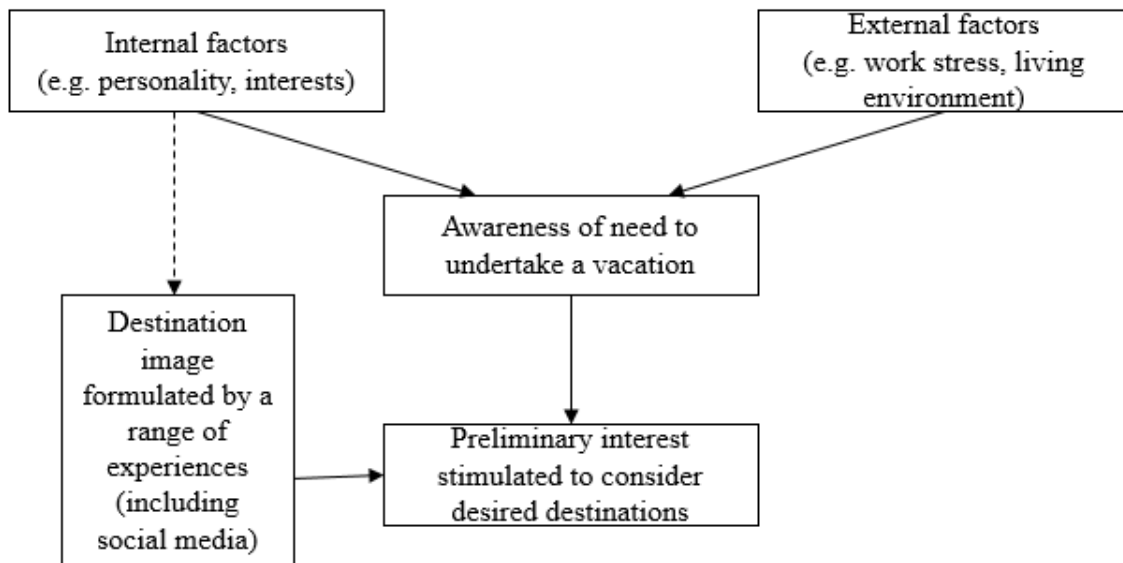
Figure 2.4: The role of destination image in stimulating interest towards particular destinations

2.3.2 Level of familiarity

The level of familiarity a decision-maker has in relation to a destination is likely to differ, as destination image is shown to vary among each individual. Therefore, the research will now analyse different levels of familiarity pertaining to destination choice.

A discussion of the level of familiarity is warranted as destination choice often involves a cognitive, affective and conative appraisal as previously highlighted, of what a decision-maker knows about a destination (Milman & Pizam, 1995). Hence, it is important to understand how

familiarity influences destination choice. Rather than view familiarity as a dichotomy between familiar or unfamiliar, Basala and Klenosky (2001) postulated that familiarity levels should be framed across a continuum, with high familiarity at one end and low familiarity at the other. Adopting a continuum approach is reasonable because destination choice differs in various contexts as triggered by a myriad of travel motivations.

In literature, a key factor resulting in high destination familiarity levels is past experience (Jang & Feng, 2007; Lehto *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, Jang and Feng (2007) postulated that past experience further enhances the development of a complex destination image. By possessing high levels of familiarity, a decision-maker is therefore more confident of selecting a destination to deliver desired vacation outcomes as compared to other destinations of lesser familiarity (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Oppermann, 1998). Destination loyalty occurs because of the favourable perceptions of obtaining desired vacation experiences (Chen & Gursoy, 2001). For this reason, high familiarity may result in some tourists choosing to re-visit a destination more frequently because they feel more confident towards their destination choice (Oppermann, 1998).

Another factor that aids in the development of high familiarity levels is the role of organic agents in shaping destination image. In a study of US households, Milman and Pizam (1995) found that Florida was a highly familiar destination to their respondents because the destination enjoyed a considerable presence within organic agents, such as television programs and newspapers. As Gartner (1993) postulated, organic agents are perceived to be highly credible because their contents appear less moderated by a destination. For this reason, engagement with organic agents can result in the development of high familiarity levels, which can lead to the popularity of some destinations being chosen over others.

Collectively, past experience and organic destination images instil more confidence in a decision-maker because high familiarity levels serve to make informed destination choices. Destination choice, as discussed earlier in Section 2.1.4, is an integral component of the vacation planning process that is highly experiential in nature. Hence, the presence of past experience and organic images are vital to assist a decision-maker within the intangible process of a destination choice.

In contrast, low familiarity occurs dues to the lack of awareness or knowledge about destinations. Oppermann's (1998) concept of destination threshold has provided a useful understanding as to why less familiar destinations have been selected. According to Oppermann (1998), destination threshold is specified to be the point where a tourist is no longer attracted to a particular destination. Using a tourism area life cycle, Butler (1980) posited that destinations can become more developed over time and that a decision-maker no longer feels attracted and motivated to select the destination. This may be due to overt developments at a destination or that the volume of tourists has significantly increased. These factors can deter a decision-maker from choosing such a destination. Instead, other interests and motivators can become more prominent factors to go elsewhere, as Pearce and Lee (2005) have argued using the Travel Career Pattern. The Travel Career Pattern is modelled after Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and comprises of five stages from relaxations, stimulation, relationship, self-esteem and development, and finally fulfilment.

The model suggests that tourists will develop a refined taste for destinations that cater to higher order motivators over their travel experiences. While this may be the case for some tourists, Ryan (1998) contended that destinations to go elsewhere are founded on the belief that the desired vacations outcomes are more likely to be met, rather than as a consequence of previous

travel experiences. The selection of less familiar destinations may therefore be deduced to be a cumulative outcome of an assessment of potential vacation goals and the desire for new tourism experiences.

Another factor driving the selection of less familiar destination choices is novelty-seeking behaviour (Assaker, Vinzi & O'Connor, 2011; Bello & Etzel, 1985; Kau & Lee, 1999). Novelty seeking has been a key motivator for travel as evidenced within tourism literature (Bello & Etzel, 1985). Novelty seekers derive a sense of accomplishment from visiting less familiar destinations because these locations may provide unique tourism experiences that may not easily found elsewhere. For instance, Kau and Lee (1999) found that a large proportion of their tourist sample was inclined to choose destinations where specific tourism experiences such as mountain climbing or scuba diving could not be experienced in a particular location. According to Bello and Etzel (1985), tourists displaying a propensity for less familiar destinations were also likely to choose exotic locations. As a result of the travel experience to less familiar destinations, such tourists appear to derive a greater sense of achievements and vocalise their travel pursuits through various means, such as word of mouth, photographs or videos to their network of family and friends (Assaker *et al.*, 2011).

2.3.2.1   Social media studies related to the familiarity of destinations

Few studies appear to have assessed the impact of social media in terms of destination familiarity (Jacobsen & Munar, 2011; Tan & Chen, 2012). Of those that have, Jacobsen and Munar (2011) found that their European respondents identified traditional WOM to have a stronger impact on their choice in visiting Mallorca, a well-known destination. Conversely, unfamiliar destinations have been suggested to feature greater use and engagement with social media contents (Tan & Chen, 2012). In the wider tourism literature, the greater the familiarity

of a destination to a decision-maker, the more confident he or she will be that desired vacation outcomes will be realised (Milman & Pizam, 1995). Hence, less information will be required, which obviously reduces the impact social media will have in this regard. Likewise, destinations that appear less familiar warrant greater information search, where social media can assist as another channel to inform decision-making. However, the paucity of literature lends further justification for this research to uncover social media influence, especially where the choice may be among familiar and less familiar destinations as discussed in the previous section. Overall, existing studies have provided some insights as to how social media increases opportunities to increase a decision-maker's awareness of, and greater familiarity to destinations. These engagements assist with building a more complex destination image, which in turn instils a greater likelihood of destination selection.

2.3.3 Risks

A decision-maker may be exposed to different types of risks in relation to destination choice. The presence of different risks influences a decision-maker's perceptions of a destination, and thereby impacting how destinations are selected or de-selected. Laws and Prideaux (2005) have defined risk to be any negative issues that can jeopardise the likelihood of obtaining desired vacation experiences. Drawing from various studies in tourism, different types of risks associated with destination choice are illustrated (in alphabetical order) in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Risks associated with destination choice

Type	Example
Financial	Currency exchange becomes unfavourable
Health	Incident of food poisoning or an outbreak of disease
Psychological	Fear of missing out on other destinations
Safety	Natural disasters at a destination
Security	Threats arising from political instability, crimes etc.

| Social | Feelings of embarrassment from family and friends when the vacation experience was less than desired |

Source: (Reisinger & Mavondo; 2005)

Table 2.3 lists potential risks that a tourist may encounter at a destination and provides examples characterising these types. Identification of such risks are essential because destination decisions are likely to be based on perceptions and therefore possess some inherent risks. However, Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty (2009) make a further distinction between actual and perceived risks. In their study, respondents indicated that perceived risks, rather than actual risks, were most likely to affect the destination image. As destination choice is a decision that occurs entirely at the pre-visit stage, it is most likely that the perception of risks based on the destination image held at the decision point will shape the selection process.

While the identification of various types of risks is useful to understand destination decisions, the likelihood of risks is also a consideration for travel in general (Law, 2006). In the study of international tourists to Hong Kong, Law (2006) found that the probability of risk provided a clearer depiction as to whether tourists were likely to realise their destination decisions. The study showed how tourists engaged with different media sources to ascertain the likelihood of risks, which is supported in other studies (Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Tsaur, Tzeng & Wang, 1997). Moreover, a destination that has demonstrated the ability to overcome previous incidents of risk is portrayed in a better position to deliver tourism experiences (Eitzinger & Wiedemann, 2007). These studies reiterate that risk perceptions are an integral component of the destination choice process and that tourists actively engage with different sources to make more informed decisions.

Other tourism scholars have further asserted that a knowledge and likelihood of risks must be examined in light of tourists' propensity for risk. In tourism literature, risk takers are often associated with novelty seekers who are prepared to embrace different perceptions of risks in pursuit of their quest for specific vacation experiences (Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Quintal, Lee & Soutar, 2010; Uriely & Belhassen, 2006). However, risk-averse tourists will more likely refrain from putting themselves in vulnerable situations by selecting destinations that are considered safe (Money & Crotts, 2003; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). For example, using a sample of New Zealand tourists, Cossens and Gin (1995) postulated that destinations perceived to be plagued by the AIDS epidemic are likely to be eliminated from consideration due to the heightened health risks.

Synthesising the outcomes of this section shows how a decision-maker may respond to different types of risks in the selection of a destination. The individual response entails an identification of risks, assessment of the likelihood of risks and their propensity for risk. The section shows that risks have the ability to negatively impact one's destination image and eventual destination selection or de-selection. As such, a decision-maker is likely to adopt cautionary measures to mitigate the risks that may arise from the vacation experience. Failure to address foreseeable risks will very likely jeopardise desired tourism outcomes.

2.3.3.1   Social media as a risk alleviation tool for destination choice

Within tourism literature, social media has been identified to be a key tool to assist with risk alleviation. For instance, Kim, Mattila and Baloglu (2011) found individuals with average computing literacy more likely to review social media contents as a tool to alleviate economic risks associated with hotel reservations. In their investigation of South Africa as a tourist destination, Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen (2012) found that social media heightened the

debate between perceived and actual risks. Narratives within their study reflected a highly subjective assessment of risks, with some discussions leading to personal attacks on other users (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2012). Incidentally, Hwang, Jani and Jeong (2013) argued that social media was utilised for the primary function of information search, rather than a risk alleviation tool. All the same, the premise of social media as a means to mitigate risks should be approached based on understanding destination decision-makers and their propensity for risks (Pennington-Gray & Schroeder, 2013). Through the discussion of different risks, a decision-maker will thereby exhibit various levels of involvement to make a more informed destination decision. As such, the research will now focus on the nature of involvement in destination choice.

2.3.4   Involvement

Broadly defined, involvement describes the intensity of an individual's actions towards a specified outcome (Broderic & Mueller, 1999; Celsi & Olson, 1988; Havitz & Dimanche, 1999). Due to the immense range of options and combinations available, a decision-maker can exhibit various involvement levels pertaining to the destination choice decision. For instance, low involvement may be associated with a repeat decision to visit friends. This is due to the minimal levels of coordination that may only require decisions as to period of travel and modes of transport. In contrast, high involvement is more likely evident when visiting a destination for the first time with several family members. Varying levels of involvement may invoke different criteria, as identified by Howard and Sheth (1969) in their distinction between extensive, limited and routine problem solving. Low involvement destination decisions may rely on fewer criteria, such as repeat visits or last minute travel arrangements (Bargeman & van der Poel, 2006; Gross & Brown, 2006). In contrast, high involvement decisions require

more time and effort to develop a destination image that resonates with the destination's ability to meet desired vacation experiences (Cai *et al.*, 2004; Josiam, Smeaton & Clements, 1999; Louviere & Timmermans, 1990). Given a less developed destination image of an unfamiliar destination, a decision-maker is likely to further increase his or her involvement by engaging with different informational sources in order to choose among competing destinations (Middleton, 1994; Middleton & Clarke, 2001; Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park & Chon, 1997).

Some studies have postulated that high involvement levels are considered to be more likely to shape behavioural intentions to visit unfamiliar destinations (Gross & Brown, 2008; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). For instance, Gross and Brown (2008) found that higher involvement levels led to their respondents choosing South Australia as a destination over other more familiar alternatives. The authors further explained how their sample chose the destination because of specific interests in particular wine regions. Moreover, Havitz and Dimanche (1997) argued that involvement levels could be manipulated by a destination through the provision of informational cues about specific types of vacations across various sources. Such cues are integral prior to destination choice as decision-makers can then concurrently utilise the diverse contents available to overcome making a wrong decision, which then jeopardises desired vacation experiences (Decrop & Kozak, 2014; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Money & Crotts, 2003).

Overall, analysing the role of involvement has established that destination decisions can vary in terms of the level of planning. Furthermore, the section has also proposed that high involvement levels are more likely to modify destination preferences. This is due to the exposure of a decision-maker to various sources of information related to a destination.

Involvement can be further developed through the provision of various vacation cues over several different platforms, such as websites, brochures and social media. Collectively, these exemplars serve to reposition an unfamiliar destination more favourably in order to manipulate destination preferences and choice. Hence, as the decision-maker becomes more involved in the vacation planning process, he or she develops greater familiarity in order to determine the suitability of a destination.

2.3.4.1   Social media within travel involvement

Three studies have explicitly targeted the role social media plays within the notion of travel involvement (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Lee, Reid & Kim, 2014; Ribiero, Amaro, Seabra & Abrantes, 2014). It must be emphasised that these papers investigated travel involvement rather than social media engagement. Such a distinction is essential as travel involvement is different to social media engagement. As this section has indicated, involvement in travel decisions is concerned with the level of planning intensity required of the vacation. In contrast, social media engagement refers to the time spent within online communities.

Filieri and McLeay (2014) suggested that decision-makers who are highly involved in the travel decision adopt both information quality and star ratings when deciding on hotel choices. This may be explained by the conscientious efforts placed towards determining the suitability of the accommodation experience associated with less familiar destinations. Additionally, Ribiero *et al.* (2014) identified that travel involvement is linked to providing reviews on social media. In other words, high travel involvement may steer decision-makers to narrate their destination experiences online to achieve two goals. These are helping others realise desired vacation outcomes and connecting with others who share similar interests. Social media is anticipated to have greater influence in high involvement decisions.

Involvement in destination decisions also incorporates the composition of the travelling party. As tourism is often undertaken by more than one person, involvement levels will likely increase when the composition of the travelling party is enlarged (Thrane & Farstad, 2011).

2.3.5   Composition of travelling party

In terms of single travellers, tourism decisions can be made serendipitously (although they are not always made that way), which suggests lower involvement levels (Hyde & Lawson, 2003; O'Reilly, 2006). In the case of couples or partners travelling together, involvement levels can be elevated due to the need for conflict management and resolution. For instance, Jang *et al.* (2007) found that the decision of where to go for a honeymoon destination was influenced by power structures within the relationship, where the dominant partner had his or her way. In contrast, destination choice for same-sex couples was more likely derived from an equivocal consultation process between partners (Hughes, 2002). To these decision-makers, involvement levels related to destination choice of same-sex couples are determined by where gay or lesbian practices are accepted (Clift & Forrest, 1999; Wiltshier & Cardow, 2001). As such, destinations who embrace same-sex couples have reaped significant benefits in terms of repeat visitors because they have been perceived to cater to their needs (Melian-Gonzalez, Moreno-Gil & Arana, 2011; Visser, 2003).

Family travel is another type of travelling party that has been a well-studied in relation to destination choice involvement (Bronner & de Hoog, 2008; Kang & Hsu, 2005; Nichols & Snepenger, 1988). Decisions have often been made as to which destinations appear most conducive for family vacations, particularly when children are involved (Cosenza & Davis, 1981; Fodness, 1992). In addition, Tagg and Seaton (1995) found in a study of European

families that cost and personal safety influenced which destination is chosen over other potential alternatives. Where conflicts occur between family members, consensus seeking has been suggested to be an effective strategy to determine destination choice (Bronner & de Hoog, 2008; Kang & Hsu, 2005). Other studies also show the highly evolving nature of family travel over time as changes occur to the family life cycle. Fodness (1992) found that empowering children to undertake aspects of the information search increased the speed at which a destination is selected. However, when the family life cycle changes to feature older aged teenagers, then destination choice was more complex because each member of the family unit had developed strong personal beliefs about different destinations (Cosenza & Davis, 1981). In these circumstances, the decision-maker, usually the parent, may often make the destination decision because he or she is paying for the entire vacation. In some cases, teenagers have been excluded from the vacation if they oppose the destination (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Literature on families as a travelling party has generated an understanding that family decisions can be high involvement processes due to the range and depth of considerations leading to destination choice. For this reason, destination choice for families is a highly iterative process and requires the utilisation of different information sources (Nichols & Snepenger, 1988; Ritchie & Filiatrault, 1980). Clearly, this suggests that destination preferences may be shaped by the engagement with destination-related information.

Travelling parties comprising peer groups are also important in destination choice. Currie *et al.* (2008) posited that peer groups are highly susceptible to the recommendations of others in relation to destination choice. Such a claim is reasonable, given that word of mouth is an influential image formation agent factor towards destination preferences (Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). Peer groups may also travel together for special interests such as photography, cycling or trekking expeditions. Some studies have examined how destination

choice has occurred within groups holding a mutual interest in particular activities. For example, Brown, Havitz and Getz (2007) showed the effect of an opinion leader when selecting a wine destination region. An opinion leader's decision is perceived to be credible due to his or her experience about the topic and is henceforth accepted in relation to the choice of a destination (Jamrozy, Backman & Backman, 1996). Collectively, peer group decisions in destination choice are more likely to be influenced by the recommendations of a few individuals that are then accepted by others due to the perception of higher knowledge of the activity type. For this reason, any attempts to influence destination preferences should therefore be aimed at the opinion leader prior to acceptance within the peer group (McKercher, 1996).

A review of the different types of travelling parties has demonstrated the distinctive processes associated with destination choice. Each travelling party brings different needs and travel motivations to the decision, highlighting the highly contextual nature of destination choice. The section also highlighted how negotiation processes becomes a feature as the travelling party becomes enlarged. For this reason, more time and effort is expected to be invested in destination decisions across larger and more complex compositions of travelling parties (Dellaert *et al.*, 1998).

2.3.5.1   Social media and travelling party

With the exception of Wu and Pearce (2013), very little is known as to how the composition of travelling parties is impacted by social media influence on destination choice. Wu and Pearce (2013) asserted that some Chinese families chose Australia because the recreational vehicle (e.g. campervans) experience was not available in their country of origin. The paucity of literature is surprising, considering that social media is likely to feature destination-related insights for the travelling party. The review of literature surrounding the composition of

travelling party has shown that each decision is contextual, and requires further clarification as to the role of social media in these circumstances (Simms, 2012; Tan & Kuo, 2014; Tussyadiah, Park & Fesenmaier, 2011). Therefore, the research will investigate this issue to understand the effect that composition of the travel party has on social media influence in destination choice.

2.3.6 Planned and unplanned destination choice

This section distinguishes between characteristics of planned and unplanned destination choice in relation to social media influence. Such a distinction is required because different considerations are attached to each type of destination decision. In the case of planned destination choice, literature suggests that a planning horizon exists prior to visitation (Dellaert *et al.*, 1998). A planning horizon shows the presence of time and effort dedicated to undertake the destination choice decision. Dellaert *et al.* (1998) contended that a planning horizon could be more than a year in advance of the actual visitation. However, within the planning horizon, their Swedish sample showed a highly iterative basis for choosing a destination. In comparison, Choi, Lehto, Morrison and Jang (2012) found that the planning horizon can be compressed to under three weeks. A plausible explanation for the variation is that Choi *et al.* (2012) investigated a sample of mainland Chinese tourists visiting Macau, which was considered a familiar destination to the decision-makers. The implication of knowing about the travel planning horizon is to further clarify what timeframe tourists need in order to make informed destination choices. The duration of the planning horizon, as discussed, will be moderated by the level of familiarity a decision-maker has with a destination. It is most probable that planned destination choices incorporating less familiar destinations will have a longer planning horizon as compared to familiar destinations. Having a more extensive planning horizon serves to facilitate opportunities for a decision-maker to equip him- or herself with the necessary

resources in order to select a destination that is perceived to best meet desired vacation experiences.

Unplanned destination choices may result from three possible scenarios. One possible scenario is an unplanned destination choice prompted by price discounting, such as purchase of a beach holiday at half price (Sigala, 2013). Discounting is a common marketing strategy to offer tourism experiences at significantly lower prices, especially in the context outside peak tourism periods (Manning & Powers, 1984). As tourism is impacted by the seasonality of travel, off-peak periods have lower occupancy rates as compared to peak periods. Tourism operators are therefore, inclined to offer discounts to entice potential tourists to choose specific experiences to recoup some operating costs. This is related to the concept of service perishability discussed earlier, where tourism experiences cannot be stored for future consumption (Cox, 2014). While last-minute destination choices can be a result of a heightened perception of value for money, such decisions are more likely to be related to less complex destinations that require fewer considerations (Leung, Guillet & Law, 2014). These considerations may be related to domestic weekend getaways where some planning is required around work commitments and the availability status of transport and accommodation providers. This section demonstrates that destination choice can be influenced through the use of low prices to some tourists.

A second scenario of unplanned destination choice may be a result of witnessing less familiar images of a destination (Basala & Klenosky, 2001). For example, a decision-maker may come across photographs of the changing colours of trees or whale migration that may trigger a decision to visit the destination. These occurrences cannot be pre-determined, and as such, give rise to unplanned destination choices. Similarly, these exemplars are most likely to be

associated with less complex destination decisions that often take place within the confines of domestic tourism (Iverson, 1997).

The third scenario of unplanned destination choice is often characterised to take place within at-destination decision-making (Hyde, 2008). To such decision-makers, the unplanned destination choice entails an assessment of the suitability of tourism activities in a region or a city. These decisions are derived out of flexible vacation plans that have loose structures in the itinerary. A decision-maker can then determine where to go during the available timeframe within national parameters (March & Woodside, 2008).

These three scenarios illustrating unplanned destination decisions represent some tourists who may choose to undertake vacations with very little planning. Such instances are probably characteristic of less complex destination choices, where a decision that does not materialise is unlikely to cause much psychological or financial risk (Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2003). It may even be the case that planned and unplanned destination choices occur within the same vacation, as in the case of semi-structured destination decisions (Martin & Woodside, 2012). Planned aspects include the destination to visit a particular country, while the unplanned decisions can stem from at-destination decision-making. Such outcomes may be also extended over time and space as in the case of round the world travel (Molz, 2010). Literature on planned and unplanned decisions shows that destination choice can be purposive or incidental and reveals destination choice as a sub-conscious process that is highly customised, where a different pool of considerations is attached to each decision point. Engaging with different sources then becomes a catalyst to develop visit intentions towards a destination. In summary, the section has added an additional dimension to the contextual nature of destination choice, where planned and unplanned decisions can occur across a continuum.

2.3.6.1   Social media within planned or unplanned destination decisions

Using a case study approach of Chinese social media communities, Kristensen (2013) observed

that planned destination decisions were more likely associated with social media engagement.

Similarly, Wu and Pearce (2013) also noted that recreational vehicle enthusiasts devised their

planned destination decisions with social media. These outcomes reflect the depth of social

media to facilitate wider engagements with other tourist experiences (Leung *et al.*, 2013).

Furthermore, the ubiquitous growth of social media in the area of photo-tagging sites such as

Instagram and Flickr has not gone unnoticed. In this space, some scholars hypothesised that

the dissemination of such visuals can have some effect to develop positive intentions to visit

particular destinations (Liu *et al.*, 2013; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Yet, Paris (2013)

contends that more work needs to be done empirically to ascertain if visuals (photographs or

videos) can influence unplanned destination decisions. Evidently, studies examining social

media influence across the continuum of planning horizons is in its infancy. Potentially, this

thesis may shed some light to understand how social media influence is exerted across

destination planning horizons.

The discussion of planned or unplanned destination decisions is also likely to feature the use

of heuristics to help make a decision. The thesis will now assess the role and types of heuristics

employed for destination decisions.

2.3.7   Heuristics

Heuristics for destination choice are employed to circumvent the diverse amount of information

related to the decision. In this context, heuristics are defined as criteria used to 'short cut' a

decision (Anderson & Milson, 1989; Gigerenzer, Todd & The ABC Research Group, 1999; Saad & Russo, 1996). With origins in consumer behaviour, the use of heuristics has been suggested under conditions of bounded rationality (Hunt, 1983; Simon, 1956). Bounded rationality describes the manner in which a decision-maker obtains sufficient information to make decisions. Heuristics are important to a decision-maker because obtaining complete information is unrealistic and time-consuming (Laroche, Kim & Matsui, 2003; Stevenson & Busemeyer, 1990; Zellman, Kaye-Blake & Abell, 2010). In addition, heuristics may be classified into compensatory or non-compensatory (Parkinson & Reilly, 1979; Pras & Summers, 1975; Wright, 1975). Compensatory heuristics exist where a particular attribute may be offset by another. In a destination context, a limited range of accommodation providers is compensated for by the significant cost savings obtained. In contrast, non-compensatory heuristics are rules employed to select key attributes that result in the purchase decision (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Van Middlekoop *et al.*, 2003). For instance, food options are a key criterion in selecting a restaurant for decision-makers with special dietary needs. In the same manner, different heuristics are employed to guide decision-making, and these are dependent on the nature of the desired destination experience (Jones & Chen, 2011).

Some applications of heuristics may be found within tourism literature. For instance, the quality of snow was determined to be a non-compensatory heuristic for ski tourists (Perdue & Meng, 2006). In contrast, Stewart and Stynes (1995) found that cost was a compensatory heuristic when applied to a destination decision involving holiday homes. However, Woodside and King (2001) contended that cost is a non-compensatory heuristic when determining if a particular destination is visited. The difference as to how cost is used as a heuristic should be understood in terms of what a decision-maker is prepared to commit to the destination decision. Clearly, the context of Woodside and King (2001) incorporating price-sensitive travellers will differ

significantly to holiday homemakers in the work of Stewart and Stynes (1995). As March and Woodside (2005) have articulated, planned destination choices will differ somewhat to realised outcomes as different considerations are attached to each decision. For this reason, knowing what heuristics are employed and how they influence the destination selection process across various contexts is vital to this research.

2.3.7.1 Heuristics within social media literature

This section reviews literature on heuristics within social media literature in a tourism context. While such heuristics are not unique to social media, they nonetheless provide a means to understand how decision-makers have devised targeted outcomes in a tourism setting. With social media as a proxy, current literature has found some heuristics that assist with destination decisions (Ong, 2012; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). In a study conducted by Ong (2012), respondents contemplating accommodation options in the USA utilised two main heuristics. These were a balanced orientation and quantity of reviews to determine their hotel selection. In contrast, Papathanassis and Knolle (2011) noted that their European respondents were more likely to select their accommodation when reviews were provided in support of reputable hotel brands. However, Llamero (2014) contended that heuristics in a social media environment are more likely a crude tool to assess perceived similarity. Her finding supports other scholars who stated that social media may not be the sole determinant for tourism decisions (Gretzel, Kang & Lee, 2008; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Given the current scope of investigation, the research seeks to locate what social media cues are employed for destination decisions, and their corresponding influence across destination choice contexts.

In considering the use of heuristics for destination decisions, another key consideration is that of travel constraints. Such considerations put caveats on the decision-maker and perhaps

moderate the decision-making process. For this reason, the research will next examine different types of constraints on destination choice.

2.3.8   Constraints

A discussion of constraints as a consideration to destination choice will help understand what factors moderate the decision-making process. Tourism literature has identified several types of constraints that inhibit the potential of making a choice from among all conceivable destinations. For instance, cost has been framed as a constraint to destination choice (Um & Crompton, 1990). In this sense, cost restricts a decision-maker's ability to select destinations that are more expensive. As such, the decision-maker will have to select a destination in terms of what he or she can afford. Cost, in this instance, serves to reposition destinations within an available set, in which a more realistic choice is made (Seddighi & Theocharous, 2001). Making a destination decision that is constrained by cost may be interpreted to be a satisficing outcome, as the selection process will then alter the expectations of desired vacation experiences (Hong *et al.*, 2006).

Another constraint located within existing literature is market access (McKercher, 1998). Market access is described as the ease of visiting a destination. Aside from cost, market access can be a constraint when a destination regulates the number of tourist visas or if a natural disaster reduces transport access to tourism regions. Anckar and Walden (2001) also contended that complicated travel arrangements to enter a destination also serve as a constraint. An instance of such arrangements may be the requirement to have two flight transit points and a half-day river crossing before reaching a destination. Decision-makers wanting to maximise

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their vacation experience within a limited timeframe may be unwilling to choose such destinations if transport takes up a significant portion of their time (Mansfeld, 1992).

Adopting a constraint-based framework to conceptualise destination decisions, Dellaert *et al.* (1998) found that constraints are actively considered throughout the vacation planning process until the destination decision is made. The authors found that different constraints formulated the sequence of what decisions are made and when a destination is visited, taking into consideration work commitments and children school holiday periods. Overall, constraints have intervened in the destination choice process by regulating what types of destinations are more favourably considered and ultimately selected.

2.3.8.1   Scope of social media literature and travel constraints

In tourism literature, some studies provide a base to understand how travel constraints have been presented in social media. Using geotagged photos, Kadar (2014) traced the mobility of tourists within 16 European cities and found that their destination choices mirrored market access. In other words, tourists chose locations where accessibility could be provided, which may be represented by air or land connections. While these considerations are not social media specific, the photographs nonetheless suggest that destination choice will be moderated by considerations regarding the ease of market access.

Additionally, some scholars have argued that social media have the ability to mitigate the perceived high costs incurred with selecting particular destinations (Hvass & Munar, 2012; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Using reviews on TripAdvisor, Lu and Stepchenkova (2012) found that USA tourists who visited Costa Rica shared with other tourists how they could travel on small budgets. Likewise, Hvass and Munar (2012) noted that some social media narratives

alluded to the use of low cost carriers to visit new destinations as a means of affordable travel. Clearly, social media have the ability to reposition particular destinations favourably by mitigating perceived travel constraints.

2.3.9   Summary of section

In summary, this section has reviewed a range of considerations attached to destination choice. From the analysis of destination image, it has been established that destination choice is derived from the overall perceptions of favourable images that are perceived to meet desired vacation experiences. Destination image may also be constructed through various agents to become more complex over time. To a decision-maker, possessing a complex destination image helps them to assess whether a destination of choice is best suited to the needs of the vacation. Knowing that destination image can be influenced also revealed that destination choice can likewise be influenced.

The section then discussed familiar and less familiar destination choices. Familiarity levels are expressed to be inversely correlated to the depth and range of information sources required for a destination decision. The more familiar one is with a destination, the less the quantity of information required. Likewise, an unfamiliar destination increases the amount of resources needed in order to make informed decisions. The analysis of familiarity levels suggests that modifications of destination preferences are more likely to be achieved when a destination appears less familiar. This is because when familiarity of a destination increases, a decision-maker is then more confident to make his or own decisions based on past experience.

The section also identified various risks that a decision-maker may be exposed to in the context of destination choice. A review of the literature has proposed how decision-makers assess and mitigate risks for their destination decisions. Furthermore, some destination decisions may suit some risk-taking behaviour. Risk-averse decision-makers may choose to exclude some destinations due to a heightened sense of insecurity. Perception of risks is a core feature of destination choice.

A synthesis of the concept of involvement has also shown that destination choice can feature various levels of planning requirements. High involvement is warranted when decisions entail less familiar destinations, while low involvement levels characterise familiar destination decisions. This is due to the greater engagement a decision-maker has with the myriad of information from different sources. A reflexive process is undertaken, where destination attributes are evaluated against personal preferences, and vice versa. As such, high involvement levels of travel preparation enable destinations to formulate appropriate messages and visuals to a decision-maker to assist with their planning. This leads to the facilitation of further opportunities for changing destination preferences and choices.

Involvement levels also vary across the composition of travelling parties. Single travellers are characterised by high levels of flexibility and loosely structured vacation itineraries. In comparison, other travelling parties, such as families, are more inclined to devise their vacation plans around family-centric destinations. Even within the evaluation set, a further assessment of the most suitable choice occurs, where the final decision is impacted by a range of factors and sources of engagement.

Subsequently, the section distinguished between planned and unplanned destination choices. The distinction has clarified that planned destination decisions are characterised with purposive information search with a dedicated timeframe. On the contrary, unplanned destination decisions occur incidentally and are undertaken with minimal planning or coordination. However, literature has also highlighted that both planned and unplanned decisions may be combined within a single destination decision. In these circumstances, unplanned decisions are more often associated with at-destination occurrences in a semi-structured vacation. Nevertheless, there exists opportunities to shape both planned and unplanned destinations.

Heuristics are also a core feature of destination choice, as the review of tourism literature has illuminated. Heuristics serve as a tool to negotiate differing, and sometimes competing, needs to arrive at a destination decision. A range of heuristics, were identified such as cost and market access and their roles in shaping the destination choice were discussed. While heuristics serve as a guide to expedite the destination decision, they too, can be shaped in accordance with destination attributes.

A synthesis of constraints inherent to destination choice has revealed that different factors affect preferences and the selection criteria. Constraints are actively considered throughout the destination choice process, until a decision has materialised. Even then, any future developments at a destination prior to visitation, such as a natural disaster, can also affect the destination choice process.

A review of the literature on the contexts in which destination decisions are made has provided further insights towards understanding the influence of social media on decision-making, as depicted in Figure 2.5.
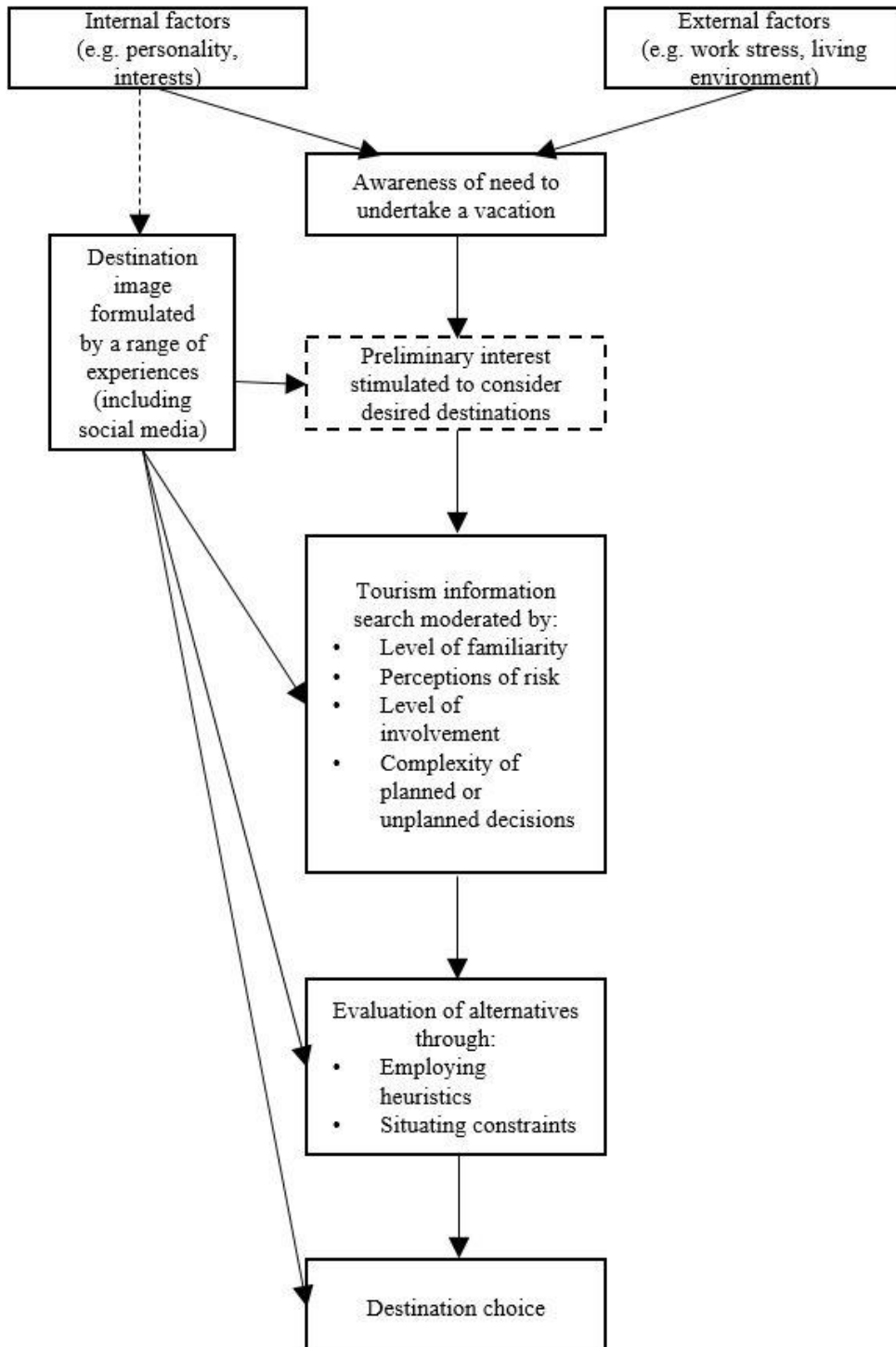
Figure 2.5: Considerations shaping destination choice

In summary, the section has provided an analysis of the various considerations that affect

destination choice. The section has also established the role of social media as an emerging and

powerful tool to assist with destination decisions. Pertinently, analysis of the literature has revealed that destination choice can be influenced over time, and is context-specific. The ability to influence is critical to a destination because shaping of preferences in a favourable manner leads to a greater likelihood of being selected over other alternatives. Therefore, the chapter will move on to define and conceptualise influence.

