

**THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACTS  
ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR:  
THE CONTEXT OF HOLIDAY TRAVEL**

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## Abstract

Social media enjoy a phenomenal success in terms of adoption and usage levels. They cause paradigm shifts on how people connect and communicate with each other, on how they express and share ideas, and even on how they engage with products, brands, and organizations. Moreover, social media became significant networks of consumer knowledge. In travel and tourism, the impacts of social media have already been described as tremendous, primarily due to the experiential nature of tourism products, and especially of holiday trips: purchases are considered risky and therefore decision making processes are information intensive.

An adequate number of studies attempt to reveal the role and impact of social media on aspects of consumer behaviour during the travel process that is before, during, and after the trip. However, almost all employ a micro approach, focusing either on a specific type of social medium (e.g. consumer review and rating websites), or on a specific application (e.g. TripAdvisor), or on a specific stage of the decision making process (e.g. information search), or on a specific stage of the travel process (e.g. before travel). Despite the advantages of such micro approaches, still the overall picture on how consumers use social media and their impact as a whole, during all phases of the travel process and throughout all stages of the decision making process remains unclear.

To address this gap, this study aims to explore use and impacts of social media on consumer behaviour with particular focus on holiday travel. To meet this aim, a qualitative methodology was designed to provide an insider's perspective on how consumers use social media throughout the holiday travel process and the impacts of such use on consumer behaviour. Seven focus groups were carried out with fifty-one active social media users who have been on a holiday trip during the last twelve months. It was revealed that social media are used during all stages of the travel process, and also during all stages of holiday related decision making processes. Through thematic analysis six themes have been constructed that provide a range of insights on how social media are used and their impacts.

This study makes four contributions to knowledge. First, to consumer behaviour theory by proposing information exchange as an enlarged consumer behaviour construct consisting of nine components. Second, to the theory of technology fluidity. Fluidity, from being a characteristic of a specific technology, is now proposed as a characteristic of the sets of behaviours and cognitive functions associated with the use of the specific technology or medium. Third, to social media related research in the context of holiday travel by identifying six functional spaces that enclose active users' specific behaviours and cognitive functions: inspiration, collaboration, decision making, self-expression, communication, and entertainment. Fourth, by proposing the social media enabled travel process model as a framework for understanding use and impact of social media throughout the holiday travel process. A number of implications for practice, as well as emerging areas for future research are drawn.

# List of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>LIST OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>16</b>
1.1. RATIONALE .....	17
1.2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES .....	23
1.3. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS .....	24
<b>2. SOCIAL MEDIA: CONCEPTS, ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>27</b>
2.1. INTRODUCTION.....	27
2.2. FROM WORLD WIDE WEB TO WEB 2.0.....	28
2.2.1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORLD WIDE WEB .....	28
2.2.2. IMPLICATIONS OF THE WEB .....	30
2.2.3. THE WEB 2.0 .....	31
2.2.4. IMPLICATIONS OF WEB 2.0 .....	33
2.2.5. IS WEB 2.0 A MASS MEDIUM, OR MORE THAN THAT? .....	35
2.3. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA .....	38
2.3.1. TERMS USED IN DESCRIBING SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEFINITIONAL ISSUES .....	38
2.3.2. DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA .....	42
2.4. TAXONOMIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA .....	44
2.5. TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA.....	48
2.5.1. BLOGS .....	49
2.5.1.1. Blogs in the tourism context .....	51
2.5.2. MICROBLOGS.....	53
2.5.2.1. Microblogs in the tourism context .....	55
2.5.3. SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES.....	56
2.5.3.1. Social Networking Sites in the tourism context.....	59
2.5.4. CONTENT COMMUNITIES .....	60
2.5.4.1. Content Communities in the tourism context .....	61
2.5.5. CONSUMER REVIEW WEBSITES .....	62
2.5.5.1. Consumer Review Websites in the tourism context .....	63
2.5.6. WIKIS .....	64
2.5.6.1. Wikis in the tourism context.....	65
2.5.7. INTERNET FORUMS .....	66



2.5.7.1. Internet forums in the tourism context .....	66
2.5.8. LOCATION BASED SOCIAL MEDIA .....	67
2.5.8.1. Location based social media in the tourism context.....	68
2.6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS .....	69
2.6.1. ON MICRO AND MACRO APPROACHES.....	70
<b>3. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: ORIGINS, THEORY AND MODELS .....</b>	<b>73</b>
3.1. INTRODUCTION .....	73
3.2. THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR.....	74
3.3. PERSPECTIVES TO THE STUDY OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR.....	80
3.3.1. THE TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES .....	81
3.3.1.1. The rational perspective .....	81
3.3.1.2. The cognitive perspective.....	81
3.3.1.3. The behavioural perspective.....	83
3.3.1.4. The experiential perspective.....	84
3.3.1.5. The trait perspective .....	85
3.3.1.6. The motivational perspective .....	85
3.3.2. THE NEW PERSPECTIVES.....	86
3.3.2.1. The interpretive perspective .....	86
3.3.2.2. The postmodern perspective.....	86
3.3.3. ADOPTING THE COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE THROUGH A HOLISTIC LENS .....	87
3.4. DEFINING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR .....	89
3.5. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR MODELS .....	93
3.5.1. CONTEMPORARY MODELS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR .....	95
3.5.1.1. The Nicosia Model.....	95
3.5.1.2. The Theory of Buyer Behaviour .....	98
3.5.1.3. The Consumer Decision Process model.....	103
3.5.2. CRITICISM OF COMPREHENSIVE MODELS .....	108
3.5.3. USE OF COMPREHENSIVE MODELS.....	112
3.6. TOURISM RELATED CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR MODELS .....	113
3.6.1. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR, OR DECISION MAKING MODELS?.....	114
3.6.2. THE NEED FOR TOURISM RELATED CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR MODELS.....	115
3.6.3. TYPES OF TOURISM RELATED CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR MODELS .....	116
3.6.4. TOURISM RELATED COGNITIVE MODELS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR .....	116
3.6.4.1. Structural models .....	118
3.6.4.2. Process models.....	121
3.6.5. OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE ON THE MODELS.....	137
3.6.6. CONSTRUCTS POTENTIALLY AFFECTED BY SOCIAL MEDIA .....	138
3.7. THE HOLIDAY TRAVEL PROCESS .....	144

<b>4. METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>147</b>
4.1. INTRODUCTION .....	147
4.2. RESEARCH AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	148
4.3. RESEARCH INQUIRY PARADIGMS .....	149
4.3.1. PARADIGMS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH .....	154
4.4. THE CHOICE OF A PARADIGM .....	155
4.5. THE CHOICE OF THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH .....	158
4.6. DATA COLLECTION METHOD .....	159
4.6.1. FOCUS GROUPS .....	159
4.6.2. RATIONALE FOR THE SELECTION OF FOCUS GROUPS .....	160
4.6.3. LIMITATIONS OF FOCUS GROUPS .....	163
4.7. FOCUS GROUP DESIGN .....	164
4.7.1. DISCUSSION STRATEGY AND APPROACH .....	164
4.7.2. QUESTIONS, INDIVIDUAL TASKS AND FLOW OF DISCUSSION.....	166
4.7.2.1. Welcome and introduction.....	166
4.7.2.2. Sentence completion tasks.....	167
4.7.2.3. Introduction to social media .....	169
4.7.2.4. Main discussion: Key questions and remaining tasks.....	170
4.7.2.5. Types of social media covered in the discussion .....	172
4.7.3. SAMPLING AND THE STUDY SAMPLE .....	175
4.7.4. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND PROCEEDINGS .....	183
4.8. ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUPS' DATA.....	186
4.8.1. BASIS FOR DATA ANALYSIS .....	187
4.8.2. METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS .....	187
4.9. THE ANALYSIS PROCESS .....	189
4.9.1. FAMILIARIZATION WITH DATA.....	191
4.9.2. GENERATION OF INITIAL CODES.....	192
4.9.3. SEARCHING FOR THEMES .....	195
4.9.4. REVIEWING THEMES .....	198
4.9.5. DEFINING AND NAMING THEMES.....	199
4.9.6. PRODUCING THE REPORT .....	199
4.9.7. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN ANALYSIS .....	200
4.10. GENERALIZABILITY AND TRANSFERABILITY OF FINDINGS .....	200
4.11. LIMITATIONS .....	201
4.11.1. SELF-DECLARATION OF MEETING THE REQUIREMENTS OF CRITERION SAMPLING.....	202
4.11.2. STUDENTS AS PARTICIPANTS IN TWO FOCUS GROUPS .....	202
4.11.3. SELECTED USE OF AIDED-RECALL.....	202
4.11.4. TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA COVERED IN THE DISCUSSION .....	203
4.11.5. ABSENCE OF POST-DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS VERIFICATION .....	204

4.11.6. LANGUAGE .....	204
<b>5. SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING THE DREAMING STAGE .....</b>	<b>205</b>
5.1. INTRODUCTION .....	205
5.2. SOCIAL MEDIA AS SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR HOLIDAY TRIPS .....	206
5.2.1. HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED INSPIRATIONAL STIMULI: TYPES OF SOURCES .....	208
5.2.2. HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED INSPIRATIONAL STIMULI: TYPES OF INFORMATION ACQUISITION .....	212
5.3. PHOTOS IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AS HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED STIMULI.....	215
5.3.1. DEVELOPMENT OF WANTS.....	216
5.3.2. GENERATION OF FEELINGS .....	216
5.3.3. INSPIRATION .....	217
5.3.4. ACTIONS .....	217
<b>6. SOCIAL MEDIA USE BEFORE THE TRIP .....</b>	<b>219</b>
6.1. INTRODUCTION .....	219
6.2. SOCIAL MEDIA AS TRAVEL RELATED COLLABORATION PLATFORMS .....	220
6.3. SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS FOR PRE-TRIP SELF-EXPRESSION .....	221
6.4. SOCIAL MEDIA AS INFORMATION SOURCES PROVIDING INPUTS TO DECISION MAKING PROCESSES .....	223
6.4.1. INFORMATION SEARCH ROUTES.....	226
6.4.1.1. The people route.....	227
6.4.1.2. The organization route .....	229
6.4.1.3. The content route.....	230
6.4.2. EVALUATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT: THE ROLE OF HEURISTICS .....	234
6.4.2.1. Consistency / Convergence of opinions .....	235
6.4.2.2. Style of Language .....	236
6.4.2.3. Relevance to own priorities and selection criteria.....	237
6.4.2.4. Perceived similarity with the reviewer .....	237
6.4.2.5. Content characteristics .....	238
6.4.2.6. Combined use of different heuristics.....	238
6.4.3. INFORMATION SEARCH LOOPS .....	239
<b>7. SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING THE TRIP .....</b>	<b>240</b>
7.1. INTRODUCTION .....	240
7.2. ACCESS TO INTERNET-ENABLED DEVICES AND RELATED ISSUES .....	241
7.2.1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ACCESS AND USE OF INTERNET ENABLED DEVICES DURING HOLIDAYS .....	241
7.2.2. AVAILABILITY OF DEVICE, COST OF INTERNET AND OTHER CONTINGENCIES.....	243
7.3. SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING THE TRIP .....	245
7.3.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AS COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS.....	245
7.3.2. SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS FOR SELF-EXPRESSION DURING THE TRIP.....	247

