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RESEARCH REPORT

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Determining the effect of online
tourism brands' use of social media
marketing on consumer/tourists'
decision-making process.

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Abstract

Social media has redefined how the practice of communication is conducted in business. Businesses can effectively and efficiently communicate their products and services to meet customers' needs at every point of desire. While at the same time, to manage customer satisfaction, consumers can post their concerns and receive a response which enhances customers satisfactions (Verizon, 2020). Social media has proven to be a valuable source of information for consumers in their purchase decision-making, especially in complex buying behaviour (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). Therefore this applies to consumers' decisions when making travel arrangements. There is a need to understand the new consumer behaviour in terms of decision-making, purchase preferences, tourism risk perceptions and the factors influencing consumers' purchase decisions (Meng *et al.*, 2021). A cross-sectional self-administered survey design was used for the study. Quantitative research gathers data from current and potential participants. The survey was developed using evidence from previous research and the steps indicated in the EKB consumer decision-making process model. The research found that social media marketing on social media sites makes the evaluation of alternatives to online tourism products and services easier and therefore makes the decision to purchase faster. This finding is important for tourism industry organisations, specifically in the post-Covid era, as the tourism industry attempts to recover.

Section 1: Introduction

From social to business, the eCommerce (social media and online engagement) environment has impacted many parts of life. When it comes to making travel arrangements (i.e. destination, transportation, accommodation, dining, attractions, and leisure activities), consumers increasingly turn to social media platforms for information. The study is aimed to determine the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumers'/tourists' decision-making process.

In recent years, it has been noted that social media marketing tools like Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat have impacted consumer travel purchase decisions. Prior research has revealed that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube significantly impact all phases of the decision-making process. As tourism businesses have become reliant on the role of social media platforms, this study will enable these businesses to understand the new consumer behaviour in terms of decision-making, purchase preferences, tourism risk perceptions and the factors influencing consumers' purchase decisions (Meng *et al.*, 2021).

1.1) Contextualisation/Background

Businesses previously assumed that social media marketing would be considered a phase that would pass by and would not impact their ability to market their business online (Verizon, 2020). Soon after, companies realised that integrating social media marketing strategies within their business positively impacted their ability to gain consumers' attention without investing large sums of money into marketing projects. According to Verizon (2020), most marketing executives integrate social media tools into their marketing strategies. Many successful businesses encourage social media marketing for its benefits, such as branding, lead generation, customer retention and research benefits (Verizon, 2020). Social media has redefined how the practice of communication is conducted for business. Businesses can effectively and efficiently communicate their products and services to meet customers' needs at every point of desire. While at the same time, to manage customer satisfaction, consumers can post their concerns and receive a response which enhances customers satisfactions (Verizon, 2020). The two-way communication of social media has enabled businesses and consumers to develop relationships, resulting in companies retaining

more customers and extending their reach in targeted consumer markets (Verizon, 2020).

According to Voramontri & Klieb (2019), consumers actively use social media platforms to gather information at their convenience. This enables them to decide what to buy while educating themselves about the new products or brands available at any given time. From a consumer's perspective, social media provides a means of more trustworthy information when compared to traditional marketing. Voramontri & Klieb (2019) further highlight that over the years, there has been a mistrust towards conventional media practices, and consumers disregard traditional media sources (television, magazines, and newspapers) to guide their purchases.

Social media has proven to be a valuable source of information for consumers in their purchase decision-making, especially in complex buying behaviour (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). Therefore this applies to consumers' decisions when making travel arrangements. Determining the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumer/tourists' decision-making process in Dubai would help marketers in the travel and tourism industry better direct their social media marketing efforts for effective outcomes.

1.2) Rationale

The eCommerce (social media and online engagement) environment has directly impacted all aspects of life, from social to business (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). When consumers make travel arrangements (i.e. destination, transportation, accommodation, food and dining activities, attractions, and shopping and leisure activities), there has been an increased focus on using social media platforms to make informed decisions (Liu *et al.*, 2019). Businesses in the travel and tourism industry increasingly turn to social media marketing to raise brand awareness, launch new products, communicate with targeted customers, and attract new customers. According to Deane (2022), consumers primarily rely on social media and value businesses' online presence. Providing them with the information they need in their information search and evaluation process allowing them to make better-informed decisions when purchasing travel arrangements (Deane, 2022).

1.3) Problem statement

There has been an increase in the role of social media platforms in supporting tourism planning or decision-making as the plethora of information available and reviews from other users assist in alleviating the risk associated with tourism purchases (Mariani *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, there is a need to understand the new consumer behaviour in terms of decision-making, purchase preferences, tourism risk perceptions and the factors influencing consumers' purchase decisions (Meng *et al.*, 2021).

1.4) Purpose statement

The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumers' decision-making process. Specifically, the research investigates leisure travellers' use of social media platforms in Dubai. The study focuses on non-travel-specific social media platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok and Snapchat to determine whether these platforms affect leisure travellers' decision-making when purchasing tourism products and services. This study was motivated by the need for post-pandemic research on shifting consumer behaviour, specifically when purchasing tourism products and services. Tourism decisions are complicated and risky, and consumers are always encouraged to search for new information, and this is done by relying on peer reviews and social networks (Meng *et al.*, 2021).

1.5) Research questions/Hypothesis

1.5.1) Main Question

What effect does the use of social media marketing by online tourism brands have on consumers' decision-making process?

The following secondary questions will be used to guide the research study:

1. What effect does the use of social media marketing by online tourism brands have on consumers' need arousal?
2. What effect does the use of social media marketing by online tourism brands

have on consumers' search for information?

3. What effect does the use of social media marketing by online tourism brands have on consumers' evaluation of alternatives?

4. What effect does the use of social media marketing by online tourism brands have on consumers' purchase decisions?

1.5.2) **Hypothesis**

H₀: Social media marketing used by online tourism brands has no effect on leisure consumers'/ tourists' decision-making process.

H_a: Social media marketing use by online tourism brands has an effect on leisure consumers'/ tourists' decision-making process.