2.4   Influence in destination choice

This section reviews the concept of influence in destination choice. This is important as the previous sections have demonstrated that different image formation agents can influence destination choice. Consequently, the ability to influence destination choice is through changing destination image. The section begins with an overview of influence. Next, various conceptualisations of influence are reviewed from broad disciplines and critiqued as to their application towards destination choice. Subsequently, different factors that influence destination choice are reviewed.

2.4.1   Overview of influence

Broadly defined, influence is the ability to exert change on attitudes (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989). Changes may be exerted in any of the following ways: neutral to positive/negative attitudes, reinforcing positive/negative attitudes or altering the direction of attitudes (positive to negative and vice versa). Characterising attitudes is complex due to the multi-faceted nature of the concept, which can also be culturally embedded (Shrigley, Koballa Jr & Simpson, 1988). Nonetheless, Eagly and Chaiken (2007) defined attitudes as a psychological evaluation of an object either favourably or unfavourably.

Some theories examining the role of attitudes have been used regularly within tourism studies. Two of the most commonly adopted theories are the Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). A central tenet of these theories is to examine behavioural change (Ajzen, 1991; del Bosque & Martin, 2008; McPeek & Edwards, 1975; Oliver, 1980). The EDT in tourism has been employed to assess whether post-visit experiences cultivates loyalty (Hui, Wan & Ho, 2007; Pizam & Milman, 1988; Weber, 1997), and as outcome, revisit intentions (Tse, 2003; Wong & Law, 2003; Yuksel and Yuksel, 2001; Zehrer, Crotts & Magnini, 2011). In contrast, the TPB lends a different perspective to understand what drives tourists towards specific actions. Some of the settings include selecting a travel destination (Lam & Hsu, 2006; March & Woodside, 2005), staying at green accommodation providers (Han, Hsu & Sheu, 2010; Kim & Han, 2010) and choice of vacation type (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Sparks, 2007; Sparks & Pan, 2009).

However, the thesis is not primarily assessing attitude formation as directed by the EDT and TPB. Neither is the thesis aimed at altering decision-maker's social media adoption patterns. Rather, the thesis seeks to locate social media influence within the pretext of a realised destination decision. For this reason, it is essential to consider how other conceptualisations of influence within an existing environment may be of greater benefit to the research.

2.4.2   Conceptualisations of influence

Different conceptualisations of influence are the focus of this section. The aim of reviewing different approaches is to provide a multi-faceted understanding of influence. Some approaches to understanding influence are the concepts of power, social ties, technology adoption and

persuasion. The selection of these approaches is derived from key disciplines such as management, marketing and sociology.

2.4.2.1   Power

Power as a conceptualisation of influence draws from hierarchical structures located within the principles of management studies (Brown, Johnson & Koenig, 1995; Gaski, 1986; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998; Rawwas, Vitell & Barnes, 1997). Gaski (1986) categorised sources of power in two sources – coercive and non-coercive sources. Coercive sources are associated with the use of punitive measures to manage negative behaviour in order to achieve desired outcomes (Rawwas *et al.*, 1997). In contrast, non-coercive sources of power influence behaviour using one of the following four types. These are reward, expertise, legitimacy and referent (Gaski, 1986). These authors are in general agreement that individuals are more receptive being influenced by non-coercive sources of power because there is a greater element of trust and willingness to engage interpersonally (Brown *et al.*, 1995; Pettigrew & McNulty, 1998). Power may not be as applicable to the scope of this research because few social media communities wield any direct relationship on its users. Even in the context of Facebook, where users are often known to one another, power may not manifest as an influence because one can easily 'unfriend' another without dire consequences (Pena & Brody, 2014).

2.4.2.2   Social ties

Social ties have been associated with the relationships that exist between individuals and their communities (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). Cialdini (2001) identified six principles of influence. These principles are liking, reciprocity, social proof, commitment and consistency, authority and scarcity. Cialdini's (2001) principles suggests that various levels of influence can be exerted, from being highly influential to having no influence whatsoever. Reflecting

Cialdini's principles, Kassin, Fein and Marcus (2011) developed a continuum of social influence to represent the different magnitudes associated with social ties. On one end of the continuum is yielding to influence, while the opposite end is that of resisting influence. An individual may be located anywhere along the continuum, where the intensity of social ties can further shift one's position towards yielding or resisting influence. According to Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), social influence comes from the interaction between personal values and perceived relevance of the social group norms. Social influence is therefore likely to be characterised by norms that exist based on one's network of relationships (Friedkin & Johnsen, 1997; Ryan, 1982). Knowing how social influence is exerted provides further insights to better understand the direction and magnitude of influence. The research will build on the notion that influence is not a dichotomous concept but should be represented across a continuum.

Guided by the principles of social influence, Schmitz and Fulk (1991) developed the Social Influence Model (SIM) to assess what relationships exist in social structures and how influence is exerted in various contexts. For this reason, the SIM does not adopt a cost-benefit analysis but pays greater attention as to how influence has been socially constructed (Fulk, 1993). The SIM has also been extended to the understanding of online communities. For instance, Vannoy and Palvia (2010) identified four elements to explain how social influence may be operationalised within online communities. The four elements involve action, consensus, cooperation and authority. The initial element of action relates to the willingness to engage with online communities. Subsequently, consensus is built on a shared understanding and acceptance of norms within the online community. Social influence then exhibits characteristics of cooperation, where this element highlights user efforts to work together in order to sustain the online community. Finally, social influence is assumed to lead to authority (otherwise referred to as legitimacy), which gives the online community the ability to

determine who can access or moderate eWOM contents. Collectively, the four elements suggest that internet use is undertaken within a highly interactive and supportive environment that serves to influence attitudes and subsequently modify behaviour (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004).

In a tourism setting, some studies have asserted that social influence brings about changes to destination preferences (Crompton, 1981; Shafer & Inglis, 2000). According to Crompton (1981), social ties serve as a key influence in terms of vacation planning. Such a finding is reasonable because vacations are leisurely pursuits, and likely to be a common topic of conversation (Shafer & Inglis, 2000). Yet, a limitation of the SIM is the lack of explanation as to how influence should be operationalised under different scenarios. For instance, who wields greater influence on a destination decision in a particular context? Also, in the context of this research, social media sites differ in areas of levels of interaction and purpose of use and these necessitate further studies towards understanding social influence conditions (Camprubi, Guia & Comas, 2013; Pennington-Gray, Kaplanidou & Schroeder, 2013). Further, some social media users may not have any ties whatsoever with others on the same site. Questions addressing how a decision-maker will be influenced when socialising in Facebook, Twitter or a forum remain unanswered. While the SIM may provide some understanding as to the role and magnitude of social ties, it is insufficient for the thesis to fully examine social media influence in destination choice.

2.4.2.3 Technology adoption

Technology adoption is another aspect of influence that has some relevance for this thesis. As social media is disseminated over technology, it is essential to understand how technology adoption has operationalised influence. One such model is the Technology Acceptance Model

(TAM). In the TAM, two conditions are antecedents towards the adoption of technology (Davis, 1989). These two conditions are perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. In relation to the thesis, the TAM shows that individuals who consider technology to be a useful proposition will likely be influenced towards its adoption for various purposes, including tourism. This model may help to understand as to why people use social media in the first instance. Applied to a destination decision-making context, the TAM has contributed to our knowledge of why potential visitors may choose to use social media for destination decisions (Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu, 2010; Di Pietro, Di Virgilio & Pantanim, 2012; Parra-Lopez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Tano & Diaz-Armas, 2011). Social media sites may be conveniently accessed by a decision-maker to inform destination decisions (Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu, 2013; Lee, Xiong & Hu, 2012). In addition, social media provide opportunities for potential visitors to evaluate the likelihood of a destination in meeting desired outcomes from the perspective of other tourists (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, both conditions of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness exist that may account for the adoption of social media in destination choice.

However, the TAM has provided very little explanation as to the conditions that lead to social media influence on destination choice as compared to other sources of influence (Hernandez-Mendez, Munoz-Leiva & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2013; Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Simms, 2012). As Poyry, Parvinen and Malmivaara (2013) have argued, the act of 'Liking' on Facebook rarely translates to the actual visitation of a destination. In fact, adoption of social media sites may be reflective of hedonic interests rather than travel intent (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013; Mkono, Markwell & Wilson, 2013). Synthesising the literature on TAM, current studies have yet to establish evidence that technology adoption is correlated to social media's influence on destination choice (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004; Rosen, Lafontaine &

Hendricksen, 2011; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Furthermore, each destination decision differs in scope and motivation for travel (Huang, 2012; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Qu & Lee, 2011). Accordingly, studies have repeatedly called for further exploration of the roles of technology use and engagement to understand social media influence, while acknowledging the contextual underpinnings in which destination decisions are made (Banyai & Havitz, 2013; Hjalager & Nordin, 2011; Huang, Chou & Lin, 2010; Ku, 2011; Sharda & Ponnada, 2008).

Some variations to the application of the TAM are also found within literature. For instance, Darley, Blankson and Luethge (2010) conceptualised an online model of consumer behaviour and decision-making. The model has proposed that the online environment acts as a key moderator of the purchase decision (Darley *et al.*, 2010). The model recognises that current decision-making processes occur in a highly technology-moderated environment. Such trends are observed in tourism, where destination decision-makers have convenient access to digital tourism collaterals (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Prideaux & Coghlan, 2010; Standing *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, the model also highlights that social influences are in existence in shaping decision-making. While the model incorporates technological adoption and social factors, a key feature of the model is the emphasis on satisfying human needs and wants (Darley *et al.*, 2010).

In the context of destination decisions, such a model requires adaptation, because tourism is highly experiential and cannot be pre-tested. Moreover, the engagement with social media is primarily concerned with information search or social interaction, and not necessarily buying behaviour. Similar to other models examining influence, a deficiency of the work of Darley *et al.* (2010) has been the lack of explicit reference to how contextual factors impact on selection.

2.4.2.4   Persuasion

Studies on persuasion are embedded in marketing principles (Friestad & Wright, 1999; Rose, Miniard, Barone, Manning & Till, 1993). Some studies state that marketing is a study of how persuasion influences buying behaviour (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Eisend, 2007). For instance, Mano (1997) found that individuals with heightened positive emotions were more likely to be influenced by advertising that employed persuasive ethical messages. However, Reynolds, Gengler and Howard (1995) argued that consumers with greater loyalty to a particular brand were more likely to be influenced than others with lesser loyalty. These studies suggest that persuasion is a multi-faceted concept that will likely vary with the lens of investigation.

One commonly adopted model to understand persuasion is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). Developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the ELM postulated that attitude change might be influenced through two routes of persuasion, a central and a peripheral route. The distinction between the two routes may be explained by the level of involvement a decision-maker has with the purchase decision (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006; Petty, Kasmer, Haugtvedt & Cacioppo, 1987). In a tourism context, destination decisions may be characterised across a spectrum of high involvement (e.g., honeymoon decisions) or low involvement, such as visiting family and friends. Decisions in contexts of low involvement require fewer selection criteria, and under such circumstances, the ELM has contended that peripheral cues are sufficient to induce influence (Karson & Korgaonkar, 2001; Slater & Rouner, 2002). In a tourism scenario, peripheral cues such as price discounts may trigger willingness to switch accommodation providers for a low involvement travel decision. However, the ELM argues that the central route of persuasion is required to address high involvement decisions. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), the central route of

information processing devotes significant attention to detail. This is because decision-makers may already have strong attitudinal beliefs about a product or service and more effort is required to influence a purchase decision. To a destination decision-maker, a destination image may have already been well developed and necessitate significant effort by a DMO to alter perceptions (Camprubi *et al.*, 2013; Grieve, 2013). Nonetheless, there are opportunities for social media to disseminate destination experiences to other tourists in a less-moderated manner fuelled through social interactions. The outcome of social media engagement may be to influence the perceptions decision-makers towards the suitability of destinations (Hsiao, Lu & Lan, 2013; Kim, Sun & Kim, 2013).

While social media may provide a vicarious destination experience through the narratives and visual images provided by other tourists, studies remain sceptical of the credibility of such content (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Sparks, Perkins & Buckley, 2013; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Thus, studies remain inconclusive as to whether the ELM adequately conceptualises the influence of social media as a persuasive tool for destination decisions because of the situational factors considered by the decision-maker (Burgess *et al.*, 2011; Cheng & Loi, 2014; Fileri & McLeay, 2014). Nonetheless, the ELM is relevant to the thesis to help frame the use of social media across high to low involvement destination decisions.

2.4.3   Conditions for influence

A review of the conditions of influence is warranted because different conceptualisations have reflected the multi-faceted nature of influence. This suggests that the study of influence can be approached in different ways. As Reno, Cialdini and Kallgren (1993) have argued, any understanding of influence must be aligned with the conditions leading to change. Literature

identifies four conditions that must exist in order for influence to be exerted. Each of these conditions will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs to further clarify when influence occurs.

First, the source or information provided must be perceived to be of a credible nature (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Whitehead Jr, 1968). Power structures and social ties show some aspects of credibility in terms of expertise or accumulated knowledge (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Therefore, it may be deduced that credibility is an antecedent to influence. Across different disciplines, several other terms have been used in association with credibility, including trustworthiness and believability (Lewicki, McAllister & Bies, 1998; Rotter, 1980; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998). With subtle definitional differences, trustworthiness and believability suggest the notion that an individual has confidence in the words or actions of another (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Rotter, 1980). To foster greater trust, it is argued that credibility must first be established (Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006; Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). For instance, a decision-maker is more likely to trust an airline when the organisation has been certified to possess high safety standards. Hence, within this research, the term 'credibility' will be adopted consistently to reflect these collective terms. The destination image formation literature has also adopted a distinction of credibility levels, see for example (Gartner, 1993). Credibility, therefore, is likely to account for some variations in influence levels pertaining to destination choice.

Second, the information received must be a sufficient motivator towards inducing attitudinal change (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sternthal, Dholakia & Leavitt, 1978). In the context of this research, influence affects one's attitudes towards or against a destination, and this leads to a greater probability of selection or de-selection (Gartner, 1993). To DMOs, understanding what influences choice is integral to the success of a destination, as, over a period of time, attitudes

that have been established are more resistant to change (Oppermann, 2000; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). This is because possessing stronger attitudes lead to greater convictions about destinations perceived to be suitable or unsuitable for vacations (Wong & Yeh, 2009). Hence, the ability to positively influence attitudes towards a destination is likely to develop favourable perceptions and revisit intentions. Lam and Hsu (2006) found that favourable attitudes towards countries with a perceived similar culture led to Taiwanese respondents choosing to visit Hong Kong. Lee (2009) hypothesised that word of mouth resulted in favourable attitudes towards a destination that influenced future tourism behaviour. As such, the ability to influence attitudes is an antecedent to destination choice (Um & Crompton, 1990).

Third, an individual must perceive that the information is highly relevant to be utilised (Karahanna & Straub, 1999; Legris, Ingham & Collerette, 2003). In a tourism context, any destination information must correspond to the needs of a decision-maker. Ayeh *et al.* (2013) used the term 'homophily' to reflect a similar-to-me mentality. Higher perceived relevance results in greater receptivity towards these destination contents. For instance, a decision-maker considering family-friendly destinations will probably be more attuned to tourism providers that feature children-minding services, or child-friendly activities than the size of a resort.

Finally, the individual must be primed to undertake change in order for influence to occur (Dalton & Gottlieb, 2003; Neves, 2009). Readiness for change is a precursor for influence because there exists opportunities to alter the status quo. In a tourism context, the term disequilibrium reflects a state of tension between a desire to detach from one's usual environment and the appeal to undertake a vacation (Crompton, 1979). Disequilibrium, therefore, can lead to a conscientious effort towards vacation planning. As vacation planning intensifies, it has been further argued that the active consideration of a vacation will expedite

the destination choice in order for the decision-maker to revert to a state of equilibrium (Goossens, 2000; Moutinho, 1993).

This section shows that the conditions for influence can be manipulated where a decision-maker shifts from a latent state of inaction towards the readiness to embrace change. This is especially crucial to the thesis because social media's role in influencing destination choice remains under-researched (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). As such, the knowledge of image formation agents of influence related to destination choice is essential.

2.4.4   Image formation agents influencing destination choice

This section is dedicated to a review of agents influencing destination choice. Specifically, the term "agent" has been used to symbolise proactive roles in effecting change within a particular setting (Eisenhardt, 1989). Tourism literature has also adopted such a term, as evident in Gartner's (1993) typology of destination image formation agents. Guided by the characteristics of an agent, this section reviews agents that have exerted a direct influence in shaping destination preferences. Agents that do not have appear to have explicit influence will therefore be disregarded. For instance, autonomous media such as news reports, serve a primary purpose to heighten the awareness and knowledge of destinations (Govers *et al.*, 2007). While the role of autonomous media has some relevance to the thesis, these may not appear to make any explicit links to tourism (Beerli & Martin, 2004). For this reason, autonomous media are de-selected as an agent that has a direct effect on destination choice. Instead, three agents within tourism literature have emerged to be dominant influences within destination choice. These agents are past experience, WOM and eWOM and where each agent will be discussed separately.

2.4.4.1   Past experience

Some studies have claimed that past experience of a destination is a highly influential agent in destination choice (Lehto *et al.*, 2004; Oppermann, 2000; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998). As past experience is a personal encounter, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that it is highly credible as a predictor of future decision-making (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Huang & Hsu, 2009; Jang & Feng, 2007; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Oppermann (2000) postulated that favourable past experience is likely to develop destination loyalty and that a decision-maker will be reasonably confident that the desired vacation outcomes will be met. Conversely, a negative experience is likely to evoke unfavourable perceptions of a destination for future decisions. Furthermore, past experience may be extrapolated to refer to other alternative destinations that are similar to destinations previously visited, such as in the case of domestic or regional tourism (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003; Jang & Feng, 2007). This occurs due to the inference of possessing mutually common attributes, such as culture, language or weather. Through past experience, greater destination familiarity is developed, and this reduces the risk of making a wrong choice. However, for potential first-time visitors who are contemplating a less familiar destination, the opportunity to learn from past experience does not exist. Instead, other agents are relied upon to make more informed destination decisions.

2.4.4.2   Word of mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) is another agent that has been demonstrated as a key influence on destination choice (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). In broad terms, WOM is defined as any form of non-paid communication between consumers (Westbrook, 1987). In tourism, WOM provides opportunities to exchange memories of a destination with others (Brown & Getz, 2005; Hsieh & O'Leary, 1994). A key underpinning of WOM is that information is usually provided through personal relationships without being

financially incentivised. For this reason, WOM contents demonstrate higher credibility for utilising in destination choice. In addition, Gartner (1993) makes a further distinction of WOM content into solicited and unsolicited WOM. Solicited WOM refer to contents that have been actively sourced whereas unsolicited WOM are received without the intention to obtain such information. In literature, solicited WOM is considered more credible than unsolicited WOM due to the willingness of a decision-maker to acquire information (Aktas, Aksu & Cizel, 2007; Michael, Armstrong & King, 2004). In the current era of destination decision-making, the solicitation of WOM content can arise from various sources, including social media (Boo & Kim, 2013; Vrana, Zafiropoulos & Vagianos, 2013).

Whilst WOM content can be obtained from different sources, such as family and friends, other studies have adopted a broad classification of WOM to include recommendations from tourism operators, for example, travel agents (Cheyne, Downes & Legg, 2006; Frias *et al.*, 2008; Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998). However, others challenged such a classification, as the travel agent may recommend certain destinations over others because of higher commissions received from particular tour operators (Hudson, Snaith, Miller & Hudson 2001; Michie & Sullivan, 1990). Yet Duke and Persia (1994) have emphasised that, when credibility is established between a potential decision-maker and a travel agent, it is more likely that the travel recommendations will be adopted. Overall, the influence of WOM on destination choice is most likely reflective of the depth of relations between a decision-maker and the content providers (Heung & Chu, 2000). In other words, the closer the friendship bonds between the content provider and receiver, the more likely that WOM recommendation will be accepted to assist with selecting a destination.

Within tourism, a key area of investigation in WOM is the valence of information and its influence in destination choice (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Snepenger *et al.*, 1990). In this research, valence is defined as the direction that recommendations are provided, which can either be positive or negative WOM (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). The potential for positive WOM as an influence on destination decisions is immense. Several studies have found that positive WOM validates destination choices in various contexts (Aktas *et al.*, 2007; Brown & Getz, 2005; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Michael *et al.*, 2004; Murphy *et al.*, 2007). In contrast, some studies have also demonstrated that whilst negative WOM reaches a larger audience, its impact on decision-making is far less conclusive (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Yuksel, Kilinc & Yuksel, 2006). For instance, Sonmez and Graefe (1998) argued that the tendency to disclose negative WOM might be related to incidents outside the scope of the destination experience. For instance, political unrest depicted in the media can portray a destination as unsafe, despite tourism operations being unaffected. Additionally, negative WOM may be the result of a single event that had occurred during the destination experience (e.g., rude resort staff), which has then been stereotyped to represent the entire destination (Yuksel *et al.*, 2006). However, when negative WOM has been appropriately managed and service recovery is performed, DMOs can modify the negative connotations for a decision-maker in order to gain more favourable consideration in the future (Heung & Chu, 2000). Given such circumstances, the need for DMOs and other tourism operators to exhibit greater responsibility in managing negative WOM has been repeatedly emphasised (Cheng & Loi, 2014; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). It may be the case that a decision-maker adopts a balanced perspective of positive and negative WOM in order to make inferences about a destination experience, and this is juxtaposed with the motivations for travel (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Murphy *et al.*, 2007). This is an area of particular relevance to

the research because WOM framed positively or negatively, is assessed by a decision-maker against other sources of destination-related information.

Moreover, it appears that WOM permeates various levels of vacation decisions, from a macro perspective of destination choice to other micro-perspectives, such as activity types (Baloglu, 2000). Furthermore, a decision-maker can solicit different accounts about a destination from various sources (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The pervasiveness of WOM can have heightened effects to influence a decision-maker in terms of developing a positive frame to choose a destination (Hui *et al.*, 2007).

2.4.4.3   Electronic word of mouth (eWOM)

As discussed in the introduction chapter, eWOM are the online contents disseminated within social media sites. As such, a review of existing literature is necessary to learn the current state of eWOM as an influence and distil knowledge gaps. At present, some studies have postulated that eWOM is a highly influential source in destination choice under certain circumstances (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012; Simms, 2012). For instance, eWOM has been suggested to influence destinations that have been portrayed to be risky decisions (Bakr & Ali, 2013; Tan & Chen, 2012). eWOM appears to reposition a risky destination in a favourable light, by drawing on the positive experiences made on social media by other reviewers. As destination experiences cannot be pre-tested, a decision-maker often relies on eWOM from social media, to mediate potential risks that may jeopardise the vacation experience (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2012; Schroeder, Pennington-Gray, Donohoe & Kiousis, 2013; Shakeela & Weaver, 2012).

Other studies have posited that eWOM influence is more likely to be associated with certain demographics. Rong, Vu, Law and Li (2012) identified three such characteristics, namely, a

younger age group, a more affluent segment and individuals possessing higher educational levels. These findings have been supported in other studies (Ip, Lee & Law, 2012; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Studies outside tourism have reported similar findings that eWOM is most influential within the profiles of a specific age cohort, such as Generation Y (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). Yet Gretzel *et al.* (2008) and Kim *et al.* (2011) argued that no single factor could account for user-generated content adoption and influence in destination decisions because destination decisions are embedded in a range of other attributes such as culture and gender. Incidentally, Thebault, Picard and Ouedraogo (2013) reported that eWOM influence featured in their sample of senior tourists contemplating destination decisions. As eWOM can be accessed by almost anyone, an inclusive approach should be taken to better understand its influence in destination choice (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). eWOM influence in destination choice should be determined by its perceived relevance and value derived from assessing such contents (Parra-Lopez *et al.*, 2011).

Dimensional differences exist between eWOM and WOM. Litvin, Goldstein and Pan (2008) asserted that eWOM has evolved from WOM sources becoming more digitally widespread. eWOM is disseminated across numerous social media sites and enables a decision-maker to obtain timely information from various sources conveniently (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Tze & Zhang, 2013). However, differences between WOM and eWOM go beyond the medium of information exchange. Tham, Croy and Mair (2013) have identified five dimensional differences between WOM and eWOM: little known source-receiver relationships; channel variety and presentation of contents; more opportunities for information solicitation; greater message retention and searchability; and content provider motivation for disclosure. These dimensional differences show that eWOM should be treated as a separate entity to WOM when examining influence in destination choice.

eWOM is often characterised by little known source-receiver relationships because social media sites are usually public domains where users may not know one another. In addition, social media facilitate variations in terms of interaction levels and also types of eWOM contents (e.g. text, photographs and videos). Further, eWOM can be probed and stored over the internet. Additionally, the intent of a content provider to disclose eWOM contents may be for altruistic, hedonic or functional reasons. By identifying differences between eWOM and WOM, Tham *et al.* (2013) argued that traditional frameworks examining communication models would need to be adapted because of the lack of cues with regard to people, contents and mediums within social media. Collectively, these dimensional differences reflect the diversity of eWOM content but heighten the need to refine existing propositions related to credibility (Hills & Cairncross, 2011). This is because almost anyone can publish eWOM contents anonymously or using a pseudonym.

Unlike WOM, where the source is known, the potential lack of source identity in relation to eWOM necessitates an assessment of credibility by the content receiver (Fjelstul & Severt, 2011; Ganguly, Dash & Cyr, 2011). To address credibility, several initiatives have been undertaken by forum sites. For example, Booking.com requires all eWOM contents to be supported by proof of stay at the accommodation (Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012). On TripAdvisor, users can vote on other reviewers as a tool to determine the credibility of eWOM in terms of perceived helpfulness based on their content provided (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011). While these initiatives are somewhat useful, demonstrations of credibility within social media remain a highly contentious issue (Pekar & Ou, 2008; Zhang, Ye, Law & Li, 2010).

Literature on the influence of eWOM in destination choice is largely centred on user engagement (Arsal *et al.*, 2010; Zehrer *et al.*, 2011). Specifically, a decision-maker has to distil

eWOM contents to determine if the information is relevant and therefore may influence one's destination choice (Kim *et al.*, 2004; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). A user's frame of reference is vital to understand how eWOM influence should be operationalised. For instance, Cox *et al.* (2009) asserted that eWOM are solicited when a decision-maker intends to validate a pre-selected destination. In other words, the engagement with eWOM is directed at a post-decision, pre-visit scenario to reduce the dissonance associated with the destination decision (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). As discussed previously, dissonance refers to felt tensions arising from doubts as to whether a particular decision has been justified (Um & Crompton, 1990). Hence, a decision-maker is likely to seek a multiplicity of eWOM contents to validate his or her destination decision (Kusumasondjaja *et al.*, 2012). Such trends correspond to the notion of the central route to persuasion, as the deeper the engagement with eWOM reinforces favourable attitudes to the selected destination (Cheng & Loi, 2014; Filieri & McLeay, 2014).

However, debate about the articulation of a supposed destination experience is still ongoing, especially in verifying the authenticity of such narratives (Huang *et al.*, 2010; Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011). Different scholars have argued that the credibility of eWOM remains under-researched (Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu, 2011; Chan & Guillet, 2011). Overall, the analysis of the literature demonstrates that there is still a lack of consensus as to how best to address the credibility of eWOM. Yet, credibility remains a core feature within the assessment of eWOM contents at an individual level in relation to destination choice.

Like WOM, the valence of eWOM influence in destination choice is also an area that has been scrutinised (Ekiz, Khoo-Lattimore & Memarzadeh, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2012; Mkono, 2012). eWOM may be spread across a spectrum of highly positive to negative comments that elaborate on a destination experience (Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Volo, 2010). Several studies have

attempted to determine if positive or negative eWOM are more influential (Crotts, Mason & Davis, 2009; Mkono, 2011). However, a review of the literature has revealed mixed findings (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Xie, Miao, Kuo & Lee, 2011). In some instances, negative eWOM has been appraised to be more likely to be influential on decision-making, as such contents are disseminated to a greater audience, as compared to positive eWOM (Browning, So & Sparks, 2013; Pantelidis, 2010; Stringam & Gerdes Jr, 2010). eWOM provides additional opportunities for users to vent their complaints, where they may be perceived to be more effective in addressing dissonance (Qu & Lee, 2011; Racherla, Connolly & Christodoulidou, 2013). However, negative eWOM alone is insufficient to explain destination decisions. For example, it was found that addressing negative eWOM within social media was perceived to heighten the perceived responsibility of the service provider and, in turn, cast a destination in a more favourable light (Litvin *et al.*, 2008; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Steffes & Burgee, 2008). Overall, studies are inconclusive as to whether positive or negative eWOM is more influential on destination choice, suggesting that the review of eWOM is a highly subjective process (Hsiao *et al.*, 2013; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Rageh, Melewar & Woodside, 2013). Clearly, current trends in literature suggest that the influence of eWOM remains a highly contentious issue.

Overall, the review of eWOM as an influence in destination choice appears to be loosely conceptualised. Moreover, the distinction between eWOM and WOM is becoming blurred (Ring, Tkaczynski & Dolnicar, 2016). According to Ring *et al.* (2016), the evolution of WOM into eWOM has resulted from content providers and users engaging with visual and verbal information across various channels. Nonetheless, literature is dominated in terms of assessing eWOM mostly at the micro-level attributes of accommodation providers or dining establishments.

2.5   Social media influence in destination choice

This section reports on existing studies that have examined social media influence in destination decision-making. Specifically, studies that have resulted in actual visitation outcomes derived from social media influence are selected for review. Table 2.4 illustrates the scope of extant studies that are dedicated towards the conceptualisation of social media influence in destination choice.

Table 2.4: An overview of relevant studies to the research

	Cox *et al.* (2009)	Fotis *et al.* (2011)	Fakharyan *et al.* (2012), Jalilvand *et al.* (2012)	Jacobsen & Munar (2012)	Simms (2012)	Bakr & Ali (2013)	Davies & Cairncross (2013)	Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis (2013)	Hernandez-Mendez *et al.* (2013)	Liu *et al.* (2013)	Rathonyi (2013)	Albarq (2014)
Geographical context	Australia	Russia and former Soviet countries	Iran	Denmark and Norway	USA	Egypt	Australia	Greece	Spain	Global	Hungary	Jordan
Sample	Tourists	Tourists	Tourists	Tourists	Tourists	Tourists	Students	Young tourists	Tourists	Culinary tourists	Students	Tourists
Destinations	No indication	No indication	Isfahan, Iran	Mallorca, Spain	No indication	Egypt	No indication	No indication	No indication	No indication	No indication	Amman, Jordan
Types of social media	Forums, blogs, social networking sites	No indication	Forums	Facebook, blogs	Photo and video-centric sites	Facebook	Forums, Facebook	Facebook	Blogs, social networking sites	Flickr	Forums, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, blogs	No indication
Social media influence in the evaluation set	✓ (22%)	✓ (24%)	✓	✓ (Very low)	✓ For unfamiliar and international destinations	Not investigated	✓ (Very low)	✓ (20%)	✓ Social media influence not as high as WOM	Not investigated	✓ (WOM most influential, followed by social media sites of known sources, then DMO sites)	Not investigated
Social media influence to validate destination choice	✓ (15%)	✓ (30.9%)	✓	Not investigated	Not investigated	✓ (86.7%)	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	✓	Not investigated	✓
Source credibility	DMO and tourism providers were more credible than social media	WOM more credible than social media	Not investigated	WOM most influential on a familiar and mature destination	Not investigated	Organic experiences were most influential on destination	WOM most influential due to known authors	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	WOM and DMO sites most trustworthy	Not investigated

	Social media were more credible than unsolicited advertising	Social media more credible than DMO sites				image and choice						
Content credibility	Higher weightage on photos than texts	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	Nature of written complaint	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated	Not investigated
Micro-level	Social media more credible than hotel website	Few changes were made to holiday plans	Not investigated	Social media low influence on where to stay	Not investigated	Not investigated	Some reported influence on desired experiences	Not investigated	Social media influence in hotels more characteristic of experienced users	Social media induces the intent to visit particular restaurants	Social media low influence on where to stay	Not investigated

Thirteen studies are recorded and arranged in a chronological order. It should be noted that two studies, Fakharyan *et al.* (2012) and Jalilvand *et al.* (2012) analysed the same data set. Fakharyan *et al.* (2012) framed their investigation towards the examination of eWOM, whereas Jalilvand *et al.* (2012) targeted eWOM as an influence on destination image. Given the proposition that heightened destination images reinforce favourable attitudes, both these studies validated their claims that eWOM content within social media influence destination choice.

Table 2.4 also reveals the existing scope of literature in terms of the geographical contexts. Two studies, Cox *et al.* (2009) and Davies and Cairncross (2013), have emerged from an Australian perspective. Other studies were derived out of Europe and two Middle Eastern countries, Iran and Jordan. The table further indicates that tourists have been the main sample within the studies, though on two occasions, student respondents have been utilised.

A key omission from many of the studies in Table 2.4 is the lack of information as to the type of destinations chosen. Only four papers had explicitly named the destinations being investigated. Among these, social media was suggested to be a prominent influence in the choice of three destinations - Iran, Egypt and Jordan. Synthesising the outcomes from these studies reveal that social media altered perceptions of an unsafe destination image through the experiences of other tourists. Jalilvand *et al.* (2012) elaborated that their sample comprised primarily Muslim tourists that highlighted religious affinity towards choosing Islamic destinations. As such, social media appeared to be a tool to validate the selection of pre-selected destination. Other studies have provided very little information in relation to which destinations were chosen, despite literature emphasising that contextual cues are integral to understanding social media influence (Simms, 2012).

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Table 2.4 further detailed different types of social media that have been investigated. Some studies have adopted a comparison across a few social media sites, though several other had applied their examination to a single site. The disparity observed within the different studies is somewhat surprising, considering that a social media user may utilise several social media sites concurrently. The current state of literature shows that these studies are highly fragmented, with very little done in terms of understanding relative influences amidst concurrent social media use and adoption.

The table also reports the outcomes from current studies in terms of locating social media in the evaluation set. As Decrop (2010) has postulated, the evaluation set occurs prior to destination choice, which provides a valuable frame to scrutinise social media influence. The studies appear to characterise social media influence across a continuum. High influence was reported in a few instances, though the outcomes are skewed towards low influence.

The review reported in Table 2.4 also suggests that social media influence occurs more often as a validation tool when a destination has been pre-selected. In other words, current studies claim that social media plays a major role in developing destination image and potentially, reducing the dissonance of making wrong destination decisions. Despite such assertions, there remains a lack of knowledge as to which destinations have been chosen and the contexts that have led to these outcomes.

Table 2.4 further examined the scope of source and content credibility within the extant studies. The concept of credibility, as demonstrated in literature, is pivotal to the knowledge of how social media influence should be operationalised. Six studies have postulated that source credibility originate from sources such as family or friends and official DMOs. Such an

outcome is justified as these sources can be verified. However, in terms of content credibility, only two studies have paid attention to the assessment of social media. The lack of an assessment of social media content credibility is surprising, as trends within literature have identified cues to assist a decision-maker with a variety of destination decisions. It may be deduced that in circumstances where studies have reported low influence levels in destination choice, then assessments of credibility is diminished. However, as social media continue to evolve, their transformation of the vacation planning process, including destination choice, cannot be ignored. As such, subsequent studies in tourism have defended the value of credibility assessments leading to decision-making and choice (Liu & Park, 2015; Llamero, 2014). While these studies are associated with micro-level decisions, credibility assessment should likewise apply to destination selection.