7.3.3.	SOCIAL MEDIA AS ENTERTAINMENT PLATFORMS .....	251
7.3.4.	SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS PROVIDING INPUTS TO AND OUTPUTS FROM DECISION MAKING PROCESSES .....	251
7.3.4.1.	As sources providing inputs to holiday related decision making processes.	252
7.3.4.2.	As platforms providing output from holiday related decision making processes .....	258
<b>8.</b>	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA USE AFTER THE TRIP .....</b>	<b>259</b>
8.1.	INTRODUCTION .....	259
8.2.	SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS FOR POST-CONSUMPTION EVALUATION.....	260
8.2.1.	DRIVING FORCES TO POST-CONSUMPTION EVALUATION .....	261
8.3.	SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS FOR POST-TRIP SELF-EXPRESSION .....	263
8.3.1.	DRIVING FORCES TO SELF-EXPRESSION.....	264
8.3.2.	CHARACTERISTICS OF SELF-EXPRESSION .....	266
8.3.2.1.	Number and types of social media employed in self-expression .....	266
8.3.2.2.	Content of self-expression .....	267
8.3.2.3.	Timing of self-expression .....	268
8.3.2.4.	Frequency of self-expression .....	269
8.4.	SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS FOR POST-TRIP COLLABORATION .....	269
<b>9.</b>	<b>SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONSUMER DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....</b>	<b>271</b>
9.1.	INTRODUCTION .....	271
9.2.	A NOTE ON THE STAGES OF THE CONSUMER DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	272
9.3.	SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE AND IMPACT PRIOR TO THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	272
9.4.	SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE AND IMPACT DURING THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	273
9.4.1.	NEED RECOGNITION.....	273
9.4.2.	INFORMATION SEARCH.....	274
9.4.3.	PRE-PURCHASE EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVES .....	276
9.4.4.	CHOICE AND PURCHASE .....	277
9.4.5.	POST-CHOICE AND POST-PURCHASE INFORMATION SEARCH .....	278
9.4.6.	CONSUMPTION.....	281
9.4.7.	POST CONSUMPTION EVALUATION.....	283
9.5.	SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE AND IMPACT POST THE COMPLETION OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	284
9.5.1.	POST CONSUMPTION SELF-EXPRESSION .....	284
9.5.2.	POST CONSUMPTION COLLABORATION .....	284
9.6.	RE-APPROACHING THE STAGES OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	285
<b>10.</b>	<b>SYNTHESIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND CONTRIBUTION .....</b>	<b>286</b>
10.1.	INTRODUCTION .....	286
10.2.	FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE HOLIDAY TRAVEL PROCESS: SYNTHESIS .....	287
10.2.1.	PROPERTIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONAL SPACES .....	289

10.3.	THE SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLED TRAVEL PROCESS MODEL .....	292
10.3.1.	COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL.....	294
10.3.2.	DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL .....	295
10.3.2.1.	The Inspiration Space.....	296
10.3.2.2.	The Collaboration Space .....	299
10.3.2.3.	The Decision Space.....	302
10.3.2.4.	The Self-Expression Space.....	311
10.3.2.5.	The Communication Space .....	318
10.3.2.6.	The Entertainment Space .....	319
10.3.3.	AN ATTEMPT TO COMPARE THE PROPOSED WITH EXISTING MODELS .....	320
10.3.3.1.	Approaching the proposed model as a consumer behaviour model .....	320
10.3.3.2.	Approaching the proposed model as a tourism consumer behaviour model.....	323
10.4.	SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONSUMER DECISION MAKING PROCESS.....	325
10.4.1.	REMARKS ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING THE CONSUMER DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	327
10.4.2.	ON LINEARITY AND RIGIDITY OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	330
10.5.	PROPOSING INFORMATION EXCHANGE AS A CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT.....	332
10.5.1.	COMPONENTS OF THE INFORMATION EXCHANGE CONSTRUCT .....	335
10.6.	CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE .....	340
10.6.1.	IN CONSUMER DECISION MAKING THEORY .....	340
10.6.2.	IN THE THEORY OF TECHNOLOGY FLUIDITY .....	342
10.6.3.	IN SOCIAL MEDIA RELATED RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF HOLIDAY TRAVEL .....	343
10.7.	IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE .....	344
10.8.	EMERGING AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	348
10.8.1.	PASSIVE RECEPTION OF INFORMATION DURING THE DREAMING STAGE .....	348
10.8.2.	INFORMATION SEARCH ROUTES.....	349
10.8.3.	POST-CHOICE AND/OR POST-PURCHASE INFORMATION SEARCH .....	350
10.8.4.	PRE AND POST-TRIP COLLABORATION .....	350
10.8.5.	SOCIAL MEDIA AS DESTRUCTORS OR ENHANCERS OF THE HOLIDAY EXPERIENCE .....	350
10.8.6.	INFORMATION EXCHANGE AS A THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT.....	351
10.8.7.	THE SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONAL SPACES .....	351
10.8.8.	THE INERTIA STATE.....	352
	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>353</b>
	<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>389</b>
	APPENDIX 1: LIST OF SOCIAL MEDIA TYPES DISTRIBUTED TO FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS .....	389
	APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONING ROUTE .....	390
	APPENDIX 3: PROFILES OF FOCUS GROUPS PARTICIPANTS .....	392

APPENDIX 4: FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION SHEET .....	394
APPENDIX 5: FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM .....	397
APPENDIX 6: MIND MAPS .....	398
APPENDIX 7: LIST OF PUBLISHED MATERIAL .....	405

## List of Tables

TABLE 2.1: COMPARING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A MASS MEDIUM TO THOSE OF WEB 1.0 AND WEB 2.0 .....	37
TABLE 2.2: TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE SOCIAL MEDIA .....	39
TABLE 2.3: APPROACHES TOWARDS A TAXONOMY OF SOCIAL MEDIA .....	46
TABLE 2.4: CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA.....	47
TABLE 3.1: PHASES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR .....	75
TABLE 3.2: OLD VERSUS NEW PERSPECTIVES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR RESEARCH .....	79
TABLE 3.3: CATEGORIZATION OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR .....	80
TABLE 3.4: DEFINITIONS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR 1967 – 2010.....	89
TABLE 3.5: STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR DEFINITIONS AND THEIR EVOLUTION 1967 - 2010 .....	90
TABLE 3.6: SUBSTANTIATING THE NEED FOR TOURISM-RELATED CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR MODELS.....	117
TABLE 3.7: CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR CONSTRUCTS POTENTIALLY AFFECTED BY SOCIAL MEDIA .....	142
TABLE 4.1: SENTENCE COMPLETION TASKS .....	168
TABLE 4.2: PHASES OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS .....	189
TABLE 10.1: TYPES OF CO-PARTICIPANTS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA INFORMATION EXCHANGE PROCESSES .....	294
TABLE 10.2: MOTIVES FOR SELF-EXPRESSION DURING THE HOLIDAY TRAVEL PROCESS .....	317
TABLE 10.3: ROLES OF CONSUMERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONAL SPACES DURING THE TRAVEL PROCESS .....	333

## List of Figures

FIGURE 1.1: USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE TRAVEL PROCESS .....	21
FIGURE 2.1: SOLIS' APPROACH ON SOCIAL MEDIA TAXONOMY: THE CONVERSATION PRISM .....	45
FIGURE 2.2: THE LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TYPES IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM .....	48
FIGURE 3.1: FORMS OF BEHAVIOURISM .....	83
FIGURE 3.2: THE NICOSIA MODEL (COMPREHENSIVE SCHEME) .....	96
FIGURE 3.3: THE THEORY OF BUYER BEHAVIOUR, OR HOWARTH-SHETH MODEL .....	98
FIGURE 3.4: THE CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS MODEL .....	104
FIGURE 3.5: POSTS IN A SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE DURING THE STAGES OF THE DECISION PROCESS .....	109
FIGURE 3.6: THE MODEL OF THE PLEASURE TRAVEL DESTINATION CHOICE .....	118
FIGURE 3.7: THE GENERAL MODEL OF TRAVEL LEISURE DESTINATION AWARENESS AND CHOICE .....	120
FIGURE 3.8: THE MODEL OF TOURIST BUYING DECISION .....	122
FIGURE 3.9: THE TRAVEL DECISION PROCESS .....	124
FIGURE 3.10: THE TRAVEL DECISION MAKING PROCESS .....	125
FIGURE 3.11: FACTORS DETERMINING THE VACATION SEQUENCE .....	126
FIGURE 3.12: THE VACATION TOURIST BEHAVIOUR MODEL .....	129
FIGURE 3.13: THE HOLIDAY DECISION PROCESS .....	133
FIGURE 3.14: STIMULUS-RESPONSE MODEL OF BUYER BEHAVIOUR .....	135
FIGURE 3.15: THE HOLIDAY TRAVEL PROCESS .....	145
FIGURE 4.1: DISCUSSION STRATEGY: TOPIC GUIDE AND SEQUENCE .....	166
FIGURE 4.2: PRE-EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCHER .....	181
FIGURE 4.3: EXTENDED THEMATIC ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK .....	190
FIGURE 4.4: SCREEN CAPTURE OF THE DATA MANAGEMENT EXCEL SPREAD SHEET .....	192
FIGURE 4.5: A STREAMLINED CODES-TO-THEORY MODEL FOR QUALITATIVE INQUIRY .....	193
FIGURE 4.6: A SAMPLE MIND MAP CREATED DURING THE SEARCHING FOR THEMES PHASE .....	198
FIGURE 5.1: SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR FUTURE HOLIDAY TRIPS DURING THE DREAMING STAGE .....	206
FIGURE 5.2: HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED INSPIRATIONAL STIMULI: TYPES OF SOURCES .....	208
FIGURE 5.3: HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED INSPIRATIONAL STIMULI: TYPES OF INFORMATION ACQUISITION .....	213
FIGURE 5.4: OUTCOMES OF EXPOSURE TO SOCIAL MEDIA CONTACTS' HOLIDAY PHOTOS IN SNS .....	215