Section 2: Literature review

2.1) Theoretical foundation

Engel Kollat and Blackwell's decision-making model

Consumers and businesses in travel and tourism can use the Engel Kollat and Blackwell consumer decision-making process model to assess the consumers' desired choice of travel arrangements (i.e. Destination, transportation, accommodation, dining, attractions, and leisure activities) before purchasing. Consumers undergo five processes: problem identification, information gathering, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Engel *et al.*, 1995). The model establishes a frame of reference for the research and gives specific guidelines for identifying the research proposal's priorities. According to Engel *et al.* (1995), it aids in the understanding of the links and interactions that occur when consumers make decisions. Furthermore, the approach allows the researcher to contribute to the knowledge gaps found (Engel *et al.*, 1995). It will serve as the theoretical foundation to dissect the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumer/tourists' decision-making process. The unpacking of the model will be provided in the literature below.

2.2) Literature review

Social media marketing

Consumers have successfully come to rely on technology and social media platforms as extensions of themselves as individuals. Social media platforms have revolutionised how people shop, communicate and interact (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). As the internet evolves, businesses in the travel and tourism industry increasingly turn to social media to raise brand awareness, launch new products, communicate with targeted customers, and attract new customers (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017).

Social media

Alalwan *et al.*, (2017) define social media as a communication channel that allows people to communicate information with one another. Other definitions of social media include a web program built on user participation, collaboration, and content sharing that enables users to upload and share information with others (Dwityas *et al.*, 2017).

According to Ofitserova (2021), leisure travellers prefer collecting information about their travel arrangements through social media rather than traditional physical travel agencies. Most travellers may be found on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Ofitserova, 2021). According to Alalwan *et al.*, (2017), social media has grown into a more interactive and collaborative platform that allows customers to share their experiences about a company's services with a larger community. Furthermore, online content has recently surpassed all other traditional marketing channels as the primary source of information for customers making pre-purchase decisions (Ofitserova, 2021).

While the internet empowers consumers to become opinion leaders, it may raise awareness of relative characteristics and provide brand comparisons (Mason *et al.*, 2021). The role of social media in customers' decision-making process is critical to providing them with the appropriate information they need to make well-informed decisions.

According to Liu *et al.*, (2019), during the travel process (pre, during, and post-trip), social media platforms are essential at all phases of the decision-making process. According to Liu *et al.*, (2019), social media was mainly employed in the decision-making process to assist consumers in their travel decisions. Unlike traditional marketing, Social media marketing provides consumers with a consistent and accessible touchpoint with which they can connect while making travel decisions, convincing them to be more present online. "Social media contributes to this valuable role by being a consistent touchpoint for customers to encourage consumers to select whether they want to acquire a product or service," adds Fontella (2021). Social media marketing touchpoints can be seen across many social

media platforms, such as sharing content, community engagement, customer reviews, and blogs (Fontella, 2021).

Social media marketing practices

Social media marketing integration presents a variety of practices that contribute to these touchpoints. Businesses can advertise their products on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The study focuses on Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat. They provide several activities that help customers in their decision-making process

The virtual applications of social media have been blended into practically every element of life, from social life to business life. According to Alalwan *et al.*, (2017), businesses, in particular, have taken a proactive approach to use social media marketing to direct and achieve their marketing goals. These goals relate to advertising, creating awareness, building consumer relationships and encouraging two-way communication. (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017).

According to Mason *et al.*, (2021), social media has revolutionised the digital marketplace by establishing consumer communities online. Social media should be considered a valuable asset for travel and tourism marketers as a marketing tool. According to Mason *et al.*, (2021), Social media marketing tools benefit consumers' consumption behaviours and their overall view of a brand's product or service. Furthermore, Alalwan *et al.*, (2017) state that businesses aggressively pursue social media marketing since it increases consumer engagement by easing information search, product interaction, and promotion and enhancing customer purchasing potential.

Social media platforms are becoming more interactive. As a result, consumers have increased their ability to share their experiences and have their voices heard. Social media marketing practices that effectively achieve marketing goals include advertising, e-word of mouth(e-Wom), and customer relationship management (Alalwan, 2018).

Advertising

When incorporating social media marketing practices, a company can fulfil its marketing objectives. Social media has become vital for advertising efforts, according to Alalwan *et al.*, (2017). This is especially true in promotional campaigns because it enables marketers to reach marketing objectives such as consumer perception, awareness, knowledge, preferences, intent to buy, and actual purchasing. These efforts add a substantial amount of assistance for consumers in identifying a need. According to Alawan (2018), advertising communications enable consumers to engage with the product offering. They subconsciously attract their attention which significantly impacts their online consumer purchasing habits (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017).

Electronic word of mouth

The use of social media marketing tools, such as electronic word of mouth within online forums, to exchange the information obtained from prior experience and consumption of a product offering has proven beneficial. According to Alalwan *et al.*, (2017), This Social media marketing approach has a more significant reach and impact than traditional word of mouth. In terms of guiding consumers on the appropriate path when making a decision. According to Hewage and Madhuhansi (2019), when customers actively seek information, they rely on friends and online communities to provide the insight they need to fulfil their needs.

Customer relations management

A well-organised and accessible after-sale service is vital in retaining customers and managing complaints. Customers and businesses interacting with social media significantly impact customer loyalty and purchase behaviour. According to Alalwan *et al.*, (2017), Social media marketing tools can help businesses maintain client relationships. Based on the literature, it is reasonable to conclude that companies can satisfy consumer queries and resolve consumer issues. The level of consumer satisfaction increases, allowing consumers to turn more often to online platforms; therefore, incorporating customer relationship management benefits both sides.

However, there are growing concerns about a company's capacity to use social media marketing tools to its full potential to provide consumers with sufficient and meaningful information through social media marketing campaigns (Alalwan, 2018). Furthermore, Alalwan *et al.*, (2017) state that social media platforms vary across developing and developed countries. These cultural, economic, and technological disparities may contribute to the ability of social media marketing tools to be impactful on consumers and how they engage with Social media marketing promotional activities, which directly impacts their decision-making.

According to Barysevich (2020), social media platforms have seen significant growth and widespread adoption among individuals of all ages worldwide. As a result, it is appropriate to go to the following phase of consumer behaviour, which will examine how social media marketing can succeed in consumer decision-making and thus be regarded as a viable tool for travel and tourist businesses.

Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is the study of how people interact with various situations when making a purchase. Engel *et al.*, (1995) define consumer behaviour as a collection of interrelated behaviours that include the obtaining, consuming, and disposing of goods and services and the decisions that precede and follow these acts.