Finally, the studies in Table 2.4 supported existing propositions that social media is strongly influential at the micro-level of vacation planning. These outcomes demonstrate that social media is primarily a discriminatory tool to make micro-level decisions based on specific attributes. The ability to compare one alternative to another on such a basis is an attempt to provide tangible cues within a highly experiential process such as vacation planning.

Overall, Table 2.4 has positioned social media to be a catalyst for influence in some destination decisions. There has been an emphasis on using social media as a variable for predicting influence and visit intentions. Predictive studies are valuable insofar as attitudes once formed, are highly resistant to change (Lee & Gretzel, 2014). However, scholars also recognise that intentions to visit do not necessarily lead to the realisation of actual behaviour (March & Woodside, 2005). For this reason, the research is concerned with the examination as to how social media influence is exerted across various contexts of realised destination choice, rather

than a modification of social media adoption rates. Therefore, this thesis analyses influence in circumstances where the destination decision-maker is already aware of, and perhaps has engaged with social media for destination choice. The premise of the thesis is to investigate the contextual factors of destination choice and locating social media influence to such outcomes. The strength of this thesis is to assess social media influence across the spread of various destination choice contexts, a key gap that is clearly evident within literature.

2.6   Research problem and questions

The research problem for this research concerns the limited scope of knowledge as to contextual factors characterising social media influence in destination choice. Condensing the outcomes of the literature, it has been established that destination choice is multi-faceted and is derived from a fit between a decision-maker and the vacation type. Tourism literature has also shown that destination choice can be influenced at varying degrees from a combination of agents. Social media is one such agent, among others, that shapes a destination choice. It has also been suggested that social media influence occurs across a continuum, though most studies suggesting this, and therefore it is not yet known whether a continuum of influence exists at the macro-destination level. The current scope of studies have proposed that social media is an avenue informing the destination decision, though relative influence of social media in comparison with other dominant sources of destination information remain under-researched. There is also a limited understanding as to how influence has been operationalised. An evident gap in current literature is that little is known about the contextual factors characterising social media influence in destination decision-making.

2.7   Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework for this research is depicted in Figure 2.6. The framework adapts Chen's (1998) TCDM model to be focused on destination choice, and particularly delineated to the stages of evaluation of alternatives and the decision stage. As the figure illustrates, social media is the focus within these stages where the primary objective is to locate the contextual cues characterising various levels of influence. Derived from the gaps in literature are three secondary questions to refine the conceptualisations of influence. The first secondary question is:

- What is the comparative influence of social media compared to other agents?

Findings to address this question will clarify how social media is positioned in comparison to other agents of influence, and how contextual cues moderate the destination decision. This question responds to literature calling for studies to examine the concurrent use and reported influence of social media vis a vis other agents in a destination decision setting (Melian-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2013; Park & Oh, 2012; Wang, 2012).

The second secondary question is:

- What is the relative influence of social media sites?

Asking this question will help understand whether some social media sites exhibit greater influence than others, and if so, what are the circumstances for their reported levels. Answers to this question will address the current fragmented nature of social media studies that have been instigated often from a single social media channel. Exploring relative influence levels can inform practitioners about social media strategies and positioning destination-related information accordingly (Kastner & Stangl, 2012; Munar, 2012).

The third secondary question is:

- Is influence related to decision-maker or decision characteristics?

Having a more nuanced understanding on social media influence from a decision-maker or decision characteristics will assist in operationalising social media influence differently. This is built on repeated emphasis within literature that has shown destination choice to be a contextual decision (Rageh *et al.*, 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

Collectively, these secondary questions serve as building blocks to address the main research question. Knowing the conditions that operationalise social media influence in destination choice lends further theorisation to the current scope of tourism literature. Overall, Figure 2.6 provides the necessary framework to understand how social media influence might be conceptualised towards a more informed understanding of destination choice outcomes, by building on the TCDM model proposed by Chen (1998).
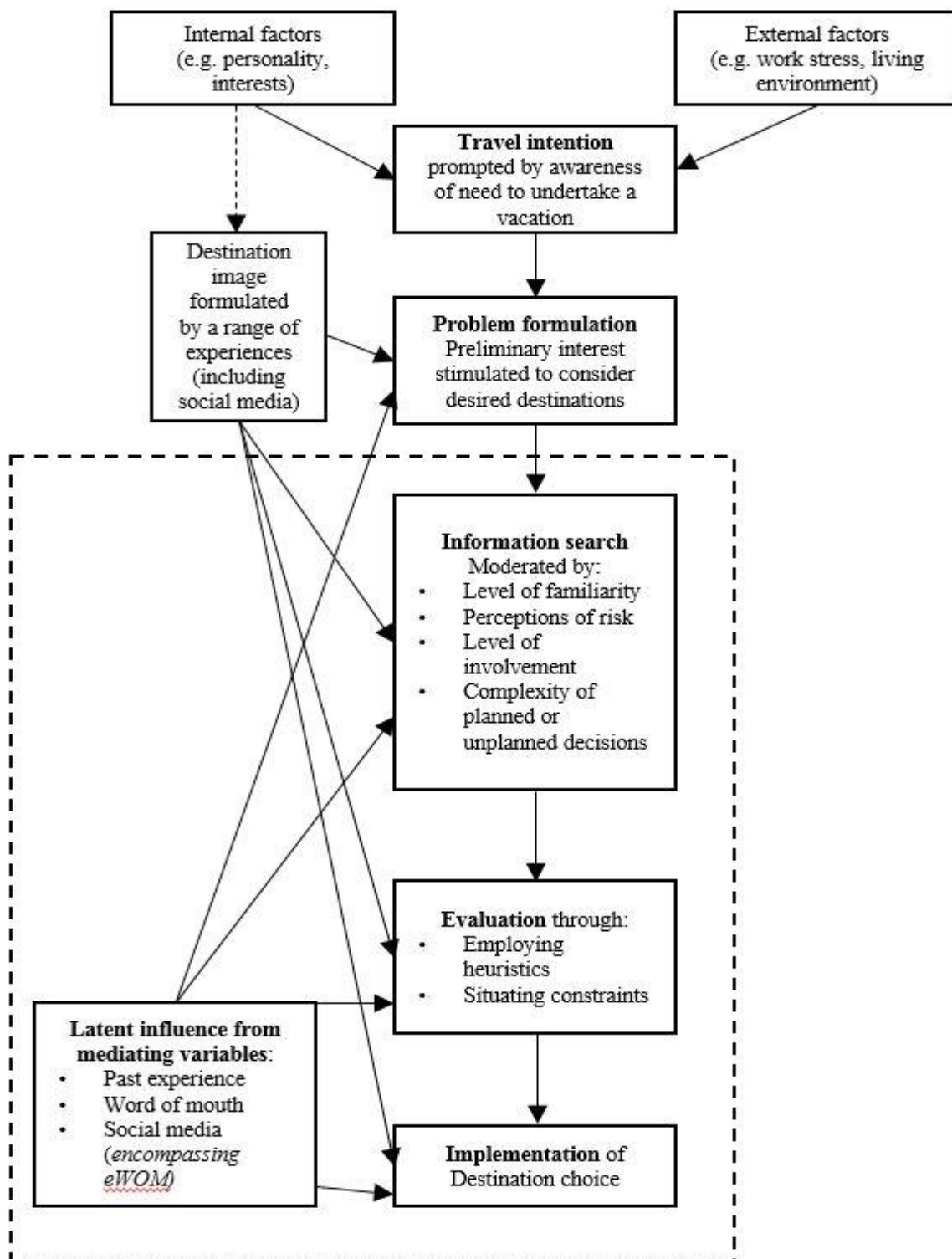
Figure 2.6: Conceptual framework of social media influence in destination choice

2.8   Chapter conclusion

This section summarises the key outcomes of the chapter. The chapter conducted an extensive review of the literature as to relevant concepts to help frame the research. Commencing with vacation planning as the broad framework helped consolidate the processes involved in decision-making. With origins in consumer behaviour, vacation planning developed an understanding of a problem-solving approach by a decision-maker that cumulates with selection outcomes.

Central to the vacation planning process is destination choice. Synthesising the literature on destination choice has revealed that very broad interpretations have been held about the destination concept. Nonetheless, there is overall agreement among various models that destination choice follows a similar elimination process to vacation planning. Literature has also revealed that destination choice sets are the dominant framework dedicated to deriving a choice outcome. A tenet of the destination choice set literature is that destination choice is multi-faceted and that various considerations are attached to the decision.

The research investigated the roles of different considerations attached to destination choice. Destination image is found to be intricately linked to destination choice. This is because destination choice entails cognitive and affective images that lead to favourable or unfavourable dispositions to shape destination preferences and selection. Through the analysis of destination image literature, it can be deduced that images change over time to become more complex. Furthermore, different agents can formulate a destination image, including social media.

The chapter also ascertained that destination decisions may be chosen from amongst various levels of familiarity. Literature has proposed that high familiarity reduces the scope of information search, while the inverse is suggested for less familiar destinations. Related to the notion of familiarity is the concept of risk. The section compiled a list of potential risks that any decision-maker may be exposed to in relation to destination choice. Knowing that these risks exist has also produced an understanding as to how decision-makers adapt to the likelihood and propensity for risks. Building on the understanding of risks in destination choice is the discussion of involvement. From the literature, involvement levels correspond to efforts taken to negotiate different risk elements pertaining to destination choice. As involvement levels intensify, destination preferences are further clarified, where a decision-maker is now better positioned to make informed destination choices. A review of travelling parties has guided the understanding as to how different groups ascertain their choice outcomes. Literature has concluded that when more persons are added to the destination decision, complexities arise due to the tensions of varying motivations for travel. Nonetheless, decision-making units that have adopted a consultative approach appear to be better positioned to select destinations that are accepted by everyone within the group. This is related to the thesis because various types of social media sites can be utilised to assist in the decision-making process.

Literature has also highlighted that destination decisions can be planned or unplanned. Planned destination decisions have been attributed to decision-maker characteristics whilst unplanned destination decisions are often derived from inducing last-minute decisions due to discounting practices of tourism practitioners. However, unplanned decisions are often associated with less complex travel arrangements, such as weekend getaways. In contrast, planned decisions are expected to include more detailed travel arrangements. The distinction of planned and unplanned destination decisions helps inform our understanding that destination choice can

warrant extensive or minimal planning. Such considerations are relevant to the thesis because social media contents can also expedite the destination choice.

A review of heuristics also guides the understanding as to what criteria are used by decision-makers to make their destination decisions. Literature has clarified that cost or specific service attributes are key considerations to select destination-related decisions. A related aspect is that of constraints to the destination decision. These constraints include market access and unsafe destinations, where some destinations will be eliminated from further evaluation. Knowing what and how heuristics and constraints impact on the pool of considerations is essential, as social media contents can help construct a more informed knowledge of, and shift destination preferences.

As this thesis is dedicated to the examination of social media influence in destination choice, an extensive review was conducted regarding the conceptualisations of influence. Drawing on the origins that influence is about effecting attitudinal change, there have been different interpretations as to how influence should be understood. Studies concerning influence are largely derived from principles across management, social ties, technology adoption or persuasion. Yet, there appears to be a highly fragmented approach to understand influence, though there is a recognition that influence lies across a continuum from high to low. Nonetheless, four conditions for influence may be synthesised within literature. Knowing what these indicative antecedents are forms the basis to investigate the role of social media as a catalyst for influence. The chapter also reviewed key factors influencing destination choice where a nuanced understanding of credibility and relevance helps frame the scope of this research. The chapter then appraised existing studies that have characterised social media influence in destination choice. Imminent in the scope of extant studies is the lack of cues in

relation to the context for destination decisions. This key theoretical gap requires further clarification and has prompted the main research question for the thesis. Consolidating the outcomes of literature is the production of a conceptual framework. Overall, the chapter has provided the breadth and depth of information pertinent to address the objectives of the research.

Chapter 3.   Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to delineate an appropriate methodology that assists with exploring social media influence in destination choice, as prompted by the knowledge gaps derived from the literature review undertaken in Chapter 2. Specifically, this chapter articulates the justification for an adopted method to guide the collection of data in order to answer the research questions. First, the research question is briefly re-stated in Section 3.1. Next, the researcher's philosophical position is described in Section 3.2 followed by the research design in Section 3.3. Criteria assisting with the selection of an appropriate research method are examined within Section 3.4. Section 3.5 discusses the process undertaken to obtain ethics approval to conduct the research. Subsequently, Section 3.6 demonstrates how the interview guide was developed. Section 3.7 then illustrates the pre- and pilot interviews that were conducted in order to enhance the interview process. The process of participant selection is articulated in Section 3.8. Section 3.9 discusses how interviews were analysed. In Section 3.10, the coding process is reported. The issues of trustworthiness (validity and reliability) of the research are considered in Section 3.11. Finally, Section 3.12 provides a summary of this chapter.

3.1   Research question

The main research question developed from the gaps in literature was:

- What are the contextual factors characterising the various levels of social media influence in destination choice?

To assist with addressing the main research questions, three secondary questions were identified:

1. What is the comparative influence of social media compared to other agents?

2. What is the relative influence of social media sites?

3. Is influence related to decision-maker or decision characteristics?

Collectively, the aims of the research topic guide the development of the selected methodology in order to address the research questions.

3.2   The researcher's philosophical position

Within any research, it is important to identify the underpinnings of the researcher's philosophical position. Crucially, it is through identifying the researcher's philosophical position that shows how the researcher understands reality and truth. While there have been different interpretations of philosophical positions, the researcher will discuss his personal stance through four sequential foundations: ontology, epistemology, paradigm and methodology (Grix, 2002).

The starting point for philosophy is ontology (Grix, 2002). Ontological claims are statements about the nature of reality, and how individuals perceive reality (Dawson, 1981; de Gialdino, 2009; Grix, 2002; Taylor, 1959). Within ontology, there are two opposing viewpoints. These are objectivism and constructionism, and each will be discussed in turn (Dawson, 1981; de Gialdino, 2009; Taylor, 1959). Objectivism posits that reality exists separate to social actors (Dawson, 1981; de Gialdino, 2009; Grix, 2002; Taylor, 1959). From an objectivist viewpoint, reality is independent of human perception (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The objectivism view has been strongly associated with positivist approaches that have sought to determine causation and test hypotheses (Bryman, 2001). Furthermore, objectivism has allowed science to employ deductive research to test theories and thereby formulate generalisations for a particular

phenomenon under study (Cresswell, 2007; Thomas, 2006). Most scientific investigations are conducted in order to support or refute a stated hypothesis (Gunnell, 1969; Weissinger, 1995). While such a view of reality has been instrumental in the development of the scientific community, the researcher subscribes to an alternative ontological stance – one that allows for different constructions of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

An alternative view within ontology is offered by constructionism. Constructionism asserts that individuals construct reality through interactions (de Gialdino, 2009; Grix, 2002; Taylor, 1959). Taking this view, constructionism acknowledges that individuals process information through interactions in order to form multiple perspectives of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this regard, the researcher is aligning himself with an ontological position of constructionism in presenting a view that reality may be constructed. Constructionism has guided the development of qualitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within qualitative studies, individuals construct meaning that is based on personal interpretations of reality (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). It has been argued that constructionism is subjective and therefore it is difficult to generalise on that basis (Hollis & Smith, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, Bryman (2001) argued against the use of applying quantitative research frameworks to qualitative research. Rather, qualitative approaches should be framed and informed by the reflexivity of the researcher to understand the process of knowledge construction from individual experiences (Bulmer, 1979; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Spiggle, 1994; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Thomas, 2006).

The next foundation of philosophy is epistemology (Grix, 2002). If ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, then epistemology is devoted to positioning knowledge and the construction of knowledge (Crotty, 1998). Drawing from the origins of ontological positions,

epistemology lies across a continuum, with objectivism on one end and constructionism at the other end of the continuum (Crotty, 1998; Dawson, 1981). In alignment with the tenets of constructionism, the researcher believes that knowledge is developed through the processing of information between an individual and multiple agents (Lynch, 2001). The researcher has adopted an epistemological stance of constructionism to construct knowledge about the subjects. In this sense, meaning-making is not understood as a representation or generalisation of beliefs but is explained within the context of investigation (Guba, 1981). Constructionism acknowledges that individuals may construct different meanings even when approaching the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, it is posited that assumptions of constructionism are framed within a qualitative, rather than a quantitative perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Following an epistemological position of constructionism, the researcher's view of inquiry regarding knowledge has been framed from a theoretical paradigm of constructivism (Rutkowski & Smits, 2001; Talja, Tuominen & Savolainen, 2005; Young & Collin, 2004). Other scholars have further used the terms 'constructivism' and 'interpretivism' interchangeably (Ponterotto, 2005; Rolfe, 2006). While both approaches are founded on the premise that knowledge is constructed, interpretivists are often detached from the subjects under investigation (Williams & Morrow, 2009). In contrast, constructivists immerse themselves with participant experiences in making sense of what is happening (Talja *et al.*, 2005). Constructivism asserts that individuals reflect and learn from past experience in developing knowledge that can be applied in the future (Jonassen, 1991; Krauss, 2005). As the aim of the thesis was to better understand contextual factors associated with social media influence in a destination decisions, aligning with a constructivism framework has provided a

more reflexive engagement to make sense of how individuals have evaluated their destination decision-making process.

Constructivism employs inductive forms of analysis to interpret data (Cresswell, 2007; Thomas, 2006). Inductive research has often been associated with examining data to derive themes and concepts to provide answers that help analyse a phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007; Thomas, 2006). Allowing themes and concepts to emerge from the data is consistent with the interpretive lens of constructionism in a systemic manner (Cresswell, 2007). Inductive approaches involve numerous iterations between the researcher and data, until a comprehensive set of themes emerge in generating preliminary theories (Cresswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman 1994). In following a constructivist paradigm, the qualitative methodology adopted for this research is to be designed and guided by the needs of the research question.

In summary, this section has identified the researcher's view of philosophy and explained how the research question was investigated using a constructivist paradigm. Essentially, the researcher believes that there are multiple ways to construct knowledge and that the research design should be developed in a manner that provides participants with opportunities to express their understanding of the topic under investigation.

3.3 Methodological design

This section provides an overall perspective as to how the research was designed. Given that little is known about the contextual factors characterising the influence of social media within destination choice (as highlighted in the conceptual framework), conducting exploratory research allowed a better appreciation of the subject matter. Exploratory research is conducted

to discover existing, yet not fully understood, phenomena and provide fresh perspectives on emerging areas of study (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005; Stebbins, 2001; Zikmund, 2003). Through investigation, exploratory research seeks insights into understanding meaning-making (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005; Stebbins, 2001; Zikmund, 2003). Exploratory research often requires the use of qualitative methods to discover participant views by investigating their personal reflections on engaging with lived experiences (Flick 2006; Graebner, Martin & Roundy, 2012; Holliday, 2002). The decision was therefore taken to adopt qualitative methods to explore the influence of social media in destination choice. Others researching on social media have also taken this approach in non-tourism contexts (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Uhrig, Bann, Williams & Evans, 2010).

3.4   Selection of research method

The next stage for consideration is to select a research method. Based on the research question and existing studies, or lack thereof, three criteria have been identified to guide the selection process of a research method. The method chosen must allow the exploration of influence, identify sources of influence and enable the researcher to examine relative influence. Two methods were identified to meet the criteria of providing opportunities to probe, being open and unstructured, and allowing participants to provide judgments (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). These two methods were focus groups and interviews, and each will be assessed for its suitability to this research.

A focus group is an assembly of individuals who have been gathered to comment on a topic in a given setting (Zikmund, 2003). A focus group is led by a moderator to discuss the topic in a semi-structured manner (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). In addition, the moderator attempts to include

all individuals who participate and provide their personal responses to the discussion topic (Zikmund, 2003). One benefit of focus group discussions is that several participants can be brought to the same setting and comment on a given topic (Sim, 1998). Another benefit of a focus group is the opportunity to develop ideas stemming from other participant comments (Wilkinson, 1998).

While focus groups are open forums for discussion, they possess two inherent disadvantages that make them appear less suited for this research. First, participants in a focus group may present ideas that are less risky, given that the individual may perceive himself or herself to be subject to criticism by others when stating a less popular view (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). Second, a few outspoken individuals may dominate the focus group discussion (Zikmund, 2003). When such circumstances arise, the moderator has to regulate the conversation and urge others to join in the conversation. In this sense, the focus group is less suited to obtaining deep insights from each respondent. For these two reasons, the focus group method has been de-selected for this research.

An interview has been defined as a form of interaction between an interviewer and a participant that allows the participant to express personal beliefs and feelings on a topic in detail (Clark, 2010; Webb, 1995). Interviews can explore underlying motivations through the probing and ordering of information, and have been used extensively in tourism (e.g. Jansen-Verbeke & van Rekom, 1996; Molz, 2010; Riley, 1996; Sims, 2009) and social media research (e.g. Munar, 2012; Panteli, Yan & Charmakiotis, 2011; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; White & White, 2007). The interactive nature of depth interviews allows the researcher to identify and probe further into responses by allowing participants to clarify and explain themselves without the potential for peer pressure associated with focus groups (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007;

McCracken, 1988; Zikmund, 2003). Accordingly, depth interviews were chosen as the research method employed, because they best addressed the criteria required to address the research question.

Different categories of depth interviews exist that are aimed at achieving different outcomes. Depth interviews can be categorised into three main formats: structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2000). As the research question sought to allow open discussions and themes to emerge during the interview, the structured interview is less appropriate in this instance. In the case of unstructured interviews, the conversation is often characterised by lengthy and free-flowing narratives (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Consequently, the conversation may drift away from the purpose of the interview and may be less suited for the research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are better suited to engage participants in expressing responses, while also permitting the direction of the interview to flow along lines of the topics raised (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 2007). In addition, the semi-structured interview can enable a participant to express a judgment in a guided and interactive manner (Flick, 2006; McCracken, 1988; Zikmund, 2003). Therefore, the semi-structured interview format was selected for the purpose of this research.

Despite the appropriateness of depth interviews for the research, several considerations need to be addressed in order to overcome potential resistance from participants involved in the interviews. First, the interview is usually conducted with a participant who does not have any prior relationship with the interviewer (Myers & Newman, 2007). However, the relationship between the interviewer and participant may be fostered through some preliminary questions in a non-threatening environment (Herzog, 2005). Second, the participant is required to provide personal information that he or she may be unwilling to disclose (Robson & Foster, 1989). To

overcome such an issue, the interviewer can reiterate the purpose of the study and how personal details will be de-identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Third, a participant who perceives that an unequal status exists between the interviewer and participant may be unwilling to offer personal insights (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). Reducing status inequality can be overcome through interviewer participation and encouragement within the course of the conversation (Roulston, deMarrais & Lewis, 2003). Fourth, as the depth interview is intrusive in nature, participants may be mindful of how they are perceived with regard to the research topic and offer insights that appear beneficial to the investigation, rather than personal views (Hermanns, 2004), so called 'social desirability bias'. Therefore, the interviewer's role is to reiterate that there are no right and wrong answers in the interview, and to encourage participants to express their personal views. These considerations notwithstanding, the depth interview was best suited for the exploratory nature of this research.

In summary, adopting depth interviews as the method of choice in this research was justified through its ability to probe participants' views in order to address the research question. However, the adoption of the depth interview needs to also consider factors that may present potential barriers to the overall flow of information collected. Therefore, implementation of depth interviews within this research required some guidelines to address the considerations mentioned above.

Goffman (1959), who likened the interview process to that of a drama production, involving the script (interview questions), stage (interview location) and actors (interviewer and participant), offers a perspective on the depth interview. The intent of the dramaturgical model was to illustrate that the depth interview is like a performance that requires role-playing to effectively produce results for an audience, who, in this context, are readers of this research

(Goffman, 1959). Such a perspective reiterates that the interview is a two-way communication process that may be further divided into three phases including preparing for the interview, conducting the interview and analysing the interview transcripts (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Turner, 2010). In this section, the focus will be on the preparation and conduct of interviews. Section 3.9 addresses analysis of the interview transcripts.

The first phase is to prepare for the interview. In preparing for the interview, four considerations needed to be addressed: setting of parameters, phrasing of interview questions, selection of the interview location and participant selection. First, it has been argued that that the depth interview requires the interviewer to set parameters for the interview process (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). The parameters include what information is to be obtained from the interview process based on pre-determined research questions and conceptual frameworks (Roulston *et al.*, 2003). Second, interview questions should be phrased using clear and common language, as this potentially avoids any ambiguity or connotations about the subject matter (Cresswell, 2007). To minimise the likelihood of errors in the wording of interview questions, it has been recommended that pilot testing be used to provide the researcher with opportunities to make amendments before the actual implementation of the interviews (Kvale, 2007). Third, the selection of the interview location is made in consultation with the interviewer and participants, such that the interview setting enables participants to feel comfortable in discussing their personal insights about the topic (Herzog, 2005). The final consideration is that the selection of participants should be determined based on criteria that best meet the needs of the research (Cresswell, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Collectively, these considerations suggest that the preparation phase for an interview should be taken seriously in order to facilitate conducting the interviews.

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The second phase is to consider how to conduct the interview. Importantly, the interview has to be conducted in a manner that allows a smooth flow of the conversation. Existing studies have focused on the engagement of the interviewer and participant in in-depth discussions regarding the subject matter (Hede & Kellett, 2012; Hills & Cairncross, 2011; Munar, 2012; Park & Oh, 2012). One way to improve interviewer and participant engagement is to build rapport through the interview, as indicated previously (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2010). Rapport building requires an interviewer to be highly responsive during the interview process and to be conscious of their own actions and subjectivities (Knavik, 2006; Roulston *et al.*, 2003). It is also recommended that an interviewer avoid correcting and judging participant comments in order to build rapport (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Should there be inconsistencies in comments, the interviewer can pose secondary questions to verify participants' inputs, which are equally valuable in the construction of knowledge (Tanggard, 2009). To trigger the construction of knowledge, vignettes may also be used within the interview conversation (Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney & Neale, 2010). In reviewing these considerations for participant engagement, the interview method was pre- and pilot tested by the researcher to assess the overall flow of the conversations. Pre- and pilot testing is covered in further detail in Section 3.7.

During the interview, an interviewer is also expected to pay attention to non-verbal cues displayed by a participant (e.g., pauses and silences, folding of arms), which may suggest potential sensitivity to the topic and the need to transition to a new area of discussion (Tanggard, 2009). In addition, it has been advocated that the interviewer take notes during the interview to record prominent themes regarding the subject matter (Turner, 2010). However, others caution against the practice of note-taking, as this may distract both interviewer and participant from engaging with the subject matter (McLellan, MacQueen & Neidig, 2003).

Nonetheless, note-taking can assist with the identification of themes to be utilised at a later stage when analysing interview data. Through the pre- and pilot testing, any non-verbal cues displayed by participants were noted by the researcher in order to learn when these cues were displayed and their potential implications for the overall flow of the discussion topic. Overall, the considerations associated with the preparation and conducting of interviews, as discussed above, provide a framework to understand the needs of the interview process and equip the researcher for the adoption of interviews as a research method (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Roulston *et al.*, 2003).

3.5 Ethics

Ethics approval was sought prior to the conduct of research through the Monash University Human Ethics Office. The Human Ethics Office adheres to the guidelines and principles of conducting human research as prescribed by the Australian Government Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs). The aim of the HRECs is to ensure that all research involving humans are conducted in an ethical and responsible manner (NHMRC, 2014). As face-to-face interviews with participants were required, the researcher applied for approval to undertake the research. The University Human Research Ethics Committee gave their approval within a month of submission of the low risk ethics application. A certificate of approval, valid for five years, was provided with the project number CF11/2846 – 2011001668. The approval letter is provided in Appendix A. It was only after the receipt of the certificate of approval did the researcher then commence posting the expression of interest and recruiting participants.

3.6　Design of interview guide

The contents of the interview guide have been designed to elicit participant responses in order to address the research question, as guided by Turner (2010). The broad themes of interest to the researcher were destination choice, influence and social media as indicated in the conceptual framework (Section 2.7).

As an exploratory investigation, the interview guide was prepared in an open-ended manner, using keywords such as 'How' or 'Can you explain' to allow the probing of topics of interest (Turner, 2010). In addition, the interview guide incorporated elements of flexibility to cater to the individual nature of the interviewees' experiences. A further consideration in the preparation of the interview guide was to include the laddering technique as a tool for seeking elaboration (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005; Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007; Trocchia, Swanson & Orlitzky, 2007). Laddering provides opportunities to probe further into participant responses, especially when necessary information may not be provided during preliminary questioning (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005; Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007; Trocchia *et al.*, 2007). The laddering technique in interviews has been adopted to investigate participants' construct of decision-making (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005; Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007; Trocchia *et al.*, 2007). Laddering was developed to elicit and construct individually held assumptions of the world based on the outcomes of actual behaviour (Butt, 1995). With origins in psychology, laddering has become widely adopted within exploratory research (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). As a method to investigate consumer behaviour, laddering allows research related to influences on decision-making, particularly in eliciting how personal values become determinants of consumer decision-making (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988; Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007; Trocchia *et al.*, 2007). In interviews, the laddering technique has been

described as a guided form of questioning in an attribute-consequence-value sequence of analysis (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). In other words, a participant is probed for the underlying reasons behind an action, and these thought processes are evaluated for their relative influence (Trocchia *et al.*, 2007).

Despite the apparent benefits of laddering to probe for information, as discussed earlier, it has been argued that interviews do not necessarily evoke cognitive thought processes (Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007). In contrast, the interview can be a discursive process, where the researcher and participants discover outcomes as a result of verbal communication (Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007). Addressing the different perspectives of cognitive and discursive interview processes, two laddering techniques have been proposed: hard and soft laddering (Grunert & Grunert, 1995). Hard laddering arbitrarily develops the ordering of thought processes in a rigid manner, with the common use of 'Why?' at the start of a question (Grunert & Grunert, 1995). In contrast, soft laddering subscribes to a free-flowing approach to eliciting responses by building on topics that have emerged during the interview (Grunert & Grunert, 1995). Commonly posed questions that characterise soft laddering include phrases such as 'How else' or 'In what way'. Therefore, the choice of hard or soft laddering is dependent on the needs of the interview (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005). It has been suggested that a soft laddering technique is more suited to exploratory research, such as the research question for this investigation (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). In this respect, the laddering technique facilitates the tracking of questioning, which it is advantageous to assess in order to determine if the researcher has been consistent in interpreting data within and across interviews (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005; Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007; Trocchia *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, the researcher can identify patterns within the data in order to make further inferences (Sorensen & Askegaard, 2007). Given the

apparent benefits, the researcher adopted laddering in a flexible manner to probe participants about influences on their destination choices.

Prior to commencing each interview, the researcher alerted each participant to the ethical conduct of research, informed consent through signing the consent form, and requested permission to record the entire interview using an audio recorder. When the participant signalled their intention to commence the interview, the researcher asked the confirmation question: Have you made a destination decision in the last six months? A positive response by the participant was then followed with a subsequent question: Can you tell me about the destination you chose?

The researcher asked the preliminary question to identify the actual travel decision that sets the context for the interview. By asking this preliminary question, a participant informed the researcher of which destination was chosen, when the travel occurred or will occur in the future and with whom did the participant travelled or will travel.

Following the preliminary question, the researcher then asked the participant how the destination was chosen: Can you describe how you chose that destination?

The question about destination choice was informed by previous studies that suggest that a decision-maker usually has more than one available destination to choose from (Crompton, 1992; Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Furthermore, the choice of a particular destination has been perceived to best meet a decision-maker's travel needs (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Therefore, the researcher investigated why a participant selected a particular destination over other alternatives. As a participant shared how the destination was chosen, the researcher focused on themes that participants have raised in order to probe the destination choice process. Studies have identified several possible themes that

may arise on the topic of destination choice. These themes may include information sources, sources of influence, risks, credibility, affordability, time and purpose of travel. In this research, the researcher prompted the theme of social media to participants to investigate their engagement or non-engagement within destination decision-making and social media's corresponding influence.

Next, four questions were presented to the participant to probe the influences on their choice of a destination:

1. What were the influences on your choice of the destination?

2. Can you elaborate on the different influences on your choice of destination?

3. How did the different sources influence your destination choice?

4. In your opinion, which of the discussed influences was the most significant on your destination choice?

The questions examining influence allowed the researcher to probe as to what were the different influences on destination choice and to assess if particular sources or channels appeared more influential than others. As a destination decision may have been decided some time ago, participant responses were recorded on paper and then presented to each participant for verification. To overcome the effect that an actual holiday experience can act as a filter reinforcing the validity of some sources and deducing the influence of others, participants were repeatedly probed to assess the consistency of responses as they reflected on the relative influences on their destination choice. This allowed for further discussion as to how these influences have acted upon travel considerations, such as the selection of familiar or unfamiliar destinations or travelling alone or with the family. Participants were advised to rank each

response as to the most significant influence to the least influential agent and their answers were recorded by the researcher.

After examining the different influences on destination choice, the researcher asked, as a summary to the discussion: Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation?

This question allowed for additional inputs that may arise as an afterthought to the interview and that a participant may wish to discuss, such as the experience from this travel decision and implications for future destination decision-making.

In closing, the researcher collected the following participant demographics:

1. How often do you travel?

2. What is your age group?

3. Whom did you travel with to your chosen destination?

4. How often do you use the internet?

5. Are there any particular websites that you visit for tourism planning?

6. How far from home do you usually travel?

7. What is your preferred mode of travel (air, land (coach, car, train) or sea)?

These questions pertaining to participant demographics provided an overall view of the profiles of the destination decision-makers within this research in order to present the findings of the investigation and compare these characteristics to existing studies. The researcher concluded the interview by thanking the participant for his or her time and insights into the research.

The preparation of an interview guide provided an overall structure for the researcher to engage with participants while being equipped with the necessary tools to achieve research objectives. In this form of exploratory qualitative research, the interview guide was prepared with a high

level of flexibility so that each interview was treated according to its merit. In summary, interview questions were open-ended to enable the exploration of themes, and a soft laddering technique was employed that allows for flexibility and added depth to allow themes to emerge from within the interview conversation. Overall, the interview guide was designed to facilitate the participants in a guided manner to address the research question.

3.7   Pre- and pilot testing of interviews

Prior to the conducting of interviews, the interview guide was pre- and pilot tested to assess its clarity, scope and logistical needs (e.g., audio equipment, time taken). Both pre- and pilot testing are useful steps for enhancing the overall quality of the interview (Baker, 1994; Kvale, 2007). Each step of pre-testing and pilot testing will be discussed separately for their contributions to enhancing the interview process.

Pre-testing the interviews was conducted with two academics within the Monash University community. These two expert researchers are experienced interviewers in their respective disciplines and were approached to tap into their expertise on the interview technique. The interview guide was used in the pre-test to assess the overall flow and content of the interview. The researchers commented that the interview questions were clearly articulated and that the topic was easily understood. Two suggestions were provided to improve the interview guide. One suggestion was to provide a definition of social media for the actual interviews where needed. In the interview guide, the definition of social media was provided to inform participants as to which facets of social media were being discussed. A second suggestion was to introduce visual cues such as screenshots of social media sites during the actual interviews. Accordingly, screenshots of different social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and

forums were printed on paper and discussed during the interview when the need arose to provide visual cues. In addition, the participants raised an important consideration in that generational difference (e.g., Generation X or Y) may be an important demographic to follow up in terms of internet usage and adoption. As a result, these generational differences were noted by the researcher to assess if this was a theme that would emerge from the data and report findings, where participants may self-identify with their use or non-use of social media in destination choice.

Next, the revised interview guide was pilot tested with three destination decision-makers. The participants were selected because they were individuals who fit the profile criteria of destination decision-makers who have made a travel decision in the last six months. The pilot test was conducted under interview conditions accompanied by an audio recorder. The duration of each pilot interview ranged from 35 to 50 minutes, with questions asked using the interview guide. After the interview, each of the three participants was asked for their feedback on the interview. The participants reiterated that the interview questions were easy to understand and that it did not take significant effort to recall influences on a recent travel decision. Moreover, the participants suggested that tourism was a generally positive experience and was not likely to cause discomfort when sharing their insights during the interview. During the debrief following one of the pilot tests, a participant commented that it would be interesting to note whether the recent travel decision was assisted through social media as compared to when social media was non-existent and how social media have changed destination decision-making. The comment was noted of interest as it provided a point of distinction prior to, and when social media came to existence to investigate its influence on participants destination choice.

In summary, conducting pre- and pilot testing of the interviews allowed expert and participant opinions to enhance the overall interview structure. Furthermore, key issues in highlighting social media and participant demographics were identified as potential areas of further investigation. Overall, through pre- and pilot testing, the researcher found that the interview guide had achieved what it was set out to do, which was to address the research question. The final version of the interview guide is presented in Appendix B.

3.8   Participant recruitment and selection

This section describes how participants were recruited and selected for the research. The section begins with identification of who the target sample was for the research. Next, the criteria used to recruit potential participants are discussed. Following this, the process to recruit and select participants is described. Finally, the section summarises the number of participants selected for the research.