FIGURE 6.1: SOCIAL MEDIA USE AS A COLLABORATION PLATFORM AMONG TRAVEL PARTY MEMBERS .....	220
FIGURE 6.2: SOCIAL MEDIA USE BEFORE THE TRIP AS A PLATFORM FOR TRAVEL-RELATED SELF-EXPRESSION .....	222
FIGURE 6.3: ROUTES IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN INFORMATION SOURCE PLATFORM .....	226
FIGURE 6.4: SOCIAL MEDIA CONTACTS AS SOURCES OF HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED INFORMATION .....	228
FIGURE 6.5: ACCESS TO CONTENT OUTSIDE SOCIAL MEDIA CONTACTS.....	231
FIGURE 7.1: ACCESS TO INTERNET-ENABLED DEVICES DURING THE TRIP .....	241
FIGURE 7.2: OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING THE TRIP .....	245
FIGURE 7.3: DRIVERS OF SELF-EXPRESSION DURING THE TRIP .....	248
FIGURE 7.4: SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS PROVIDING INPUTS TO AND OUTPUTS FROM HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED DECISION MAKING PROCESSES.....	252
FIGURE 7.5: USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES EVALUATION PROCESSES .....	256
FIGURE 8.1: SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS PROVIDING OUTPUTS FROM HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED DECISION MAKING PROCESSES .....	260
FIGURE 8.2: DRIVING FORCES TO POST-TRIP SELF-EXPRESSION .....	264
FIGURE 9.1: CONSUMPTION STAGES OF HOLIDAY TRIP RELATED DECISION MAKING PROCESSES .....	281
FIGURE 10.1: SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONAL SPACES DURING THE HOLIDAY TRAVEL PROCESS .	288
FIGURE 10.2: THE SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLED TRAVEL PROCESS MODEL.....	293
FIGURE 10.3: INTERACTIONS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA PRE, DURING, AND POST THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS.....	327
FIGURE 10.4: FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING HOLIDAY TRAVEL RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES .....	345
FIGURE 10.5: THE SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLED CONSUMER JOURNEY: A 360 <sup>o</sup> HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK.....	346

## List of Abbreviations

CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CDP	Consumer Decision Process
CRW	Consumer Review Websites
DMP	Decision Making Process
eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
EU	European Union
FGs	Focus Groups
FTP	File Transfer Protocol
HTML	HyperText Markup Language
HTRUGC	Holiday Travel Related User Generated Content
HTTP	HyperText Transfer Protocol
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
IED	Internet-enabled Device
IF	Internet Forums
LBS	Location Based Services
LBSM	Location Based Social Media
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OTA	Online Travel Agencies
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
SNS	Social Network Site
SoLoMo	Social-Local-Mobile
UGC	User Generated Content
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
US	United States of America
VoiP	Voice Over Internet Protocol
W3C	World Wide Web Consortium
Wi-Fi	Wireless Local Area Network
WOM	Word Of Mouth
WTO	World Tourism Organization
WWII	World War II
WWW	World Wide Web

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## **1. Introduction**

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Social media is all about facilitating people to express and share ideas, thoughts, and opinions with others. It is also about enabling people to connect with others, like they were doing for the last thousands of years. However, what is of significance is that social media: (a) removed spatial and time constraints that were inherent in traditional methods of communications; (b) provided online tools that enable one to many sharing of multimedia content; and (c) employ easy to use interfaces that enable even non-specialists to share and connect.

During the last years social media are enjoying a phenomenal success: Facebook, a social networking website, claims that its active users reached 1.3 billion worldwide, more than 50% of which log in every day (Facebook 2014); Twitter, a micro-blogging website hosts 225 million users who post on average 500 million tweets per day (Twitter 2014); More than 1 billion unique users visit YouTube each month, watching more than 6 billion hours of video (YouTube 2014), and at the same time it is estimated that there are over 181 million blogs worldwide (Nielsen 2012). Within the tourism context, two thirds (67%) of US travellers seem to read reviews provided by other travellers during their travel related search process (Google 2014), while 15% of US adults write a hotel review after returning home from a trip (Expedia 2013). TripAdvisor, a travel review website, seems a clear leader among travel related social media. It serves more than 260 million unique users per month who seek advice about their travel plans among 150+ million travel reviews and opinions for more than 4 million businesses around the globe (TripAdvisor 2014). With such usage rates, it seems rather expected that the impact of social media on travel planning has been characterized as “enormous” (Xiang et al. 2015, p.246).

As per the context of this study, the significance of the tourism industry and especially its holiday trip segment is well documented. Tourism is one of the fastest growing economic sectors on a global basis, producing 9% of the world’s GDP, and generating 6% (or \$1.4 trillion) of the world’s exports (United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) 2014). In 2013 international tourist arrivals reached a record of 1087 million, with an average annual growth rate of 5.3% during the last five years. Travel for holidays, recreation, and other forms of leisure represent the largest share of all travel activity: In 2013, this form of travel

represented 52% (or 568 million) of the total volume of international arrivals (UNWTO 2014). Although available leisure time is decreasing, the demand for shorter but more frequent holiday trips is increasing primarily due to the increasing work and life pressure, thus making holiday trips more vital than ever before (World Tourism Organization (WTO) 1999). Tourism demand is expected to increase with an average annual growth of 3.3% to reach 1800 million international arrivals by 2030, while leisure, recreations and holidays will represent 54% of all arrivals (UNWTO 2011).

The demand for tourism and especially for leisure, recreation, and holidays evidences a - so far - remarkable crisis resistance, primarily driven by tourism's positive impact on consumers' quality of life (Bronner and de Hoog 2014). As they suggest:

“holidays, in particular the main summer holiday, can be positioned closer to being a necessary good than to being a luxury good during an economic crisis. This finding is contrary to studies in the nineties (Melenberg and van Soest 1996), when tourism was a luxury good for households. A change seems to have occurred as regards the necessity of a holiday. Many vacationers are prepared to sacrifice expenditures on a variety of products just so as to keep on going on holiday” (Bronner and de Hoog 2014, p.12).

During the 2008-2013 global financial crisis which negatively influenced consumers' disposable income, and despite predictions that demand for tourism will decrease (Papatheodorou et al. 2010; Ritchie et al. 2010; Smeral 2010), holiday travel managed soon to overcome the crisis (Eurostat 2012; Bronner and de Hoog 2014; UNWTO 2014). It is forecasted that by 2030 international arrivals for leisure, recreation, and holidays will reach 970 million (UNWTO 2011).

## 1.1. Rationale

Tourism products are experiential: Intangible and composite in nature, inseparable therefore difficult, or even impossible to be physically evaluated before purchase. As a result, their purchases are considered risky, and information intensive in terms of their decision making process (McIntosh et al. 1995; Holloway 2004; Middleton et al. 2009; Huang et al. 2010). Especially in times of economic downturns, such as the 2008-2013 global financial crisis, when consumers attempt to economize on holiday trips, information search is becoming even more intensive (Bronner and de Hoog 2013). To reduce the purchase associated risk and cope with the information intensive decision making, consumers search for information in a variety of sources (Crotts 1999; Gursoy and McCleary 2004; Chung and Buhalis 2008).

The Internet's interactivity, customization, and vast information resources provided tailored search and content to users, being able to cover almost any idiosyncratic preference (Newhagen

and Rafaeli 1996). As a natural consequence, the Web soon became one of the most effective means for potential tourists to search for information (Werthner and Klein 1999). However, despite the existence of numerous online sources, information from other consumers who already have experienced the particular product, and are willing to provide information, is considered as the most preferred source and the most influential in the context of travel-related decision making (Crotts 1999). At the same time, there are concerns that the vast amount of information available on the Web causes an information overload, impacting negatively on users' ability to locate information that is relevant to their needs (Radosevich 1997; Pan and Fesenmaier 2006; Mintel 2014)

The Internet, and in particular Web 2.0, provides to consumers a new communication platform similar to that of word of mouth that also empowers consumers (Pan et al. 2007). Social media, apart from their popularity as generic tools enabling sharing of content and connection with others, are becoming increasingly important also in tourism, since: (a) Potential tourists rely on others' experiences for their decision making due to the experiential nature of tourism products (Litvin et al. 2008; Yoo et al. 2007), thus in an effort to decrease uncertainty and increase the exchange utility; and (b) Social media enable storytelling, a usual post-travel engagement in our travel culture, on a '24/7' basis, not only to a larger audience, but also provide a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities (Gretzel et al. 2006).

Social media play a still increasing, important role in travel planning as information sources for potential travellers (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Almost a fourth (23%) of US Internet users were "somewhat" or "significantly influenced" by social media for their travel related decisions (eMarketer 2010b). When travelling to unfamiliar destinations, travel blogs were found to provide better advice than friends and relatives (Tan and Chen 2012; Lee and Gretzel 2014). Similarly, 31% of the Lonely Travel's Thorn Tree forum's threads seem to influence members' travel planning decisions (Arsal et al. 2010).