According to Fontanella (2021), consumer behaviour is research that leads to the purchase and use of specific products. The decision-making model aims to help marketers recognise and implement the many linked aspects that encourage purchasing decisions. According to Engell *et al.* (1995), understanding and reacting to customer motivation and behaviour is not just a question of opinion but a must for competitive survival. Understanding the behaviours that lead to purchase intent is fundamental for marketers. It helps retain customers, identify weaknesses in current advertising strategies and best practices for various consumer groups, develop new products and services, and improve customer service (Engel *et al.*, 1995). These elements directly affect the organisation's ability to achieve a competitive advantage over its competitors (Charm *et al.*, 2021).

The EKB model

The EKB model, designed by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, is built around five consumer decision-making activities (Hewage & Madhuhansi, 2019). A consumer's active information searching, evaluation activities, relationships, and interactions are depicted in the model.

Problem recognition: A customer will see a gap between their desire to solve a problem and their ability to do so (Engel *et al.*, 1995). Social media marketing can stimulate these expectations through various social media communities and promotional advertisements (Hewage & Madhuhansi, 2019).

Search for Information: Gathering relevant knowledge from various sources, including the external environment and one's mind (internal memory search), is required for this stage (Engel *et al.*, 1995). Social media marketing tools and practices can help brands raise their brand awareness and provide a valuable exchange of information in online communities. Consumers are more likely to seek information on the chosen alternative and decide which of the various options would produce the best results (Shine, 2020). According to Shine (2020), creating a friendly online social media community can promote brand loyalty and allow community members to praise the firm for their positive experience. Consumers prefer to learn about products and services via friends and online communities (Hewage *et al.*, 2019).

Alternative evaluation: A consumer will compare the numerous brands accessible after completing an information search. This is primarily due to the consumer's underlying goals, reasoning, and personality (Engel *et al.*, 1995). This step aims for the consumer to simplify the review process when the decision is more uncertain (Hewage *et al.*, 2019). This can be achieved by creating a consumer experience through advertising promotional campaigns. According to Stankevich (2017), Advertising and promotional campaigns can help businesses and consumers form an emotional bond.

Purchase: The stage at which consumers have the power to buy or not buy, which may result in a favourable outcome for brands (Engel *et al.*, 1995). The choice is based on whichever product or service would give them the most advantages over the options they were considering (Hewage *et al.*, 2019). Travel and tourism businesses may use social media platforms to deliver this information to consumers while making decisions, allowing them to make informed decisions.

Post-Purchase Decision: The customer assesses their satisfaction with the product or service. If satisfied, they may become a brand advocate. This is essential because satisfied consumers may provide credit to the brand via social media platforms. Thus, contributing to a larger online community.

The decision to make travel arrangements online

Consumers' interactions with businesses have evolved due to the eCommerce environment. According to Ltd (2022), the expected global online travel market will reach US\$ 1,463.98 Billion by 2027. Travellers in recent years have redirected their attention toward online options for booking their trips and leisure activities, indicating that consumers value a business's online presence. According to Ltd (2022), companies are becoming increasingly digitalised and making the necessary efforts to develop their online presence. The online travel industry allows consumers to book their desired travel arrangements from the comfort of their homes while enticing them with package deals and price-saving options when making purchases (Ltd, 2022).

Businesses that proactively incorporate social media marketing tools into their activities can expand and better comprehend the possibilities that social media marketing tools present. Consumers can now buy products and services online through many channels, and these transactions are impacted mainly by social media referrals. According to Deane (2022), consumers do not proceed with their travel booking intentions without conducting research.

The travel business is a competitive industry. According to Ltd (2022), online travel agencies have shown one of the most notable digital transformations when providing

their business offerings. This digital transformation has dramatically impacted travel and tour businesses to connect consumers with various online travel arrangements. The global online travel market trends indicate that 82% of all travel bookings worldwide took place without human interaction in 2018 (Ltd, 2022). According to Deane (2022), consumers primarily rely on social media and value businesses' online presence to provide the information they need in their information search and evaluation process. It allows them to make better-informed decisions based on pricing and packages when purchasing travel arrangements (Deane, 2022).

Provision of detailed information

When consumers consider purchasing, they use eCommerce platforms to offer more specific information about the product or service.

Consumers worldwide have profited from online platforms to find various products and services. According to Schulze (2020), The most common use of these online platforms is for consumers to search for items and read product reviews. As a result, this has a significant amount of relevant impact on the purchasing decisions of consumers when they are interested in a product or service. Haridasan *et al.*, (2019) state that they (leisure travellers) engage in the information-gathering process but may not have all the required information. Therefore, Consumers resort to online engagement to actively search for information to eradicate any concerns they may have.

According to Schulze (2020), as online shopping and social media marketing tools become more popular alternatives to offline ones, consumers can make more educated selections that will substantially impact their purchasing behaviour. According to Haridasan *et al.*, (2019), It facilitates the range of customers to view the pricing information for the related product or service.

Increased touchpoints for the scope of offerings

Online shopping provides consumers with various items and services easily accessible via numerous Social media marketing platform touchpoints. Consumers can locate nearly whichever product or service they require to meet their unmet wants. This creates ease for consumers, so they prefer to shop online more

frequently. According to Schulze (2020), consumers can buy many things online, including everything from electronics to insurance to travel. On the other hand, businesses that use only one online shopping channel are less effective than those that use a third-party marketplace (Wyatt, 2021). A third-party market allows companies to expand their products and services by connecting "sellers with buyers" on other web-based platforms (Wyatt, 2021).

Travel and tourism businesses are increasing their presence in the E-commerce industry, where customers may book trips and make travel reservations online. By utilising eCommerce marketplace strategies such as online third-party partners to promote the products and services, travel and tourism businesses can provide a diverse offering to consumers. eCommerce marketplace can create unified environments that customers will return to. Travel and tourism companies may gain vital data that allows them to better understand their consumers on a more personal level, allowing them to bridge the gap between their current and ideal digital marketing approaches. Recognising the benefits of various social media marketing tools will ensure that their current digital marketing strategies can fulfil their consumers' expectations and satisfy them.

Better evaluation means better brand perception.