The identification of the most appropriate individuals is essential to answering the research question (Patton, 2002). Prompted by the lack of contextual cues within existing literature, the research sought destination decision-makers based in Melbourne, Australia who have made such a travel decision within the last six months, either domestically or internationally. This is a strength of the research, as Table 2.4 highlighted that three out of four existing studies have featured samples within the confines of a domestic tourism decision. Very little remains known about social media influence for destination choice among decision-makers contemplating a range of destinations, either domestic or international. Expanding the investigation to include participants who had chosen domestic and international destinations will provide some clarity towards conceptualisation of social media influence. As a user of social media, the researcher

anticipates that participants who utilise social media will have some engagement within the various sites related to tourism, and for social media to exert some influence on decisions, such as destination choice. However, what will be of interest are the contexts that characterise influence and when high influence occurs.

To achieve this outcome, two criteria guided the selection of appropriate participants for the research. The first criterion in being a destination decision-maker was to focus the interview on participants' ability to discuss the influences on their destination choice. The second criterion of having made a recent travel decision was to allow them to recall their experiences in destination decision-making. Within tourism literature, twelve months appears to be an acceptable timeframe in examining recent travel decisions (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Walter & Tong, 1977; Young, Ott & Feigin, 1978). For the purpose of this research, recent destination decisions that were made within the last six months to improve recollection of vacation decisions. To obtain the required sample for this research, the next step was to recruit and select appropriate participants to be interviewed (Patton, 2002; Zikmund, 2003).

For this research, both print media and social media sites were selected to call for an expression of interest regarding the research. The concurrent use of both print and social media sites allowed the researcher to obtain a wider pool of destination decision-makers who meet the necessary criteria. An example of the advertisement is presented in Appendix C. In print media, an expression of interest was placed once each in the *Berwick News,* the *Caulfield Glen Eira Leader* and the *Waverley Leader*, three local newspapers. These three newspapers were selected because these regions possessed the largest circulation and readership numbers within the City of Casey, the City of Glen Eira and the City of Monash (areas in Melbourne

geographically close to the researcher). As the chosen newspapers are freely distributed to most households and organisations, the researcher could adopt a broad approach to recruiting participants. This would allow potential participants to voluntarily be part of the research from a general population of residents within the boundaries of metropolitan Melbourne. Table 3.1 indicates a selected profile of each of the sampled regions for the study in comparison to Greater Melbourne in terms of socio-demographic indicators.

Table 3.1: Selected socio-demographic indicators of data collection sites

	City of Casey	City of Glen Eira	City of Monash	*Greater Melbourne*
Population at 30/6/14	283,415	144,059	185,037	*3,999,950*
Male	49.7%	48.7%	49.4%	*49.2%*
Female	50.3%	51.3%	50.6%	*50.8%*
Australian citizens	83.7%	82.6%	77%	*83%*
Under 18s	27.9%	21.3%	19.1%	*22.2%*
18-34 years	24.1%	24.3%	26.5%	*25.5%*
35-59 years	34.9%	34.5%	32.0%	*34.1%*
Above 60 years	13.2%	19.9%	22.6%	*18.2%*
University qualifications	12.9%	23.6%	30.0%	*23.6%*
Overseas born	34.9%	34.6%	44.7%	*31.4%*
Full-time employed	61.7%	59.4%	58%	*60.1%*
Part-time employed	30.0%	34.1%	33.8%	*32.3%*
Unemployed	5.9%	4.6%	6.2%	*5.5%*
High household income	24.0%	33.9%	29.4%	*27.3%*
Middle household income	57.4%	44.3%	46.8%	*50.2%*
Low household income	18.6%	21.7%	23.8%	*22.5%*

| Average household size | 3.01 | 2.47 | 2.70 | *2.62* |

Source: Australia Community Profile (2014)

From Table 3.1, there are some distinctive characteristics in the regions selected to recruit potential participants. For instance, the City of Monash has almost 6 percent fewer Australian citizens, more residents above 60 years old and a higher percentage of university graduates that then the average for Greater Melbourne. This may be explained by the presence of the main campus of Monash University within the region and also a nucleus of early Asian migrants to Melbourne located at one of the suburbs, Glen Waverley (City of Monash, 2015). From Table 3.1, additional features within the City of Casey suggest that the region possesses a disproportionately lower number of university educated residents and a slightly higher number of under 18s. This is because the region is one of the fastest growing regions in Melbourne, attracting residents from regional Victoria and also younger families (City of Casey, 2015). These distinctive characteristics notwithstanding, the regions provide a diverse catchment of potential participants to help address the research questions of the thesis.

On social media, there were several considerations for identifying a suitable list of potential sites for placing the expression of interest. First, these social media sites needed to provide access to destination decision-makers who were based within Melbourne, Australia. This was to ensure that face-to-face interviews could be conducted with potential participants. Second, the social media sites chosen should be directed towards discussing destination decisions rather than generic topics. This was to allow the possible selection of participants who were more likely to be deciding on a future destination decision or who had recently travelled. Third, the

selected social media sites should provide opportunities to engage with destination decision-makers across a range of demographics.

Conducting interviews with participants from a range of sites (whilst Melbourne-based), allowed for a greater scope of investigation. Guided by these considerations, the researcher sought moderator or administrator approval prior to placing the expression of interest on several social media sites. Once approval was given, an expression of interest summarising the objectives of the interview and an external web link (http://bitly.com/ZuJv1L) were published on the social media site for interested participants, asking them to provide their contact details in order for the researcher to further assess their suitability for the research. Table 3.2 illustrated the social media sites (in alphabetical order) that were utilised to place the expression of interest:

Table 3.2: Social media sites utilised to place the expression of interest

Name	Website
Aussie Travellers Forum	http://www.aussietravellersforum.com.au/forums/showthread.php?2741-Expression-of-interest-for-research-project&p=9766
Australian Explorer	http://www.australianexplorer.com/forum/stories/expression-of-interest-for-research-project.htm
CouchSurfing	https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/places/melbourne-victoria-australia#_=_
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/
Flickr	http://www.flickr.com/groups/melbourne/discuss/72157633892385552/
FlyerTalk	http://www.flyertalk.com/forum/oceania-australia-new-zealand-south-pacific/1470742-expression-interest-research-project.html
Gumtree	http://www.gumtree.com.au/s-community/c9300
Meetup	http://www.meetup.com/Melbourne-Travel-Massive/ http://www.meetup.com/Mature-Ladies-who-Love-to-Travel/
OzBargain	http://www.ozbargain.com.au/forum/38185
The Australian Frequent Flyer	http://www.australianfrequentflyer.com.au/community/media-requests/expression-of-interest-research-project-50812.html
TravelBlog	http://www.travelblog.org/Topics/33408-1.html

TravelForum	http://www.travelforum.org/general-chat-introductions/8320-expression-interest-research-project.html
Twitter	https://twitter.com/

Lonely Planet Thorn Tree Forum and TripAdvisor, two of the largest tourism-related social media sites were not utilised in this research, as consent was not given to the researcher to post the expression of interest. For Facebook, the advertisement appeared as follows in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Facebook advertisement posted over a one-month period

For Twitter, the researcher sought approval from Social Media Melbourne (http://socialmelb.com/), a casual group of social media users to publicise the expression of interest. Social Media Melbourne brings together an online community of social media users from various backgrounds, either professionals working with social media or individuals who utilise social media for leisure. On Social Media Melbourne's Twitter platform, hashtags #socialmelb and #socialmedia are commonly utilised. Hashtags may be described as social media bookmarks that enable followers who are subscribed to the online community to be kept informed of eWOM disseminated from any of its members through short messages known as 'tweets' (Chang, 2010; Small, 2011). The hashtag provided an external link for interested members to know more about the research. Furthermore, it was noted that Twitter users who

had re-tweeted the external link provided greater awareness to other users about this research.

A screenshot of the Twitter call for participants appears in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: Twitter post for expression of interest

Overall, the selection process yielded 47 interested participants through print media and 31 respondents from social media sites. A breakdown of the numbers obtained from the different sources is depicted in Table 3.3:

Table 3.3: Responses obtained from the expression of interest

Print Media	Responses	Participants Selected	Participants De-Selected
Berwick News	23	15	8
Glen Eira Leader	9	4	5
Waverley Leader	15	10	5
Sub-total	*47*	*29*	*18*
Social Media	Responses	Participants Selected	Participants De-Selected
CouchSurfing	3	1	2
Facebook	4	1	3
Gumtree	3	1	2
Meetup	5	2	3
OzBargain	6	2	4
Twitter	7	3	4
Sub-total	*28*	*10*	*18*
TOTAL	75	39	36

From the list of individuals who had responded to the advertisement, some participants were de-selected based on not meeting the criteria for the research. For instance, participants who were not decision-makers, participants under 18 years and non-English speaking participants were de-selected. In addition, others who were de-selected were either those who withdrew their interest due to work commitments and other personal reasons or individuals who were not contactable.

Sourcing potential participants using two different methods was devised to reach a broad sample of individuals appropriate to the research questions within the selected regions. The newspaper advertisement was aimed at individuals who habitually read their local newspaper, though the advertisement does not explicitly highlight the need for social media to be used and influential on destination choice. In contrast, the researcher acknowledges that the use of social media sites for recruitment may have introduced an inherent bias because participants could have social media as their top of mind consideration during the conduct of the interviews. However, this potential issue was addressed during the interview where the researcher allowed participants to narrate their destination choice experience without overtly discussing social media as a tool and influence on their decision-making. In this sense, both recruitment techniques through newspaper and social media sites provided a similar basis for comparing outcomes to address the research question.

At the end of the call for participants, 39 interviews were conducted. At this point, the researcher found no additional need to conduct further interviews, as the existing interviews appeared to have reached theoretical saturation (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). In this context, theoretical saturation occurred when the interviews no longer produced any new themes related to the research questions.

All the interviews took place in public spaces such as cafes and library meeting areas, with each session ranging from 35 minutes to an hour, although most interviews were completed within 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission to allow the researcher to review the entire conversation (McLellan *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002). The researcher also took notes of items that might be explored in areas of interest emerging from the interview. Following the completion of interviews, the researcher transcribed verbatim for data analysis (Poland, 1995).

3.9   Analysis of interviews

Researchers have advocated different qualitative data analysis techniques to allow for a deeper exploration of themes within interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Cresswell, 2007; Kvale, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Within qualitative data analysis, a commonly accepted view is that it comprises three components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each of these components will be elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

The first component is data reduction. Data reduction enables a researcher to condense large quantities of data for analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process of data reduction enabled the researcher to restructure interview contents to meet the needs of the research. In processing data reduction, it has been noted that the data are not necessarily eliminated, but have been condensed and prepared through the researcher's reflexivity and interpretive lens (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Tesch, 1990).

The second component of data analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) is data display. Data display is an iterative process that occurs during data collection and analysis. Rather than producing large quantities of extended text narratives, data display enables a researcher to identify and group data based on their similar meanings and contexts (Bradley, 1993; Faust, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In existing studies, numerous ways of data display have been proposed (Kinchin, Streatfield & Hay, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These include concept maps (Kinchin *et al.*, 2010), descriptive figures such as word clouds (McNaught & Lam, 2010), and participant quotes (McCracken, 1988). Overall, the diversity of data display formats allowed the researcher to select how data were to be presented and analysed for conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Critically, the researcher determined what data were selected for display based on their relevance to the research question.

The third component of data analysis as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) is conclusion drawing and verification. In this research, conclusion drawing and verification aimed to provide understanding around the influence of social media in destination choice and thereby address the research question. In conclusion drawing and verification, a thematic approach is undertaken to address the questions of interest (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Hoepfl, 1997; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Weston *et al.*, 2001). In this context, themes are dynamic concepts that shape behaviour and activity (Opler, 1945). The ability to identify themes is critical to qualitative data analysis because these themes serve as a tool for inductive techniques for analysing human experiences (McCormack, 2000a; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Weston *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, it is essential for raw data to be examined to identify themes that allow for the analysis and discussion of the topic under investigation.

In this research, an assessment of the rigour associated with exploratory studies can be achieved through trustworthiness when examining data, method, investigator and theory (Decrop, 1999). The attempt to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research is not to assess for accuracy as is the case with quantitative studies, but to provide a delimitation of the study and to enhance the researcher's grasp of reflexivity and analysis (Riley & Love, 2000; Walle, 1997). The notion of trustworthiness is detailed within Section 3.11.

3.10   Coding

Coding is an antecedent to identifying themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this research, codes are defined as labels attached to segments of text describing an issue (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Therefore the advantage of coding is in identifying emerging areas within the text that assist in answering the research question (Weston *et al.*, 2001). In existing studies, several methods have been proposed for coding qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For instance, coding can be applied using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Briefly, grounded theory is a method that seeks to generate theory that emerges from the findings without holding any pre-assumed concepts about the subject matter (Martin & Turner, 1986; Pandit, 1996). However, grounded theory was less suited for this research, as the conceptual framework has informed the key areas of investigation (Section 2.7). Instead, coding may be conducted through applying a template to the data (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This template comprises preliminary categories that have emerged from the literature reviewed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this research, the broad categories were destination choice, influence and social media. Following this, the researcher has applied two levels of coding to the data set, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). These two levels of coding are open and selective

coding, which have been applied and adopted across numerous qualitative studies, including social media in a tourism context (Kasavana *et al.*, 2010; Li *et al.*, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

First, open coding reviewed the transcripts for ideas and issues raised during the interviews. A subsequent step of open coding was to provide brief descriptions of these codes in order to reduce and organise the data. Although open coding allowed for the same ideas to be coded into separate categories, each category of themes should be distinctive (Jehn & Doucet, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Next, selective coding was applied. Selective coding reduces the duplication of themes and integrates outcomes into related concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). For example, the relationship between codes could exist in the form of a hierarchy or a network of ideas (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The purpose of selective coding is to facilitate the analysis of data in making inferences and to provide further elaboration about a phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An excerpt of how selective coding was applied is presented in Appendix D.

While coding is beneficial in identifying themes for the research topic, other helpful guides for analysis consideration have been presented (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; McCormack, 2000b; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). A common outcome of inductive coding is that overloading of information can occur (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This is a result of excess text being coded without necessarily identifying all appropriate categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Furthermore, the context and meaning of the participant's comments may be lost during the sorting of codes, since the transcripts have been rearranged (McCormack, 2000b). To overcome

these issues, specialised computer software such as ATLAS/ti and NVivo are available to assist with qualitative data analysis (Basit, 2003; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Thomas, 2006). On the one hand, the benefits that qualitative software brings to the researcher have been the ability to handle large quantities of text and create diagrammatic representations of transcripts for interpretation (Basit, 2003; Thomas, 2006). On the other hand, qualitative software has been criticised for being too structured and narrow in focus (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; La Pelle, 2004). It has been suggested that analysis of qualitative data should use both manual and electronic means to allow for researcher reflexivity (La Pelle, 2004). In addition to manual coding, the researcher utilised NVivo, a qualitative software program for managing interview data. The advantages of NVivo are that it is compatible with Microsoft Word, which enables the researcher to code text and create descriptive templates for qualitative data (Siccama & Penna, 2008). Collectively, these tools equipped the researcher in administering and analysing qualitative data.

In summary, the qualitative data analysis process is by no means a fixed mode, but occurs through several iterations and stages. Facilitated through two principles of open and selective coding, the researcher organised the interview transcripts in a manner suited for analysis. In addition, resources such as NVivo were utilised to provide a different perspective in the coding of themes. Overall, data interpretation was guided by the research question and an assessment of trustworthiness.

3.11   Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness relates to the ability of the researcher to present findings that have been supported and interpreted through rigorous research methods (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Roulston,

2010). In quantitative studies, trustworthiness has often been associated with ascertaining the validity, objectivity, accuracy and reliability of results (Decrop, 1999). However, applying a similar lens of trustworthiness to qualitative studies has been criticised for being too arbitrary and impractical, given the differences between positivist and constructivist research (Bradley, 1993). As compared to positivist notions of research, the concepts of validity and objectivity within constructivist research can be addressed using supported interpretations offered by the researcher (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Roulston, 2010). There have been emerging explanations as to how trustworthiness is to be applied within qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kapoulas & Mitic, 2012; Thomas, 2006). However, proponents of qualitative studies argue that trustworthiness was never meant to be a common rule, but rather a reminder of the need for researchers to be aware of the subjectivity associated with qualitative research outcomes (Cresswell, 2007; Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nonetheless, a widely accepted basis of assessing trustworthiness within qualitative research has been proposed, using four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hoepfl, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thomas, 2006). In providing a basis to ascertain the trustworthiness of qualitative research, each of these criteria is discussed in turn.

Credibility, in the context of qualitative research, assesses the ability of the researcher to present findings that best represent the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). To minimise errors of a researcher, it has been recommended that member checks are conducted to verify the accuracy of transcription (Thomas, 2006). In qualitative research, member checking is the process of providing participants with transcribed data or an interview summary for review (Manning, 1997). While member checking does not imply that credibility is assured, it reduces the likelihood of errors made by the researcher, which in turn clarifies the nature of the data presented (Bradley, 1993). In this research, the researcher conducted member

checking by sending all participants a copy of their interview transcript within a week of the interview session, asking for guidance as to the emphasis and correct interpretation of what they had contributed. Where there were inaccuracies in interpretation, the errors (if any) were highlighted by the participant and amendments were made by the researcher in the transcript for analysis.

Transferability, in qualitative terms, is the extent to which the research findings may be applied to a different context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, it is not the intent of qualitative research to make generalisations of findings (Guba, 1981; Hoepfl, 1997). Rather, transferability of the data will be informed by the interpretive lens of readers to assess if and how such findings may be applicable in a different context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton 2002). In this research, the issue of transferability was addressed by broadening the geographical regions for the recruitment of participants. Specifically, research participants were sought from within three different regions across metropolitan Melbourne, namely, the City of Casey, the City of Monash and the City of Glen Eira. The notion of transferability was addressed by the perspective that a broad pool of participants were discussing their destination decisions across a range of contexts.

In the context of qualitative studies, dependability is defined as the researcher's level of consistency in interpreting across the range of data sources (Bradley, 1993). To enhance the dependability of qualitative research, it has been proposed that an audit trail be conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within this research, an audit trail consisted of reviewed raw data, coding documents and theoretical frameworks (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). The audit trail commenced with manual open coding of themes with Microsoft Excel, which was then set aside for a week. Next, the researcher revisited theories and dominant themes from the

literature as a reflexive tool for data analysis. Subsequently, all interview transcripts were entered into NVivo and each transcript was annotated with themes prior to another attempt at coding. The codes obtained from NVivo were then compared and contrasted to the manual coding sheets before finalising the overall themes for data presentation and conclusion drawing. From reviewing the audit trail, readers can assess if the researcher's interpretation had been consistently applied throughout the data (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). The audit trail is available on request to verify the outcomes of the research.

Confirmability, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), refers to the process of evaluating whether the researcher has taken reasonable steps to interpret the data. In qualitative studies, confirmability has been identified as a key challenge, because a researcher is adopting a personal frame of reference in interpreting data (Basit, 2003; Guba, 1981). A common practice to enhance the confirmability of findings is intercoder agreement (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Intercoder agreement is the process where independent coders evaluate the contents of a message to arrive at similar interpretations of its meaning (Kurasaki, 2000; Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). The reason for implementing an intercoder agreement process is to address the concern that a single researcher may be susceptible to personal idiosyncrasies when interpreting and analysing data (Burla *et al.*, 2008; Kurasaki, 2000). In this respect, intercoder agreement has provided a useful frame to mitigate the subjectivities associated with qualitative research (Lombard *et al.*, 2002). Through intercoder agreement, the research findings appeared more trustworthy when codes have been interpreted and confirmed by other independent coders.

Given the importance of intercoder agreement to qualitative research, there exists a range of measures in calculating intercoder agreement (Kang, Kara, Laskey & Seaton, 1993). These

measures include statistical calculations such as Scotts' *Pi* (π), Krippendorff's *Alpha* (α) and percent (%) agreement (Burla *et al.*, 2008). As a measure of intercoder agreement, percent agreement is calculated based on the agreed number of codes as a percentage of the total number of codes (Lombard *et al.*, 2002). The advantage of percent agreement is the ease of calculation and its ability to accommodate a range of coders (Kang *et al.*, 1993). Despite its benefits, two drawbacks are evident in percent agreement. First, percent agreement may be biased in the nature of pre-identified codes. Second, there is a possibility that agreements could occur by chance (Burla *et al.*, 2008). Notwithstanding chance, given the exploratory nature of this research, the percent agreement measure has been chosen for the purpose of calculating intercoder agreement to enhance the confirmability of findings, as supported by previous literature (Lombard *et al.*, 2002).

It has been recommended that intercoder agreement should be applied initially to the first few transcripts to assess whether the data has been reasonably interpreted as a checking mechanism for final codes (Kurasaki, 2000). The researcher consulted with two qualitative research experts within the university to independently code a list of forty quotes from each interview into pre-defined themes. A sample of the codes adopted for the research is provided in Appendix E. In this research, intercoder agreement was applied to the first six interview transcripts collated in the preliminary weeks of conducting the interviews. The results of the intercoder agreement are as follows:

	Researcher and Expert A	Researcher and Expert B
Number of quotes from each interview	40	40
Number of codes agreed with researcher	33	35
Percent agreement	82.5%	87.5%

Between the researcher and expert A, the percent agreement was at 82 percent, where expert A felt that a glossary of terms and their definitions would have increased the percent agreement scores. Taking this feedback in account, the researcher presented researcher B with the list of quotes as well as a glossary of terms and definitions for coding. The percent agreement scores between the researcher and Expert B was recorded at 87.5 percent. In discussing the coding disagreements with the researcher, Expert B felt that the themes could be categorised across multiple codes, though Expert B acknowledged that the pre-defined themes derived from the conceptual framework should provide a useful basis for further analysis. The comments from Expert B were noted and the researcher continued to calibrate codes in an iterative process for the entire set of interview transcripts (McLellan *et al.*, 2003). With both experts, the researcher found general agreement on most codes except for the few codes that have been derived from previous literature. The percent agreement scores recorded above 80 percent has been argued to form an acceptable basis for continuing with the research (Lombard *et al.*, 2002). To address the disagreement found between the researcher and Experts A and B during initial coding, the researcher modified these codes before re-administering a subsequent inter-coder test with the entire set of interview transcripts to review and reflect the coding interpretations in order to guide the analysis of interview contents. Additionally, the researcher incorporated a longer quote of participants' comments in sentences and mini-paragraphs to provide the context and background as evidence of thick description. Essentially, thick description provides a stronger basis for interpreting qualitative interview findings in order to understand participant experiences and meaning-making (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Firestone, 1993; Ponterotto, 2006).

Overall, the adoption of strategies by the researcher in addressing the considerations of trustworthiness had provided a basis for ensuring that academic rigor has been employed in the

management of data. In addressing credibility, the use of member checking allowed participants to review the interpretations of the researcher in transcribing the interviews. In addressing transferability, recruitment of a broad pool of participants allowed for further examination of themes in various destination decision-making settings. To address dependability, the audit trail adopted by the researcher presents reflexive processes describing the manner in which data is reviewed and consolidated. Finally, incorporating intercoder agreement and thick description increased the basis of enhancing confirmability of findings.

3.12   Chapter conclusion

In summary, this chapter described the research methodology adopted to answer the research question. The chapter outlined the researcher's ontological view of constructionism in situating this research. Aligned with a constructivist framework, the researcher's worldview is that individuals construct meaning of their experiences through a cognitive process. Using the constructivist framework, the researcher aimed to explore the influence of social media on destination choice, which is the overarching research question of interest.

The exploratory nature of this research justified undertaking qualitative research. The form of qualitative research that has been assessed as being most suited for this research is that of the semi-structured depth interview. While acknowledging that there are criticisms of the interview method, the interview best meets the criteria in allowing probing of answers and exploring the influences in destination choice. The chapter noted three key stages of the interview process: the interview preparation, conducting the interview and analysis of interview data. Following this, literature on the interview method was presented to provide an overall view as to how other studies have developed this technique and the coding of qualitative data. Trustworthiness

of the research was then discussed through the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and transferability. By engaging with the criteria of trustworthiness, the researcher had illustrated the rigour of the research method for the investigation. Collectively, these considerations provided further evidence of the suitability of the chosen research method. From the discussion about research methods, the chapter illustrated the research design that has been employed for the purpose of this research. Overall, this chapter provided the justification of a qualitative research method to answer the research question.

Chapter 4.   Findings and Discussion

A review of the literature has shown that different agents are concurrently exerting their influence on destination choice (Section 2.4), where each of these can possess varying levels of influence. Building on the current scope of literature (Section 2.7 Conceptual framework), the findings and discussion chapter will present and discuss findings to address the research questions:

Main –

What are the contextual factors characterising the various levels of social media influence in destination decisions?

Secondary -

- What is the comparative influence of social media compared to other agents?

- What is the relative influence of social media sites?

- Is influence related to decision-maker or decision characteristics?

The findings and discussion chapter will be structured to synthesise the reported levels of social media influence characterised by the participants' different contexts for destination decisions. To facilitate the flow of the discussion, a structure of the chapter is provided. Section 4.1 provides an overview of destination decision contexts. Next, Section 4.2 analyses factors related to social media non-use. A discussion of the destination choice context where social media exerts no influence whatsoever can then allow the focus of the research to understand conditions where social media has an influence, as per the primary research focus. Following this, Section 4.3 discusses the use of social media and elucidates its relevance to the information search and evaluation process to better understand its influence in destination decisions. Section 4.4 then investigates how social media credibility has been assessed. Section 4.5 will

discuss the contextual factors that appear to characterise high levels of social media influence. In Section 4.6, the factors related to moderate levels of social media influence will be reported. Thereafter, Section 4.7 will review factors leading to low levels of social media influence. Finally, Section 4.8 summarises the outcomes of the chapter.

4.1   Overview of destination decision contexts

An overview of destination decision contexts is presented in Table 4.1. These contexts for participants' destination choice allow a more nuanced understanding of the findings. Table 4.1 lists participants in the sequence of conducting the interviews. Having assigned a pseudonym to each participant, the next four columns in the table are participant demographics of gender, age, occupation and marital status. Identification of these demographics allows the researcher to compare whether such variables are a discriminant of social media influence in destination choice, which other studies have alluded to (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2011; Shreekala & Hemamalini, 2013). Additionally, Table 4.1 showcased the destination contexts chosen by participants, whether they were first or repeat visitors and number of travelling companions. The researcher noted these aspects of the destination choice because the existing literature does not discuss decision-making contexts in detail, yet it seems likely that these contexts are important to understand potential influences on destination choice.

Table 4.1: Participants' context for destination choice

No.	Name*	Gender	Age group	Occupation	Marital status	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Travelling companions
1	Thomas	Male	51-60	Retiree	Married	Singapore	Repeat	Family
2	Moses	Male	41-50	IT programmer	Married	Sri Lanka and Singapore	Repeat	Family
3	Joseph	Male	31-40	Sales manager	Married	Phuket (Thailand)	First	Family
4	Suzie	Female	51-60	Housewife	Widowed	Fiji	Repeat	Daughter
5	Terry	Male	41-50	Engineer	Married	Kota Kinabalu (Malaysia)	Repeat	Family
6	Alastair	Male	21-30	Food consultant	Not married	Apollo Bay (Australia)	First	None
7	Lionel	Male	41-50	Unemployed	Married	Gold Coast (Australia) and Taiwan	Repeat	Family
8	Iris	Female	41-50	Music teacher	Married	Warrnambool (Australia)	First	Family
9	Jonah	Male	31-40	Self employed	Married	Sydney (Australia)	Repeat	Family
10	Jacob	Male	41-50	Unemployed	Married	Netherlands	Repeat	Wife
11	Martha	Female	41-50	Waste management supervisor	Married	Bright (Australia)	First	Husband
12	Priscilla	Female	51-60	Housewife	Married	New South Wales (Australia)	First	Husband
13	Gary	Male	51-60	Self employed	Married	Norfolk Island (Australia)	First	Wife
14	Claudia	Female	41-50	Educator	Divorced	South Africa	Repeat	Family
15	Dorothy	Female	21-30	Unemployed	Married	Adelaide (Australia)	First	Husband
16	Eric	Male	61-70	Self employed	Married	New Zealand	First	Family
17	Gordon	Male	31-40	Software engineer	Married	Gold Coast (Australia)	First	Family
18	Donna	Female	51-60	Healthcare professional	Not married	Tanzania	First	None
19	Grace	Female	61-70	Housewife	Married	Eastern Europe	First	Husband
20	Andy	Male	41-50	Project manager	Married	Singapore	First	Family
21	Eddie	Male	21-30	Dental assistant	Not married	Ballarat (Australia)	First	Partner
22	Norman	Male	31-40	Unemployed	Married	New Zealand	First	Wife

No.	Name*	Gender	Age group	Occupation	Marital status	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Travelling companions
23	Colleen	Female	31-40	Finance Officer	Married	Israel	First	Husband
24	Linda	Female	31-40	Housewife	Married	Lorne (Australia)	First	Family
25	Peter	Male	41-50	Research analyst	Married	Ballarat (Australia)	First	Family
26	Lynn	Female	31-40	Housewife	Married	Fiji	Repeat	Family
27	Jemima	Female	21-30	Researcher	Not married	Adelaide (Australia)	Repeat	Family
28	George	Male	51-60	Self-employed	Not married	South Korea	Repeat	Friend
29	Phil	Male	61-70	Self-employed	Married	Round the world trip	First	Wife
30	Keith	Male	51-60	IT professional	Not married	Balearic Islands (Spain)	First	None
31	Melissa	Female	51-60	Senior manager in telecommunications	Married	Vietnam Morocco and Tanzania	First First	Friends Family
32	Evangeline	Female	21-30	Social media analyst	Married	USA	First	Husband
33	Kristie	Female	31-40	Social media analyst	Not married	Hobart (Australia) Jervis Bay (Australia)	Repeat First	Friend Partner
34	Esther	Female	21-30	Administrative officer	Not married	Botswana, Namibia, Qatar, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia	First	Partner
35	Kylie	Female	31-40	Self employed	Separated	Cambodia and Vietnam	First	Friend
36	Margaret	Female	61-70	Retired	Married	USA	First	None
37	Eliza	Female	21-30	Actress	Not married	Round the world trip	First	Friends but occasionally alone
38	Mark	Male	21-30	IT consultant	Not married	Canberra and Queensland (Australia) Vietnam	First First	Friends Friends

No.	Name*	Gender	Age group	Occupation	Marital status	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Travelling companions
						New Zealand	First	Friends
39	Anthony	Male	51-60	Market consultant	Not married	England	Repeat	None
						Dubai (United Arab Emirates) and Turkey	First	None
						Cambodia and Vietnam	First	Friends, but occasionally alone

* Pseudonym assigned to each participant

There is an almost even distribution across gender (20 male and 19 female). Diversity of age groups and occupations existed across the data set. In terms of marital status, the majority of participants were married. They chose destinations all over the world, though some participants discussed more than one decision that occurred in the last six months. Thirteen narratives related to repeat visitations, while 32 narratives were associated with first time visits to a destination. Six of the trips were undertaken as a single traveller, with the remainder involving at least one other companion. Having gleaned some brief insights to the pool of participants, the remainder of the chapter will analyse:

- Factors characterising social media non-use

- The corresponding influence of social media in destination choice in comparison with other agents of influence

- The relative influence among the social media sites employed

- How social media influence features across the interactive roles of destination, decision and decision-maker characteristics

4.2   Factors characterising social media non-use

For any social media influence to occur, social media must first be utilised. This is because no influence will occur if social media are not utilised. Table 4.2 illustrates four participants who did not employ social media over the course of their vacation planning. The first column on recruitment source refers to the site where each participant located the research and contacted the researcher to be part of the project. The next column on destination choice are the places that the participants had selected to visit, while the subsequent column features some of the decision characteristics surrounding the destination selected. The final column identifies other agents that were highlighted by participants to have an influence on their destination selected.

Table 4.2: Non-users of social media and their destination choice contexts

Participant	Recruitment source	Destination choice	First or repeat visit	Trip characteristics	Level of social media engagement	Other agents of influence
Gary	Newspaper	Norfolk Island	First	• Decision triggered by advertisement on travel magazine • Travelled with wife	None	WOM
Colleen	Newspaper	Israel	First	• Decision prompted by religious affiliation • Missed out on a similar trip a few years ago • Travelled with husband	None	Advertisements
George	Newspaper	South Korea	Repeat	• Decision made for VFR reasons • Vacation planned just a month prior to departure • Independent traveller	None	Lonely Planet guide books
Margaret	Social media	USA	First	• Decision on the basis of exploring the world • Independent traveller	Meetup participant	WOM

In this research, four participants, namely George, Colleen, Gary and Margaret stated that they did not use social media for their vacation planning. From Table 4.2, each of the destination choice contexts provide some explanation as to the non-use of social media.

An interesting observation from Table 4.2 appears from within the recruitment source. As this section is a discussion surrounding social media non-influence, it is peculiar that one of the participants, Margaret, responded to taking part in this research having come across the expression of interest within a social media site, Meetup. Meetups are a unique type of social media in the sense that the online communities actually organise real-life meetups, hence its name (Sessions, 2010). Hence, it was anticipated that being part of a group that attract individuals with similar interests would somewhat influence Margaret in terms of the decision to visit the USA. However, she further reiterated that despite her engagement on Meetup, Margaret did not employ social media towards the selection of the USA. Margaret explained her circumstances:

> "*I joined these Meetup groups since October last year to get out and about and find new people.* For instance, o*n the weekend before I went to Mount Baw Baw with cross country skiing people I met on Meetup. I found that the youth hostel people are more like me. They are less likely wanting to go to the three star hotel and more likely to want to rough it in a chalet that suits me.*"

Hence, it may be the case that Margaret has a very specific reason for engaging on the Meetup groups as a tool for socialisation within proximity of her home environment. The decision to visit the USA was instead made on the basis of word of mouth, which she articulates: "*I have a friend who lives in Indiana. She asked me all the time that if I went to America to go and see her, and recommended me places like NASA that she knew I would like.*"

Yet, Margaret acknowledged the growing impact her engagement on Meetup has on her recent travel decisions. She added that "*What I find is that because I am an older person and by myself, I don't have anyone to travel with. So that was an idea to meetup with the mature ladies who wished to travel. The Meetup group of mature ladies, they are talking about going to Antarctica and that is a nice idea…Unless those mature ladies say, look there's friend and who will take us on Antarctica on a boat for a reasonable sum of money, I'll be there.*" This quote show that there are some indicators that increasing engagements on social media can lead to more influence on destination choice, and hence alter a decision-maker's travel preferences accordingly.

The rest of this section will discuss reasons as to why social media formed no part for the remaining three participants' destination choices. Two main reasons emerged that may be used to explain why social media was excluded from the destination choice of these participants. These were negative attitudes towards social media; and destination choices requiring very little planning. Each of these reasons will be analysed subsequently.

The presence of negative attitudes towards social media resulted in its non-use. For instance, Gary commented, "*I don't like the internet and social media. I rather find things myself than forms of advertising.*" The quote raises an interesting view of how advertising is perceived by destination decision-makers as Gary's choice of Norfolk Island was through a paid advertisement within a travel magazine. In this case, he seemed biased towards advertising by tour operators or travel agencies, yet more receptive to apparently "independent" reports produced within travel magazines. The work of Gartner (1993) offers some explanation to the distinctive appreciation of travel advertising. According to Gartner (1993), traditional advertising are a form of *Overt Induced I* agents characterising lower credibility levels in

comparison to featured editorial sections within travel magazines as *Covert Induced II* agents with slightly higher credibility.

Margaret echoed a similar sentiment, though she revealed that her negativity towards social media was more for the fear of getting her computer infected by viruses from social media sites. Margaret explained, "*I am paranoid that any YouTube video will have a virus…*" Hence, Margaret appeared to be very selective of her social media engagement to include Meetup, but not YouTube or other file sharing sites. Such a position in framing the benefits of some social media sites over others has resulted in greater adoption of her Meetup groups. This distinctive characteristic demonstrates that some social media users have a clear appreciation of their roles and expectations of social media, and one that should be further scrutinised for participants who employ social media for their destination choices. In tourism literature, social media non-use has been attributed to the lack of user experience (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011), antagonistic narratives (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2012) or lacking in perceived credibility (Davies & Cairncross, 2013). The findings provide other factors to show why social media non-use could occur, including negative attitudes to technology or fear of viruses. Yet, the narratives of Margaret and Gary reflect some contradictions in responses, further highlighting that tourism decisions, such as destination choice, may invoke inconsistent behaviour due to other cognitive forces weighing in on the decision (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014; Martin & Woodside, 2012).

Another factor shaping negative attitudes to social media was technological saturation. Elaborating on this, George stated, "*I don't like spending a lot of time on computers as I used to work in IT so I've had enough of sitting in front of computers.*" This exemplar show that different factors can give rise to negative attitudes, where participants exhibiting such characteristics are likely to shun social media in favour of other agents of influence in their

destination choice. In George's case, technology saturation suggested his willingness to detach from any form of online engagement, which would thereby exclude social media. For this reason, decision-makers that feel similar sentiments may also exhibit no social media use in destination choice. These circumstances will characterise no social media influence whatsoever. Technology avoidance or detox, has been highlighted to be a tension within developed societies where smartphones and other digital devices proliferate (Park, Fritz & Jex, 2011). Hence, while there may be other destination decision-makers like George who desire to disengage from technology, there are others who are less unwilling to give up access to the digital space for fear of missing out on work and other personal interests, such as on social media (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). This notion of technological detachment will be analysed further in the chapter when discussing the role of social media influence by other participants in comparison with complementary or competing agents of influence.