In parallel with the above advances in the area of social media, there are also major changes at the consumer level that impact consumer behaviour. Changes in values and lifestyles, shorter leisure time, and search for value for money have led to a new breed of tourism consumers: More informed, more independent, and more individualistic (Poon, 1993). At the same time, travel-related consumer behaviour has become increasingly contradictory (Marabella 2004). For example, consumers demonstrate contradicting holiday lifestyles within relatively short periods of time: they are willing to pay for luxury travel experiences but at the same time they search the web for the best hotel rate (Gretzel et al. 2006).

Changes in Information Communication Technology also have an impact on consumer behaviour. Almost 80% of households in EU-28 have Internet access (Eurostat 2014). However, of equal significance is that consumers' perception of Internet seems to be changing:

“In the first few years of the study, going online was described as an activity in its own right. ‘Going online’ was something that you did, in the same way as ‘watching TV’ or ‘listening to the radio’. More recently, participants describe the Internet more as a facilitator or a utility – a different and usually more convenient way to conduct tasks which were previously done in another way. Now it is clear that for many participants the Internet is offering more than convenience – it is providing benefits and creating opportunities that were not previously available to them” (Ofcom 2014, p.10).

At the same time, new types of Internet enabled devices (e.g. smartphones and tablets) emerged, and soon gained increased popularity among consumers: Tablet user penetration in EU-5 reached 31% in 2014, and a rise to 44% is forecasted for 2018 (eMarketer 2014a). Smartphone penetration around the globe reached 24% of the total population (or 1.76 billions), and a rise to 36% (or 2.7 billions) is forecasted for 2018 (eMarketer 2014b). It is estimated that by 2015 more than half of the population in 15 countries will own a smartphone, and as Monica Peart, senior forecasting analyst at eMarketer suggests:

“The embrace of this technology among the approximately 500 million people in these countries who will be using smart devices by the end of next year will have a significant influence on media usage, ecommerce and marketing” (eMarketer 2014b).

In addition to penetration rates, the wealth of new technological features (e.g. GPS, high definition photo and video cameras, etc.) that these devices feature will further increase the volume and richness of interaction and content sharing among consumers via social media applications. It becomes apparent that social media and mobile devices fundamentally change travel related consumer behaviour (Xiang et al. 2015).

Most academic studies focus on the use and impact of social media in the research phase of the travel process (Leung et al. 2013). However, social media seem to have a role also in the during the trip, as well as in the post-trip stages of the travel process: 73% of US social media users access these applications at least once daily during their travel (eMarketer 2010a). Similarly, in the UK, among those holiday makers who use an Internet enabled device (e.g. smartphone, tablet, etc.) 30% update their Facebook status during holidays, 26% check their social feeds, and 8% tweet (Bloomberg 2011). In terms of post-trip behaviour, 43% of US travellers post travel-related content on social media upon return from their trip (Expedia 2013). As a result emphasis in the study of social media needs to be placed not only in the pre-trip, but also in the during, and in the post-trip stages of the travel process.

In the academic literature there are only two empirical studies that attempt to provide insights on the overall impact of social media during the whole travel process, that is approaching pre, during, and post-trip as three distinct stages and examining use and impacts of social media during each one. The first is a study by Cox, Burgess, Sellito and Buultjens (Burgess et al. 2009; Cox et al. 2009) that attempts to reveal the role of social media in the travel process and on the trustworthiness of the information. The second is a study by Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (Fotis et al. 2011; Fotis et al. 2012) that attempts to provide a comprehensive view of the role and impact of social media before, during and after the trip, providing insights on usage levels, scope of use, level of influence and trust. In addition to these two, a series of studies that employ the consumer panel of the U.S. Travel Association and conducted in cooperation with the National Laboratory for Tourism & eCommerce (for example Yoo and Gretzel 2011; Yoo and Gretzel 2012) do include use of social media throughout the travel process, however they (a) do not focus on each stage of the travel process, and (b) they primarily focus on use of social media for trip planning purposes.

In the first study, Cox et al. (2009) attempted to reveal the role of travel related social media (referred in the study as “websites containing user-generated content”) in consumers’ travel process, the trustworthiness and importance of the information contained in these sites compared to traditional sources of information, and the attitudes of social media users towards the usefulness of these sites compared to non-users. Their online survey sample (n=12,544) consisted of prospective travellers who visited and registered (as e-mail subscribers) in the official tourism website of New South Wales in Australia. Their findings suggest that social media websites are mainly used after travellers have chosen their holiday destination (28%) rather than when trying to narrow down their choices of destinations (22%) or when deciding on the destination (21%). During, and post-trip usage was found very limited: 6% used social media during the trip to find information about specific attractions, 5% post-trip to share experiences with other travellers, and 4% to compare experiences with those of other travellers. Moreover, traditional sources of information (e.g. state tourism websites, travel agents’ websites) were found more trustworthy than travel related social media (e.g. TripAdvisor, blogs, social networking sites). However the study has two major limitations: First, the sample consisted of prospective travellers who visited and registered (as e-mail subscribers) in an official tourism website, namely the Tourism New South Wales. As a result it may be argued that the sample had already a positive predisposition, or even a preference towards official sources of information, a claim that is strengthened by the fact that among the seven sources of travel related information examined, it was the “state tourism websites” that was found to be the

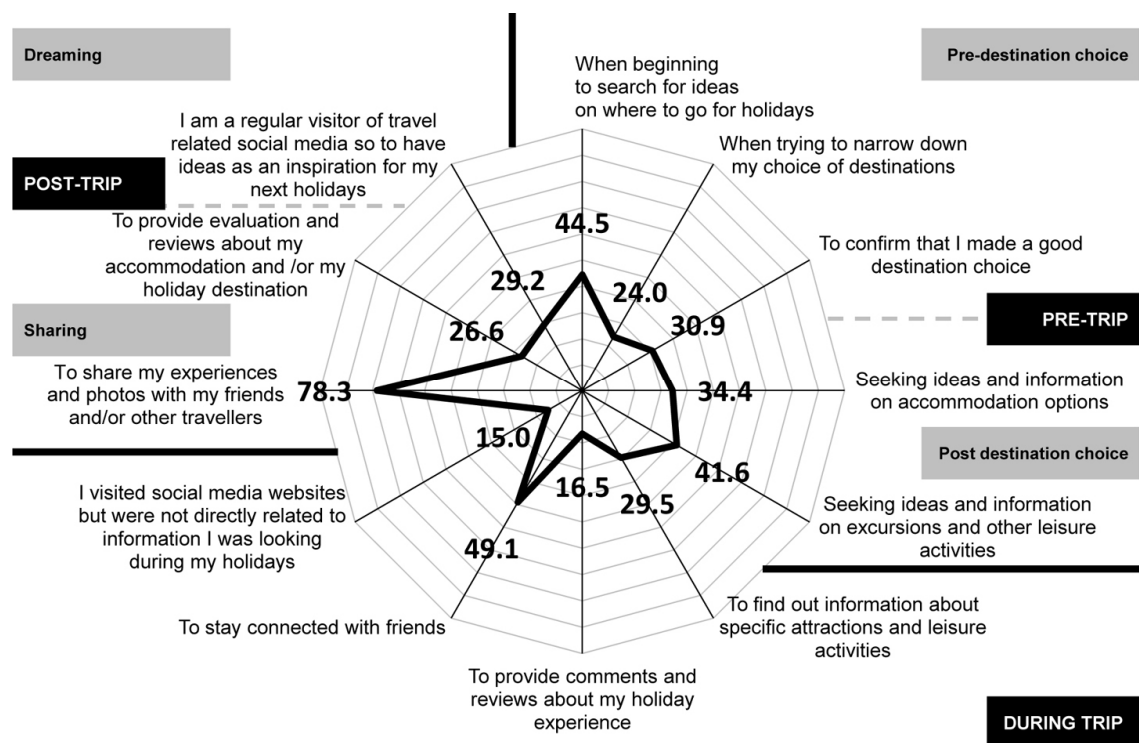


most trusted source. Second, the fact that the sample consisted of prospective and not of actual travellers can also be considered as a limitation, given that

“Significant differences have been reported between the factors considered in making an actual decision and those involved in a hypothetical decision”. (Beaulieu & Schreyer, 1985, cited Um & Crompton, 1990, p.433).

In the second study, Fotis et al. (2011; 2012) found that among travellers residing in the Former Soviet Union Republics social media are predominantly used during the post-trip stage for sharing experiences and photos with friends and other travellers (78% of respondents). As shown in Figure 2.4, the second most popular use of social media was observed during the trip to enable travellers to stay connected with friends (49%).

Figure 1.1: Use of social media during the travel process



Source: Fotis et al. (2012)

Figures represent % of users who engaged in activity

Social media use during the pre-trip stage for the purposes of information search about potential destinations, leisure activities and accommodation was found less popular. A strong correlation was observed between level of influence from social media and changes made to holiday plans in terms of destination and accommodation selection before final decisions were made. In contrast to the study of Cox et al. (2009), social media were perceived more trusted than official tourism websites, travel agents and mass media advertising. Apart from the small sample size (n=346), an additional major limitation is that the study focused only to a specific geographical

area (Former Soviet Union Republics) and therefore the findings cannot be generalized especially to other national markets with distant cultural characteristics.

As will be presented in detail in chapter 2, apart from these two studies, there is an adequate number of travel related social media studies the vast majority of which employ a micro-approach: They focus on: (a) specific social media applications; or (b) specific social media types; or (c) specific stages of the travel process; or (d) specific stages of the travel related decision making process. Therefore, it is proposed that a comprehensive, exploratory study on the overall impact of social media focusing equally on each stage of the travel process will provide a wide angle picture of the phenomenon, a picture of the forest rather than the trees, and therefore provide a holistic understanding of social media use and impacts. This enlarged view is considered necessary given that social media are significantly impacting the tourism system (Xiang and Gretzel 2010); are “having enormous impact on travel planning” (Xiang et al. 2015, p.246); have a “considerable impact” on travel related decisions (Yoo and Gretzel 2012, p.199); and are “not just another information source but rather fundamentally change travel planning for those who use them” (Yoo and Gretzel 2011, p.200). The need for this study is further documented by claims that research on the extent to which social media affect tourists’ attitudes and purchasing decisions “can be considered still poor and in its infancy” (Del Chiappa 2011, p.339); that “the significant impacts of social media on tourists’ decisions are not well documented (Liu et al. 2013, p.8); and that there is still “a lack of research on how social media portals influence travellers” (Shu and Scott 2014, p.288).