The presence of a business creating an online presence and online purchasing allows customers to evaluate items and services to make decisions that will lead to repeat purchases. According to Haridasan *et al.*, (2019), internet information will enable users to get pricing information for a related product or service. When evaluating products, consumers prefer to regard price as a valuable aspect. According to Sullivan *et al.*, (2018), having a more significant price perception has a knock-on benefit. It gives consumers a better overall impression of the brand since it increases their sense of quality (Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). This provides a value that impacts the consumer's final decision to acquire the desired items or services. As a result, travel and tourism marketers seek digital marketing strategies to create a global community of devoted customers who will become brand ambassadors in return.

Even though online platforms have become a popular source for useful pricing information. According to Schulze (2020), human-related factors prohibit online transactions from being successful. Compared to internet retailers, engaging with offline stores provides a sense of privacy and protection while minimising dissatisfaction while not being able to contact the human component (Schulze, 2020).

2.3) Concluding remarks

The role of social media in customers' decision-making process is critical in providing them with the appropriate information they need to make well-informed decisions (Mason *et al.*, 2021). Consumers have successfully come to rely on technology and social media platforms as extensions of themselves as individuals. Social media has grown into a more interactive and collaborative platform that allows customers to share their experiences about a company's services with a larger community (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). In addition, social media marketing provides consumers with a consistent and accessible touchpoint with which they can connect while making travel decisions, convincing consumers to be more present online. This has also allowed businesses to take a proactive approach to use social media marketing to achieve their marketing goals of increasing consumer engagement, product interaction, and promotion to enhance the customers purchasing potential (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017).

Social media marketing practices (advertising, e WOM and customer relationship management). Advertising can subconsciously attract their attention, significantly impacting online consumer purchasing habits (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). E-word of mouth enables a significant reach and impact compared to traditional word of mouth (Alalwan, 2018). Customers actively seek information and rely on friends and online communities to provide the insight they need to fulfil their needs. Managing customer queries and concerns creates a stronger bond, allowing consumers to turn more often to online platforms (Alalwan, 2018). Travel and tourism businesses can increase customer satisfaction through customer relationship management.

Understanding the behaviours that lead to purchase intent is fundamental for marketers. It helps retain customers, identify weaknesses in current advertising

strategies and best practices for various consumer groups, develop new products and services, and improve customer service (Engel *et al.*, 1995). These elements directly affect the organisation's ability to achieve a competitive advantage over its competitors (Charm *et al.*, 2021). All of which can be achieved through understanding and reacting to customer motivation, which is essential for competitive survival in the travel and tourism industry.

Travellers in recent years have redirected their attention toward online options for booking their trips, indicating that consumers value a business's online presence (Ltd, 2022). Consumers are now in control of how they direct their activities, and now they find it easier and more efficient to book their desired travel arrangements from the comfort of their homes while enticing them with package deals and price-saving options when making purchases (Ltd, 2022). In addition, consumers use these online platforms to search for items, read product reviews and educate themselves on various product offerings.

2.4) Conceptualisation/operationalisation

Social media marketing

The use of social media technology, channels, and software is to produce, communicate, and provide offerings to the market for an organisation's stakeholders (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017).

Social media

Social media is a communication channel that allows people to share information and influence others (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). Other definitions of social media include a web program built on user participation, collaboration, and content sharing that enables users to upload and share information with others (Dwityas *et al.*, 2017). The concept of social media marketing tools will include variables of social media preferences such as Instagram, Tik Tok and Snapchat. The indicator of the most frequently used social media platforms indicates the time spent on social media. Operationalisation of the following concepts will be gathered through a questionnaire

to ask participants to indicate preferences for social media usage and time spent on these platforms.

Consumer decision-making process

The consumer decision-making process model assesses the consumer's online and offline desire choices before purchasing. Consumers undergo five processes: problem identification, information gathering, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Engel *et al.*, 1995).

Online travel arrangement decisions

These comprise categories (i.e. destination, transportation, accommodation, food and dining activities, attractions, and leisure activities) that fall under the preparations individuals consider when planning a trip through online channels (Liu *et al.*, 2019).

The concepts about the consumer behaviour of the online travel arrangement decisions. The variables will include the various stages of the decision-making process where these consumers would use social media and whether it was likely for them to purchase through an online channel provided through social media platforms. To measure engagement, a questionnaire would be used to ask participants to indicate which stages of social media are used.

Section 3: Research design and methodology

Positivism

3.1) Research paradigm

The research considers the worldview a positivistic methodology to answer the research problem. Positivism promotes ideals that value individual thought and the opinion of objective knowledge derived from evidence-based truth and well-described experimentation. According to (Artinio *et al.*, 2019), a positivistic method aims to provide explanatory linkages or causal relationships, leading to hypothesis control of the phenomena under question in the research study; this stresses facts and reasons for behaviour. It emphasises the importance of individual thought and the concept of objective knowledge, intending to move away from "truth by decree" (Artinio *et al.*, 2019).

The research study employed a scientific approach to the study of consumer behaviour. It explored the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumers/tourists' decision-making process. The researcher adopted the positivistic approach as it will compare the use of the various social media marketing tools and the social trends of the decision-making by leisure travellers. Positivism is founded on objective knowledge and evidence-based data collected through experiments, and the research will employ a quantitative research design.

3.2) Research design/approach:

A quantitative research approach was employed for this study. Quantitative research gathers data from current and potential participants. The researcher collected information through sampling methods and the distribution of online surveys, polls and questionnaires where the participant's results were represented numerically. Through descriptive research, cross-sectional research allowed the researcher to evaluate the relationship between social media marketing tools used by online tourism brands that have an effect on leisure consumers'/ tourists' decision-making process. It will be beneficial to the research as it will identify the relationships and the ability to predict outcomes of the study area to make modifications in the future (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014).

3.3) Provisional research approach

3.3.1) Epistemology

Epistemology considers objective knowledge significant since it aims to determine the relationship between online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumer/tourists' decision-making process in Dubai. These online travel arrangements can be categorised as a consumer's choice of destination, transportation, accommodation, food and dining activities, attractions, and shopping and leisure activities.

3.3.2) Ontology

This research examines observing and measuring reality (du Plooy *et al.*, 2014). Due to the study's nature and reality, it will be represented numerically. This will enable travel and tourism businesses to understand the trends and the type of information leisure travellers seek when making online travel arrangements, which could contribute to their future social media marketing strategy and overall marketing strategy.

3.3.3) Axiology

Axiology emphasises being free of biases with principles of integrity and honesty (du Plooy *et al.*, 2014). The study participants in the study would be an honest and accurate depiction of whether social media marketing tools impact online travel arrangement decisions for leisure travellers in Dubai.