Destination choice that features low involvement with the vacation plans can also result in social media non-use. Colleen, in sharing insights about her decision to Israel, showed that a decision to go with an all-inclusive tour package was not the result of social media. According to Colleen, "*My husband and I really wanted to go sort of like a spiritual experience than a holiday destination…Sometime last year, I saw an advertisement in Word For Today and United Christian Broadcasting which resurrected our interest with a team going to Israel… We already missed an opportunity to visit Israel previously and we didn't want to miss another opportunity.*" From her comments, the decision to go to Israel appeared a straightforward decision. Her decision to choose Israel was based on religious beliefs, and that she intended to visit sites related to Christianity. Colleen stated that social media was not used for this decision to select Israel. Instead, other considerations were more instrumental, as she revealed: "*We realised it wouldn't have been difficult as we were a team from a church and church doing it*

as a group rather than individuals trying to go by themselves would make a big difference. As the church was taking a team on a pilgrimage on a group visa, we were convinced of our decision to go as the major travel complications have been removed." As her narrative reveals, Colleen's destination decision was validated due to the confidence that the complexity of the travel plans were left to the responsibility of a group who are experienced in taking others to Israel. The removal of constraints to the vacation planning process resulted in a positive evaluation of Israel as a highly available destination, which reduced the need for Colleen to further conduct information search on her own. For this reason, she perceived social media to be of no use to this particular decision. However, she opined that social media will be used for other destination decisions: "*For other trips I would use social media. Because as an independent traveller you have more time to see what interests you whereas in a group you have to adhere to others and the trip is not so flexible.*"

Due to social media non-use, in the most part, the findings demonstrated that social media had no influence on these four participants' destination choice. These circumstances expand on the notion of perceived value as an antecedent to influence within the conceptual framework. Decision-makers who do not consider social media advantageous to their information search and evaluation will not engage with it. Now, attention will instead shift to the other 35 participants, all of whom utilised social media for their destination choice. Their insights will be examined to understand their decision-making contexts and any corresponding social media influence.

4.3   Social media use

The purpose of this section is to analyse participants' social media use relating to their destination choice. There are two specific aims of this section. First, the section aims to uncover which social media sites were employed for destination decisions, and whether usage patterns correspond to relative influence levels. This serves to address a gap in knowledge identified in the literature review, as most studies to date have focused on single social media sites as the unit of analysis (Melian-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2013; Poyry *et al.*, 2013; Wolfe, Phillips & Asperin, 2014). Second, the section aims to tease out how participants assessed social media credibility. This is because literature has suggested that social media raises credibility concerns dues to the ease of disseminating information from relatively unknown sources (Llamero, 2014; Santos, 2011; Scott & Orlikowski, 2012). Knowing how social media credibility is assessed can assist with a better conceptualisation of influence across different types of destination decisions.

4.3.1   Participants' use of social media sites

This section discusses participants' use of social media sites. It identifies various sites that are employed for destination choice, and highlights reasons for their use. The rationale of this section is to establish the distinctive forms of social media engagement so that a more nuanced understanding can be established as to how the variety of social media sites available to any user may influence the destination decision. This section highlights the heterogeneous nature of social media engagements through collating the social media sites utilised, discussing reasons for their use, and analysing their roles in influencing destination choice.

Table 4.3 illustrates participants' use of social media sites and the frequency of use for destination decisions.

Table 4.3: Social media sites used and frequency count

Social media sites	Total
Forums: TripAdvisor (9) CruiseCritic (1) Lonely Planet Thorn Tree (1) Others (9)	20
Social networking sites: Facebook (10) CouchSurfing (1) MeetUp (2)	13
Reviews on intermediaries: Accommodation reservation websites (9) Urbanspoon (1)	10
Blogs	4
Twitter	4
File-sharing: YouTube (2) Instagram (1)	3
News feeds: Reddit (1) WikiTravel (1)	2

Some notable observations in Table 4.3 are that the most frequently employed type of social media site are forums such as TripAdvisor. The second most cited type of social media utilised are social networking sites, for example Facebook. The third most utilised social media site are reviews on online intermediaries, which offer reservation services related to accommodation.

The findings are similar to the study by McCarthy, Stock and Verma (2010), in that forums are one of the most popular type of social media sites within tourism. However, the findings show some points of differences as compared to other studies. Some studies have suggested that Facebook is the preferred social media site of use amongst decision-makers (Bakr & Ali, 2013; Shreekala & Hemamalini, 2013). However, this was not the case for the participants in discussing their destination choices. Some participants provided some clarity as to why their patterns of use differed. In defending the use of Facebook, Anthony stated that "*I am a big*

Facebook user because I am a migrant and so a lot of my relatives live overseas and that is a great way of keeping in contact with people…I don't consider Facebook to be an expert in tourism matters." Like many others, his comments reiterate that participants have a clear appreciation of the purpose of social media sites when engaging concurrently with different types of social media. Facebook, as a social networking site, is perceived to be for the primary purpose of developing relationships (Tosun, 2012). For this reason, many participants' interactions on Facebook are geared towards such outcomes. Similar sentiments are shared by Phil, who articulated that "*Facebook seems to me more about an individual and their life rather than what I am interested in which is a destination.*" However, almost a third of the participants identified that social network sites such as Facebook were instrumental to their choice of a destination. Hence, while the findings may suggest that Facebook is not a site that provides expertise in tourism matters, some participants are nonetheless influenced because of knowing the identities of the content provider.

The research also found that the use of forums was relatively common for other non-tourism decisions. For instance, Eddie expressed that "*Say if I buy a TV, I will read a lot of reviews. And I go into those shops and ask the person selling the TV to demonstrate and tell them what I think before making my decision.*" Similarly, the use of reviews for other household purchases was also reiterated by Lynn: "*Reviews? I actually like them. Like if I wanted to buy a steam mop, I actually read them. I would use reviews quite a bit.*" However, Lynn indicated that the decision to visit Fiji was somewhat different, where there was less reliance on reviews because of the prior experience of having been to the destination: "*I didn't actually check reviews for Fiji because we had been there.*" This view was likewise shared by Suzie: "*I did not consult with TripAdvisor with Fiji as we were there the year before.*" The findings show that reviews can be utilised across a myriad of purchase decisions. However, the perceived value of social

media is reduced significantly when the destination is familiar to a decision-maker, who can then base his or her decision on previous experiences.

As such, the outcomes of this research indicate that the patterns of social media use are reflected in a contextual exposure to social media contents, as suggested by Gretzel *et al.* (2008). The findings suggest that social media use for destination choice is perhaps related to the perceived usefulness of social media, as espoused by Evangeline: "*Forums like Redit and Something Awful where you can probably talk to people who live in that area about their culture and what there was to do coming from a tourist perspective really helped shaped the itinerary to confirm which states we would visit and how long we would stay there…*" Such outcomes may perhaps give further support for the application of the Technology Adoption Model (TAM) proposed by Davis (1989) in a social media context. Participants who identify specific types of social media to be of greater use in a tourism setting are more likely to employ these sites for destination choice. However, whilst such outcomes are somewhat useful to know, corresponding influence levels revealed a contrasting trend.

4.3.2   Relative influence among social media sites

The aim of this section is to examine if social media sites differ in terms of their influence levels for destination choice. Such an investigation is in response to the call by Kusumasondjaja *et al.* (2012) to assess if different levels of social media influence exist, and if so, in what manner for tourism decisions, such as destination choice. To achieve this aim, the findings are structured on the basis of types of social media employed for destination choice, and how they ascertain the relative influence of social media sites for their respective decisions.

A snapshot of participants' classifications of high, moderate and low influence is provided in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Exemplars of high, moderate and low social media influence

High influence	Moderate influence	Low influence
Social media were the primary influence on the destination decision	**Social media informed and were a secondary influence on the destination decision**	**Social media were used, but were not a main influence on the destination decision**
"We didn't know any friends who had been to Vietnam and TripAdvisor was the main influence for us." (Mark)	*"We decided on Phuket eventually because of the food and just value for money. Forums did help somewhat…"* (Joseph)	*"I don't think I am influenced so much by others' comments on social media, especially to the major decisions as to where to visit."* (Moses)
"Forums really helped shaped the itinerary to confirm which states we would visit and how long we would stay there." (Evangeline)	*"Basically I think about where I want to go…influenced by how far I can drive in a day and where I would stay for the night. Then I base it on TripAdvisor to make my final decision as to where these stops are."* (Jonah)	*"For choice of destination, social media are maybe very slightly influential."* (Jemima)
"Over Easter, we drove to Jervis Bay and that was purely based on an Instagram photo that I saw." (Kristie)	*"Because I use the internet a lot so if people are talking about something in social media then it will pick my interest to visit the destination."* (Dorothy)	*"Social media have a little bit of influence. I am lucky that I do know the area and I have people who have probably been there before that I can actually ask."* (Claudia)

The classification within Table 4.4 hints that a continuum of social media influence on destination choice exists. However, the key point to note is that destination choice is highly contextual and that these contexts matter in any discussion of social media influence. Conceptualising social media across a continuum of high to low influence follows the assertions of Weaver (2005) in mapping tourists across a continuum. While his work concerns the fields of ecotourism, Weaver (2005) emphasised that pinpointing a particular position on a continuum is certainly contextualised. The continuum emphasises the integral role of

contextualising destination choice locating social media influence. Each consideration pertaining to the decision-maker, destination or trip characteristics should not be utilised as a single factor to characterise influence, but must be framed based on a specific destination decision. As such, a decision-maker's past or future decisions may be located at different points along the continuum depending on the specific characteristics of a given decision.

Building on the outcomes from the previous section, Table 4.5 illustrates the pool of participants' use of social media sites for their respective destination choices and the relative influence ascribed to the decision context. The aim of discussing the outcomes from Table 4.5 is to answer the secondary research question investigating the relative influences of social media sites on destination decisions.

Table 4.5: Participants' use and indicative influence of social media for destination choice

No.	Name	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Forums	Social networking sites (SNS)	Reviews on intermediaries (RoI)	Blogs	Twitter	File sharing sites (FS)	News feeds (NF)	Relative influence
1	Thomas	Singapore	Repeat			✓					1. RoI
2	Moses	Sri Lanka and Singapore	Repeat		✓						1. SNS
3	Joseph	Phuket (Thailand)	First		✓						1. SNS
4	Suzie	Fiji	Repeat	✓							1. Forums
5	Terry	Kota Kinabalu (Malaysia)	Repeat	✓							1. Forums
6	Alastair	Apollo Bay (Australia)	First		✓			✓		✓	1. NF 2. Twitter 3. SNS
7	Lionel	Gold Coast (Australia) and Taiwan	Repeat			✓					1. RoI
8	Iris	Warrnambool (Australia)	First	✓	✓						1. SNS 2. Forums
9	Jonah	Sydney (Australia)	Repeat	✓							1. Forums
10	Jacob	Netherlands	Repeat		✓						1. SNS
11	Martha	Bright (Australia)	First	✓							1. RoI
12	Priscilla	New South Wales (Australia)	First	✓							1. Forums
13	Claudia	South Africa	Repeat		✓						1. SNS
14	Dorothy	Adelaide (Australia)	First		✓		✓				1. SNS 2. Blogs
15	Eric	New Zealand	First	✓							1. Forums

No.	Name	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Forums	Social networking sites (SNS)	Reviews on intermediaries (RoI)	Blogs	Twitter	File sharing sites (FS)	News feeds (NF)	Relative influence
16	Gordon	Gold Coast (Australia)	First			✓					1. RoI
17	Donna	Tanzania	First	✓							1. Forums
18	Grace	Eastern Europe	First			✓					1. RoI
19	Andy	Singapore	First	✓							1. Forums
20	Eddie	Ballarat (Australia)	First	✓							1. Forums
21	Norman	New Zealand	First			✓					1. RoI
22	Linda	Lorne (Australia)	First			✓					1. RoI
23	Peter	Ballarat (Australia)	First			✓					1. RoI
24	Lynn	Fiji	Repeat	✓							1. Forums
25	Jemima	Adelaide (Australia)	Repeat			✓					1. RoI
26	Phil	Round the world trip	First	✓					✓		1. Forums 2. FS
27	Keith	Balearic Islands (Spain)	First	✓			✓				1. Forums 2. Blogs
28	Melissa	Vietnam Morocco and Tanzania	First First	✓	✓						1. SNS 1. Forums
29	Evangeline	USA	First	✓	✓			✓			1. Forums 2. SNS 3. Twitter
30	Kristie	Hobart (Australia)	Repeat		✓		✓				1. Blogs 2. SNS
		Jervis Bay (Australia)	First						✓		1. FS

No.	Name	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Forums	Social networking sites (SNS)	Reviews on intermediaries (RoI)	Blogs	Twitter	File sharing sites (FS)	News feeds (NF)	Relative influence
31	Esther	Botswana, Namibia, Qatar, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia	First	✓	✓			✓			1. Forums 2. SNS 3. Twitter
32	Kylie	Cambodia and Vietnam	First				✓				1. Blogs
33	Eliza	Round the world trip	First	✓	✓						1. SNS 2. Forums
34	Mark	Canberra and Queensland (Australia)	First		✓			✓			1. SNS 2. Twitter
		Vietnam	First	✓					✓		1. Forums 2. FS
		New Zealand	First			✓					1. RoI
35	Anthony	England	Repeat			✓					1. RoI
		Dubai (United Arab Emirates) and Turkey	First	✓	✓						1. SNS 2. Forums
		Cambodia and Vietnam	First	✓						✓	1. Forums 2. NF
TOTAL				**20**	**13**	**10**	**4**	**4**	**3**	**2**	

Some notable observations may be made from the results listed in Table 4.5. First, 28 destination decisions featured only one social media site. Furthermore, 11 of the featured destination decisions highlighted the role of social media use within intermediary sites. The use of social media in this instance, was gleaned at the point of booking accommodation where reviews are made available for use within online sites such as Wotif or Expedia. For instance, Peter mentioned that "*The place in Bright, that sort of unit we stayed in – it had a lot of good reviews and people were very satisfied at staying there. So we decided that was worth paying a bit more to stay at a place like that.*" The use of social media for accommodation choices is also supported by Lionel: "*We read that certain beaches are very crowded. Only some of those private beaches on the northern side are quieter and the scenery better. We followed their advice and booked our accommodation along these beaches.*" This suggests that such participants used social media to assist with their micro-level decisions.

However, nine other participants were content with perusal of forums as the sole social media site for their destination decisions. These participants were instead more focused on obtaining a wide spread of insights so as to ascertain the desirability of a destination to realise vacation experiences, as Eric indicated: "*Because this was our first cruise experience, we found a diversity of other people's experiences on Cruise Critic, noting those especially on the Dawn Princess or the New Zealand itineraries. Because of this diversity, we had to base what the cruise offered with what we wanted out of this travel experience.*" Eddie likewise concurred that reviews provided a good spread of information to generate greater destination image familiarity and complexity, which increased the positive disposition towards a destination: "*We read most of the reviews, though some people say there are not many animals there but we wanted to touch animals so we weren't bothered by those negative comments as long as we could touch those animals.*" These comments show the value social media bring to the

destination decision when participants can trawl for relevant information easily to validate the selection of a destination, as well as reducing possible dissonance. However, the comments also reveal that participants already possessed positive destination images and had pre-selected their destination of choice. Thus, rather than being an influence on the destination decision, social media becomes a tool to validate that destination decision.

Five other participants stated that social networking sites was the sole social media site used to the destination decision in addition to other non-social media agents. Their reliance on social networking sites, in particular Facebook, was attributed to knowing where the social media contents originated. Moses best describes such a perception: "*The reason that I trusted the advice is not because of Facebook but because of my knowledge of who that person is.*" As a type of social networking site where source identities are often known among users, Facebook can allow participants to ascertain source identities in order to establish credibility. As source identities are a vital way to establish credibility, it is perhaps unsurprising that Facebook was identified to be most influential across the different social media sites. This outcome is consistent with Lee and Paris (2013) who found Facebook to be a channel that facilitates relational trust to exert influence.

Simms (2012) postulated that decision-makers are more likely to be influenced by social media for unfamiliar, and probably international destinations. However, there appears to be very little correlation between the type of social media site and familiarity with the chosen destination. For instance, seven participants who utilised reviews on intermediaries were visiting their destinations for the first time, with the four remaining others employing these sites for repeat visits. Likewise, five of the participants used only forums for first time visits while four others

engaged them for repeat visits. This outcome reveals that the past destination experience alone does not fully account for the distinctive use of social media tin destination choice.

This research does not provide any evidence for Simms' (2012) claim that unfamiliar destinations are likely to require greater social media use. This is because it appears that participants have utilised social media in a highly personalised manner, which suggests that usage patterns are more likely to be related to perceived relevance, rather than destination familiarity. Such an outcome is aligned more to the work of Thebault *et al.* (2013) who posited that social media use should be understood in terms of their usefulness towards destination decisions. This point raises an interesting perspective that commonly used sites should not be interpreted as also influential in destination decisions. Knowing about these distinctions has helped to unpack the understanding as to how social media influence should be conceptualised on the basis of perceived relevance, rather than destination characteristics as reported within extant literature.

Having identified that participants who employ just one type of social media site are more likely to do so because of perceived relevance to vacation planning, the research will now turn to focus on participants who employ two or more different social media sites concurrently for their destination choice. The aim of this discussion is to elucidate how the relative influence of social media is to be unpacked when more than one site is utilised for destination decisions. Among these, 11 decisions were made with the use of two social media sites, while two other decisions involved three social media sites.

Six participants identified that forums were the most influential type of social media site when used in conjunction with other social media. For Alastair, the use of forums was attributed to

gleaning insights from locals about the destination culture: "*Some locals tell me to go see festivals on Chapel Street and Lygon Street for Thai food just small things like that.*" In contrast, Esther's propensity to use forums over other social media sites is due to greater perceived honesty of comments: "*Whereas a recommendation on a forum or TripAdvisor, it is less likely to be as biased, I hope anyway…I tend to think that anonymous people that I don't know are being truthful in their opinions – whether they are is unknown but I tend to think they are being honest.*" Another participant, Phil emphasised the benefits of forums in providing a rich pool of information so as to obtain specific inputs to assist with his decision-making: "*For the Maldives, I also used TripAdvisor to choose which underwater camera to buy.*"

Evidently, participants who emphasise the value of forums see the benefits of obtaining a multiplicity of insights to help with their destination choices. This outcome is similar to the work of Hwang *et al.* (2013) to further their knowledge about a destination. However, Hwang *et al.* (2013) confined their focus to just the sole use of forums. As such, this research extends the authors' claims that in some situations, forums are likewise perceived to be more influential when different social media sites are used concurrently. After all, with the ease of accessing social media contents, it may be the case that any user can employ more than one social media site depending on the nature of the destination decision, or personal preferences.

5 other participants instead considered social networking sites such as Facebook to be more influential when different social media sites are used. Iris explained why she felt Facebook was more influential: "*As it is a specific question about camping, I had gone on Facebook to ask my friends…I would believe my friend because I don't know the other person and my friends don't lie to me.*" The greater trust accorded to known sources on Facebook was also highlighted by other participants, including Dorothy: "*On Facebook most of the people you tag from are*

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your friends. So you know that you can trust the person." This view was also encapsulated by Michael: "*I think Facebook I would believe more if my friends were telling me stuff compared to strangers on other social media sites.*" The effect of known source identities was especially critical for these participants to acknowledge that Facebook as a social networking site was more influential than other social media sites. As the source of information is known to the participants, there is greater perceived credibility that the information received can be relied on to make destination decisions. Furthermore, the provision of relevant information could come in different forms, as Anthony commented: "*Facebook was just a tool to have the conversation.*"

The findings suggest that social networking sites are a unique type of social media because most of the source identities can be ascertained by the user. Increasing source credibility instils greater confidence that the contents obtained from social networking sites such as Facebook can be trusted. This shows that different social media sites exhibit distinctive source-user identities and where used concurrently, trigger differing levels of influence for destination choice. This finding validates the work of Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) in that social networking sites are highly influential on destination decisions, and extend the current scope of literature by demonstrating that it is also exhibiting stronger relative influence.

Interestingly, the five participants who considered social networking sites to be most influential when used concurrently with other social media sites were also contemplating decisions based on their first visits to the destination. While the decisions featured domestic and international destinations, the possession of lower familiarity levels by participants raised some elements of uncertainty that appeared to be addressed by known family or friends who have been to the destination. The pre-decision information search, through Facebook, then helped to mitigate

such concerns as the following quotes revealed. "I had a friend who had been so the minute she said it was good, then I stopped researching." (Iris). Her comments were also consistent with what Eliza had indicated when seeking advice from friends on Facebook: "*So if I knew someone who had been there or was in Thailand or somewhere in Europe, I would message them and say hi, what would you recommend in this area.*" The effect of WOM, which through Facebook evolves as eWOM, remains a strong influence on the destination decision, especially when these individuals have been to the destination, as Mark explained: "*I consider Facebook the most influential if my friends have been there. Because I find friends' inputs the most reliable because I know them. So if someone had said such and such a place was really bad and don't go, then that would certainly influence my decision.*" Evidently, participants have stronger convictions that information received on social media sites such as Facebook can alleviate any potential risks related to unfamiliar destinations. The outcomes indicate how Facebook is perceived to have greater relative influence over other social media sites due to the known source identities when contemplating destination decisions.

While social networking sites enable any user to ascertain source identities and therefore instill greater trust in the contents received, some other participants considered Facebook to be less relevant for destination choice. For instance, Phil claimed that "*Facebook to me doesn't have much depth. Facebook seems to me more about an individual and their life rather than what I am interested in which is a destination.*" Kristie agreed: "*Facebook is harder to find images for international destinations.*" In contrast, Esther' use of Facebook was to show photographs of her trip to others in her network: "*My Facebook is where I put the bulk of my photos to disseminate to others.*"

Two key factors assist with addressing the secondary research question investigating relative social media influence. The first relates to perceived usefulness of the social media site in relation to destination choice. Various participants espoused their beliefs and appreciation of the contents obtained from social media sites that corresponds to the level of perceived usefulness to assist with destination decisions. This finding supports the work of Casalo *et al.* (2011) in that perceived usefulness is a key marker that decision-makers employ when ascertaining relative influence of different social media sites. The second factor is that there is a greater scrutiny of credibility as an indicative antecedent for influence. The need to scrutinise credibility of social media information is due to the ease of disseminating online contents, which may or may not originate from authentic sources. For this reason, the research will next turn to focus on how credibility has been assessed by participants in order to process social media information as a proxy to influencing destination choice.

4.4   Credibility assessment of social media contents

This section discusses how participants have undertaken credibility assessment of social media contents. As the credibility of social media has been repeatedly questioned within tourism literature, the aim of this section is to provide a more informed understanding of credibility cues employed to assist with destination decisions. Understanding how credibility is assessed aids in the understanding of the secondary research question examining social media's comparative influence vis a vis other agents of destination choice. Participants employed the use of six cues for assessing social media credibility in their destination decisions. These cues were quantity of comments, recency of comments, valence of information, visual evidence, perceived similarity and need for elaboration. Table 4.6 shows which of these cues are employed by participants.

Table 4.6: Social media assessment of credibility for destination choice

No.	Name	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Perceived similarity	Visual evidence	Quantity of comments	Need for elaboration	Valence of information	Recency of comments	Number of cues
1	Thomas	Singapore	Repeat		✓	✓				2
2	Moses	Sri Lanka and Singapore	Repeat		✓	✓				2
3	Joseph	Phuket (Thailand)	First	✓		✓				2
4	Suzie	Fiji	Repeat					✓		1
5	Terry	Kota Kinabalu (Malaysia)	Repeat		✓					1
6	Alastair	Apollo Bay (Australia)	First	✓		✓				2
7	Lionel	Gold Coast (Australia) and Taiwan	Repeat			✓		✓		2
8	Iris	Warrnambool (Australia)	First	✓			✓			2
9	Jonah	Sydney (Australia)	Repeat		✓	✓				1
10	Jacob	Netherlands	Repeat	✓						1
11	Martha	Bright (Australia)	First	✓						1
12	Priscilla	New South Wales (Australia)	First	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	5
13	Claudia	South Africa	Repeat	✓						1

No.	Name	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Perceived similarity	Visual evidence	Quantity of comments	Need for elaboration	Valence of information	Recency of comments	Number of cues
14	Dorothy	Adelaide (Australia)	First	✓	✓		✓	✓		4
15	Eric	New Zealand	First	✓				✓		2
16	Gordon	Gold Coast (Australia)	First		✓		✓	✓		3
17	Donna	Tanzania	First	✓	✓		✓			3
18	Grace	Eastern Europe	First	✓						1
19	Andy	Singapore	First	✓		✓				2
20	Eddie	Ballarat (Australia)	First	✓	✓	✓		✓		4
21	Norman	New Zealand	First		✓					1
22	Linda	Lorne (Australia)	First		✓					1
23	Peter	Ballarat (Australia)	First	✓		✓	✓			3
24	Lynn	Fiji	Repeat	✓						1
25	Jemima	Adelaide (Australia)	Repeat				✓			1
26	Phil	Round the world trip	First	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
27	Keith	Balearic Islands (Spain)	First	✓			✓			2
28	Melissa	Vietnam	First	✓		✓			✓	3
		Morocco and Tanzania	First	✓						1

No.	Name	Destination choice	First/repeat visit	Perceived similarity	Visual evidence	Quantity of comments	Need for elaboration	Valence of information	Recency of comments	Number of cues
29	Evangeline	USA	First	✓	✓					2
30	Kristie	Hobart (Australia)	Repeat	✓						1
		Jervis Bay (Australia)	First		✓					1
31	Esther	Botswana, Namibia, Qatar, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia	First	✓		✓	✓			3
32	Kylie	Cambodia and Vietnam	First	✓						1
33	Eliza	Round the world trip	First	✓						1
34	Mark	Canberra and Queensland (Australia)	First	✓	✓					2
		Vietnam	First	✓	✓					2
		New Zealand	First	✓	✓					2
35	Anthony	England	Repeat		✓					1
		Dubai (United Arab Emirates) and Turkey	First	✓				✓		2
		Cambodia and Vietnam	First	✓			✓			2
		TOTAL		29	17	13	11	9	3	

Table 4.6 examines two aspects of social media influence. The first aspect is to assess if participants who employ more credibility cues are those that were reported high social media influence on their destination choice. The second aspect is to analyse the variety of credibility cues and why these have been employed across the range of destination decisions. Knowing more about these two aspects helps to understand social media influence within destination choice. In this regard, some interesting observations can be noted from Table 4.6. The first is that only 4 destination decisions featured 4 or more credibility cues. The second observation is that perceived similarity was the most frequently cited social media cue employed, with other cues ranging from 3 to 17 instances. The subsequent sections will be dedicated to understanding the various utility levels from the most to least cited credibility cue.

4.4.1 Perceived similarity

Perceived similarity was listed as a cue employed in 29 destination decisions. This was by far the most often mentioned cue used as a tool to ascertain social media credibility. In this research, perceived similarity is taken to mean that the comments appears to meet the interests of the destination decision-makers. This is related to the evaluation stage of the conceptual framework, indicating that social media influence commonly occurs relatively at the latter stages of the destination decision-making process. Priscilla illustrates how perceived similarity manifests as an influence: "*I would see what they are talking about and if we liked to do it.*" Like many others, Dorothy elaborates that social media acts as a valuable tool to obtain insights from others about novel experiences, an area that triggers her travel interests: "*Because my travel patterns are usually based on acquiring a different experience, so if people are talking about something unusual in social media then it will pick my interest.*" While the lure of specific activity types is not unique to social media, the immersion with online communities

creates stronger alignment between eWOM contents and personal interests. The discussion of perceived similarity is a core feature of social media, which have been developed for the primary aim of socialisation (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Chu & Kim, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Furthermore, studies on persuasion have argued that individuals will be more receptive to accept recommendations when the destination appears highly congruent to one's desired experiences and motivations (Silvia, 2005; Swartz, 1984). These findings have provided further evidence to suggest that perceived similarity is a vital cue in order for credibility to be constructed.

Related to the discussion of perceived similarity is the key tenet that tourism is an intangible purchase decision. As such, social media fulfils the ability for decision-makers to ascertain if their pre-selected destination decision is one that is justified. Such a view is best exemplified by Eric: "*We also found out what there was for our kids to do from other tourists who travelled with their families as this would be the first time we are going as a family. This reassured me as to what would be best for my family to do and we then proceeded accordingly.*" Hence, the findings suggest that the effect of interacting with others on social media generates more potential for similar interests to be exhibited and disseminated through eWOM. This then creates greater levels of influence on the destination choice.

4.4.2   Visual evidence

The comparative influence of social media vis a vis other agents is tied to the amplification of visual evidence utilised for destination decisions. 17 participants highlighted visual evidence to be another cue to assess social media credibility. Visual evidence, in the form of photographs and videos were used to determine the suitability of a destination. For instance, Iris commented:

"*I was able to make a destination decision just by looking at the photos.*", which also indicate very high social media influence. Some social media sites enable its users to view a back catalogue of photographs and videos, and this multitude of visual evidence can strengthen participants' attitudes with heightened dispositions towards the destination. Hence, participants appeared to adopt visual evidence as a proposition to make their potential destination choice, as stated by Kristie: "*Over Easter, we drove to Jervis Bay and that was purely based on an Instagram photo that I saw and I wanted to go there.*" This quote, again demonstrates very high social media influence. In the tourism literature, visual evidence has been widely considered to be a catalyst for stimulating destination appeal. As such, visuals have appeared in many tourism collaterals in print media (e.g. brochures, guidebooks and postcards) and screen, such as movies, television programs and travel documentaries (Croy, 2010; Jones & Smith, 2005; Molina & Esteban, 2006; Wong & Liu, 2011; Yuksel & Akgul, 2007). However, in relation to social media, two main benefits were identified by participants. One was the speed at which such visuals can be obtained and consumed, while the other was the amount of visuals to assess for consistency (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Such views are encapsulated by Mark: "*I used to have to research a long time for what I need, but now I can get access to photos and lots of them on social media sites like Instagram and Flickr.*"

While some participants were influenced to choose a destination solely based on visual evidence (e.g. Kristie), other participants already had a general pre-disposition towards some destinations, and in those cases, social media visuals further strengthen visitation intentions within the evaluation stage, as in the case of Phil: "*For the Maldives, I used a lot of YouTube videos. I particularly wanted to see manta rays so I searched YouTube to locate these creatures were sighted and what time of the year did they appear more often. This reinforced my desire*

to go to the Maldives." Social media, therefore, has the ability to induce favourable attitudes leading to destination selection.

Yet, other participants call to question the validity of photographs posted on social media. After all, the ease of disseminating eWOM contents on social media can also take the form of photographs or videos. Some participants possess suspicions when approaching social media photos, due to the lack of knowledge as to who is the creator for such contents. For instance, Grace opined that "*It could be the manager who posted a photo of a beautiful place. Who knows? You don't know the authenticity of those things.*" This cautious view was also highlighted by Dorothy: "*You get to see pictures, not just by tourism sites but also normal people, though these days photos can be photoshopped…*"

Despite Dorothy's perceived lack of visual credibility on social media, she nonetheless relied on these photographs to make her destination decisions. When probed further, Dorothy explained how she matched the visuals on social media with what her friends on Facebook have posted. She added "*With Facebook you can tag a picture on a thumbnail and that helped me assess for the consistency with other others have posted about a destination.*" The intention to verify the credibility of visuals was also mentioned by Phil: "*By looking at the websites and the professional tourism photos then comparing with those created by travellers who have been there…I look for consistency…Nice beautiful shot of a glossy environment produced by the official website but there are at least half a dozen photos from social media contributors who show a dirty, smelly and mouldy place…I think I know who I should believe…*" Phil's comments challenge the assumptions that known sources are likely to be more influential on destination decisions. His experience shows the willingness to follow advice based on the collective perception by other tourists on social media, rather than the official contents from

the tourism provider. Decision-makers who behave similar to Phil in adopting the views of unknown others on social media may hold negative perceptions of tourism providers offering just one perspective, often a highly positive view of the destination experience. Instead, these individuals will lean towards the consistency of views obtained and consumed with the ease of access to unmoderated, and less incentivised eWOM contents.

The evidence suggests that visuals are rarely the solitary credibility cue utilised by destination decision-makers engaging with social media. Among the 17 who reported their use of visuals for destination choice, only 4 decisions were identified to have visuals as the sole credibility cue. When used as the solitary cue, visuals are extremely influential to drive the destination decision. However, it was interesting to note that Kristie was the only one to state photographs obtained from Instagram were sufficient to induce her decision to visit Jervis Bay in New South Wales, Australia. According to Kristie: "*Over Easter, we drove to Jervis Bay and that was purely based on an Instagram photo that I saw and I wanted to go there.*" In contrast, the other three participants utilised photos to inform their destination decision, albeit to a micro-level of selecting accommodation providers or attractions. For instance, Jonah said that "*I have seen the photos. I went to the hotel's website to have a glance at the area and some nice beaches and forest walks I think. So we thought it was ok and just went for it.*" Likewise, Norman shared that "*It was just a case of one or two holiday parks to choose from. So the website photos can sway you between one or another.*" In contrast, Linda revealed that whilst she had seen the photos on the accommodation website, they were not the sole factor as to why she decided on visiting Lorne. She explained that "*I looked on the internet to see the website of the hotel. And it seemed ok. But pictures are always deceiving…But my husband got a call from an agency saying that he had a discounted hotel rate and we had to pay $270 for the three nights with breakfast included, so that's why we went.*"

These distinctive engagements with visual cues on social media provide two key outcomes to characterise social media influence. First, the majority of participants employ visuals along with other cues to increase their confidence of potential destination experiences. Second, visuals can, in some instances, trigger the destination decision, as in the case of Kristie. However, Kristie noted that this was perhaps more an exception, than a norm. She commented that: "*For me, destination decisions are usually based on word of mouth and from there I make up my mind. Unless I see an amazing photo of a place where I've never heard of or thought about going but this is normally not how I decide, so Jervis Bay was an exception.*"

This interesting outcome presented by Kristie's perspectives could be discussed by drawing on the ELM proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). In this model, persuasion could be effected through a central or peripheral route of information processing, depending on the level of decision involvement. Comparing the case of Kristie and Linda, the destination decisions were based on domestic locations that did not appear to be highly complex. For instance, Kristie said that visiting Jervis Bay was decided based on the next window of opportunity away from personal commitments: "*I think I saw in in February and a matter of time to find when we could go up to Jervis Bay, which was the next long weekend that was Easter.*" This view was also validated by Linda: "*The way we plan holidays is do you have a couple of free days to go here or there and we usually say yes or if we can't no.*" These appear to be characteristics of destinations that feature lower involvement levels. The ELM postulates that lower involvement decisions can be influenced through peripheral cues. In these cases, Kristie was influence in her destination on a beautiful photograph obtained from social media, while Linda decided on Lorne due to the price discounts received with a particular accommodation provider.

Clearly, destination decisions can vary across a spectrum of low to high involvement types. The findings show that visual evidence can be sufficient to induce low involvement decisions in some instances, echoing the findings provided by some scholars (Liu *et al.*, 2013; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Additionally, visual evidence serve to provide further tangible cues in support of realising desired experiences in circumstances of high involvement vacation planning. Applied to the conceptual framework, the research illustrates that social media can be influential across involvement levels related to destination decisions. However, the findings are indicative of greater social media influence within higher involvement vacation plans. This outcome points to the need to take into account involvement levels as a facet of destination decision contexts when analysing social media influence.

4.4.3　　　Quantity of comments

Around one third of participants (13 out of 35) employed quantity of comments as a cue to assess social media credibility. There was a perception that more comments could be construed as credible insights: "*...If you've got five years' worth of data and 300 entries, you've got a pretty safe reason to go with consensus*" (Melissa). Outside of tourism, some scholars have argued that the greater the quantity of reviews, the more likely will social media exert its influence on purchase decisions (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010; Lee, Park & Han, 2011; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Quantity of reviews, in the context of this research, is an important cue to assist with the assessment of social media credibility, as Thomas revealed "*...If I find there are thirty reviewers and all gave a three to five rating, then you can triangulate and there is more basis for reliability.*" While social media may be a convenient and quick tool to obtain destination insights, associated risks can therefore be mitigated by obtaining a multiplicity of reviews. Margaret added "*TripAdvisor is from individuals sharing their own personal*

expectations and views. But when you read the complete lot, you get a feel for Vietnam." Such an outcome is consistent with literature found outside of tourism whereby a larger pool of reviews appears to compensate for credibility concerns (Park, Lee & Han, 2007).