Such developments in social media, together with changes in consumer behaviour challenge the suitability of traditional consumer behaviour theory to explain in depth the social media phenomenon. For example, Constantinides and Fountain (2008, p.239) support that these developments “further complicate the time-honoured textbook buying behaviour process described in the Inputs – Processing – Response models”. Earlier, it has even been supported that Internet and the associated new technologies have discredited - for some consumers and some choices - the assumptions that led Simon (1955, 1956) develop the theory of bounded rationality (Mishra and Olshavsky 2005). Such an assumption, if valid, may have been strengthened by the presence and increased popularity of social media. Moreover, as will be presented in detail in chapter 3, comprehensive models of consumer behaviour focus on the information processing mechanism, and at the same time recognize the influential role of the environment and the social experiences (Foxall 1990; Stewart 1994; Marsden and Littler 1998). So far, the mass media and interpersonal communication were the cornerstones of information collection. Therefore, it may be suggested that the Internet, and in particular the social media (as a subset of Web 2.0 applications), managed to change dramatically not only the traditional mass

media communications, but also the ways consumers communicate and collaborate with each other. In such a case, the – so far – cornerstones of information collection are altered, and therefore decision making needs to be reconsidered within the prism of social media. If such an argument is valid, then consumer behaviour theories, and therefore consumer behaviour models, need also to be reconsidered. It is believed that a wide angle approach in studying the phenomenon of social media from a consumer behaviour perspective will provide the required conceptual framework to contribute towards this direction.

## 1.2. Aim and objectives

The **research aim** of this thesis is to explore the use and impact of social media on consumer behaviour with particular focus on holiday travel. To achieve this aim, this study focuses on active users' interactions with social media during all stages of the holiday travel process, and also during all stages of the consumer decision process.

Following the identification of the research aim, the following **objectives** of this study have been formulated:

1. To explore social media use and impact during the entire holiday travel process.
2. To reveal the functions of social media within the context of the holiday travel process.
3. To propose a model that will act as a framework for understanding use and impact of social media throughout the entire holiday travel process, as well as throughout the holiday travel related consumer decision making processes.
4. To provide a deeper understanding of social media potential implications for travel and tourism related marketers.

To achieve the objectives, the following **research questions** have been formulated:

1. During which stages of the holiday travel process are social media used?
2. How are social media used during each stage of the holiday travel process?
3. At which stages of holidaymakers' decision making processes are social media used?
4. How holidaymakers construct social media use during the holiday travel process?
5. How social media impact active users' travel related consumer behaviour?

### 1.3. Structure of the thesis

**Chapter 2** provides a thorough understanding of social media. The chapter commences with a brief introduction to web 1.0 and Web 2.0 and their implications. After critically addressing a terminological, a definitional, and a taxonomical issue, it proposes a definition of social media, as well as a social media taxonomy. Each of the eight social media types proposed in the taxonomy (namely, blogs, microblogs, social network sites, consumer review and ratings websites, Internet forums, collaborative projects, and location based social media) is presented in detail in a separate section. Each section includes a discussion on existing studies that attempt to describe the impact of the particular type of social medium to aspects of both generic and travel related consumer behaviour. The chapter concludes by identifying a literature gap resulting from the fact that almost all of the existing studies, attempting to describe the role and impact of social media, employ a micro approach, being either: (a) social media type specific; (b) application specific; (c) decision making process stage specific; or (d) travel planning stage specific. Thus it recognizes the need for a comprehensive, landscape picture via a wide-angle lens, exploring the overall impact and role of social media, focusing equally on each stage of the travel process, and attempting to cover all stages of the decision making process.

In need for a comprehensive view on the impact of social media in consumer behaviour, **Chapter 3** seeks a perspective through which consumer behaviour should be studied for the purposes of this study. It starts by discussing the phases in the development of consumer behaviour, followed by the approaches, or perspectives that are available for researchers to study consumer behaviour. A critical evaluation for each perspective is undertaken to enable the selection of the lens through which this study will be conducted. A review of consumer behaviour definitions is presented and a new definition is proposed for the purposes of this study. The chapter then proceeds to a critical review of the comprehensive consumer behaviour models. After the review of each model, an attempt is made to identify the constructs that may be affected by social media, so to inform the research process. A similar attempt is made within the tourism context, through a review of a number of cognitive tourism related models, and identification of travel related constructs that may be affected from social media.

**Chapter 4** provides a detailed discussion on the methodology. It presents adequate justification for all decisions taken, and describes the research process in depth. The chapter starts with a discussion about research enquiry paradigms, since an understanding of philosophy of research is considered as an essential prerequisite in conducting research, especially for novice researchers. The choice of the qualitative approach adopted in this study is then substantiated based on the nature of the research questions. The choice of focus groups as the data collection

method is presented, accompanied by its rationale. A detailed section on focus group design follows: It addresses issues such as discussion strategy and approach, design of questions and individual tasks, the choice of the sampling method and the actual sampling process employed. The study's sample is presented with adequate information on the focus groups composition, size, length of discussion, number of focus groups and saturation, including a number of other considerations. The analysis of focus group data is described in depth, along with the detailed process employed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues related to the generalizability and transferability of findings, and with a discussion on the methodological limitations of this study.

**Chapter 5** is the first chapter of the findings and explores social media use and impact during the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process. First, it is examined whether focus group participants consider social media as sources of inspiration for future holiday trips. Within this section, different sources of social media content, as well as different types of information acquisition are identified. Second, the role of holiday photos in social networking sites as holiday travel related stimuli is explored and a number of impacts from such exposure are identified.

**Chapter 6** explores social media use and impact in the pre-trip stage of the holiday travel process. Three social media functions have been identified and discussed. First, as communication platforms among members of the travel party; second, as platforms for travel related self-expression; and third as information sources providing inputs to holiday travel related decision making processes. Within the latter function, three alternative routes of information search have been identified and discussed in depth. Findings on the role of heuristics in evaluating content and source credibility are discussed.

**Chapter 7** explores social media use and impact during the trip. Four factors that determine whether a social media user will use Internet – an essential prerequisite for social media use - during the holiday trip are identified and discussed in-depth. Four functions of social media have been identified: First, as communication platforms to enable active users to keep in touch with their social media contacts; second, as platforms providing inputs to, and outputs from, holiday related decision making processes; third, as platforms for travel related self-expression; and fourth as entertainment platforms.

**Chapter 8** explores social media use and impact in the post-trip stage of the holiday travel process. Three functions have been identified and discussed in-depth: First, as platforms enabling post-consumption evaluation during holiday travel related decision making processes;

second, as platforms for travel related self-expression; and third as platforms for post-trip collaboration among the members of the travel party.

Whereas chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 approach the analysis of the focus group discussions from the perspective of the holiday travel process and its four stages (dreaming, pre, during, and post-trip), **chapter 9** approaches the analysis from the perspective of the Decision Making Process (DMP). The chapter explores social media use during each of the five stages of the DMP, as proposed by the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006). However, in an attempt to provide a holistic view to the DMP the chapter also discusses social media use prior to the initiation of the DMP, and also post the completion of the DMP.

Through a critical synthesis of the study's findings, the first part of **Chapter 10** attempts to draw the big picture by providing an overall view of social media use and impacts on the holiday travel process as a whole. The synthesis proposes the existence of six social media functional spaces located within the whole holiday travel process: Inspiration, Collaboration, Decision making, Self-expression, Communication, and Entertainment. The chapter continues by presenting the social media enabled travel process model as a framework to provide understanding of social media use and impacts throughout the holiday travel process. Moreover, information exchange is proposed as an enlarged consumer behaviour theoretical construct resulting from the numerous information exchange interactions, performed via social media, during all stages of the holiday travel process and during all stages of the decision making process. Nine components of the construct are preliminary proposed and further discussed. The chapter concludes by presenting the contribution to knowledge made by the current study, the implications for practice, and the emerging areas for further research.

## 2. Social media: Concepts, issues and implications

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*“In a few years, men will be able to communicate more effectively through a machine than face to face.” (Licklider and Taylor 1968, p.21)*

### 2.1. Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the impact of social media on consumer behaviour with focus on holiday travel. It is therefore considered imperative to begin by providing a thorough understanding of social media. This chapter commences by presenting a brief introduction about the World Wide Web and its implications, as a prerequisite to address the question whether Web 2.0 (and therefore its related applications such as social media) can be considered as a mass medium. It then attempts to define the subject under study: social media. Toward this end, three issues emerging from the literature have been identified: (a) the terminological issue; (b) the definitional issue; and (c) the taxonomical issue. To address each issue, existing studies are critically reviewed, compared and contrasted. As a result, both a definition and a taxonomy of social media are proposed. A detailed review of each type of social media follows. Existing studies that attempt to describe the impact of each type of social media to aspects of both generic and travel related consumer behaviour are reviewed and critically discussed.

The chapter concludes by identifying a literature gap: Almost all of the existing studies that attempt to describe the role and impact of social media employ a micro approach being either: (a) social media type specific (e.g. consumer review and rating websites); (b) application specific (e.g. TripAdvisor.com); (c) decision making process stage specific (e.g. information search); or (d) travel planning stage specific (e.g. before travel).

As a result the need for a comprehensive, landscape picture via a wide-angle lens, exploring the overall impact and role of social media, focusing equally on each stage of the travel process, and attempting to cover all stages of the decision making process is recognized.