3.4) Population and Sampling

3.4.1) Population:

The target population consists of leisure travellers who reside in Dubai and who make use of non-travel-specific social media platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok and Snapchat. The accessible population is derived from the target population and consists of leisure travellers living in Dubai and with whom the researcher has contact. The sample size for this study is 15 for the purposes of statistical analysis ability. The unit of analysis was leisure travellers living in Dubai.

3.4.2) Sampling:

The sampling method used was non-probability convenience sampling. Non-probability sampling does not allow for the random selection of population parameters (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Convenience sampling was used to select participants who were known to the researcher and were conveniently available. Participants were contacted for the research via (WhatsApp/Email/Message) informing them of the purpose of the research and inviting them to participate in the survey.

Alternatively, posting on the researchers' various social media accounts inquiring about participating in the research of the determining the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on consumer/tourists' decision-making process.

3.5) **Data-collection method**

A cross-sectional self-administered survey design was used for the study. Quantitative research gathers data from current and potential participants. The survey was developed using evidence from previous research and the steps indicated in the EKB consumer decision-making process model. The survey consisted of a demographic section and sections relating to the use of social media platforms and tourism purchase decision-making. A five-point Likert scale was used to determine participants' level of agreement with various statements regarding their social media platform use and tourism purchase decision-making. The demographics section included questions on gender, age and monthly income. Other nominal variables included how much time was spent on social media, which social media platforms were used, what external factors affected leisure travellers' decision-making process, which days of the week were spent on social media and which months of the year leisure travellers prefer to travel. The Likert scale section consisted of 10 questions where participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with various statements relating to their use of social media platforms for decision-making of tourism purchases (1=Strongly Disagree, and 5= Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms and was distributed/posted on the researcher's social media accounts. An email containing a

link to the questionnaire was also sent to the researcher's contact list. The link to the questionnaire was accessible for a period of 16 days from 04 - 20 August 2022. There were 43 usable responses for the study.

3.6) *Data-analysis method*

Survey data using Google Forms provided a descriptive analysis of data. Data were imported to Microsoft Excel for coding and exported to SPSS v.23 for analysis. The survey was employed to determine whether social media marketing used by online tourism brands has an effect on the consumer's decision-making process. The scale was tested for reliability and yielded a Cronbach alpha of 0.722, which is considered 'acceptable' and indicates a high level of internal consistency. Descriptive statistics were used to develop a demographic profile of participants and Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess the relationship between the online tourism brands' use of social media marketing and consumers' decision-making process.

Section 4: Findings

Presentation of findings

The findings for the data are presented below. A demographic profile of participants is presented using charts and other nominal variables and presented in Table format. A total of 43 leisure travellers residing in Dubai completed the self-administered online survey.