Despite the potential for gleaning insights about a destination from the quantity of comments available, other participants instead lamented that there is sometimes an information overload effect, which could lead to hesitation in following advice on social media for destination choice. For instance, Linda complained that "*I get overwhelmed by how many things there are on social media and that's why sometimes I go to the places that I know because it is just too much to look at, where to start and I know what I have in mind, but when I go on these sites, there's such a big variety and I get lost in everything.*" As for Anthony, the quantity of eWOM resulted in him having to take more time and effort to discern between the claims made by various users on the forum. According to Anthony:

> "*The Vietnam trip that I am planning for has been quite tricky to put things together there are an awful lot of scams. There is a significant number of places claiming that they've booked you into this and that and while they're genuinely gonna book you something, it may not be what you have necessarily wanted…Some of the people on these forums were supposedly giving independent advice, but were actually people who were trying to goad you to try and stay at a particular place or use a particular agent or do a particular type of thing. I have had to be more careful in exercising my judgment about which advice to take and whether it is genuine or independent.*"

The lack of source credibility meant that Anthony resorted to soliciting friends who have been to Vietnam for advice:

"I have decided to go with personal recommendations from people who have been there and ask them who did they go and see and which agent did they use and contact these agents. Because there is so much rubbish on TripAdvisor that while it's helpful, you can't rely on it entirely and need more information from elsewhere to sort out the wheat from the chaff, sorting the good from the bad."

Findings indicate that the comments indicate that participants may not solely rely on the quantity of eWOM as the tool to construct credibility of social media. While the quantity can help alleviate fears or post-purchase dissonance to a pre-determined destination, various participants have alluded to the notion that the lack of source credibility is still problematic to be completely reliance on social media. Likely for this reason, all 13 participants employed at least one other cue to ascertain social media credibility towards their destination choice. Addressing the secondary research question that explores whether social media influence is related to the decision-maker or the decision characteristics, this section has revealed that social media credibility assessment is more likely associated with the decision-maker's perception of the quantity of contents, rather than the decision itself. This occurs because the decision-maker is ascertaining the validity and accuracy of other tourist claims against his or her pre-held destination image.

4.4.4 Need for elaboration

In all, 11 participants stated that elaborate comments were a cue adopted to assess social media credibility. In particular, these participants sought in-depth information to ascertain the precipitating factors leading to a positive or negative destination experience highlighted by other social media users. Comments that were too brief were likely to be dismissed as Keith

acknowledges: "*It depends on how they write it. A few broad strokes to say they hate this place with no reasons and sometimes they may post it three or four times and are probably unsure what they are talking about.*" His view was supported by Evangeline, who commented that "*Some people give very vague reviews which make you wonder – "What was it specifically that made you complain about? (rolls her eyes)."* These comments show that elaborate comments were important, and that the criticism gleaned from social media did not influence her destination decisions as they were not perceived to be justified. From existing tourism literature, Filieri and McLeay (2014) have suggested that social media users apply a need for elaboration cue towards their accommodation decisions. However, the outcomes of this research indicate that information elaboration is just as important in shaping destination decisions. The findings suggest a link to the central route of information processing as proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). According to these authors, a central route characterises high involvement decision-making. Destination choice is often considered a high involvement activity because of the intangible nature of tourism experiences. For this reason, their social media engagement is expected to be focus on comments that elaborate on favourable or unfavourable outcomes.

Guided by the ELM model, it was anticipated that the need for elaboration would characterise high involvement destination decisions. In other words, the research should be expected to feature destination decisions that may be complex to put together, or a financially expensive purchase. However, 5 out of the 11 participants instead highlighted that the need for elaboration corresponded to a low involvement decision. These five participants chose domestic destinations that did not appear to require much cognitive appraisal, and were instead undertaken with minimal planning. Such characteristics are best encapsulated by Peter: "*I think with a place like Ballarat, you wouldn't worry so much as it is within a day's drive from*

Melbourne. It is not such an expensive holiday. Probably I will think more carefully when I pay for an expensive overseas trip." Nonetheless, the intent to seek elaborate comments was to obtain specific destination-related information to plan what to do at a pre-selected destination, as Iris explains: "*I just Google in a forum on whatever caravan park and see if I can pick up any threads from that as to what facilities or amenities exist.*"

This interesting outcome where some participants express a need for elaboration to support low involvement destination decisions may be attributed to the ease and convenience of soliciting insights on social media sites, as Dorothy stated: "*It is easy and convenient, everything you need is pretty much at your fingertips on social media. So you get a lot of detailed information.*" Such trends are likely to be observed as more eWOM become easily available to any destination decision-maker who employ the use of social media for tourism planning, which some other scholars have alluded to (Chung & Koo, 2015; Kavoura & Stavrianeas, 2015; Oz, 2015). As such, the research shows that the ease of obtaining elaborate comments prior to the actual destination visit facilitates travel planning across a spectrum of high to low involvement destination decisions. These findings help to explain how elaborate comments can be influential within the evaluation stage of destination decisions, as obtaining specificity of information assists the decision-maker with further clarity that desired vacation experiences can be realised on the back of other tourists' comments.

4.4.5   Valence of information

Nine participants highlighted that the valence of information was another cue used to assess social media credibility. Some participants were keen on obtaining positively skewed reviews, such as Lionel: "*People told us certain beaches on the Gold Coast are very crowded. Only*

some of those beaches on the northern side are quieter and the scenery better. We took note of these and went to these beaches..." At a micro-level, Dorothy and Peter looked for positive reviews in deciding on accommodation. Dorothy mentioned that "*I think cleanliness is one thing...As long as they say that there it is generally clean and it is not grimy or very dirty I think I am ok with it.*", while Peter commented that: "*We look for things like if they were satisfied with the service, cleanliness and presentation of the place. Just generally things like that. If they had a good experience, we figured we might have a good experience too.*"

As discussed in Section 2.3.3, positive feedback on social media can assist with overcoming post-decision dissonance, especially when the destination has been pre-selected. In these exemplars, obtaining favourable recommendations on social media are one possible avenue to instil confidence in other decisions that need to be made whilst at a destination, such as attractions and accommodation choices. Despite favourable comments identified to assist with reassuring participants about their respective destination-related choices, it was interesting to note that some still possessed a highly sceptical view of positive reviews, such as Eddie: "*I don't like 100 percent good reviews, I want to see a bad review. If it appears all good reviews, I think this might not be true.*"

Three other participants raised the point that negative eWOM were the determining factor for their destination-related decisions. For instance, Priscilla defended her decision not to go on a particular activity due to the negativity of comments she encountered on social media: "*I clicked on the reviews site and I would not be going on the boat. They're mostly negative and few positive ones. I thought that was such a skewness that there was no way I was going on the boat!*" Likewise, Gordon justified his decision to avoid a particular theme park due to the negative eWOM he received: "*At the end of the day, bad press carries further than good*

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press…The impact for negative news related to the theme park was far more damaging than positive feedback. From these social media comments, it had an effect on me, indirectly telling me to go elsewhere (laughs)." For Anthony, the negative valence of social media contents resulted in him eliminating all shortlisted hotels in Konya, Turkey. Instead, he turned to a few individuals on TripAdvisor and gambled on a risk to select a lesser known homestay in the city.

> "*This was particularly a bit of a dodgy one because the contact person was using a Hotmail email address. I immediately thought why haven't they got an official email address? They were happy for me to book with pre-payment and I thought I wasn't losing anything so if I turned up and there was no hotel, hopefully I will get somewhere else to stay. I did do some searches on this hotel and it didn't come up very much on Google, just enough for me to think it was real. But there were several people on TripAdvisor who had talked about it and it wasn't one of the hotels that had been ranked.*" (Anthony)

Anthony's lengthy quote is useful to emphasise that the risk propensity profiles of participants can be a plausible explanation as to why some individuals decide against what appears to be a highly incongruent decision. This is because his deliberation as to visiting Konya was prompted by the accommodation provider not having a corporate email address, and hence raising some potential concerns about the possible professionalism of the hospitality received. Yet, his comments bring to light that in some instances, the evaluation of eWOM valence is made through the use of other criteria applied to the decision. For instance, Eddie shared that: "*Forums are just a guide even though the experience might be really bad. Even though they say negative things, we wanted to experience it ourselves. But then from the pictures which didn't look too bad and price which was really attractive and cheap, we thought we will just give it a try.*" His comments showed how the role of other factors, namely favourable visual

heuristics and price, and how these acted as compensatory cues to the negative valence of social media contents found. Eric also backed up Eddie's claims, stating that: "*I think you have got to read the comments at face value. You will get both pros and cons but you then need to do further research yourself and see if such comments are justified or meet your needs, which in our case was safe and kids-friendly activities.*"

Hence, this section has shown that in relation to the main research question, social media are approached with the intention of seeking if others found a destination experience favourable or unfavourable. Knowing why other tourists were satisfied or dissatisfied with their destination experiences helped participants to formulate a more comprehensive image to pre-test their own visit. These outcomes are similar to what has been suggested in other studies (Kusumasondjaja *et al.*, 2012; Melian-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2013). However, filling information gaps in the conceptual framework, the research emphasises that the assessment of information valence is conducted with other criteria taken into consideration. As the research only found 9 out of 35 participants employed the use of valence as a credibility assessment tool, it may be the case that decision-makers have already made up their minds as to the destination, and use valence as a tool sparingly where needed for other related decisions. This perspective is aptly summed up by Gordon, who expressed that "*If you're really passionate about going somewhere, you are going to find the good in everything about that place.*"

4.4.6   Recency of comments

Recency of comments was only adopted by three participants. To these participants, obtaining up to date information was vital because eWOM contents provided a more timely perspective of a destination, as Priscilla highlighted: "*If it was posted in 2009 I tend not to think that is a*

relevant comment but if it was in the last year or so I give it more thoughts." In a non-tourism context, the recency of reviews appeared to be instrumental in influencing decisions (Lin, Huang & Yang, 2007; Yayli & Bayram, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2010). While these studies have investigated the context of products that can be pre-tested, the recency effect should arguably apply in a destination decision context and Phil noted that "*A South African destination that I wanted to visit was made after reading someone who went recently to the place. This isn't in the guidebooks yet!*" Drawing from the recent experiences of others, decision-makers were more likely to obtain current insights about a destination as compared to other agents of influence as a credibility cue. This may explain why the recency effect in social media appeals to some decision-makers when making destination choices. Melissa rated social media more highly in providing timely information as compared to other sources, such as travel guidebooks: "*There is more recent information, like what was it like last month, on TripAdvisor whereas it might have changed hands since the last edition of Lonely Planet. So definitely social media has more recent data than guidebooks, and certainly helps me better in my travel plans.*"

Despite the value of recency of information for destination decision-makers, it was surprising to note that very few of the participants highlighted this as a potential cue to assess for credibility. It appeared to be more intentions to determine if the destination meets personal expectations and needs, rather than the recent eWOM. This finding suggests that social media engagement is still primarily concerned with finding insights that align with self-interests, and is in line with what other studies have found (Ayeh *et al.*, 2013; Casalo *et al.*, 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

4.4.7   Summary of section

This section analysed the process of assessing social media credibility. This is related to the main research question as credibility is a core feature in understanding influence on destination decisions. Social media warrant a calculated approach to process online contents. The research has unpacked how participants make sense of credibility cues, though this process occurs in a highly personalised manner. Unpacking this was especially important due to gaps in the conceptual framework where existing literature has yet to establish how social media is processed vis a visa other agents of influence at the evaluation stage.

Whilst it was anticipated that those who engage with a greater number of social media cues were likely to be highly influenced as to their destination choices, this was not the case in the research. Instead, influence levels were not determined by the cues, though other factors, as will be discussed in the next three sections. Of the 41 destination decisions that were discussed, 32 of these featured just 1-2 cues. The social media cues employed were mostly used in support of pre-selected destination choices, and helped mitigate post-decision dissonance. Table 4.7 also showed a decreasing trend for the remaining 9 decision-makers to employ more than 3 credibility cues.

Table 4.7: Number and frequency of social media credibility cues employed

Number of credibility cues	Frequency
1	17
2	15
3	5
4	2
5	1
6	1

Collectively, the section indicates that for the majority of decision-makers, one or two credibility cues is sufficient. There is very little to suggest that a greater engagement with the number of cues corresponded with higher social media influence on destination choice. Hence, it may be concluded that the assessment of social media credibility is a highly personalised process, and one that is context specific. The next section will discuss different levels of social media influence across the decision contexts.

4.5   High social media influence

This section is dedicated to analysing contexts where social media has a high level of influence on destination choice. The research examines the circumstances leading to high social media influence and whether these are more likely related to the participant or the decision. This discussion is necessary to address the secondary research question as the findings thus far have argued that social media not only differs in influence between individuals, but also across different types of decisions. Eight participants self-reported that social media exerted high influence on their destination choice. The researcher categorised these eight participants under the heading high social media influence, when participants expressed that their destination choice was significantly influenced by social media, as these selected quotes reveal:

"*TripAdvisor absolutely shapes my choice of a destination.*" (Phil)

"*Forums really helped shaped the itinerary to confirm which states we would visit and how long we would stay there.*" (Evangeline)

"*Over Easter, we drove to Jervis Bay and that was purely based on an Instagram photo that I saw.*" (Kristie)

"*We didn't know any friends who had been to Vietnam and TripAdvisor was the main influence for us.*" (Mark)

Table 4.8 shows the contextual factors characterising high social media influence in destination choice. The structure of Table 4.8 is presented to enable a systematic approach to understand whether decision-maker characteristics or decision considerations are more likely to suggest high social media influence. Following the identification of participants who had reported high social media influence, the second column in Table 4.8 illustrates where participants were recruited. The next column in Table 4.8 featured the types of destinations chosen. The fourth column reveals the trip characteristics to better understand the contexts surrounding high social media influence.

Table 4.8: Contextual factors illuminating high social media influence in destination choice

Participant	Recruitment source	Destination choice	Trip characteristics	Level of social media engagement	Other agents of influence	Relative levels of influence on destination choice (from most to least influential)
Alastair	Newspaper	Great Ocean Road, Victoria, Australia	• First visit to destination • Travelled with partner • Weekend getaway • Self-drive vacation	Highly engaged on WikiTravel, Twitter, Reddit and Facebook	• Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. Social media 2. WOM 3. Travel guidebooks
Iris	Newspaper	Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia	• First visit to destination • Purpose of travel was to go camping • Family vacation over summer • Experienced camper	Highly engaged on Facebook and camping forums	• Previous camping experience • Travel magazines • WOM	1. Social media 2. Past experience 3. WOM 4. Travel magazines
Eric	Newspaper	New Zealand	• First time cruise vacation • Travelled with family •	Highly engaged on cruise and other forums	• Travel agencies • WOM	1. Social media 2. WOM 3. Travel agencies
Phil	Newspaper	Round the world trip	• Round the world trip on the back of accumulated frequent flyer miles • Planned at least one year in advance	Highly engaged on forums (e.g.TripAdvisor and Booking.com) and YouTube for travel and other purposes	• Travel agencies • Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. Social media 2. WOM 3. Travel guidebooks

Evangeline	Social media	USA	• First visit to USA • Social media especially influenced choice of cities within the country	Highly engaged on social media, including work functions on several sites (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and forums)	• WOM	1. Social media 2. WOM
Kristie	Social media	Jervis Bay	• First visit to Jervis Bay • Weekend getaway • Self-drive vacation • Visited with partner	Highly engaged on social media, including work	• WOM	1. Social media 2. WOM
Eliza	Social media	Round the world trip	• Planned a year in advance • Some destinations chosen due to friends who played host, while at other times travelled independently	Highly engaged on TripAdvisor, Facebook and CouchSurfing	• Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. Social media 2. WOM 3. Travel guidebooks
Mark	Social media	Canberra	• Stopover point for one night enroute to Gold Coast • Triggered by a special event	Highly engaged on TripAdvisor Facebook, Twitter and YouTube		1. Social media
		Vietnam	• First visit to destination • Travelled with friends • Planned one month prior to departure		• Travel guidebooks	2. Social media 3. Travel guidebooks

The first column identifies those participants recruited from newspaper advertisements and social media sites. An equal number of four participants was each recruited from newspaper advertisements and social media sites. This was an interesting outcome, as the research was expecting more participants to respond within social media sites given the focus of the investigation. However, within social media, participants may not necessarily focus on advertisements and instead cast their attention for information acquisition or to socialise, as Foster *et al.* (2010) have found. For this reason, the basis of recruitment did not appear to be a discriminating factor to account for high social media influence.

The next column in Table 4.8 featured the types of destinations chosen. In the table, four of the eight participants identified high social media influence for domestic destinations, with the other decisions focused on international destinations. This outcome was somewhat unexpected, as Simms (2012) has posited that greater influence is more likely associated with international outcomes. Further analysis as to why high social media influence was reported for the domestic destinations will be discussed within section 4.5.1.

From the eight participants, there is a range of trip characteristics that have reported high social media influence, and these do not necessarily show any consistent pattern to distinguish one particular type of decision from another. For instance, the length of the vacation or the composition of the travel party did not provide any noticeable differences to explain why or how high social media influence has occurred. Nonetheless, there is a common thread of high engagement that is evident across all eight participants. High social media engagement will be discussed in Section 4.5.2.

The subsequent column indicated that participants identified between one to three agents that were exerting an influence on their destination choices. The indication that few agents are exerting their influence on destination choice is somewhat surprising, as other scholars have contended that a larger number of agents are incorporated when contemplating less familiar destinations (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). This finding will be discussed in Section 4.5.3.

In summary, high social media influence is suggested to occur out of three specific conditions. These are both domestic and international destination choices, high social media engagement and the presence of few agents of influence. Each of these will be separately analysed to address the research question.

4.5.1   Domestic and international destination choices

The findings show that high social media influence can be seen in both domestic and international destination choices. This section investigates the circumstances as to why both types of decisions can report high social media influence. This section addresses the secondary research question to determine if social media influence is related to the decision-maker or the travel decision.

As discussed earlier, four participants, namely Alastair, Iris, Kristie and Mark, indicated that social media was highly influential in their domestic destination choices. The narratives cast some light as to why these participants found social media to be especially influential:

> "*We decided within a twenty four hour period on what we wanted to do over*
>
> *three days to spend in that vicinity (Great Ocean Road)…We had pre-planned*

by looking up on WikiTravel and tourist websites on what was available…I looked at the Travel Victoria website but WikiTravel influenced me most for the fact that it is user content based rather than saying only the good things." (Alastair)

"The main criteria we wanted for a camping destination was somewhere not too far from the beach, so that we could have walked to the beach. And also affordable prices and also what the place had to offer…As we have been to Anglesea, Lorne and Apollo Bay previously, we went on the internet to see if Warrnambool was a good place…We had glowing reviews on forums and a Facebook site that cemented our decision to go there very quickly." (Iris)

"I saw a beautiful photo of Jervis Bay on Instagram in February and it was just a matter of time to find when we could go up there, which was the next long weekend that was Easter." (Kristie)

"Canberra were doing a promotion on Facebook and Twitter called the Human Project where they were advertising to get more people into Canberra. We had a look at the websites and blogs they were posting and got interested so we decided to spend some time there to look around." (Mark)

A common thread that can be observed emerging from the above-mentioned quotes is that the decision to choose their respective destinations was determined within a short span of time. Furthermore, these participants did not appear to require further insights from social media for their destination choices. Mark added that *"I am fairly familiar with Canberra given that it is*

on the way to Sydney, so the Human Project gave me further impetus to spend a night there because I didn't realise that there was more to do from my previous experience in the city."

The cues highlighted by the participants indicated that the information on social media was sufficient to make their destination decision choice and that no further information search or validation of the decision was necessitated.

These destination choices to be akin to low involvement tourism decisions characterised by the ELM model (Cheng & Loi, 2014; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). More importantly, these low involvement decisions can be made using peripheral cues such as driving distances and affordability. The narratives indicate that the ease and timeliness of obtaining relevant insights on social media can influence destination choices for some decision-makers. This outcome reiterates the prominence of social media not merely as a means to obtain related tourism information, but likewise as a catalyst to influence the destination choice, especially where these involved unfamiliar destinations.

In the case of international destinations, each of the five participants provided further explanations as to why social media was influential:

> "*We thought of doing a trip to Asia but eventually felt like doing something different, so we ended up booking the cruise after heard about the cruise experience from people who have travelled on cruises in the past on a site called Cruise Critic which had other people's comments about the cruise we were going on.*" (Eric)

> "*The main influence on our destination choice was TripAdvisor where I read a review on safaris and how close they were to lions and how you might miss out if*

you don't get to this sort of place. That sounds like something I wanted to do and that confirms the decision, yes we want to go there." (Phil)

"One of the other things is my husband is a massive sport nut – he obviously loves sports so we made a decision that when we were there we would watch one sporting event and the sport being played at that time was the NBA. We jumped onto some of the local forums and asked what sort of culture is an NBA game…So once we did that we learnt that it was the Golden State Warriors, which was apparently the friendliest team we were seeing play my husband's favourite team the Chicago Bulls, we made sure that we were going to be in that city during that time." (Evangeline)

"I looked on social media sites like TripAdvisor to get ideas of the countries that we were going to…I focused on destinations in Southeast Asia and saw what people on these sites recommended as such…TripAdvisor was massive influence on choosing where we went." (Eliza)

"We kind of knew some of the towns but not their locations. It was through TripAdvisor that we could see what we could do there and picked it out from there. TripAdvisor was very influential." (Mark)

An observation of these participants was that their international destination chosen was for a first time visit. The narratives showed how social media was a core tool to solicit information about the destination. In addition, the ability of social media to obtain specific bits of information was a major influence on these participants' destination choice. For instance, Phil

highlighted that TripAdvisor provided opportunities to be close to animals as part of a safari experience, while Evangeline gleaned insights from forum commentaries about sporting cultures.

These opportunities to probe and assess whether the social media contents are congruent to desired vacation experiences is an extension of the activities-based model of destination choice postulated by Moscardo *et al.* (1996). While the findings validate the model that the appeal of activities is a pull factor to stimulate visitation, social media is a highly valuable tool that helps to influence destination choices over other alternatives, as suggested by Sun, Ryan and Pan (2015).

In combination, the findings show that social media can exert high influence for both domestic and international destination choices. This finding also supports the belief within current tourism literature that social media is primarily an influence under contexts of lesser familiarity, as argued by some scholars (Fotis *et al.*, 2011; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Simms, 2012). All the same, the research has shown that destination types, domestic or international, are not the best discriminant of high social media influence. For this reason, the research subsequently shifts its focus to assess whether high social media influence is associated with participant characteristics.

4.5.2 High social media engagement

High social media engagement was a common theme among the eight participants. When probed, all participants explained that their social media engagement was similar to their browsing patterns outside of tourism. Eric best describes such a view: "*I have been on the*

Whirlpool forum for around five years…mainly for appliances such as televisions, refrigerators…which I look at as I am about to change my household purchases." Likewise, Evangeline shared how social media was a core component of her work: "*It is my job to run social media campaigns…Prolifically I use LinkedIn just to network with other people and their jobs for personal and professional development and meeting key people really in industry.*" In contrast, Phil quantified his high pattern of engagement in terms of time spent on social media: "*As I only work part-time, I can spend around 20 hours a week on social media to read stuff such as TripAdvisor. You know, TripAdvisor does take a long time to read*! (Laughs)". As the findings suggest, high social media engagement is generated from two main factors. One, a prolonged immersion within social media over a number of years. Two, an adoption of social media for uses other than tourism. Taken in combination, participants have transferred their social media engagement to a destination choice context. Alastair aptly summarises the collective view of the participants: "*Yeah, the digital age that we live in, if you're social media literate gives you the confidence to make destination decisions on your own.*" This heightened engagement has resulted in these eight participants nominating social media as being highly influential towards their destination choice.

Participants possessing high social media engagement also exhibited willingness to interact on social media. Such a view is encapsulated by Eric:

> "*We sought advice on Cruise Critic prior to travel to specifically focus on what is the leisurely pace on board and what we would expect leading up to the cruise, for example things to pack and also visa arrangements…I also found out that most cruise passengers got seasick around the Tasman Sea area but not for me or my family as I managed to buy a particular motion sickness pill Nexium which is also non-drowsy.*"

Like other participants, Eric could solicit for cruise insights from other past tourists prior to determining destination choices. While the choice of going on a cruise ship could be formulated by a range of agents of influence, his comments showed where social media interaction provides further cues to persuasion as to the destination chosen. In these circumstances, social media can heighten the desire to visit a particular destination over others. This occurs when social media offers insights on destinations that may not be available or rapidly accessed in other information sources. Another relevant example was obtained from Eliza:

> "*The friends I have made within CouchSurfing connected me with people on the site…… one of these friend had said you should definitely stay with such a person who was in a little town called Trieste in Italy purely because there was someone there who could host me and very nice and go and stay with him. So a couple of times I went to a destination because of the CouchSurfing recommendations.*"

Eliza's comments suggest that a recommendation on CouchSurfing stirred her interest and desire for visitation. This context is related to the notion of available and unavailable destinations within the choice set literature (Um & Crompton, 1990). Hence, by focusing on the positive outcomes that there could be a host in the city that one was previously unaware of, social media can persuade the decision-maker to select a particular destination over another.

The high levels of social media in this study resonate with the patterns of social media interaction proposed by Heinonen (2011). Specifically, the findings show that willingness to interact are synonymous with "posters" on social media, as Iris explained: "*The Anglesea site I asked a question and get an answer straight away on Facebook from people who have been there. Others ask me about a place I have camped and I have likewise responded.*" As Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) have articulated, posters reflect a heightened disposition

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to engage with social media and as an outcome, develop favourable attitudes to be influenced by these contents. Gartner (1993) proposed that solicited WOM increases the potential for influence due to the willingness of the user to acquire the information. Soliciting eWOM is an active form of engaging with social media.

This research therefore positions social media engagement as an indicative antecedent to influence. Some studies have found that social media engagement within tourism is a driver of decision-making at a micro-level of airline choice (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom, 2015) or hotel selection (Boo & Kim, 2013). In response to Del Chiappa (2013)'s call for studies to address different layers of social media influence in tourism, this research extends existing literature by positioning social media engagement derived from a non-tourism context to be also an indicative antecedent at the macro-level of destination choice, as identified as a gap in the conceptual framework. The research supports the work of Heinonen (2011) in that a decision-maker can apply his or her social media engagement across various decision-making contexts. The higher the engagement, the greater propensity for social media to exert corresponding influence on destination choice, as evident from the findings.

4.5.3   Fewer agents of influence

Fewer agents of influence were found within contexts of high influence participants. These participants, through their high social media engagement, employed fewer agents of influence to select a destination. Mark succinctly describes such sentiments: "*on Facebook, if I want to get people's opinions on something, I would post a private message … I use that for decisions when going anywhere instead of using a lot of sources because I can judge my friend's responses.*" Mark expanded on the use of social media as a proxy to assess how others

perceived a proposed destination choice. The interactivity of multiple user comments on social media facilitates different viewpoints to better position the suitability of a destination. For the proposed conceptual framework, this indicates that the knowledge gap of understanding how social media applies to the evaluation stage can be better understood as a tool to further develop the destination image, and thereby influencing choice outcomes.

Wilson (2012) postulated that seeking additional perspectives on the destination of choice assists a decision-maker to determine the likelihood that the vacation outcomes will be met. This is related to the notion of dissonance, in that certain risks may be inherent when choosing a less familiar destination. Tourism decisions, such as destination choice, are highly intangible and can cause decision-makers some uncertainty not knowing what to expect from corresponding purchases. This results in the use of other cues, such as social media to address any experienced dissonance. The findings showed numerous instances where social media were employed to influence destination choice, which is well documented by Eliza: "*I contemplated visiting some places in Spain and ventured onto CouchSurfing. However, I consulted other users on the site because I felt it was quite risky to go to these unfamiliar places as a single white female. Eventually I did step into the unknown, after receiving reassurances about safety and feeling less vulnerable.*"

Engagement with fewer sites of influence for unfamiliar destination choices is a contrast to what has been suggested in tourism literature. For example, Kerstetter and Cho (2004) suggested that unfamiliar destinations would require multiple sources of information to establish their suitability. However, this research appears to challenge such assertions in that high social media engagement may override the need for multiple agents of influence, as Phil noted:

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"*Just reading on Lonely Planet it might say what the average temperature in the Maldives is but it doesn't say what the real experience is. Instead, I looked over a number of years with TripAdvisor reviews for a period of time to see how bad it was. People might say, look there'll be a shower or two in the morning but the rest of the day it'll be sunny. And there were consistent reports that you're not going to be spending two weeks where it'll be bucketing down rain. You might get the odd shower and we had nothing and it was so beautiful there.*"

Tourism literature has proposed that agents demonstrating higher credibility are more likely to exert influence on decision-making (Mack *et al.*, 2008; Ayeh *et al.*, 2013; Llamero, 2014). It was interesting to note that seven participants (with the exception of Mark), considered social media to be more influential than other perceived more credible agents such as WOM or past experience. This surprising outcome was defended by these participants, who felt they could ascertain social media credibility by employing multiple cues (Section 4.4). Their high engagement with social media gave them greater trust in their abilities to apply social media for destination choice. As such, there appeared to be lesser requirements to solicit destination insights from elsewhere, which is best summed up in this quote: "*When I get to look for people on social media who are more like me, that is more valuable than what my friends tell me about a destination*" (Phil).

Such outcomes are not necessarily a contradiction to existing literature, rather a fresh perspective warranted because of the trajectory of social media growth within tourism. Prior to social media existence, it was very likely that a destination decision-maker would have to gather information from various channels to inform his or her choices. However, social media has drawn together many of these traditional channels of destination information, thereby

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reducing the time and effort required to make destination decisions. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of social media shows how the immersion in social media sites has instilled greater confidence in participants to make their destination decisions. Applied to the information and evaluation phases of this study's conceptual framework, it can be deduced that social media engagement is a key feature to understanding how travel information search is conducted and the corresponding influence on destination choice. Equipped with an extensive understanding and perceived value of social media appears to reduce the need to engage with multiple agents of influence, and in turn, primes a decision-maker to make informed destination decisions.

4.5.4 Outcomes of section

Overall, in this research, high social media influence was associated with decision-maker characteristics rather than with a destination. Nonetheless, the destinations were also more likely to be first time visits, and show how social media helps to alleviate the lack of familiarity with such decisions. The section has analysed the impact social media engagement has on information search and has concluded that social media engagement is an antecedent to influencing destination choice. By virtue of the immersion in social media, participants readily engage and override the need for multiple agents to be employed for destination choice. This feeds into the conceptual framework as the heightened engagement with social media reduces the interaction with other sources of influence, and thereby amplify social media's influence on destination choice.

Contrary to existing literature, the research did not find any apparent patterns within demographic variables such as age, gender or occupation type as being related to high

influence. Instead, the research aligns with a more inclusive approach taken by Thebault *et al.* (2013) to explain social media influence. The findings suggest that the perceived value of social media held by an individual, rather than their demographics, will determine its role in shaping attitudes towards a destination. Therefore, when a decision-maker becomes more engaged with social media use, then it will become an increasingly dominant influence on destination choice. Derived from the findings is the synthesis of Table 4.9 that characterises high social media influence across destination choice contexts.

Table 4.9: Summary of characteristics associated with high social media influence in destination choice

Participant characteristics	Destination characteristics	Trip characteristics
• High social media engagement	• Both domestic and international destinations	• Few number of agents of influence • First time visits • WOM as a secondary level of influence

From Table 4.9, high social media influence is evidenced by engagement levels and three trip characteristics. These considerations help to illuminate the current scope within tourism literature as to how best to characterise high social media influence in destination choice.

4.6 Moderate social media influence

This section discusses the contexts that characterise moderate social media influence in destination choice. Such a discussion assists with further clarity towards the main research question investigating the contextual factors characterising various levels of social media influence on destination choice. 11 participants identified that social media exerted a moderate

influence in their destination choices. Excerpts of what is categorised as moderate influence are provided below:

"We decided on Phuket eventually because of the food and just value for money. Forums did help somewhat, like advising which beaches were more children friendly and also when and which time of the year is good to go where and to look out for what stuff." (Joseph)

"Basically I think about where I want to go. I will draw out the route, I like to drive, I will think about where I want to drive, and then I will start to look at the hotels along the route to break the journey, influenced by how far I can drive in a day and where I would stay for the night. Then I base it on TripAdvisor to make my final decision as to where these stops are." (Jonah)

"I think they all contribute almost equally to my choice of a destination. I don't see one more influential than the other but maybe social media might be a good start. Because I use the internet a lot so if people are talking about something in social media then it will pick my interest to visit the destination." (Dorothy)

"Half of our destination decision is based on recommendations from friends and the other half from forums." (Eddie)

As the above quotes suggest, categorising participants within the heading of moderate influence is on the basis where social media plays a supporting role in in formulating the destination choice outcome. Further insights on the 11 participants and their destination choice contexts are presented in Table 4.10. The structure of Table 4.10 allows for a quick observation as to

the types of destinations chosen and the trip characteristics associated with each of the respective participants.

Table 4.10: Contextual factors illuminating moderate social media influence in destination choice

Participant	Recruitment source	Destination choice	Trip characteristics	Level of social media engagement	Other agents of influence	Relative levels of influence on destination choice (from most to least influential)
Dorothy	Newspaper	Adelaide	• First time visit • Self-drive vacation with husband • First visit to Adelaide • Chose enroute destinations based on unique attributes such as sinkholes and Christmas lighting • Visited a tourist information centre	High	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media
Eddie	Newspaper	Ballarat	• First time visit • Travelled to destination for the purpose of wildlife tourism experience at the zoo • Visited the destination with partner • Some familiarity with the destination having previously read about the zoo	High	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media (equally influential on the destination choice)

Melissa	Social media	Vietnam	• First time visit • Travelled with group of friends • Focused on cultural tourism experiences	High	• Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media 3. Travel guidebooks
		Morocco and Tanzania	• First time visit • Travelled with children • Sought safari experiences • Desired to see places different to Australia		• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media
Esther	Social media	Botswana, Namibia, Qatar, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia	• First time visit to several of these destinations • Travelled with partner • Some parts of the journey was undertaken with a structured tour group	High	• Travel agencies • WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media 3. Travel agencies
Kylie	Social media	Cambodia and Vietnam	• First time visit • Travelled with a friend • Focused on history and heritage locations • Planned to do some community work with orphanages • Most decisions planned while at-destination	High	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media

			• Has a relative who frequently visits the chosen destinations who was regularly consulted			
Anthony	Social media	Turkey	• First time visit • Tremendously interested in the culture and history of the destination • Solo traveller	High	• Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media 3. Travel guidebooks
		Cambodia and Vietnam	• First time visit • Travelled with friends • Interested in oriental culture and heritage of the destination	Moderate	• Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. WOM 2. Travel guidebooks 3. Social media
Joseph	Newspaper	Phuket	• First time visit with family • Family vacation • Meeting up with other members of extended family from around the world • Some familiarity having previously visited Phuket	Moderate	• Past experience • WOM	1. WOM 2. Past experience 3. Social media

Jonah	Newspaper	Sydney	• Repeat visit • Self drive holiday • Family vacation • Some familiarity from previous visits to the destination	Moderate	• Past experience	1. Past experience 2. Social media
Priscilla	Newspaper	New South Wales	• First vacation with husband after prolonged illness • Serendipitous decision-making on a self-drive holiday • Extensive use of driving maps • Traced genealogical roots to select destinations	Moderate	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media
Norman	Newspaper	New Zealand	• First time visit • Initial campervan experience • Travelled with wife	Moderate	• Travel guidebooks • WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media 3. Travel guidebooks
Keith	Social media	Balearic Islands	• First time visit • Previously visited other parts of Spain in the year prior • Solo traveller	Moderate	• Travel guidebooks	1. Past experience 2. Social media 3. Travel guidebooks

From the first two columns, it may be noted that moderate social media influence is equally not gender or recruitment method specific. In particular, six male and five female participants identified social media to be of moderate influence on their destination choice.

Other characteristics from Table 4.10 showed some points of difference. For instance, two to three agents were exerting an influence on their destination choices, with WOM identified to be the strongest influence for most participants. This was an interesting contrast to participants reporting high influence in the previous section that had employed a single agent. Tourism literature suggests that multiple engagements across a diversity of social media sites are more likely to lead to heightened influence (Kavoura & Stavrianeas, 2015; Tussyadiah, Kausar & Soesilo, 2015). While several of the participants indicate high levels of social media engagement, this did not translate into high influence outcomes on destination choice. Instead, high social media engagement alone in these circumstances were not as influential on destination choice. Rather, there were other aspects of the decision related to destination familiarity and assessments of credibility that moderated the reported levels of social media influence. The remainder of this section will analyse the trip characteristics in order to better understand how moderate influence should be conceptualised. Three main themes have emerged from Table 4.10. These are first time versus repeat visits, WOM as a reliable cue and semi-structured destination decisions. Each of these themes will be subsequently discussed.

4.6.1   First time versus repeat visits

Moderate social media influence appeared to be related to decisions associated with first time visits to a destination. However, despite the lack of prior experience in visiting the destination, several participants highlighted that their decisions featured destinations that were relatively

familiar. Such sentiments are best expressed by Keith: "*In 2009 I had a short visit to Madrid that had lots of culture and I enjoyed the place…I already learnt about the Balearic Islands from different aspects – guidebooks, news articles and figured that I will likely enjoy this destination too.*" While several participants appeared to be first time visitors to a destination, there did not appear to be a heightened level of risk regarding their vacation. Rather, participants used their past experience travelling through similar regions to give them confidence that they would experience desired tourism outcomes. For Esther, her decision to visit parts of Africa were built on past experience travelling through the region, and also WOM. She added, "*At the end of last year I was in Kenya and Tanzania for three weeks and the experience of being there and the people I met made me want to go back and explore different parts of Africa.*" This quote showed how past experience in having visited countries in Africa instilled greater confidence to return to and visit new destinations. To other participants, the impact of greater familiarity with a destination meant that they could draw from a range of information sources to derive a pre-visit destination image. Linked to the conceptual framework, social media appears in these circumstances to be a supportive tool with the concurrent use of other agents of influence on destination choice.