## 2.2. From World Wide Web to Web 2.0

The Internet as an infrastructure, and more specifically the web as a user friendly multimedia information space, revolutionized not only the way people and organizations communicate, but also how they access information and interact in a vast range of their daily activities. With over 2.8 billion users worldwide in 2013, representing 40% of the world's population, or 77% of residents in developed countries (International Telecommunication Union 2014) the Internet, as media communication theorists suggest, contributes: (a) to make the general public more active and engaged, and (b) to “a new era of truer and greater democracy” (Burnett and Marshall 2003, p.8). However, it is the second generation of web-based services, or Web 2.0, with its user-friendly interface and ability for the creation of user-generated content, that revolutionized the way users interact with others, with organizations, and with information in general. This second generation of web-services transformed the web, as a medium, from a “one to many channel”, to a “many to many”, and simultaneously to a “one to one channel”, with a phenomenal welcoming reaction from Internet users all around the globe. Such progress, characterized as a seismic change (Hirst and Harrison 2007), is causing paradigm shifts in a range of disciplines: from political science to sociology, and from communications to consumer behaviour.

### 2.2.1. A brief history of World Wide Web

To better understand social media and their impacts on consumer behaviour it is considered necessary to present a brief historical background on the development and the implications of the web, as the concepts of social media and Web 2.0, although not identical, are closely related.

In 1990 CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, accepted a proposal to fund the development of a “universal linked information system” concerning

“...the management of general information about accelerators and experiments... [addressing] the problems of loss of information about complex evolving systems ... based on a distributed hypertext system.” (Berners-Lee 1989, p.1).

The proposal was an initiative by CERN's network programmer Tim Berners-Lee in his effort to overcome the organization's problems in managing the information about various research projects, and the different platforms used to store information on different computer systems. What might have influenced his innovative thinking in conceptualizing the web was perhaps that he perceived CERN as a micro-model of the world. Therefore, he attempted to meet information management issues that the rest of the world will face in the years to come. Berners-Lee when referring to “loosing information at CERN” he described the organization's working structure as a “multiply connected web whose interconnections evolve with time” and



supported that “a web of notes with links (like references) between them is far more useful than a fixed hierarchical system” for information management (Berners-Lee 1989, p.5-7). His proposed solution was influenced by Ted Nelson’s concept of “hypertexts” and “hypermedia” (1965 cited Nelson 2010) however operating within an Internet environment:

“Imagine, then, the references in this document, all being associated with the network address of the thing to which they referred, so that while reading this document you could skip to them with a click of the mouse.” (Berners-Lee 1989, p.12).

In 1990, Berners-Lee made four developments that proved critical for the birth of Internet as we know it today: (a) the initial code for the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), a language that enables computers to communicate with each other over the Internet; (b) the Universal Resource Identifier scheme of addresses; (c) the WorldWideWeb, the first web browser; and (d) the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) for formatting web pages. The World Wide Web (WWW) was born: “a global hypertext project that enables people to work together by combining their knowledge in a web of hypertext documents” (World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) 2009). Since then, the web grows with a geometric growth: In 1998 the first Google index revealed 26 million pages, in 2000 it reached one billion, and in November 2008 the milestone of 1 trillion unique URLs was reached (Alpert and Hajaj 2008). On the contrary, to what Internet is (a hardware infrastructure, a network of networks), the WWW can be described as a systematic collection of interlinked hypertext documents (texts, images, videos, sounds, animations etc.) that constitute “an abstract (imagery) space of information” that can be accessed through a variety of devices via the Internet (Griffiths 2002). In a broader, and much later definition, Fuchs et al. (2010, p.51) define the World Wide Web as

“...(the most prominent part of the Internet) as a techno-social system, a system where humans interact based on technological networks.”

Although the terms WWW and Internet are sometimes being used interchangeably, both in academia and in daily life, it should be noted that the WWW is a service, one application that runs on the Internet infrastructure (W3C 2010), among other applications such as e-mail, ftp, VoiP etc. Moreover, the term Web, or web, defines all (inter) connected devices and applications, as opposed to the term WWW that originally defined the (inter) connected PCs (O’Reilly and Battelle 2009). From a technical perspective, Berners-Lee (2007) identifies three factors that were critical for the success of the web: (a) Universal linking architecture: Its capacity to accommodate unlimited links, from any page to any page, without any permission requirements or coordination from any central authority; (b) Open foundation: Its open technical standards and royalty free technology, that ensure development of innovative commercial, non-commercial and governmental service applications; and (c) Separation of layers, e.g. network

transport, routing and information application that enable innovations to take place independently.

### **2.2.2. Implications of the Web**

According to The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C 2004), the web has numerous impacts in society and culture, science, industry and business: In society and culture the web provides a new medium of worldwide human communication and revolutionized access to information and knowledge with implications in all aspects of the daily life from religion and sex to health, politics and commerce. In science, the web has drastically changed the way scientists are doing research: It enables real time access to an enormous amount of information via sophisticated but user-friendly search tools, facilitates cooperation between scientific communities, serves as a new platform for conducting primary research but also as a channel for the dissemination of scientific knowledge. In industry, businesses exploited the first generation of the web as an information and sales channel introducing innovative B2B and B2C business models (Alford 2000). The web became a mission critical component for business operations, enabling servicing of customers anywhere in the world on a 24/7/365 basis, enhancing convenience, speed and access. New services and products have been created, new markets have been formed and new companies have been developed.

In terms of implications to marketing, it was during the second half of the '90s that scholars started discussing the implications of the Internet's interactivity on consumer power suggesting that such developments in IT will make traditional marketing practices obsolete (van Raaij 1998). At that time the focus of the impact was mainly: (a) on the changes in the acquisition of information (from delivery to retrieval media); and (b) on the power shift from sender to receiver in the classical mass communication model of sender → message → receiver. However, there were also early notions that newsgroups and chat boxes (applications that existed well before the web) would enable consumers to share information, discuss, provide problem solutions and suggestions about products and brands, thus causing a paradigm shift for marketing communications (Van Raaij 1998). As early as 2003, the Internet was seen as "great enabler of consumer power" (Urban 2003, p.4), causing a steady decline on the influential power of traditional mass media and other marketing tools (Constantinides 2009). Urban (2003, p.4) identified the "increasing communication between customers" in the form of consultation and collaboration among the five trends that created increasing consumer power, the other four being increasing access to information, access to more alternatives, more simplified transactions and customer distrust and resentment. In 2004, it was argued that "the web is fundamentally changing, and will continue to change, marketing thought and practice" (Sharma and Sheth

2004, p.696). The web realigned marketing focus from a supplier to a customer perspective enabling a customer-centric rather than a mass market approach. It is the customer now, and not the product, that initiates marketing activities, and as a result the product is easier to be personalized. More than that, the web reduces transactional costs and increases customer satisfaction since it provides the tools for expectation management through provision of audio-visual material that enable customers to form more realistic expectations. The web enables cocreation of products and services; assures universal rather than local or regional availability removing the locational dependence of physical distribution; serves as a platform for development of infomediaries (e.g. product review websites) that reduce information overload; enables “open pricing” as users have access to pricing information across competitors; provides non-time based interactions and flexible delivery of services on a 24/7/365 basis (Sharma and Sheth 2004).

The web’s impacts to consumer behaviour have been characterized as similar to those of the Industrial Revolution, of the printing press, or the railroads (Sharma and Sheth 2004). Due to the web, consumer preferences and the decision making process are not influenced only by the traditionally defined controllable and uncontrollable stimuli. They are also influenced by the “web experience”, or the “online atmospherics” consisting of online controllable factors such as website usability, interactivity, trust, aesthetics, online marketing mix (Constantinides 2004), and by the website’s quality, interface, satisfaction and experience (Darley et al. 2010). Another implication that should be credited to web is that it provided the environment that enabled the further development and the popularity of virtual communities (Burnett and Marshall 2003).

On the other hand, there are also signs of negative implications: The Internet and the web makes consumers highly individualistic, more time driven and demanding, more information intensive, dictating timing and mode of communication, and with increased expectations (Akehurst 2009). In addition, the vast amount of information available on the web causes an information overload, impacting negatively on the ability of users to locate information relevant to their needs (Radosevich 1997; Lee and Lee 2004), or even causes other pathologies of information such as information anxiety and infobesity (Bawden and Robinson 2009).

### **2.2.3. The Web 2.0**

Web 2.0 is an emerging and therefore controversial term, as there is no consensus of what it exactly represents (Madden and Fox 2006; Constantinides and Fountain 2008). The term was originally coined by DiNucci (1999) who conceptualized the transformation of the web from “screenfulls of text and graphics” to a “transport mechanism [...] through which interactivity

happens” (DiNucci 1999, p.32). Moreover, DiNucci was the first to envision what today is known as the Internet of Things: the web beyond the boundaries of the personal computer, but through a range of interconnected devices such as TV sets, car dashboards, cell phones, hand-held game machines, and microwave ovens. However, the term Web 2.0 (and consequently web 1.0 as a retronym) has been popularized by O’Reilly and Dougherty (O’Reilly2007) to describe the next, changing face of the web, and the qualities online companies had that enabled them to survive the dot com crash. In that respect the web is seen as a platform harnessing the collective intelligence and the wisdom of the crowds providing rich user experiences (O’Reilly 2007). Musser and O’Reilly (2006, p.4) define Web 2.0 as:

“... a set of economic, social, and technology trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the Internet — a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by user participation, openness, and network effects.”

In an attempt to reconcile and combine the Web 2.0’s technological and social elements, Constantinides and Fountain (2008, p.232) define it as:

“a collection of open source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users’ networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of content.”

However, they clearly state that they use the terms “Web 2.0” and “social media” as interchangeable, considering blogs, social networks, content communities, forums / bulletin boards and content aggregators as “categories of Web 2.0” (Constantinides and Fountain 2008). Such a view of Web 2.0 can be considered as rather limited, especially when compared to:

- a. Musser and O’Reilly’s (2006, p.4) view that Web 2.0 is “a set of economic, social, and technology trends”.
- b. the views of McKinsey (2009) who consider that Web 2.0 includes also tools and platforms such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and mash-ups.
- c. O’Reilly’s (2007) view who also considers RSS, Bit Torrent, and Napster as Web 2.0; and
- d. O’Reilly and Battelle’s (2009) view who additionally include in the Web 2.0 applications such as those developed by InSTEDD (Innovative Support to Emergencies, Diseases and Disasters), sensors driven real traffic monitoring systems, and e-government (or Government 2.0).