Figure 1: Gender

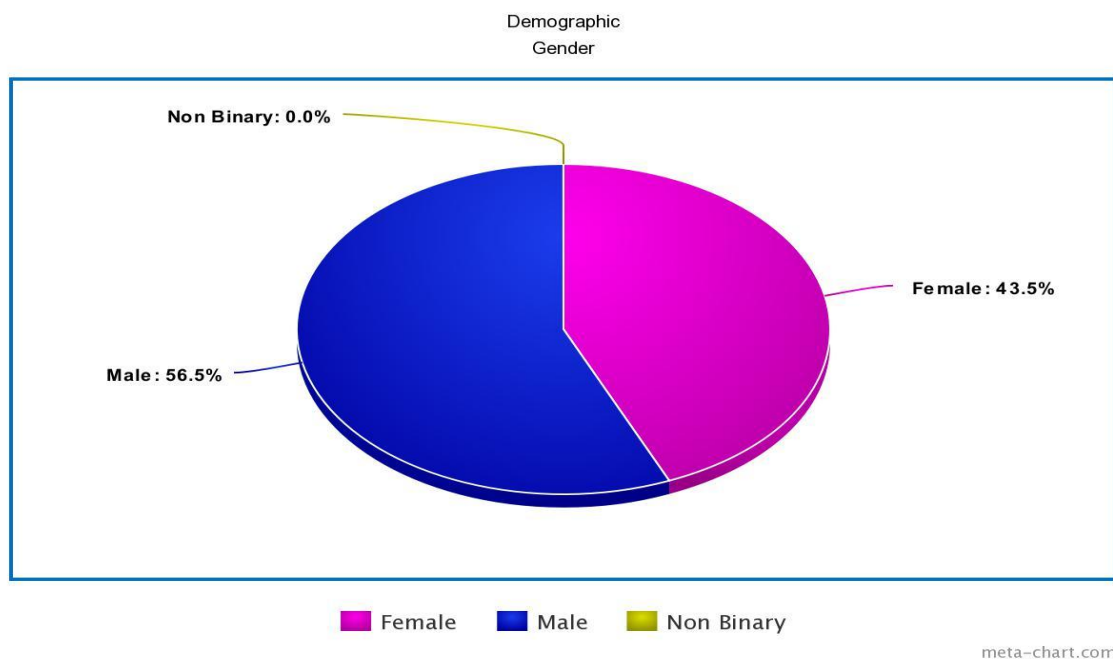


Figure 2: Monthly income in AED

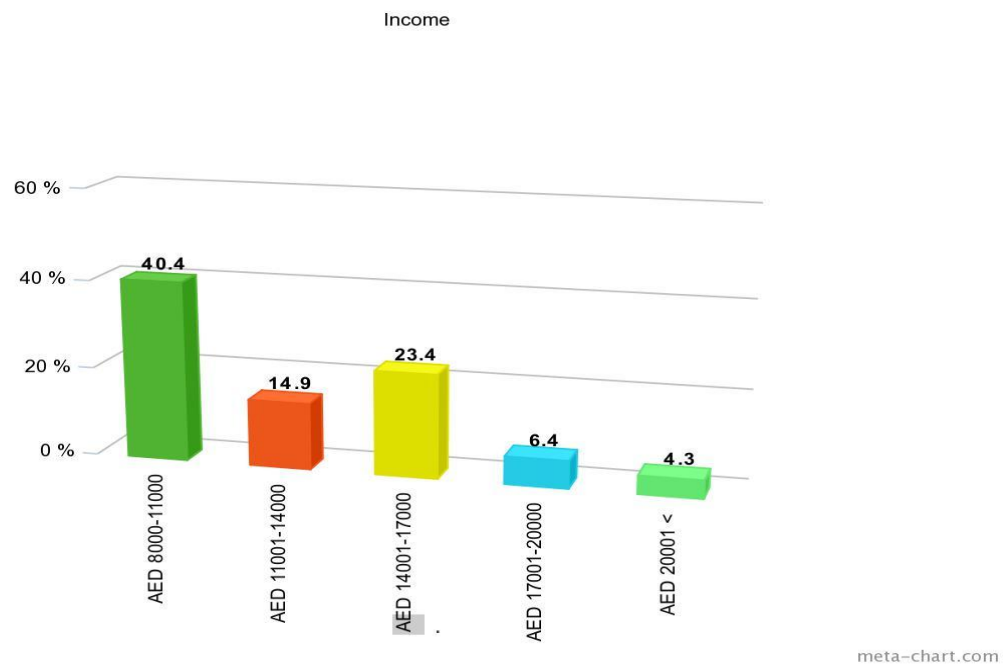


Figure 3: Time spent on social media (hours per week)

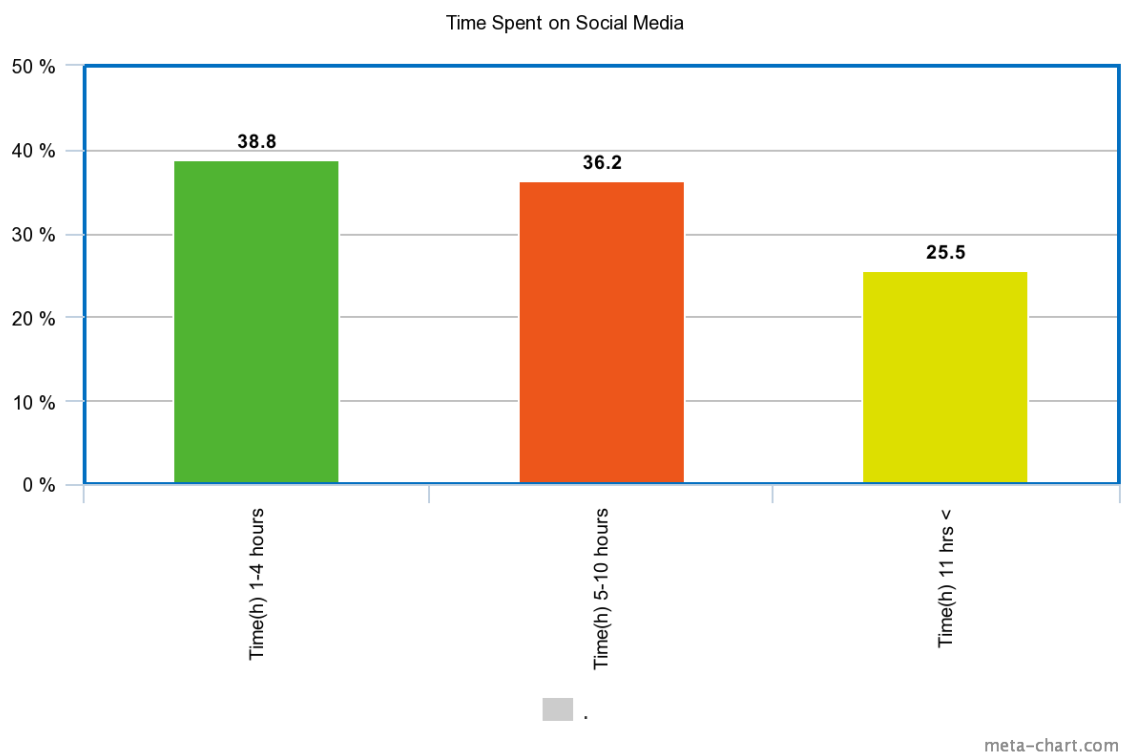
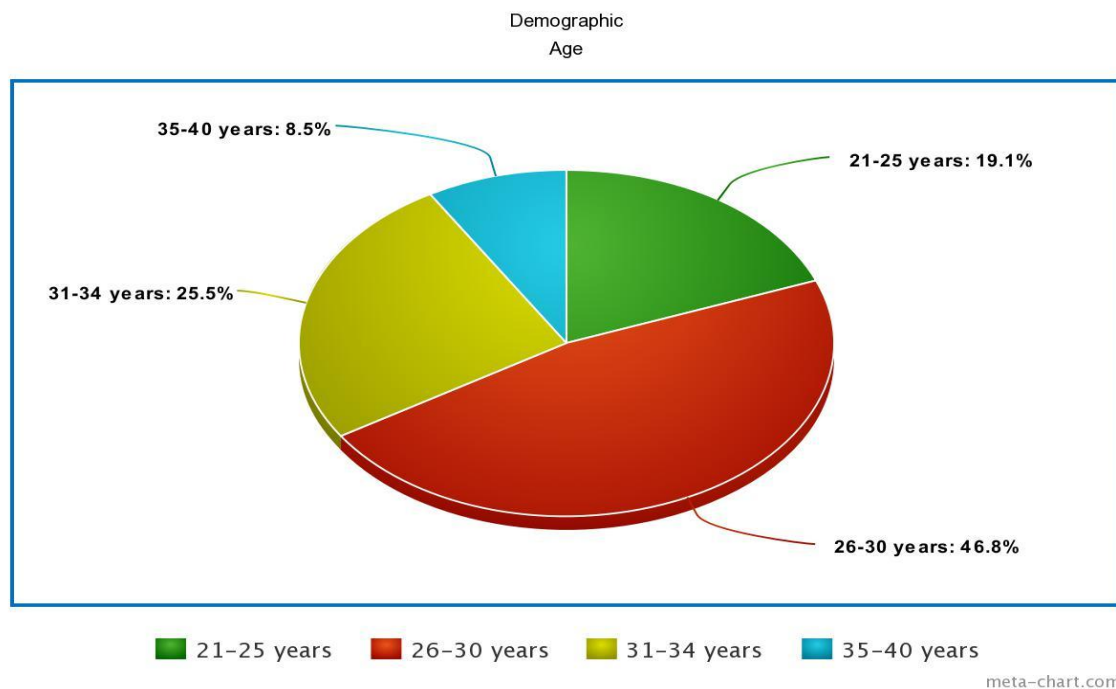


Figure 4: Age



Figures 1 - 4 show that 46,8% of participants were aged 26-30 years and 25,5% were aged 31-34 years, the majority were male (55%) with 96% having travelled outside of Dubai. Participants earned between AED 8000-11000 (40%) and AED 14001-17000 (23%) and the majority (67%) preferred to travel during the months of May-August. Participants spend 1-4 hours (38%) or 5-10 hours (36%). Table 1 provides the days of the week that participants access social media sites, indicating that 38% of participants access social media sites every day of the week and 32% access social media sites on weekends only.