Social media were being used as a validation tool for participants and their respective destination choice. For instance, Eddie commented that: "*The first time we found out about the zoo was from a friend through word of mouth, then I went to forums and confirmed our decision to go to Ballarat as we realised we could touch those animals.*" Likewise, Melissa also emphasised how social media further stimulated interests to visit destinations offering distinctive cultures: "*I had the idea that I liked to go to Vietnam to see a different culture. Social media had some influence, though to a moderate extent by reinforcing my perceptions.*"

(Melissa). In addition, there may be also opportunities for social media to cater to special interests, as in the case of Anthony:

> "*So the reason I went to Konya is because of my fascination with Rumi, who comes from the branch of Islam called Sufi if you've heard of whirling dervishes, which are quite iconic in Turkey. When I was contemplating to go there, yet not knowing how I was to get there, I found out that I can get the high speed train to get out to Konya from Istanbul by talking to people on TripAdvisor that I inked into my itinerary.*" (Anthony)

Participants reported that destination appeal can be developed out of different interests such as culture, heritage and wildlife experiences as discussed respectively by these three participants. However, social media served as a tool to validate their positive destination image and intentions to visit by heightening the specific attributes associated with realising the desired experiences and motivations (Section 2.3.1.3). In this sense, influence is conceptualised in the manner of increasing a decision-maker's intentions to select a destination following of predisposed attitudes. This outcome further extends the suggestions of Wang (2012) and Ayeh *et al.* (2013) in that social media have generated greater impetus for destination visitation by distilling the potential for desired tourism experiences to be realised. These studies show how destination intentions can be heightened through social media engagements, though actual visitation was an implicit outcome. This finding, that social media is a validation tool for destination choice, provides a better understand of the role of social media in tourism decision-making. As the conceptualisation of influence includes strengthening one's attitudes, this research has demonstrated that social media are a vital tool to achieve such a facet of influence. The findings demonstrate the application of social media as an agent of influence at the implementation stage of the conceptual framework. Specifically, the role of social media seems

to be an influence on the choice of destinations already within the late choice set. Social media reinforce desired images so that a destination is preferred over others. All the same, for first time visitors, social media presents ample opportunities to elevate one's attitudes to a particular destination, leading to eventual choice outcomes.

4.6.2   WOM as a reliable cue

Participants reporting moderate social media influence showed an increasing reliance on WOM to determine their destination choices. This is evidenced in Table 4.10 when assessing the relative influence of different agents exerted on the destination choice. In particular, WOM and past related experience were identified to be more credible than social media. The rest of this section will analyse why WOM was of such prominence to participants reporting moderate social media influence.

Esther described the circumstances leading to her decision to visit Africa:

> "*There is one lady I work with and she spends three months in South Africa with a friend and was just travelling around…She recommended going to several places. So that was also very influential on the places that I went to.*"

When probed as to how WOM compared to social media in terms of influencing destination choice, she added:

> "*I understand reviews to be a bit more grey and hesitate to use them in their entirety because even if it were to have 100 percent glowing reviews, that doesn't necessarily mean it will be great when I get there you don't know and these people are whom you have never met and probably will never meet in*

your life are not exactly a reflection of your standards and opinions of what

is good."

This cautious approach when engaging with social media is also acknowledged by other participants:

"*I think potential differences would be on Facebook most of the people you*

tag from are your friends. So you know whether you can trust the person or

not. I would attribute the level of trust is higher versus a blog." (Dorothy)

"*I have to read those reviews to know what to expect, even though it might*

not happen to me. I just want to know what might happen. I don't like 100

percent good reviews, I want to see a bad review. If it appears all good

reviews, I think this might not be true as I don't know the person." (Eddie)

Participants assessed social media to be of some uncertainty related to credibility due to the lack of knowledge regarding source or content authenticity. For this reason, reviews are incorporated to the destination decision-making process, though with some scepticism. Furthermore, a prioritisation process seems to occur, as Dorothy mentioned that Facebook appears more credible than blogs due to the knowledge of sources as compared to generic blogs. Despite the notion that Facebook identities are known to the user, Joseph provides a further lens of interpreting contents obtained from the site and assessing credibility:

"*We sort of weigh out where there that person is in life as well. If that person*

is an older person, and that person is saying that the elephant rides are very

boring, rough and very dirty, you sort of take it in perspective because that

person is older in that sense. Whereas the younger person might tell you the

beach is very nice and all that. They further verified that the beach was very

nice because they then sent us photos to share the fun they had. So in the end

we went with the second group of friends opinions due to what we could extract

as written and visual cues."

Hence, it can be deduced that the increasing reliance on credibility cues goes beyond the mere identification of desired experiences, but also the WOM sources. This process of scrutinising various indicators of the vacation experience is synonymous with the notion of data triangulation, where Branthwaite and Patterson (2011) postulated to be a key consideration in ascertaining credibility of social media contents. By obtaining differing viewpoints about a destination, participants can develop further confidence that their desired vacation experience is achievable. The findings reiterate that different agents of influence are exerting concurrently on the destination choice, though the relative influence of each agent is contingent on their perceived credibility.

This outcome is therefore applicable to better understand the framework of credibility assessment proposed by Hilligoss and Rieh (2008). In their framework, Hilligoss and Rieh (2008) conceptualised three tiers as to how credibility should be understood between an information seeker and the contents received. The first tier is that of interaction, which is then followed by the next tier focused on the employment of credibility cues and a final tier concerned with the construction of credibility outcomes. Applied to the research, the framework is useful insofar to showcase the engagement between participants and social media, then the use of different cues towards the construction of credibility. The findings amplify the roles of source-related cues (e.g. known identities) and aesthetics (e.g. visuals) towards credibility construction, but also add an extra dimension of perceived similarity to

position social media contents to be incorporated towards the choice of a destination. The increased reliance on credibility cues characterising moderate social media influence outcomes is a reflection of the manifestation of eWOM by unknown others that has come to the attention of destination decision-makers, as illustrated within this section.

The narratives appear consistent with literature in corroborating WOM as a key influence in destination choice. From the participants listed in Table 4.10, WOM appeared to be more influential than social media in 11 out of 13 destination decisions. Norman articulated why WOM appeared more credible than social media: "*I would have found stuff on New Zealand myself but my in-laws gave us the urge and the excitement by giving first-hand information of the place. You can get something from social media or travel agents but having someone actually tell you I've been there and done that experience and not to do this or that is more reliable.*" As for Kylie, WOM was perceived to be more valuable because of how others appeared to have a more authentic experience: "*I'd rather hear from my auntie and what she does over there than to go to social media or a travel agent. Because the travel agent told me that we could stay at five star accommodation and we went no no no. We could do that in Melbourne. We want sights, the smells and the real experience…I read reviews, but I don't take them too seriously because I didn't think the stuff was always true.*" Similar concerns with social media were also raised by Anthony: "*Because there is so much of a variation from comments about Vietnam on TripAdvisor that while it's helpful, you can't rely on it entirely and need more information from elsewhere to sort out the wheat from the chaff, sorting the good from the bad. I've decided that I am going with personal recommendations from people who have been there and ask them what they did.*"

The above-mentioned narratives are consistent with tourism literature highlighting the credibility of WOM for relevant decisions, such as destination choice. As social media, in particular forums, can be accessed by anyone, therefore some suspicion is created some suspicion among the participants as to the accuracy and reliability of social media contents. The lack of source identities, or knowing the truthfulness of the reviews, has resulted in some participants being influenced by more credible agents such as WOM for their destination choices. This outcome supports existing literature that has demonstrated how credibility is an antecedent to influencing one's destination image and corresponding tourism decisions (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

While WOM was identified to be more credible than social media, several participants also expanded their discussion concerning WOM that occurred in the online space of specific social media sites, such as Facebook. For instance, Dorothy explained that "*When I am on Facebook and they are my friends I will ask them or start a poll of my own as to where to go.*" The shift from WOM to a digital realm has been discussed as eWOM, though different social media sites appear to present varying levels of credibility. This is because social media sites differ in terms of their use, contents presented, and more importantly source identities. Sites like Facebook are social networking sites where the circle of friends is often known to the user. This is unlike other social media sites such as forums or YouTube or blogs where the audience may not know the author of the contents and vice versa. This section emphasises that while participants engage with eWOM, the distinctive proposition of known source credibility on some social media is more important than what site the contents are on. Such a view is best epitomised by Esther, who commented that: "*Reviews on TripAdvisor don't go by any sort of criteria. Most of it is like people liking this place because of XYZ reason but that might not be what I want for a holiday. So that is one thing that I keep in mind in that when looking at reviews, other*

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people's standards are standards you don't know and these people are whom you have never met and probably will never meet in your life are not exactly a reflection of your standards and opinions of what is good. I will be more influenced if it was my family or friend recommending the same place on Facebook because I know what they are like." The comments reflect that participant engagement on social media is not only to find out specific information as to what may be appealing about a destination, but also whether the information is of a credible nature. These considerations result in a different attitude to the various sites, and hence assist in providing some explanation as to why moderate social media influence has been reported in these participant destination choices. Relating to the conceptual framework, this section has provided further insights to fill knowledge gaps where credibility of WOM is weighted more favourably to destination decisions, with social media supplementing additional incentives to choose a destination.

4.6.3 Semi-structured destination decisions

Nine participants identified that semi-structured destination decisions was another common feature when reporting moderate social media influence in destination choice. Tourism literature has characterised semi-structured destination decisions to feature some elements of flexibility and spontaneity, where decision-makers can determine further outcomes while at the destination (Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Hyde, 2008). The following comments illustrate participants' semi-structured destination decisions:

> "*We didn't know what to expect and when we got to what seemed like a nice place and everything was booked out and we slept in the car. So we were happy to do that as it adds to the fun. People think we are silly but we like the excitement of that. Also we found some great bargains by not booking. When you rock up to the town*

it is quite often a lot cheaper than pre-determining where to stay as we would get for $60 a night with breakfast. Others were $100 in the town so that meant extra pocket money for us." (Priscilla)

"*We haven't decided where exactly we are going except for the first few nights in Cambodia as yet but we can ask questions and get travel advice on the go. We have a couple of main things we want to do when we get there, though my friend and I are open to everything.*" (Kylie)

These findings are indicative of the growing appreciation of semi-structured vacation planning as postulated by Martin and Woodside (2012). There is a tendency for participants to undertake at-destination decisions instead of having every aspect of the vacation planned prior to departure. Despite the lack of familiarity related to first-time visits to international destinations, other participants nonetheless highlighted the value of incorporating flexibility to their decision-making:

"*So we all tried to go out together because it is a family vacation anyway. But if you don't want to go out you don't have to go out…It is still very carefree but there is sort of a rough plan so we do talk about what to do tomorrow…*" (Joseph)

"*We wanted to go to the Great Ocean Road after Ballarat, but after a long drive, we didn't want to go all the way and thought we would do it weeks later, which we did on a weekend two weeks after.*" (Eddie)

With the exception of Esther, the ten participants reporting moderate social media influence had undertaken the entire responsibility of planning the vacation. This emphasises the benefit

that social media and other sources of information have empowered destination decision-makers to make plans related to tourism, and reduces the apparent need to consult with traditional intermediaries such as the travel agent. Rather, these participants incorporated inputs from highly influential agents such as WOM and to a lesser extent, social media to be stored for processing during the pre- and at-destination experience. The availability of such a rich pool of content increased the availability of options, including destination choice, as Melissa explained: "*There were particular instances that some people wanted to go somewhere and others went elsewhere instead. It was more a case of choosing what interested them. But it certainly helped that I obtained different information from personal recommendations and social media to inform what I could proposed that the different peer groups would like to go.*"

Overall, most of the participants have reported moderate social media influence in their semi-structured destination decisions, reflecting a highly iterative approach to their vacation planning. Emerging from this is the willingness to incorporate variability to their vacation plans, and therefore having the flexibility to undertake more decision-making while at the destination. To these participants, the pre-visit phase is mostly influenced by WOM and past travel experience, if any, and supported then with social media in supplementing informational gaps. This section has elucidated that moderate social media influence is exerted in destination decisions under circumstances where semi-structured vacation planning takes place. Such an outcomes lends further clarity to inform the knowledge gap concerning the contextual factors characterising social media influence. It shows that social media influence may be understood in terms of the decision, rather than the decision-maker or destination attributes.

4.6.4 Outcomes of section

The findings indicate that moderate social media influence is more likely associated with first time than repeat visitors, WOM as a reliable cue and semi-structured destination decisions, rather than with the demographics of a decision-maker. In the area of first time versus repeat visitors, the findings validate the work of Jacobsen and Munar (2012) in that heightened familiarity reduces the level of uncertainty associated with travel decisions, and hence a lower reliance on social media contents.

The second apparent theme on the reliability of WOM cues is similar to what other scholars have found, albeit at a more micro-context. For instance, credibility cues are postulated to be a tool for discerning quality and value for money in the areas of accommodation and dining experiences (Ong, 2012; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). This research extends such postulates in the manner that credibility cues are likewise applicable as a proxy to influence destination choice.

However, the outcome that semi-structured destination decisions feature moderate social media influence is surprising as Wu (2015) suggested that social media facilitated semi-structured planning behaviour, and correspondingly influence destination decisions. This difference may be explained by the level of travel experience that these 11 participants seemed to have possessed, and thereby increased their ability to incorporate flexibility in travel planning. Reflecting the views of other participants, such a sentiment is best expressed by Keith: "*I am better prepared as a traveler because I have been travelling before the internet and social media came to existence. So while social media is a very valuable addition to travel planning, I am generally aware of what to expect out of my travels.*" These participants are perhaps a

reflection of the growing sophistication of travel motivations as characterised within the Travel Career Pattern (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Evidenced across the narratives is the propensity of participants to embark on trips that embodied flexible planning and choice outcomes. This approach steers participants towards seeking more semi-structured destination plans.

Condensing the outcomes of the section, the research has further informed the conceptualisations of moderate social media influence as typified in Table 4.11. Collectively, this section has teased out further insights to better understand the secondary research question as to how social media compares with other agents of influence in destination choice.

Table 4.11: Summary of characteristics associated with moderate social media influence in destination choice

Participant characteristics	Destination characteristics	Trip characteristics
• Employed between one to three social media cues • WOM as a strong influence due to credibility	• Greater destination familiarity	• Semi-structured destination decisions • Social media used to validate choice

4.7   Low social media influence

This section is concerned with characterising low social media influence in destination choice. 17 participants identified that social media had low influence on their destination choice. This discussion is warranted to provide further distinction of the contextual factors characterising social media influence, and thereby addressing the main research question. Exemplars as to what constitutes low social media influence are provided in the following quotes:

"I don't think I am influenced so much by others' comments on social media, especially to the major decisions as to where to visit." (Moses)

"TripAdvisor and all that, from past experience, it would give you some sort of an overall feel, but I wouldn't take it as authoritatively influencing my destination choice." (Terry)

"Social media has a little bit of influence. I am lucky that I do know the area and I have people who have probably been there before that I can actually ask." (Claudia)

"For choice of destination, social media is maybe very slightly influential." (Jemima)

This section elucidates what characterises low social media influence. This is essential as the greater proportion of social media users within the pool of participants have reported that social media is of low social media influence. However, before jumping to a premature conclusion that social media is of little influence on all destination choice, unearthing the contextual cues will be essential in helping to address the research questions. An overview of the contexts related to low social media influence characteristics is condensed in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12 reveals some distinct patterns from participants characterising low social media influence in destination choice. From the table, the second column showed that with the exception of Kristie, the remaining 16 participants were recruited from their response to the newspaper advertisement. Both domestic and international destinations were likewise identified to be featuring low social media influence. Likewise, some participants also reported low social

media influence for first time visits to their respective destinations. Rather, the findings revealed four contextual factors characterising low social media influence in destination choice. The factors were repeat visits to destinations, VFR tourists, short trips and opportunistic social media engagement. These factors will now be discussed.

Table 4.12: Contextual factors illuminating low social media influence in destination choice

Participant	Recruitment source	Destination choice	Trip characteristics	Level of social media engagement	Other agents of influence	Relative levels of influence on destination choice (from most to least influential)
Lynn	Newspaper	Fiji	• Attending a wedding • Family vacation	High	• Past experience	1. Past experience 2. Social media
Kristie	Social media	Hobart	• Festival attendee • Travelled with friends	High	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media
Thomas	Newspaper	Singapore	• VFR tourism • Family vacation • Visits the destination once every two/three years	Moderate	• Past experience	1. Past experience 2. Social media
Lionel	Newspaper	Gold Coast and Taiwan	• VFR tourism • Family vacation •	Moderate	• Past experience • WOM	1. Past experience 2. Word of mouth 3. Social media
Claudia	Newspaper	South Africa	• VFR tourism • Family vacation • Visits the destination every two-three years	Moderate	• Past experience • WOM	1. Past experience 2. WOM 3. Social media
Grace	Newspaper	Eastern Europe	• Group packaged tour • Travelled with husband • First visit to destination	Moderate	• WOM • Travel guidebooks	1. WOM 2. Travel guidebooks 3. Social media
Jemima	Newspaper	Adelaide	• VFR tourism • Very familiar destination	Moderate	• Past experience • WOM	1. Past experience 2. WOM 3. Social media

Moses	Newspaper	Sri Lanka and Singapore	• VFR tourism • Family vacation • Singapore was a short stopover point due to airline routing	Low	• Past experience • WOM	1. Past experience 2. WOM 3. Social media
Suzie	Newspaper	Fiji	• Vacation for rest and relaxation • Travelled with daughter • Visited Fiji the year prior	Low	• Past experience	1. Past experience 2. Social media
Terry	Newspaper	Kota Kinabalu	• VFR tourism • Family vacation • Main purpose of travel was to celebrate Chinese New Year	Low	• Past experience	1. Past experience 2. Social media
Jacob	Newspaper	Netherlands	• VFR tourism • Travelled with wife • High destination familiarity	Low	• Past experience • WOM	1. Past experience 2. WOM 3. Social media
Martha	Newspaper	Bright	• Weekend getaway • Travelled with husband • Self-drive trip	Low	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media
Gordon	Newspaper	Gold Coast	• Family vacation • Self-drive trip • First visit to destination	Low	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media
Donna	Newspaper	Tanzania	• Solo traveller • Wildlife and volunteering enthusiast	Low	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media

			• First visit to destination			
Andy	Newspaper	Singapore	• VFR tourism • Family vacation	Low	• Past experience	1. Past experience 2. Social media
Linda	Newspaper	Lorne	• Purchased discount accommodation package • Family vacation • Self-drive itinerary • First visit to destination	Low	• WOM • Travel brochure	1. Travel brochure 2. WOM 3. Social media
Peter	Newspaper	Ballarat	• Weekend escape • Family vacation • Self-drive itinerary • First visit to destination	Low	• WOM	1. WOM 2. Social media

4.7.1 Repeat visits

Repeat visits were one context where social media had low levels of influence. 10 of the 17 participants stated that their destinations chosen had been previously visited. Reflecting a collective opinion regarding the role of past experience on destination choice, Suzie commented: "*As I had been there the year before, so social media were not so influential for Fiji.*" As past experience is a personal encounter at a destination, participants have a well-developed destination image to rely on. This links back to the conceptual framework where destination experience will generate a complex destination image, and becomes difficult to change. This implies that there is very little scope for social media to alter destination images and attitudes. Such views are likewise echoed by Jacob: "*We didn't need much information from social media because we are familiar – we've been there so many times. We know it like our back pockets!*" The quote provided further support to existing studies that have suggested heightened familiarity with a destination is associated with passive information search through a retrieval of past travel experience (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Milman & Pizam, 1995). Because of the heightened familiarity, social media appears not to be needed to assess the suitability of a destination chosen for repeat visits. As such, participants travelling to previously visited destinations explained that social media had very little influence towards their destination choice, a sentiment encapsulated by Lionel: "*Yes, we are quite familiar with Taiwan and the experiences we can have. Social media is of very little influence to change that perception.*"

The research also found that even a previous visit to a destination that had occurred several years ago was still considered to be integral to the destination choice decision, as epitomised by Moses: "*We know the geographical terrain of Sri Lanka…Colombo which is the capital,*

the other areas are like Galle, which is in the southern part of the country. And Kandy, which is the central highlands. And where the wildlife sanctuaries are is in a place called Yala. That's pretty much south, east, west of the country and the middle. The one bit that I had to look up was in the north, that part is still recovering from the civil wars in Sri Lanka."

Evident within the quote is that where a significant length of time had elapsed between the previous visit and the destination choice, significant engagement with social media was not required. Instead, the narratives alluded to the ease of obtaining updated destination contents from online search and other agents of influence such as WOM. These outcomes reiterate that a complex destination image exists for such participants that has resulted in strong attitudinal beliefs where desired vacation outcomes will be realised. This is in line with existing literature that have illustrated that past experience is a dominant influence in destination choice (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Huang & Hsu, 2009; Lehto *et al.*, 2004). When probed, Moses articulated that "*There are sites that other people have commented. But in Sri Lanka it doesn't apply to us so much because of our prior knowledge of the place. And therefore, many of the comments are from foreigners to Sri Lanka whereas us, hailing from Sri Lanka we have much better idea and the same experience may not apply to us.*" This perception of cultural affinity was supported by Claudia:

"*They were lots of people who commented on South African experiences but a lot of them I found quite negative. I am lucky that I do know the area having been born there and I have people who have probably been there before that I can actually ask. In this case I probably wouldn't go to places just relying on the forums.*"

It seems that a complex destination image formed by past experience has resulted in strong attitudes that are less likely to rely on social media when assessing the suitability of a destination. This reinforces the key themes of the conceptual framework and reiterate that social media has lesser influence as compared to other agents of influence that have proven to be highly credible in shaping destination preferences. As such, and as expected, social media has low levels of influence on destination choice featuring repeat visits. Social media were instead employed to fill gaps in contemporary knowledge such as current prices or operating hours as the above-mentioned quotes have indicated. Evidently, such engagements with social media occur after the destination has been pre-selected. This section thereby contributes to a more refined conceptualisation of how influence should be understood in addressing the secondary research question by analysing why, in circumstances of repeat visits, social media does not feature as prominently as other agents of influence due to the highly credible nature of past experience as a real and authentic aspect of vacation planning.

4.7.2   Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourists

The research also revealed that VFR tourists had low levels of social media influence. Eight participants identified VFR to be their primary purpose of travel. Unlike other purposes for travel, VFR tourism occurs for very specific reasons where the decision-maker has far less discretion on destination choice. In this space, their destination choice is contingent as to where families and friends were located or planning to visit. Furthermore, participants revealed that the overarching motivation for such vacations is to see loved ones, as Lionel indicated: "*In the past four years, my family did not visit our family in Taiwan. So I think that is how we decided.*" When the primary motivation is to undertake a VFR tourism vacation, there is very little to suggest that social media will alter such motivations otherwise. This is because literature has

demonstrated that VFR tourism is embedded within strong relational ties that exist out of family structures and cultural identities (Asiedu, 2008; Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Shani & Uriely, 2012). These relational ties are built over time and will prompt decision-makers to select a particular destination when VFR motivations are strongly felt (Backer, 2012). For this reason, participants travelling for the primary purpose of VFR tourism reported low social media influence.

However, social media was still used by these decision-makers. The specific scope of social media influence was located at the micro-level decisions, such as accommodation or attraction choices. Most participants could attest to having some social media influence, as in the case of Moses: "*I did use social media to search some of these places to stay.*" On a different note, Andy utilised social media to glean other tourist experiences at new attractions: "*There were a couple of new attractions in Singapore like the casinos, Gardens by the Bay which was still under construction, the Marina Bay Sands and the Marina Barrage. So I looked up reviews on these new attractions that we have not visited and decided it would be good for us to go to these places.*" The research provides some insights to locating social media influence among VFR segments. Several participants highlighted that social media exerted some influence on their choice of accommodation options. For instance, Claudia noted that "*And a lot of them did have Facebook links which offered photographs and personally detailed information, so that was quite useful*". VFR experiences that feature some element of stay external to the homes of friends and relatives are known as Commercial accommodation VFR (CVFR) tourists (Backer, 2012). However, CVFR tourism experiences are also likely to occur in an environment where known sources may provide information on commercial accommodation. As such, social media may have minimal influence because of the presence of other agents, such as WOM. Claudia elaborated on such an experience: "*I would probably consult with my family because they live*

there and know the area best." Likewise, Moses concurred with such a view, stating that "*And family and friends, oh definitely. When we get there, Sri Lanka being a small, close community, everybody knows everyone. So you can get special prices for accommodation because of our contacts in Sri Lanka.*" As these narratives suggest, there is a perception that WOM referrals are a reliable source of information. This is consistent with literature where WOM has been demonstrated to be a highly credible source (Murphy *et al.*, 2007; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). For this reason, social media may still have some influence within the context of VFR tourism, but their relative influence will be moderated by the presence of WOM and level of familiarity within a pre-selected destination. Collectively, the outcomes of this section add further knowledge as to how, and why VFR tourists characterise low social media influence in destination choice. This assists with further clarifying the main research question, and presents a refined perspective that social media can have some influence in the destination decisions, though at rather micro-levels.

4.7.3   Short trips

Short trips were another context with low social media influence in destination choice. Short trips are defined here as relatively straightforward travel arrangements that corresponded to self-drive tourism experiences taken by five participants over a few days. To these participants, "push' motivators prompted the destination decision, such as the need to escape from the routine of everyday life. Participants clarified various contextual cues associated with their straightforward arrangements, which are best summed up by Martha: "*My husband and I went to Bright which is on the border of New South Wales and Victoria, just for a weekend away from work.*" Such decisions were made at short notice, where Martha added: "*It would have been about one or two weeks prior to when we were going there. It was very short notice.*"

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Short trips appeared to feature low social media influence as such decisions are related to locations in regional areas that are unlikely to increase the perceptions of risks significantly. Peter epitomised such a view: "*I think with a place like Ballarat, you wouldn't worry so much as it is within a day's drive from Melbourne. It is not such an expensive holiday. Probably I will think more carefully when I pay for an expensive overseas trip.*" The findings revealed other variables that influenced the destination choice, such as price discounts. Linda revealed that her first time visit to Lorne was influenced by attractive accommodation prices: "*My husband got a call from an agency saying that he had a discounted hotel rate and we had to pay $270 for the three nights with breakfast included, so that's why we went.*" These exemplars show how peripheral cues such as price promotions can trigger decision-making. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), peripheral cues are associated with low involvement purchase decisions. This appears to be the case for these participants, destination choices reflecting low complexity do not require significant planning efforts. For this reason, peripheral cues such as price discounts may be enough to induce destination choice. Hence, in these circumstances, social media were reported to have minimal influence in destination choice. Nonetheless, there may be an opportunity for social media to be highly influential, especially in its ability to disseminate peripheral cues visibly to an online audience.

As a whole, short trips are often undertaken with less travel planning. These decisions employ a few heuristics such as price or accessibility. Social media may not have a significant influence on such considerations due to the minimal effort required to coordinate short trips and therefore have minimal influence towards these destination choice outcomes. This relates back to the conceptual framework by demonstrating that short trips as a characteristic of travel may be one way to discriminate social media influence on destination choice.

4.7.4   Opportunistic social media engagement

The 17 participants reporting low social media influence can be characterised as undertaking opportunistic social media engagements. Borrowing from Parent, Plangger and Bal (2011), the term opportunistic social media engagement is defined as the incidental participation of consumers to social media prior to the actual purchase decision. Applied to a tourism setting, opportunistic social media engagement may be in the form of booking accommodation using third party intermediaries (e.g. Expedia.com) and reading user reviews on particular properties when the destination is already chosen. It was evident that participants in this category had already made their destination decision from a range of sources, and social media contents were superficially assessed in relation to micro-level decisions, such as activity or hotel selection. Lionel shared his perspective: "*People on the forums told us certain beaches are very crowded. Only some of those private beaches on the northern side are quieter and the scenery better. We took note of these and went to these beaches and it is true what the reviewers say. When we booked our hotel we chose to be along the northern beach so at least we know we will have peace and tranquility.*" Due to the short nature of their visit, there appeared to be a greater willingness to accept wrong choices being made, as described by Moses: "*So even if the hotel doesn't live up to expectation, it is something you can put up with because you are there for a short period.*"

Nusair, Bilgihan and Okumus (2013) described opportunistic engagements to symbolise social media encountered at the point of making destination-related purchase decisions. Such engagements are therefore a contrast to other types of destination decision makers who actively seek out social media contents. Specifically, low influence contexts occur when the decision is made to visit a destination that warrants little planning. Social media may only feature at the

micro-level, though other cues such as price and location can have a more direct influence on choice outcomes. From several comments, there is evidence to suggest that participants were primarily concerned with what eWOM was disseminating, rather than where such contents were obtained:

> "*Yes there are social media sites that I came across but I can't name them.*" (Moses)

> "*Which social media site? I can't remember, it is probably somewhere in my computer at home.*" (Lionel)

> "*Yes I have come across some social media sites, but I can't remember which one was it anymore.*" (Martha)

The inability to recall where their social media engagement was located is indicative of the trivial nature of social media as a low influence in participants' destination choice. These participants were more concerned with obtaining eWOM as a means of supporting micro-level decisions. Such an outcome is consistent with what other scholars have found (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2010). This finding is relevant to the research as it indicates that less intentional efforts to seek social media contents are an antecedent to perceived influence levels on destination decisions.

4.7.5   Outcomes of section

In summary, this section has revealed a more nuanced understanding to address the main research question as to the factors characterising social media influence in destination choice. The section, in particular, pays attention to contexts of low social media influence that relates more to the decision context, rather than participant or destination considerations. The findings demonstrate that such decisions are based on characteristics that are of high familiarity, feature VFR experiences and require minimal planning. As these destination decisions appear to be of a low involvement nature, social media was reported to have low influence on such participants. Table 4.13 documents the characteristics related to low social media influence in destination choice.

Table 4.13: Characteristics of low social media influence in destination choice

Participant characteristics	Destination characteristics	Trip characteristics
• Opportunistic social media engagement for micro-level decisions	• Repeat visits • VFR tourism	• Short trips

Table 4.13 has documented characteristics of low social media influence to feature generally low involvement destination choices. This may be attributed to the high level of familiarity associated with repeat visits to a destination, the cultural affinity of VFR tourists to their hosts, and short trips that can be organised with minimal complexity. For this reason, the engagement with social media is at a micro-level to discriminate between alternatives. In contrast, the destination of choice to these participants are more likely to be influenced by other agents such as past experience and WOM because of the heightened destination image and source credibility.

4.8   Chapter conclusion

In summary, the chapter has shown how social media influence in destination decisions should be conceptualised across different contexts. The chapter first identified whether social media was employed for vacation planning. The outcomes show that social media was used in the majority (35 out of 39) of participants. Next, the chapter analysed why social media were employed. The findings revealed that social media were utilised not only as they were easily accessible and convenient, but also as a means to "pre-test" the destination experience from the lens of other tourists' created contents. Subsequently, the chapter discussed how social media featured vis a vis other agents of influence on the destination decision process. The findings indicate that whilst they were viewed as being more influential in some cases, others felt that the lack of perceived source and content credibility suggested moderate to low influence levels. Furthermore, the chapter reported that most participants already had a well-developed destination image of where they had strong intentions to visit, with social media further validating such pre-determined choices. Synthesising these collective outcomes, the chapter then derived specific factors that characterise high, moderate and low social media influence in destination decisions. The key outcomes of each section are summarised in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14: Contextual factors characterising social media influence levels in destination choice

	High influence	Moderate influence	Low influence
Participant characteristics	• High social media engagement	• Reliance on WOM as a credibility cue	• Opportunistic social media engagement for micro-level decisions
Destination characteristics	• Both domestic and international destinations	• First time versus repeat destinations	• Repeat visits • VFR tourism
Trip characteristics	• Fewer number of agents of influence	• Semi-structured destination decisions	• Short trips

To uncover contextual cues characterising social media influence, the remainder of this chapter will be discussed in accordance to the outcomes obtained from each section.

From the analysis of characteristics related to social media non-use, the findings showed participants who did not employ social media understandably exhibited no social influence on their destination choices. Reasons for not employing social media included technology saturation and decisions that required very little planning. These participants were excluded for further analysis.

The vast majority of participants however utilised social media. Within the usage patterns, the findings indicated that forums were most commonly used, though social networking sites were identified to be more influential due to the nature of known sources. This distinction was crucial to the influential roles of social media in addressing two key areas of mitigating dissonance and credibility considerations.

Subsequently, the construction of credibility revealed six cues that participants employed concurrently. These six cues were perceived similarity, visual evidence, quantity of contents, need for elaboration, valence of information and recency. Of contents. Constructed credibility, while appearing as an oxymoron, is an antecedent to influence because of the concurrent production and consumption of social media contents that occurs in a highly unmoderated environment. Investigating credibility construction further explains social media engagement and its corresponding influence on destination choice.

The findings were then divided into three key categories – High, moderate and low social media influence. The chapter first unpacked contextual cues associated with high social media influence. The findings revealed that high social media influence is driven by greater engagement and higher perceived credibility. In other words, high influence is connected with decision-makers who possess a sound understanding and appreciation of social media. This resulted in social media being highly influential on their destination decisions. Further, having favourable social media experience in a non-tourism context also triggered their willingness to use and be influenced in their destination decisions. Such circumstances also occur amidst the presence of few agents of influence, which suggest the reliance some decision-makers place on social media.

In comparison, moderate social media influence involved decision-makers who possessed relatively complex destination images, with social media employed in support of positive destination attitudes prior to choice. The research also showed the strength of WOM as a reliable cue that influenced these decision-makers. Finally, moderate social media influence characterised semi-structured destination decisions, primarily to assist in locating specific information within the vacation planning process.

Finally, in circumstances of low influence, social media is used primarily at the micro-levels such as accommodation and dining after a destination has been pre-selected. This research found that social media had minimal impact on destination choice for some participants because of the heightened familiarity with destinations or the lower complexity associated with such decisions. Instead, other considerations such as price and time outside of work commitments were main drivers as to when a vacation can be planned. These considerations corresponded to the types of destinations chosen. Often, short trips were made within a short planning timeframe, whereas other destination decisions such as VFR tourism types were undertaken during school holiday so that the entire family can travel together.

Overall, Chapter 4 has shown that social media influence on destination choice can be characterised using contextual cues. The research argues that knowing these contextual cues is important because they lend a refined understanding as to how social media is perceived, used and exerted as an influence on destination choice. Pertinently, the contextual cues reflect the multiplicity of vacation planning scenarios and that destination choices cannot be treated as a uniform entity. Additionally, the research also contends that it is insufficient to argue that social media has an influence or has no influence without knowing the precipitating factors of destination choice. Collectively, the research has delivered theoretical contributions and implications for practitioners in their adoption of social media and has led to the conceptualisation of a continuum of influence. This will be subsequently discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Contributions, Implications, Limitations and Conclusion

This chapter provides a closure to the thesis. The aim of the thesis was to investigate the contextual factors characterising social media influence in destination choice. These have been attained through a systematic progression evidenced through the flow of the thesis.

Chapter 1 provided an overview of social media as studied in tourism. It was highlighted that tourism providers, including DMOs, have widely adopted social media, though are not necessarily enlightened as to its implications on their organisations. The chapter also synthesised an overview of social media through tracing its origins and explosive growth. Social media are expressed to highlight the growing trends of connectivity and information exchange building on technological developments.

Chapter 2 consolidated the key literature to help frame the research. Drawing from the overarching framework of vacation planning, the chapter synthesised how destination choices are made. A key feature of destination choice was that such decisions are based on perceptions, better known as the destination image. Social media are now a prominent tool for information search to assist with destination decisions. Through the synthesis of destination choice models, tourism literature has established that destination choice is an outcome derived from personal characteristics, decision contexts and destination image. Further, destination decision-making can be influenced at any stage by a range of agents, which may be provided through social media. However, the notion of credibility underpins the potential magnitude of influence exerted by each agent. Extant studies have suggested that social media possess varying levels of influence based on destination choice contextual factors. The variance in understood outcomes is a key research gap that requires further clarification. The gap led to the discussion

of how influence may be understood through a review of different models of influence. Two models, namely the SPM model proposed by Martin and Woodside (2012) and Chen's (1998) TCDM Model were evaluated to be appropriate to investigate social media influence. However, as the TDCM model was aimed at teasing out influence at a pre-visit stage, it was therefore justified to be the basis for the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2. Finally, the key themes of the literature are integrated into a conceptual framework that located the research aims and questions.