On the contrary, Fuchs et al. (2010) outlining the qualities of the web, and based on the ideological frameworks of Marx (collective cooperative production), and Tönnies

(communities), define Web 2.0 “...as a medium for human cooperation” (Fuchs et al. 2010, p.43). Nevertheless, there seems to be an agreement to the fact that Web 2.0 is not a technological novelty but a philosophy; an approach on a common vision of its user community; a change in the understanding of the user’s role in IT applications, of knowledge and of the status of information (Tredinnick 2006; O’Reilly 2007; Constantinides 2008; Fuchs et al. 2010). This study adopts this view, but in contrast to Constantinides and Fountain (2008), it perceives social media (explicitly defined later in this chapter) as a subset of Web 2.0 applications.

#### **2.2.4. Implications of Web 2.0**

The impacts of Web 2.0 have been characterized as a “still in progress - seismic change” causing paradigm shifts in a range of disciplines, but also major changes in our daily lives (Hirst and Harrison 2007). Among other, Web 2.0 contributes to the democratization of countries (Sedra 2011; Howard 2011), enables citizen journalism (Gillmor 2004; Glaser 2006), permitted the formation of online communities (Xin 2009) and virtual communities of consumption (De Valck et al. 2009), empowered consumers (Urban 2003), broadens word of mouth (Ho and Chang 2010), and further complicated the “time-honoured textbook buying behaviour process” (Constantinides and Fountain 2008, p .239). More specifically:

Web 2.0 has an impact on the democratization of countries: The 2011 events in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as the 2009 post-election protests in Iran, showed that Web 2.0 presents a major challenge for the ability of the state to control the media and the message. In Egypt and Tunisia Web 2.0 applications, such as Twitter and Facebook, played an active role in initiating the pro-democracy movement, facilitating communications and coordinating actions, thus evidencing the revolutionary potential of Web 2.0 (Sedra 2011). As one Egyptian activist tweeted “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world,” evidencing the role of social media in the 2011 Middle East revolts (Howard 2011).

Within a similar vein, Web 2.0 provides the platform for citizen journalism: Users without formal education or professional training in journalism have access to user-friendly software and hardware tools (e.g. smartphones and tablets) that enable them to publish not only text but also elaborate multimedia content on any topic of interest. They are able to publish their opinion from practically anywhere in the world, achieving global distribution: from a news-story to a detailed product review, a case on product success or failure (Gillmor 2004; Glaser 2006).

Web 2.0 enabled the formation of online communities, linking users to each other on a global basis, forming a complicated web of interactions, moving human interaction to a virtual

dimension (Xin 2009). However, such communities (known earlier as virtual communities) existed well before web 1.0, primarily in the form of text based (chat) rooms, (bulletin) boards, rings & lists, and dungeons (Kozinets 1999). Virtual communities have been defined as:

“social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” (Rheingold 1993, p.5).

On the basis of their purpose, virtual communities were classified as communities of relationships, communities of interest, communities of fantasy, and communities of transaction (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). Kozinets (1999) was the first to describe the role of virtual communities of consumption, defined as:

“affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon a shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities.” (Kozinets 1999, p.254).

Therefore, it may be concluded that it was not Web 2.0 that enabled the formation of online communities, but it was Web 2.0 due to its interactivity, and user-friendly interface applications that exploded the popularity of online communities. Today, not only there are countless online communities (in various forms) that cover almost any imaginable topic of interest, but more than that users have access to tools that enable anyone to start his/her own community. Furthermore, virtual communities of consumption are substantial social networks of consumer knowledge, serving as reference groups with their power derived from the heterogeneity of its members that affect consumer behaviour, while their influence differs across the various phases of the consumer decision process (De Valck et al. 2009). On the other hand, Jepsen (2006) supports that virtual communities dramatically increase consumer access to non-commercial individualized information. As a result they may replace commercial sources of information to some extent, but they cannot replace primary reference groups to a similar extent.

In terms of communications, Web 2.0 transformed the web from a “one to many” to a “many to many” communication channel, and simultaneously to a “one to one” channel of interaction, allowing users not only to communicate but also to interact and engage. This transformation of the web has implications also in marketing and consumer behaviour. One of the greatest impacts of Web 2.0 is consumer empowerment: Practically, Web 2.0 offers greater information transparency; content generation and publishing through a range of devices and platforms that are easy to use even by non-specialists; possibility for product cocreation and personalization; capacity to sanction or reward brands for product performance but also for their ethical and social responsibilities (Buhalis and O’Connor 2005; Gretzel et al. 2006; Constantinides and Fountain 2008; Rodriguez-Ardura et al. 2010). Urban (2003, p.2) suggests that customers “have now the tools that inform them of the true state of affairs” and identifies five trends that increase

consumer power, making companies become more trustworthy: Increasing access to information, access to more alternatives, more simplified transactions, increasing communication among consumers and consumer distrust and resentment. As a result, Web 2.0 broadens word-of-mouth (WOM) communication networks: WOM is not limited only to face-to-face but extends to online environments, while at the same time Web 2.0 enables maintenance of existing and development of new interpersonal relationships (Ho and Chang 2010). Constantinides and Fountain (2008) further develop the claim made from Constantinides (2004) on the impact of web 1.0 on consumer preferences and the decision making process as a result of the web experience. They claim that Web 2.0 adds another construct, namely the “Web 2.0 experience” in the decision making process: In addition to the controllable and uncontrollable stimuli, and the “web experience” (online controllable factors such as website usability, interactivity, trust, aesthetics and online marketing mix), the “Web 2.0 experience” consists of online uncontrollable factors such as blogs, social networks, podcasts, communities, etc. Therefore, Web 2.0 is perceived as “a new marketplace component” that:

“...further complicates the time-honoured textbook buying behaviour process described in the Inputs-Processing-Response model.” (Constantinides and Fountain 2008, p.239).

Moreover they suggest that Web 2.0 results in consumers’ increasing mistrust to traditional mass marketing tactics also evidenced by the diminishing effects of mass media. As a result, Web 2.0 is transforming the marketing communications paradigm shift already created by web 1.0 (Van Raaij 1998), to a new paradigm shift on how companies perform their marketing function: The push strategies employed in the era of mass media, and the relationship marketing employed in the 1990s seem to give their position to advocacy-based strategies that are more appropriate in an era of emerging consumer power (Urban 2003).

### **2.2.5. Is Web 2.0 a mass medium, or more than that?**

With over 2.8 billion Internet users worldwide (International Telecommunications Union (ITU) 2014a) the web is still causing significant changes on how people communicate. Morris and Ogan (1996) were among the first to conceptualize the Internet not only as a mass medium, but more than that as a “multifaceted mass medium” in the sense that it contains many different configurations of communications. Despite the fact that Web 2.0 developed much later, they argued that Internet reconsiders the source-message-receiver feature of the traditional mass communication model, not only due to the interchangeability of message producers and receivers, but also due to the concept of interactivity.

By comparing the characteristics of a mass medium, as defined by McQuail (2005), to those of web 1.0 and Web 2.0, as presented in Table 2.1, it may be argued that Web 2.0 nowadays assumes a much broader role and function than any of the traditional mass media. Hirst and Harrison (2007) support that Internet and the new media create a new content paradigm in media communications that revolutionizes not only how the message is delivered, but also the content and the mode of the message. They claim there is a change from push to pull, and from mass media to micro-targeted media that challenges the traditional radio-television-newspaper broadcast model faster than anyone could have predicted. More specifically, driven by changes in demographics and the human behaviour they postulate a “still in progress - seismic change” with sociological and political impacts, from broadcast to narrowcast: The mass audience is now split into individual/atomic particles consisting of single entities of receivers - consumers. Looking beyond Hirst and Harrison’s (2007) view of Web 2.0, and also beyond the sender - receiver relationship, what seems to support the argument that Web 2.0 is more than a mass medium is the continuous interaction among those single entities of – so far seen as – receivers. This interaction covers thematically nearly all aspects of human behaviour: from humans as political entities to humans as sexual partners, and from humans as social animals to humans as consumers. In terms of the latter, it is the ability of Web 2.0 to act as an omnidirectional platform for product related interactions that not only differentiates Web 2.0 from other media, but what also enlarges its function. To that end, it is mainly social media, as a subset of all Web 2.0 applications that manifested the role of Web 2.0 within the context of consumer behaviour.



Table 2.1: Comparing the characteristics of a mass medium to those of web 1.0 and Web 2.0

Characteristics of a mass medium (McQuail 2005)	Characteristics of web 1.0	Characteristics of Web 2.0
Should reach the many	Reaches the many	Reaches and inter-connects the many
Audiences are viewed as large aggregates of more or less anonymous consumers	Audiences are viewed as large aggregates of more or less anonymous consumers.	In the era of Web 2.0, the existence of “audience”, in its traditional sense, is being argued (Livingstone 2003; Van Velsen 2011). Despite that, “audiences” can be viewed as large aggregates, but at the same time can be viewed as individual / atomic particles consisting of single entities of receivers. They have the option to be anonymous or eponymous. Receivers can become also senders.
Sender is usually an organization or a professional communicator	Sender is usually an organization or a professional communicator	Sender, or content creator can be any user.
Another voice in the society	Another voice in the society	Plethora of voices in the society
Giving or selling access to media channels	Giving or selling access to media channels	Giving or selling access to media channels.
The relationship between sender and receiver is one-directional, one-sided and impersonal	The relationship between sender and receiver is one-directional, one-sided and impersonal	The relationship between sender and receiver can be (a) one-directional, one-sided and impersonal, or (b) bi-directional, multi-sided and can vary from personal to impersonal
Senders have more authority, prestige, or experience than the receivers	Senders have more authority, prestige, or experience than the receivers	Senders and receivers may have equal authority, prestige or experience
The sender-receiver relationship is often calculative or manipulative in intention	The sender-receiver relationship can be calculative or manipulative in intention	The sender-receiver relationship can range from mutually rewarding to calculative or even manipulative in intention
The message is usually mass produced, reused and repeated in identical forms	The message is usually mass produced, reused and repeated in identical forms. Messages can be personalized to an extent	The message can be anything from highly personalized to mass produced, it can be reused and repeated in identical forms, or in different forms

Source: Amended from McQuail (2005)

## 2.3. Towards a definition of social media

The emergence of a subset of Web 2.0 applications, usually described with the term “social media”, has been considered as those that are primarily responsible for many of the consumer behaviour related implications of Web 2.0 such as consumer empowerment, the broadening of WOM, and the increasing mistrust to traditional mass marketing practices (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). As it was argued in the previous section, Web 2.0 is not only a mass medium, but a platform that has a much broader role and function than any of the traditional mass media. Therefore one cannot study the impact and role of social media by approaching them exclusively as new forms, or types of mass media. To achieve an understanding of social media, and therefore an understanding of their impact on consumer behaviour, as per the focus of this study, it is considered imperative that the concept under study should be explicitly defined. The following sections serve this purpose.