Table 1: The days of the week which participants access social media

Days of the week	Count	Percent
Weekdays	8	17.0%
Everyday	18	38.3%
Weekends	15	31.9%
One Weekday Only	1	2.1%

One Weekend Day Only	0	0.0%
Except Sunday	2	4.3%

Table 2: Social Media Sites

Social Networking Sites	N	Percent	Percentage of case
Social media sites (Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, Facebook)	43	51.6%	100.0%
Microblogging	6	6.6%	12.8%
Blogs/Forums	6	6.6%	12.8%
Social Bookmarking Sites	11	12.1%	23.4%
Photo & Video sharing	21	23.1%	44.7%
Total	91	100.0%	193.6%

For this question, participants were asked to select all of the social networking sites they used, allowing for more than one selection. Table 2 provides the multiple-response answers of all 43 participants. The Percent column provides the contribution of each social networking site option, while the percentage of cases provides the percentage of participants that selected each social networking site option. All 43 participants(100%) use social networking sites such as Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat and Facebook, while 45% of participants use Photo and video sharing social media sites, 23% use Social Bookmarking Sites, and only 13% of participants used Microblogging and Blogs/Forums respectively. Social media sites (52%) are the most commonly used form of social networking sites used by participants.

Table 3: External Factors

		N	Percent	Percentage of Cases
External Factors	Cultural norms	26	27.4%	55.3%
	Social class	31	32.6%	66.0%
	Reference Groups	17	17.9%	36.2%
	Family influences	15	15.8%	31.9%
	Unexpected Circumstances	6	6.3%	12.8%
Total		95	100.0%	202.1%

For this question, participants were asked to select all of the external factors that affect their leisure tourism purchases. The majority of the 43 participants (66%) indicated that social class, followed by cultural norms (55%), affected their leisure tourism purchase decision-making.

Spearman rank order correlations have been used to describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables, namely, to determine the relationship between the use of social media platforms and online tourism purchase decision-making with selected variables. A correlation of 0 indicates no relationship at all, a correlation of 1.0 indicates a perfect positive relationship, and a value of -1.0 indicates a perfect negative relationship

Table 4 below provides the results of statistically significant relationships.

Table 4: Spearman Rank Order Correlation

	V7 Blog s/ For ums	V8 Social Book mark ing sites	V1 Online spen t week ly	V1 2Social medi a sites enab le me to seek infor mation out	V1 3Social medi a sites have incre ased my involv ement with online to urism brands	v1 4Social medi a sites ket ing so cial eval uated my invol vement to make faster	v1 5Social medi a sites mak ing so cial eval uated my invol vement of online to urism	v1 6Used a vari ety of so cial medi a sites to gather inform ation about online	v1 7The social medi a sites I use are effective by my life style	v1 9My intention to purchase online to urism brands is	v2 0My attitude towards social medi a marketing of online to urism brands affects	v2 1Cultural norms	v2 2Social class	v2 3Reference Groups	v2 4Family influence	v2 6Which days of the week are you more frequent ly on social medi a sites?	v2 7Which months of the year do you prefer to travel?	V2 8Do you prefer content that displays	
v2Gender									-.2 97 *	-.4 74 *			-.3 29 *				.3 12 *	-.3 25 *	

v4MonthlyIncome	.3 65 *																	
v6Microblogging		.3 91 **																
v7Blogs/Forums		.3 91 *																
v9Photo & Video sharing			.4 05 **															
v10 Indicate how much time (weekly) you spend on these social media sites:																		
v11SocialMediaSit esExposeMeToA ctivelySeekOutTo urismOnline				.5 09 **	.5 21 **			.3 03 *										
v12Social media sites enable me to actively seek out information on social media					.4 81 **													
v13 Social media sites have increased my involvement with online tourism brand							.3 42 *											
v14Social media marketing on social media sites helps me to make faster							.5 98 **											.3 86 **

indicates that the purchase of tourism products or services is made faster through social media marketing on social media sites as a result of social media sites making the evaluation of alternatives for online tourism easier. All Likert scale variables (v12-v20) provided at least one statistically significant relationship. Gender correlated negatively with 'v17 The social media sites I use are affected by my lifestyle' ($r = -.297, p = .045$); 'v19 My intention to purchase online tourism services on social media sites is increased' ($r = -.474, p = .001$); 'v22 Social Class' ($r = -.329, p = .025$) and 'v27 Months of the year preferred to travel' ($r = -.325, p = .027$). As indicated in the finding above, male participants were more likely to agree and strongly agree with v17, v19, v22 and v27 than female participants.

4.2) Interpretation of the findings in context

The aim of this research was to determine the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on tourists' decision-making process using the EKB model (Engel et al., 1995). Using Google Forms, the self-administered closed-ended survey was distributed/posted on the researcher's social media accounts and a link to the survey was emailed to the researcher's list of contacts. All survey participants currently reside in Dubai, which is ranked number one in terms of air connectivity and is considered the largest international travel gateway (Fahamu, 2022). This would provide valuable information as participants residing in Dubai have increased leisure travel options. It was, therefore, important to determine if there was an effect between the use of social media sites and leisure tourists' decision-making purchases. As indicated in Table 4 above, each of the Likert scale variables had at least one statistically significant positive or negative correlation with other variables. For positive correlations, an increase in one variable would result in an increase in the corresponding variable, whereas a negative correlation increase in one variable would result in a decrease in the corresponding variable. The strongest negative correlation indicates that it is more likely male leisure tourists that intend to purchase online tourism services through social media sites. According to Smith (2022), men (84%) account for more internet purchases than women (77%), between the ages of 25 and 49. Men are said to be "more direct" and use online shopping when they want to make purchases. Additionally, Smith (2022) explains that men are information searchers who scrutinise any product they want and consider all of its

benefits. The strongest positive correlation indicates that social media sites make the evaluation of alternatives easier and therefore make the decision to purchase faster. As stated in the literature review, when consumers consider purchasing, they use social media sites to offer more specific information about the product or service. Consumers worldwide have profited from online platforms to find various products and services. According to Schulze (2020), The most common use of these online platforms is for consumers to search for items and read product reviews. As a result, this has a significant amount of relevant impact on the purchasing decisions of consumers when they are interested in a product or service. Haridasan *et al.*, (2019) state that they (leisure travellers) engage in the information-gathering process but may not have all the required information. Therefore, Consumers resort to online engagement to actively search for information to eradicate any concerns they may have.