Chapter 3 provided the methodology in order to address the research question. The chapter began with the declaration of the researcher's constructivism position. The constructivism position is based on understanding how knowledge is constructed from the perspectives of the research participants. This mode of enquiry has informed the research design in employing an exploratory investigation of the contextual factors for social media influence in destination choice. The chapter also justified the rationale for utilising in-depth, semi-structured interviews based on being open and its ability to probe participants as to what has influenced their destination choice. In the chapter, the steps taken to develop the interview guide were described, and in turn, pre and pilot tested for the overall flow and clarity of the research. Subsequently, the chapter has noted the steps taken to obtain ethical clearance. Chapter 3 also established where the invitation to express interest would be publicised to obtain a pool of participants. Additionally, the chapter listed the process for data analysis through the three components of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Conducting data analysis was through a systematic manner in which the derived themes were used to better structure the findings. Finally, Chapter 3 discussed how trustworthiness was achieved through a rigorous process of self-reflexivity and comparing the findings with

literature. Overall, the chapter explained how the methodology was devised in order to meet the needs of the research.

The findings, as emerging from the data, were presented in Chapter 4. Among the participants, an external information search was widely evident, and social media has featured prominently. The chapter also revealed that the majority of participants employed social media to at least some extent for their destination decisions. However, most participants reported a moderate to low influence of social media on their destination decision. Participants further reiterated that a range of social media sites were utilised, with each site featuring various levels of interaction. The chapter identified six cues to assess social media credibility. This process of credibility assessment has enabled a more refined understanding of how participants make sense of social media contents. Based on the findings, it was found that social media are not a highly credible source, which probably explained why it was more likely to feature as a moderate to low level of influence at the level of destination choice. However, there are a few exemplars where social media is reportedly the major influence on destination choice. Nonetheless, the research has conceptualised social media influence as a validation tool for a pre-selected destination, rather than being the outright source to determine choice selection. However, there are few exemplars where social media is reportedly the major influence on destination choice. These contexts appeared to have arisen out of the extensive social media engagement exhibited by such participants.

The rest of Chapter 5 further clarifies the outcomes and contributions of the thesis. Section 5.1 will provide answers to address the research questions. Next, Section 5.2 presents theoretical contributions of the research to existing knowledge. Subsequently, Section 5.3 discusses the outcomes of the thesis towards managerial implications. Following this, Section 4.4 identifies

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limitations of the research, while Section 5.5 proposes future research that may be developed. Finally, Section 5.6 concludes the thesis.

5.1   Answers to research questions

Through the demonstration of the destination choices associated with social media influence, the research is now well-positioned to present answers to the research questions. To recap, the primary research question was:

- What are the contextual factors characterising the various levels of social media influence in destination decisions?

Derived from the literature were another three secondary questions:

1. What is the comparative influence of social media compared to other agents?

2. What is the relative influence of social media sites?

3. Is influence related to decision-maker or decision characteristics?

As the answers to the secondary questions will help to address the main research question, these will first be addressed.

Secondary question 1: What is the comparative influence of social media compared to other agents?

The majority of participants used social media to inform their destination decisions (Section 4.3). This outcome is similar to tourism literature that have demonstrated the role social media plays in terms of tourism and destination decisions (Chung & Koo, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Additionally, most participants used another 1-2 agents. This is likewise consistent with tourism literature that have reported the concurrent use of social media with other agents for

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vacation planning (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Davies & Cairncross, 2013; Fotis *et al.*, 2011). The findings demonstrated that there was nuanced influence occurring. So to compare with the other agents, first the group of influence will be categorised. A small proportion of participants were not influenced by social media at all (Section 4.2), while another small proportion of participants were highly influenced (Section 4.5). The majority of participants identified low influence (Section 4.7), while a large minority also stating moderate influence on their destination decisions (Section 4.6).

For the group reporting high influence, the other agents used include WOM, travel agencies and travel guidebooks (Section 4.5). As noted, social media was the primary influence, and for most, the other agents had limited to no influence. The research showed that social media is of higher influence to other agents when destination decision-makers exhibit higher engagement levels with social media. These circumstances have arisen out of their non-tourism social media adoption that have appeared to be transferred to a destination choice context. The social media experience has prompted such individuals to be more confident in knowing how to navigate their way through enormous quantities of social media contents and construct credibility perceptions as an antecedent to influence.

For participants whose destination decision was moderately to lowly influenced by social media, other influences include WOM, travel guidebooks and past experience (Section 4.6 and 4.7). In these decisions, social media was generally was prominent secondary influence. Two plausible explanations emerging from the findings may be attributed to destination familiarity and credibility considerations. First, in terms of destination familiarity, participants' knowledge of probable destination choices is developed from a myriad of sources. Hence, unless a destination has very recently transformed significantly, social media are unlikely to

modify the cognitive image of a destination, as Banyai (2012) has postulated. Second, social media are a conduit where destination-related information can be disseminated by unknown sources. This has resulted in users questioning their perceived credibility. While the research has located how some decision-makers construct credibility through employing a range of cues when engaging with social media, others are likely to be influenced by agents that are more credible for destination decisions. These have been demonstrated to be past experience and WOM. Nonetheless, the research has shown that an affective destination image component can be shaped through social media engagements. This is an outcome of constructing favourable dispositions through social media contents that result in strengthening a decision-maker's attitudes towards a destination. As these insights were derived from circumstances where a decision-maker was inclined to select a destination, social media influence was exerted to reinforce personal beliefs. For this reason, moderate to low social media influence appeared to be the main occurrences within the research.

There are also some circumstances where social media have no influence whatsoever. These instances occur where decision-makers face technological saturation or that social media is not perceived to be of any value to their vacation planning. In these circumstances, social media will have no corresponding influence on such individuals and their destination decisions. Overall, the influence of social media compared to other agents varied due to a range of other contextual factors.

Secondary question 2: What is the relative influence of social media sites?

As presented in Section 4.3, use of specific social media sites did not equate to influence. In fact, it was found that whilst forums were most commonly used, the most influential were

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actually social networking sites such as Facebook. Whilst social media demonstrated different levels of influence on participants' destination decisions, there was commonality as to the sites that were influential. The most influential social media sites (e.g. Facebook) were characterised by having known contributors, while for others, Facebook was the tool to have the conversation or information disseminated, which in this case happened to be a particular social media site. At a secondary level of influence, social media sites such as TripAdvisor were noted. Other social media sites were used such as blogs and YouTube, though not deemed very influential.

The distinction between level of use and influence is clearly context specific. Social media and its reported influence is also moderated by the types of interactions any user has on a given site. To the participants, interactions levels vary depending on the type, length and purpose of engagement. These factors cast light on the perceived usefulness of social media that is highly contextualised, both in a tourism and non-tourism environment. Given the different types and nature of engagement, the research therefore amplifies the justification for any corresponding investigation of social media influence to feature comparative studies involving two or more sites.

Secondary question 3: Is influence related to decision-maker or decision characteristics?

Decision-maker characteristics such as gender and age did not correlate with any particular levels of influence. Additionally, neither did the make-up of the travel party appear to relate to levels of social media influence. The only decision-maker characteristic that has an associated pattern with that of social media influence on destination decision-making was social media engagement. All of those that were highly influence by social media had high levels of social media engagement (Section 4.5.2), whilst understandably those with no social media influence

had no engagement with social media at all (Section 4.2). Nonetheless, there were participants with high social media engagement levels across the moderate and low influence groups as well. However, the proportion of highly engaged social media users decreased in the move from high to moderate influence (Section 4.6), and again to low influence (Section 4.7).

Decision characteristics appeared to demonstrate better indicative explanations for variance in social media influence in destination decisions. Specifically, high influence is suggested to be related to decision-maker characteristics. These decision-makers possess high social media engagement levels where their immersion in the online communities have resulted in greater disposition to use social media sites for everyday experiences, including vacation planning. This engagement has led to high social media influence on their destination choices.

However, moderate social media influence is more likely to be associated with decision characteristics. In these circumstances, decision-makers have a relatively developed destination image to choose a destination that is best suited to meet their needs. Where participants were already pre-disposed to choose a destination, social media were a solicited tool that elevated the destination appeal. This outcome resulted in moderate social media influence through the validation of a pre-selected destination. The validation process lends greater justification that their decision was a sound one, and in turn, mitigates potential post-decision dissonance prior to actual visitation.

For low influence contexts, social media influence corresponded with the decision characteristics. However, such instances differ to moderate influence outcomes because low influence were particularly characterising decisions that were of lower complexity. As participants could base their decisions using few peripheral cues such as price and distance,

destination choice outcomes could be made without the need for extensive social media engagement.

Collectively, these insights served to address the main research question:
What are the contextual factors characterising the various levels of social media influence in destination decisions?

First, this research has arbitrarily identified four levels of social media influence in destination decisions: High, moderate, low, and no influence. Importantly, social media most often plays an influencing role with other influence agents. It is in some exceptions that social media alone influences a destination decision. The influence with other agents increases as social media's influence decreases. Even within social media, not all sites exert similar influence levels. The social media sites that have identifiable sources are most often perceived with higher levels of credibility, and hence influence. Nonetheless, those participants more engaged with social media do not place as much importance on having known sources for social media to influence their decisions. The level of influence appears to be most explained through decision context, as compared to the person making the decision (though level of social media engagement does present an indicative pattern). This indicates, that even for a particular destination decision-maker, the level of social media influence will change dependent upon the nature of the decision being made. More specific to the primary research question, across the three influence groups, are three contextual factors that were found to characterise the various levels of social media influence in destination decisions. These are destination familiarity, complexity of travel planning and perceptions of credibility. These will now be briefly discussed in relation to the research question.

The role of destination familiarity is embedded with the conceptual framework (Section 2.7) in undertaking information search. This has been guided by tourism literature that have demonstrated that active information search occurs in circumstances of lower destination familiarity (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Milman & Pizam, 1995). The findings showed a consistent trend with literature as destination familiarity was demonstrated to be a marker for social media influence. High influence occurred most often in circumstances of lower destination familiarity. This was because social media helped decision-makers to consolidate an array of relevant content to increase one's awareness, and as such develop the destination image. Conversely, when destinations were more familiar to a decision-maker, then social media was reported to be of low influence. In these circumstances, social media were less influential due to the fewer opportunities to modify highly familiar destinations that have an established and already complex destination image.

The conceptual framework (Section 2.7) synthesised the role of travel complexity as a moderator of destination information search. Derived from tourism literature, travel complexity can be used to distinguish between vacation planning and the corresponding investment of time and effort to undertake information search (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Fodness & Murray, 1999). The complexity of travel planning was another factor that may be used to characterise social media influence. Vacation plans that were more complex to arrange necessitated the use of multiple channels of information, which included social media. When social media sites were used to obtain very specific information, their influence was more evident in destination choice. Likewise, when destination decisions could be made using a few peripheral cues, social media exerted lower influence in destination choice. There are obviously some exceptions, as in the case of Kristie whose destination choice was based on the photograph found on social media,

which was sufficient to induce actual visitation. Hence, the research proposes that social media can be a peripheral cue for less complex destination decisions.

Perceptions of credibility also underpin social media influence. High influence occurred when participants ascertained that the source or contents were of greater credibility. However, these circumstances arose out of a robust construction of credibility using several cues. In contrast, when social media was perceived to be of less credibility, then the destination decision is influenced by other agents. Participant engagement on social media, if any, will then be characterised by seeking insights in support of a pre-selected destination.

Having addressed the research questions, the remainder of this section will discuss areas that were highlighted as instrumental to destination choice, but did not emerge as distinctive factors in conceptualising social media influence.

The element of risk that was raised as a key consideration within literature due to the experiential nature of tourism did not appear to confound decision-makers across the influence continuum. It was anticipated that the heightened risk associated with the lack of source and content credibility on social media would skew the perceived influence towards the low influence end of the continuum, as prompted by Kusumasondjaja *et al.* (2012). While this appeared to be the case for decision-makers characterised by moderate to low social media influence, it did not deter others on the high influence end of the continuum. The plausible explanation for this may be a result of their deep appreciation of social media benefits across a range of life experiences that are translated to a destination choice context. In this space, the heightened engagement with social media instils a robust set of criteria to ascertain social

media credibility. These outcomes then lead to greater receptivity of such decision-makers to be influenced by social media contents.

Another consideration that did not result in a distinctive influence pattern was the composition of travel party. Across the continuum, both solo travellers and others with at least one partner were located within high, moderate and low influence classifications. While literature has suggested that larger travel parties increases planning complexity, the research did not discern any notable patterns to characterise this outcome. Rather, it should be framed that engagement levels and perceived attitudes towards social media were more likely to differentiate influence outcomes. This finding validates the work of Thebault *et al.* (2013) in arguing that the disposition and engagement with social media is a better indicator of adoption and corresponding influence, rather than the composition of the travel party. As the findings have demonstrated, the responsibility of choosing a destination rests on the shoulders of the main decision-maker, and this outcome is assessed on the basis of best meeting desired vacation experiences. Thus, when the interactions and perceived benefits of social media outweigh other agents of influence, then they exert greater influence on the destinations chosen.

5.2   Theoretical contributions

The research makes four theoretical contributions to existing literature. First, literature has positioned high social media influence in destination choice to occur in the context of risky destinations (Fakharyan *et al.*, 2012; Simms, 2012). This research has instead argued that high social media influence occurs due to the presence of greater social media engagement. The theoretical contribution is that a broader perspective of high influence contexts should be adopted to include the decision-maker characteristics rather than solely based on destination types. This assertion builds on other studies outside of tourism that have argued that greater

engagement on social media fosters the willingness to be influenced (Chu & Kim, 2011; Crawford, 2009).

Second, literature has found that moderate social media influence in destination choice occur due to the lack of perceived credibility of source or contents (Albarq, 2014; Cox *et al.*, 2009; Fotis *et al.*, 2009). This research has instead synthesised that moderate social media influence are derived because of the greater familiarity to a destination. The theoretical contribution is that moderate social media influence may correspond to destination characteristics in addition to the credibility of social media information. Outside of tourism, scholars have contended that familiarity with a decision moderates the scale of social media influence (Kim & Ahmad, 2013; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). The research, therefore, argues that such postulates likewise apply to tourism.

Third, literature has posited that low social media influence are a consequence of heightened destination familiarity (Davies & Cairncross, 2013; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). This research has instead demonstrated that low influence is related to the lesser complexity of travel arrangements. As such, the contribution is that low influence is not merely about one's knowledge of a destination, but should also incorporate the ease of vacation planning as a consideration. Building on the work of Power and Phillips-Wren (2011), the research ascertains that less complicated decisions are a contextual factor to characterise low social media influence, as in the case of some destination choices.

Finally, literature has showed that social media credibility is assessed using few content cues (Cox *et al.*, 2009; Davies & Cairncross, 2013). Instead, the research has articulated that credibility assessment is valuable proxy for various levels of social media influence in

destination choice. High influence occurs during a robust construction of social media cues, while moderate and low influence levels appear to use cues more sparingly. Hence, the contribution is that social media credibility assessment is a necessary antecedent to influencing destination choice.

Collectively, these theoretical contributions point to the need for contextual cues to be clarified in order to better conceptualise social media influence. These outcomes have distilled that destination choice is derived from a myriad of considerations, and therefore social media influence should be interpreted differently. By aligning the contextual cues to social media influence, the research has addressed some of the criticisms raised by Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) in terms of the under-researched nature of social media influence within tourism. Condensing the outcomes of the research has led to the clarification as to how a continuum of influence should be conceptualised. The research, therefore extends the TCDM model by illuminating how social media influence may be understood. Synthesising the theoretical contributions of the research has led to a refined conceptual model of social media influence in destination choice, as seen in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: A continuum of social media influence in destination choice

	High influence	Moderate influence	Low influence	No influence
Information search	• Reflected high social media engagement • Adopted towards both domestic and international destinations • Undertaken with the use of few sources of information	• Reflected moderate to high social media engagement • Reduced quantities of information search required due to greater destination familiarity	• Involved minimal time and effort due to low complexity of decisions • Undertaken with the use of few sources of information	• Collated through other sources due to technological saturation or perception that social media is of minimal use to the vacation
Evaluation	• Ascertained social media contents for similar-to-me interests • Delved into the specificity of information • Constructed credibility based on several cues	• Inclined to select destinations that are already perceived favourably • Utilised social media contents to validate decisions • Processed social media contents on the basis of consistency of information	• Matched destination choices due to travel motivation, rather than social media engagements • Assessed using more credible agents of influence • Possessed complex destination image	• Deliberated out of other constraints such as costs, duration and work commitments
Implementation of destination choice	• Planned for destination choice in a highly iterative manner • Relied on extensive social media inputs due to greater trust and experience with use	• Instilled a propensity to experiment within semi-structured vacations • Strengthened intentions to visit a destination	• Utilised social media for micro-decisions once destination has been selected	• Developed through agents of influence other than social media

From Figure 5.1, the continuum of social media influence is mapped across two axes of the conceptual framework, and characterising social media influence. On the vertical axis lies the key stages of the Chen's (1998) TCDM Model of information search, evaluation and implementation and situated within a destination choice context. These stages are identified to be integral in steering the outcome of destination choice and hence, are also where different agents of influence operate. The horizontal axis synthesises the outcomes of the research in portraying specific characteristics for each level of social media influence.

The continuum of influence therefore extends the contributions of the research to theory by distinguishing the circumstances that can help to better understand social media influence in destination choice. This is achieved by disentangling the participant, destination and decision considerations in order to obtain a more nuanced understanding as to how social media influence should be conceptualised. Moving across the different levels on the continuum, it can now be ascertained that each of these considerations vary in terms of their roles to illuminate how social media influence is to be understood.

Within high social media influence contexts, participant characteristics appear to be an indicative antecedent to influence. This is evidenced by the heightened social media engagement overriding other considerations towards destination choice. It is through this immersion with social media that has resulted in a strong catalyst for influence to some decision-makers.

However, moving across the continuum, there appears to be a shift in the dynamics of social media influence. Destination and decision characteristics are more prominent in conditions of moderate to low social media influence. These circumstances related to destination familiarity

and lower complexity of travel arrangements suggests that social media is of secondary importance when contemplating the suitability of a destination. Rather, as a result of a well-developed destination image, and possessing sufficient experience to undertake decisions, most decision-makers have derived their destination choice outcomes with the confidence of meeting desired vacation outcomes. Possessing such strong attitudinal beliefs reduces the role of social media as an agent of influence to manipulate choice outcomes. Instead, social media acts as a proxy for validation of a pre-selected destination.

Despite the outcome that social media exerts high influence in only some instances, the research found that social media is adopted by almost all the participants at the micro-level. This is related to the decisions such as accommodation, dining, transport, attractions where there appeared to be a greater willingness to allow social media to influence outcomes. This contrast to the macro-level of destination choice is perhaps attributed to the time and spatial orientation of risk for micro-decisions. Participants were prepared to accept wrong choices of a restaurant, hotel or place of interest because each of this was just one component of the entire vacation. Other aspects could therefore, compensate for a lower than expected outcome of service and could be easily remedied by going somewhere else. In comparison, destination choice is perhaps a decision that has more far reaching consequences. To most participants, getting the destination choice right is of utmost concern as subsequent micro-decisions hinge on the selection of the destination. For this reason, the destination image, as shaped by a range of agents of influence such as social media, is scrutinised while contemplating personal interests. As the research showed, the destination image is primarily formulated by past travel experiences and WOM, often developing prior to the existence of social media. For this reason, the influence of social media towards destination choice is most likely to be in the form of strengthening visit intentions. However, in some circumstances, social media has been
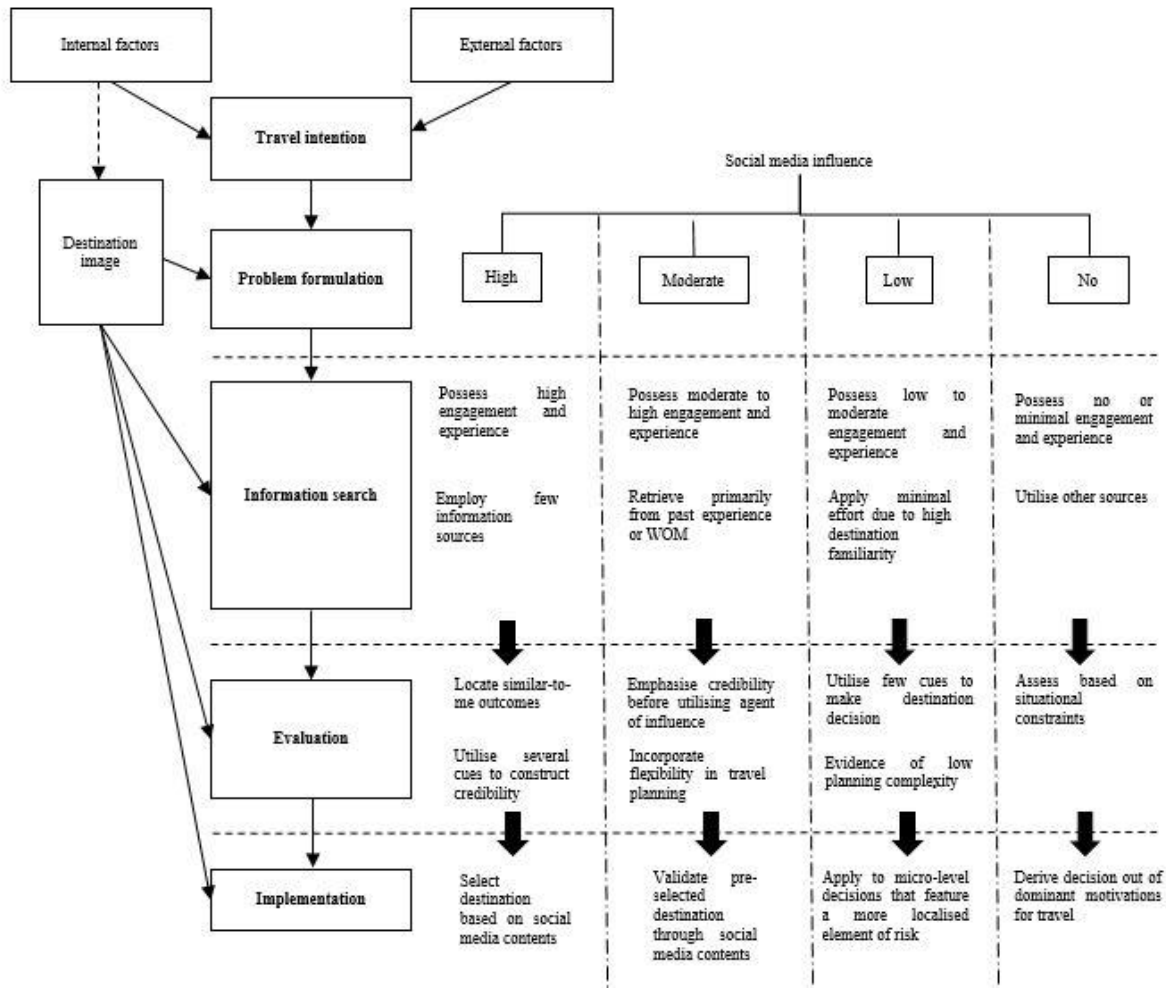
demonstrated to alter the suitability of a destination as an alternative to another. Overall, the research has ascertained that a continuum of social media influence exists but this needs to first be understood from the triumvirate relationship between participant, destination and decision characteristics of destination choice. This is because destination choice is highly contextual, and the research has established that the contexts matter for understanding social media influence.

Cumulatively, the outcomes of the research assist with adapting the TCDM Model proposed by Chen (1998). As his model was developed well before the proliferation of social media, this research provides a refined perspective of social media as an agent of influence applied to destination choice. The revamped model of social media influence in destination choice is illustrated in Figure 5.2.

The continuum of social media influence is mapped onto the three key phases of the TCDM model. In addition, the characteristics of each facet of the influence continuum is synthesised from the research outcomes. These details contribute to the current scope of literature by informing how to conceptualise social media influence and the attributes related to the sequence associated with destination decision-making processes. The manifestation of influence progressing from information search to evaluation and implementation are demonstrated to be distinctive across the continuum and emphasises the need to contextualise destination choice. The strength of this revamped model is derived from the depth of insights obtained from a range of decision-makers across a spectrum of destinations chosen for various reasons. Such a model expands the breadth and depth of destination contexts in an environment where current studies have focused on very narrowly defined markets and destinations. The

subsequent section will analyse the implications emerging from the research for industry and managerial practices within tourism.

Figure 5.2: A revamped TCDM Model

	High	Moderate	Low	No
Information search	Possess high engagement and experience	Possess moderate to high engagement and experience	Possess low to moderate engagement and experience	Possess no or minimal engagement and experience
	Employ few information sources	Retrieve primarily from past experience or WOM	Apply minimal effort due to high destination familiarity	Utilise other sources
Evaluation	Locate similar-to-me outcomes	Emphasise credibility before utilising agent of influence	Utilise few cues to make destination decision	Assess based on situational constraints
	Utilise several cues to construct credibility	Incorporate flexibility in travel planning	Evidence of low planning complexity	
Implementation	Select destination based on social media contents	Validate pre-selected destination through social media contents	Apply to micro-level decisions that feature a more localised element of risk	Derive decision out of dominant motivations for travel

5.3   Managerial implications

Two managerial implications are identified from the outcomes obtained in this research. First, as the findings have illuminated, high social media influence is linked to social media engagement. For this reason, DMOs will need to keep find ways to further interact with social media users from the initial desire to go on vacation through to destination choice. Likewise, destination managers can consider how tourists in the other social media influence groups

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(moderate/low/none) could be targeted with particular marketing messages to influence their decision-making. This interaction may comprise participating in conversations on distinct social media sites. Organisations that maintain a conscientious effort to understand how their destinations are perceived can then respond to the needs and interests of tourists through various social media channels (Milwood *et al.*, 2013; Munar, 2012). Yet, in this space, the monitoring of social media sites will need to be carefully approached. While a DMO has no direct control over the contents on social media, it can respond accordingly to mitigate potential areas that have cast a destination in a negative light. However, the response will need to be carefully structured, as protecting the destination image can be construed as overt marketing efforts, which are perceived to be less credible online content (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). Nonetheless, the speed at which social media contents are reaching potential visitors will hasten the efforts of DMOs to engage on various sites.

The second managerial implication is how to address the issue of social media credibility. As the research has demonstrated, credibility perceptions are an important antecedent to influence. For this reason, a DMO must consider how best to address source and content credibility. As current credibility perceptions across some sites are still unclear, the findings may suggest a need for eWOM contents to be juxtaposed with WOM from known sources. Some attempts to do so are already underway. For instance, by incorporating Facebook profiles on TripAdvisor, decision-makers can now see where their networks have visited and attribute greater credibility to these known identities. However, such initiatives will raise further considerations as to social media user privacy issues as well as disclosing personal and digital identities. Some studies have argued that some social media users value their ability to remain anonymous and choose not to be contacted (Berger & Paris, 2013; Illum, Ivanov & Liang, 2010). In these circumstances, the integration of eWOM contents with source identities remains a key

consideration for DMO and other industry practitioners (Bakr & Ali, 2013; Kusumasondjaja *et al.*, 2012). Incidentally, TripAdvisor appointed Wendy Perrin, a renowned travel writer as their advocate (Clampet, 2014). Yet, it remains to be seen if having a prominent opinion leader would increase the perception of source or content credibility to the millions of TripAdvisor users around the world. Likewise, the potential for other social media sites to have a well-known travel personality on their sites is an area that managers can likewise consider. These individuals may include Lonely Planet founder Tony Wheeler or even adventure enthusiast, Bear Grylls. This decision will obviously depend on the type of site, the destination or activities on offer and reputations of such 'ambassadors'.

5.4 Limitations

Whilst the findings of this research have contributed significantly to understanding social media influence in destination decisions, nonetheless there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as an exploratory investigation, the results obtained are reflective only of the existing participants. This approach was also based on a constructivist paradigm, where other scholars may have different interpretations based on their research epistemologies. Other samples from various geographical or cultural backgrounds will be needed to further validate the research outcomes. Second, the research collected data based on vacation decisions at a single point in time. A longitudinal study may reveal differences in terms of reported social media influence. Third, the research was limited to the range of social media sites accessed to recruit and select participants. The use of other social media sites such as TripAdvisor, YouTube or Lonely Planet Thorn Tree may provide different perspectives of influence. Fourth, the research sought insights from destination decision-makers in a retrospective manner in relation to their destination choice. This may result in the omission of some details where destination decisions can sometimes be sub-conscious. Such a limitation could be addressed

through the use of journals to diarise the decision-making considerations leading to future choice outcomes. Finally, the use of two different recruitment methods could have introduced some bias as to how participants perceive their importance of social media as an influence and hence, paint a false impression of its influence in destination choice. These limitations notwithstanding, the research has documented avenues for future studies.

5.5   Future studies

Future studies may examine the impact of social media engagement to obtain discernible differences in terms of their roles in tourism. Such findings will certainly assist DMOs to better position their social media initiatives on various sites. Other studies may conduct a comparison of popular with less popular destinations to test for social media influence. In addition, studies may wish to examine the contexts for social media initiated campaigns against destinations that have ignored social media that have led to heightened visitor numbers over a longitudinal basis. Subsequent research can also be undertaken in the direction of unpacking usage patterns and social media experience as drivers of influence, as noted by other scholars (Kang & Schuett, 2013; Leung *et al.*, 2013; Pennington-Gray *et al.*, 2013). There can also be subsequent investigations of the TCDM model and its application for multi-destination rather than single decisions. Outside of tourism, the model can be assessed for decision-making towards different service contexts or product purchases. The various avenues provide ample directions to further advance the role of social media influence within a consumer behaviour context.

5.6   Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has addressed the knowledge gaps by synthesising the contextual factors characterising social media influence in destination choice. By undertaking this research, a refined understanding of social media influence in destination choice has been

produced. The key outcomes have heightened the need for contextual cues to be a primary consideration in examining social media influence. The research has cumulated with an understanding that social media remains a primary tool in support of destination choice, though it can on some occasions exert high influence. An explanation for their reported influence levels has been that participants' familiarity with, and preferences for a particular destination are likely to have developed prior to social media existence. However, there is an apparent trend that social media adoption is widespread across the vacation planning process. Such trends may reposition social media to be more prominent over other agents of influence due to the ease of use and personalisation of information in the future. Overall, social media will continue to transform destination decision-making processes, as they become more conspicuous in the online environment.

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Appendix A: Ethics approval to undertake the research

MONASH University

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC)
Research Office

Human Ethics Certificate of Approval

Date:	27 October 2011
Project Number:	CF11/2846 – 2011001668
Project Title:	The influence of social media in destination choice
Chief Investigator:	Dr Glen Croy
Approved:	From: 27 October 2011 To: 27 October 2016

Terms of approval

1. The Chief investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, and a copy forwarded to MUHREC before any data collection can occur at the specified organisation. **Failure to provide permission letters to MUHREC before data collection commences is in breach of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research**.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash University letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must contain your project number.
6. **Amendments to the approved project (including changes in personnel):** Requires the submission of a Request for Amendment form to MUHREC and must not begin without written approval from MUHREC. Substantial variations may require a new application.
7. **Future correspondence:** Please quote the project number and project title above in any further correspondence.
8. **Annual reports:** Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report. This is determined by the date of your letter of approval.
9. **Final report:** A Final Report should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
10. **Monitoring:** Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
11. **Retention and storage of data:** The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

Professor Ben Canny
Chair, MUHREC

cc: Dr Judith Mair, Mr Min-En Aaron Tham

Postal – Monash University, Vic 3800, Australia
Building 3E, Room 111, Clayton Campus, Wellington Road, Clayton
Telephone +61 3 9905 5490 Facsimile +61 3 9905 3831
Email muhrec@monash.edu   www.monash.edu/research/ethics/human/index/html
ABN 12 377 614 012 CRICOS Provider #00008C

Appendix B: Structure of the interview guide

Hello, I'm Aaron Tham, a PhD student from the Department of Management in Monash University. Thank you for taking time to be part of my research project. Please see the explanatory statement that I have prepared for you. Are there any questions that you would like to raise before we proceed with the interview? If not, I would like ask if you have made a travel decision within the last six months?

This acts as a screening question that could terminate the interview should the participant not meet the criteria.

If yes, please review the consent form once again and then sign on the consent form.

Preliminary Question

1. Please tell me more about the destination you chose

Destination Choice

1. Please further describe how you made the decision to choose that destination

Researcher will focus on the themes that participants raise to probe into the destination choice process.

Information sources

Influence

Other agents …

Risks

Credibility

Cost

Time

Motivation for travel

Social media (May need to prompt participants)

Laddering technique if they say X, follow-up with Y

Influences on Destination Choice

1. What were the influences on your choice of the destination?
2. Can you elaborate on the different influences on your choice of destination?
3. How did the different sources influence your destination choice?

4. In your opinion, which of these influences listed today was the most significant on your destination choice?

<u>*Final Question*</u>

Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation?

Student researcher will close the interview by collecting participant demographics

1. How often do you travel?
2. What is your age group?
3. Who did you travel with to your chosen destination?
4. How often do you use the internet? Are there any particular websites that you visit for travel planning?
5. How far from home do you usually travel?
6. What is your preferred mode of travel (air, land (coach, car, train) or sea)?

Researcher conducts member check to ensure that the interviewer details are correctly recorded and coded. Finally, the session is concluded by restating the overall objective of the interview. In addition, researcher informs participants that their inputs to the research may be accessed in a summarised form through email. Researcher thanks participant for their time and insights that are a valued contribution to the research.

Do you make your travel decisions?

Research project – call for participants

Monash University is looking for participants to take part in a research project that explores how individuals determine their travel destination and what influences their choice.

Participants should be travel decision-makers, over 18 and conversant in English.

This project involves an in-depth interview about your recent travel experience and destination decision-making process. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience on-campus at Monash and take approximately an hour to complete.
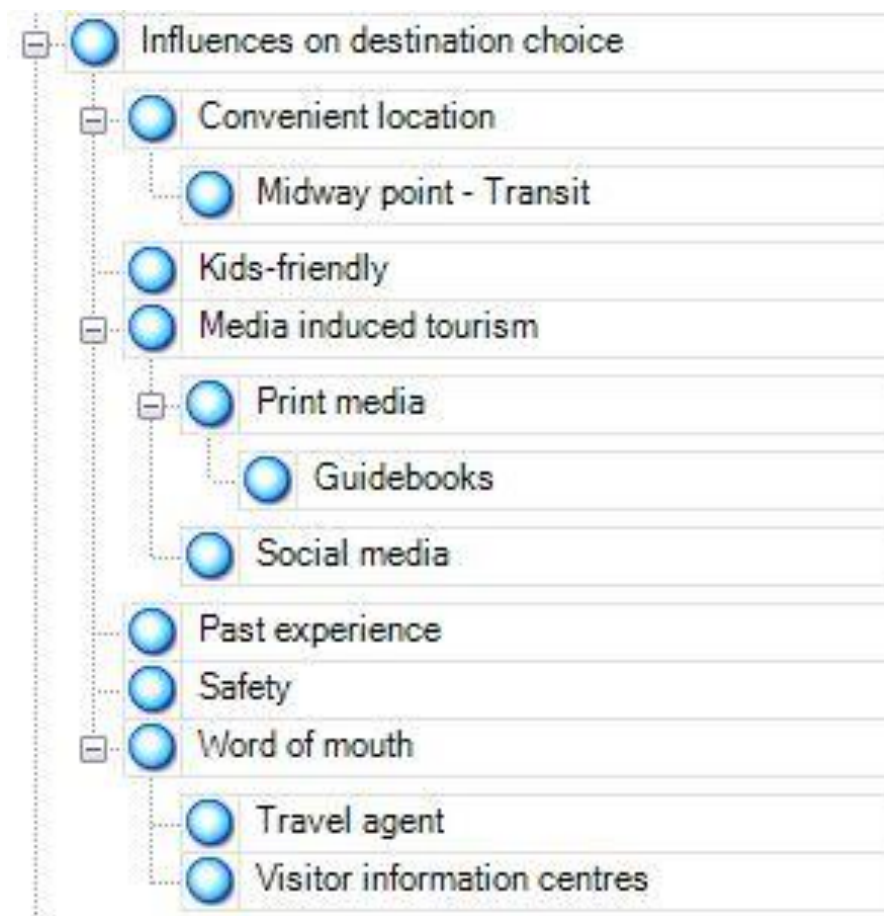
For further information:
Student researcher Aaron Tham on 03 9904 7902 or email min.tham@monash.edu

MONASH University

CRICOS Provider: Monash University 00008C

Appendix D: Example of selective coding mechanism from NVivo

- Influences on destination choice
  - Convenient location
    - Midway point - Transit
  - Kids-friendly
  - Media induced tourism
    - Print media
      - Guidebooks
    - Social media
  - Past experience
  - Safety
  - Word of mouth
    - Travel agent
    - Visitor information centres

Appendix E: Sample of codes

Coded under heading of financial considerations
Look at cheapest flights and where would be cheapest destinations to fly into
We figured that driving was most cost effective
Essentially it was down to costs
Due to monetary constraints we kept to Australia
We chose the hotel was that it wasn't too expensive
If I had more money, I would take the kids to Europe

Coded under heading of online information search
I used the Victoria tourism websites and also Google maps and of course they have certain localised websites as well, but certainly internet based
I've actually browsed on the internet to see what sort of things I want to do
I went through several internet channels
The internet was the main thing
I researched on the internet
It was all done online

Coded under heading of new experiences
Ballarat was a place we hadn't been to
Places that we heard about and had never been to
Just to go away and do something different
So that was the main reason that we went to see somewhere of Europe that we hadn't seen before
Eventually felt like doing something different
Acquire a different experience