4.3) Research Question, Problem, Hypotheses/Objectives Addressed

Research question and Hypothesis: Supported

The study survey aimed to determine the effect of online tourism brands' use of social media marketing on tourists' decision-making process. The researcher utilised a quantitative approach to answer the question. Quantitative research gathers data from current and potential participants, providing a credible means of the data being objective and ensuring the possibility of it being measurable. The use of a cross-sectional self-administered survey design was used for the study. The analysis of the study's data was deemed favourable to the hypothesis that social media marketing use by online tourism brands affects leisure consumers'/tourists' decision-making process.

Section 5: Contribution, Ethical considerations and Limitations

5.1) Reliability and Validity

Reliability

The proposed study uses a self-administered survey with closed-ended questions to determine the impact of social media marketing tools on online travel arrangement decisions for leisure travellers in Dubai. (Using EKB consumer decision-making framework). As a result, the extent to which a research instrument consistently produces the same results when used in the same situation on multiple occasions.

According to du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, (2014), some sources of error may affect your data collection and interpretation ability; therefore, the error may affect the reliability of your data. Misinterpreting a questionnaire question or even interpreting the same questions differently are errors that this research study seeks to avoid.

The consistency of the measurement of the study can be achieved by using the same method used amongst the sample of participants used. The researcher has taken caution and much thought into when and how the data collection process is undertaken. The considerations would ensure that the data collected and the interpretation of the results would be precise, stable and reproducible if the research were repeated by another researcher using the same method or instruments (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). The use of standardised questionnaire would be emailed to all participants to ensure all participants receive the same structure and there are no deviations from questionnaire to questionnaire.

Validity

According to du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, (2014), The validity of a research study refers to how well the findings among study participants correspond to true results among similar individuals outside of the study.

The proposed study's findings must demonstrate the impact of social media marketing tools on online travel arrangement decisions for leisure travellers in Dubai. The study will further test the validity through its content and research structure.

Quantitative methods use logic and objectivity to make sense of the phenomena in question.

Further ways in which the researcher would enhance the validity of the study is through various sources of data such as charts and the inclusion of annexures which of the questionnaire with the participant's results which will include their inputs and the date of the data collected (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014).

5.2) Anticipated Contribution

This study's input will add to the existing knowledge within the travel and tourism industry. The research findings will be provided from the consumers who make specific online travel arrangements for the purpose of leisure and their relation to the impact that social media marketing tools have on their decision-making. The study will emphasise the importance of each of the targeted social media platforms (Instagram, Tiktok, and Snapchat) and their impact on the decision-making processes of these consumers. These contributions will benefit travel and tourist businesses looking to improve their digital marketing strategies. As previously mentioned, the eCommerce environment has directly impacted many sectors of life, from social to business. Customers are more inclined to buy from you if you have a good reputation and are actively present online.

5.3) Ethical Considerations

According to du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, (2014), ethical considerations are a set of principles guiding your research designs and practices.

The ethical considerations are as follows:

- A consent form was provided informing participants that they are aware of their rights and permission granted (POPI Act).
- The participants should be aware that they are taking part in a research study and should give their permission to participate.
- Entitlement to remain anonymous, and participants have the right to withdraw anytime.

The researcher must not inflict any pressure on study participants; the respondents should willingly participate in the study.

- Ensure that research and findings are bias-free and that there is no work falsification (Plagiarism).
- This study's respondents will not be provided with any form of incentives because doing so would distort the credibility of the results.
- Ensuring that results are non-discriminatory.
- To avoid discrimination against the study, the researcher would ensure that the study participants have no restrictions on sex, race, ethnicity,
- Respect for intellectual property.
- Before using any intellectual property, the researcher is required to obtain authorisation from various departments and provide the relevant documentation before conducting the research
- Ensure that respondents are of age (Over 18)

5.4) Limitations:

According to du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, (2014), any potential problems the researcher anticipates or encounters while conducting the study can be defined as limitations. Limited accessibility regards geographic location and sample size of participants. Furthermore, because the researcher has a limited amount of time to conduct the research, this is why the use of convenience sampling is considered.

According to du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, (2014), convenience sampling can be biased on the researcher's social or professional context. Therefore the limitation of using convenience sampling would provide the inability to generalise the results to an entire population.

Additional limitations that may occur are a lack of extensive research due to time constraints, the researcher's failure to control the travel and tourism environment and the researcher's limited to quantitative as participants provided limited responses.

5.5) Final conclusions including an evaluation of the success of the research in relation to the research problem/question and possible future actions and/or future research that can be conducted on the topic (heuristic value of the study)

The findings of this research study indicate statistically significant differences in gender and various statements regarding the decision making process for online tourism products and services. These findings indicate that further research into the differences between gender and the purchase of online tourism products and services would be beneficial. It is recommended that, based on the quantitative findings of this study, further qualitative research be conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of tourists' decision making processes as related to social media marketing on social media sites. This will further enhance the specific research findings, providing a holistic view of the relationship between social media marketing on social media sites for online tourism products and services.

5.6) Implications of findings for future practices

Based on the findings of the study, the majority of the data within the demographics indicate that their ideal target audience would be males who are aged between 21-34 years. The data will contribute to the understanding of the marketing segmentation by the income of the target audience. Majority of the participants earned between AED 8000-11000 (40%) and AED 14001-17000 (23%). Additional findings, such as the preferred months of travel and days of the week the participants have access to their social media, will further assist online tourism brands in developing new products to accommodate their target audience's demands. Lastly, understanding the use of social media sites that the participants use will ensure that online tourism brands are well equipped with understanding their intended target audience. The reason of adjusting their digital marketing strategies whereby they are well educated to direct their advertising in order to research their intended audience in order to convert them into customers.

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