### 2.3.1. Terms used in describing social media and definitional issues

A review on the literature reveals that there is no yet a unanimous agreement on the terms used to describe social media. This is expected to an extent, given the young age of the concepts involved. At least fifteen different terms (as shown in Table 2.2) are being interchangeably used to describe the same concept.

Constantinides (2008, 2009) and Constantinides and Fountain (2008) use the term social media as a synonym to “**Web 2.0**” claiming that Web 2.0 and social media are terms that can be used interchangeably. Similarly Cox et al. (2008) use the term “**Web 2.0 websites**” in parallel with the term “**user-generated content websites**” to describe blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networks as “key types of Web 2.0 user-generated content sites” (Cox et al. 2008, p.3). On the contrary, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that the two terms are different: They consider Web 2.0 as an ideological and technological foundation in the form of a platform that enabled the evolution of social media and still enables their operation. Moreover, it was shown earlier in this chapter that Web 2.0 is a broader concept that is associated not only with economical, societal and technological trends (Musser and O'Reilly 2006), but also with a broader range of applications (McKinsey 2009; O'Reilly 2007; O'Reilly and Battelle 2009).

Coates (2005) and Richter & Koch (2007) use the term “**Social Software**” as a broader term that incorporates social media. More specifically, Coates (2005) in his definition includes message-boards, musical taste-sharing, photo-sharing, instant messaging, mailing lists, and social networking. Richter and Koch (2007) also use the same enlarged term, but they include

Table 2.2: Terms used to describe social media

Term	Authors (Indicative)	No. of academic papers using the term <sup>1</sup>	Year of oldest paper <sup>1</sup>
Consumer-generated media	Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004); Gretzel et al. (2008); Jeong and Jeon (2008); Yoo et al. (2009); Onishi and Manchanda (2010); Yoo and Gretzel (2011)	40	2006
New social media	Fischer and Reuber (2011)	19	2005
Social communication platforms	Jansen et al. (2009)	0	
Social communication services	Jansen et al. (2009)	1	2010
Social networks	Miguens et al. (2008)	17,214 <sup>2</sup>	1955
Social networking	Cox et al. 2008	3,692 <sup>2</sup>	1988
Social networking sites	De Valck et al (2009); Cox et al. (2009)	635	2005
Social media	Thevenot (2007); Smith (2009); Mangold and Faulds (2009); Jin et al. (2010); Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 2011; Safko 2010; Cha et al. (2010); Asur and Huberman (2010); Xiang and Gretzel (2010); Parra-Lopez et al. (2011); Hanna et al. (2011), Leung et al. (2013), Liu et al. (2013)	1,115	2004
Social software	Coates (2005); Richter & Koch (2007)	455	1997
Social web sites	Kim et al.(2010); Akehurst (2009)	25	2006
User-generated content	Dhar and Chang (2009)	549	2001
User-generated content websites	Burgess et al. (2009); Dotan and Zaphiris (2010); O'Connor (2010)	3	2007
User-generated media	McConnel and Huba (2007); Shao (2009)	12	2006
Web 2.0 websites	Cox et al. (2008)	20	2006
Web 2.0	Constantinides (2008, 2009), Constantinides & Fountain (2008)	3,492 <sup>2</sup>	2006

*Source: Author*

<sup>(1)</sup> Includes articles, articles in press, conference papers, and editorials, where the term appears in title, or in abstract, or as a keyword, based on a search in Scopus Database conducted 14 April 2011. The list was updated with selected articles in 18 October 2014.

<sup>(2)</sup> Use of the term does not necessarily indicates that it is used within the context of, or related to social media

only weblogs, wikis, social tagging applications and social networking applications. In contrast to their views, Fuchs et al. (2010) provide sufficient arguments, from a techno-social perspective, that the term social software is a much broader term than social media that supports group communication.

Kim et al. (2010, p.216) use the term **“Social Web sites”** to define websites that enable people to “form online communities, and share user-created contents”. However, they evidence a rather borderless perspective by considering as social web sites the “union of social networking sites and social media sites” (Kim et al. 2010, p.216). Akehurst (2009) uses the same term to describe YouTube.com, Facebook, MySpace.com and Flickr.com.

Jansen et al. (2009) use the term **“Social communication platforms”** and **“Social communication services”** as umbrella terms for social networks, virtual reality and online communities such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Flickr.

De Valck et al. (2009) refer to MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and Wikipedia with the term **“social networking sites”**, and in a rather similar manner Cox et al. (2009) describe by the same term MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube. Cox et al. (2008, p.2) use the term **“social networking”** to describe “pages that contain user-generated content in various formats”. Despite its long-standing presence in sociology, even the term **“social networks”** (see Table 2.2) has been used within the context of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and travel literature, to describe social media. Miguens et al. (2008, p.1) rather loosely define social networks as “online communities of people who share common interests and activities”. However with respect to the use of the term “social networking sites” it should be stated that social media is a much broader term. It should not be confused with social networking sites, a term that seems already well established to describe a subset of social media and more specifically online systems that allow users to become members, create a profile, build a personal network connecting them to other users with whom they exchange on a frequent basis skills, talents, knowledge, preferences and other information (Boyd and Ellison 2007; McKinsey 2009; Lenhart and Madden 2007). From a different viewpoint, Christakis (2010) disagrees with the use of the term “social networking” to describe any form of social media:

“Just like we use the word “friend” to describe the people you interact with on Facebook, which is probably not right, we also say “social network” when we talk about Twitter. But, again, Twitter is not like the social networks that James and I study, [which are] face-to-face networks. These [are] different phenomena and we probably should use a different word for it. Maybe we should call it “selective broadcasting” instead of “online networking.” And, maybe if we did that, we would think about it in a different way.”

Another group of scholars use variations of the term “user / consumer generated content / media” to describe social media. Dhar and Chang (2009, p.300) use the term **“user generated content”** to define “the conjunction of blogs and social networking sites”, and in a rather similar approach Burgess et al. (2009), Dotan and Zaphiris (2010), and O’Connor (2010) use the term **“user generated content websites”**. However, it may be argued that by such an approach

the medium is identified with the content. The Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) suggests that the term “user generated content” refers to the content exchanged through social media, and not the social media per se. OECD clearly defines that any content in order to be regarded as User Generated Content (UGC), or User Created Content (UCC), should possess three basic requirements: (a) publicly available content; (b) reflecting creative effort; and (c) not created within professional routines and practices (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent 2007). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest such requirements exclude certain types of content to be regarded as UGC: (a) E-mails and instant messages cannot be characterized as UGC as they are not publicly available; (b) Copy pasting of an existing blog post, or other UGC, or content from online media sources to another social medium without any modification or comment, cannot be characterized as UGC give that such actions do not reflect an amount of creative effort; and (c) Content created for commercial purposes. On the contrary, Burtch and Hong (2010) suggest the OECD’s definition includes unnecessary assumptions relating to the requirement of public availability and the requirement of absence of remuneration, and therefore propose a more liberal view:

“We define UGC as information contributed voluntarily by an average Internet user that is subsequently capable of being observed by some third party.” (Burtch & Hong 2010, p.1).

However, they add the requirement of “average user”. Therefore, in agreement to their definition, reviews of experts posted in social media cannot be characterized as UGC.

Lastly, another group of scholars in their attempt to describe social media use the term “consumer / user generated media”. Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004); Jeong and Jeon (2008); Gretzel et al. (2008); Yoo et al. (2009); Onishi and Manchanda (2010); Yoo and Gretzel (2011) use the term “**consumer generated media**”. However, such a term has a limiting scope. Given that a consumer is “a person who uses up a commodity; a purchaser of goods or services, a customer” (Oxford English Dictionary 2011), then by using the term “consumer” the nature and scope of social media is limited. Such use a priori assumes that the generated content relates only to products and services, or an individual’s actions and experiences in the marketplace. Such an assumption holds true for specific social media such as consumer review websites, or for specific content (e.g. a person writing in a blog her experiences about a new smart phone). However, this cannot hold true for all content in all social media. A term that seems to overcome the limitations associated with the use of the term “consumer” is “**user generated media**” (McConnel and Huba 2007; Shao 2009), however, as shown in Table 2.2 the term did not manage to gain adequate preference among scholars.

Fischer and Reuber (2011) use the term “**new social media**” to describe Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. However this term would have been correct only if the term “social media” has been used before to denote any other form of media.

On contrary to the use of the terms described above, a still increasing number of scholars use the term “**social media**” (Thevenot 2007; Smith 2009; Mangold and Faulds 2009; Jin et al. 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 2011; Safko 2010; Cha et al. 2010; Asur and Huberman 2010; Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Para-Lopez et al. 2011; Hanna et al. 2011; Leung et al. 2013). The same term is also used by a number of distinguished industry practitioners (Intel 2008; Solis 2010; Cavazza 2010; eMarketer 2010a; Universal McCann 2010). In addition to the arguments presented in this section, in support to the use of the term “social media” as opposed to the other terms, Table 2.2 provides additional evidence that the term “social media” is the most popular among those used in the Academia. It can be seen, that the term “social media” is found in the title, or in the abstract, or as a keyword in 1,114 articles, conference papers, and editorials, as opposed to smaller numbers for the other terms under consideration. Terms such as “Web 2.0”, “social networks” and “social networking” evidence higher numbers, however as explained in this section, this is due to the fact that these terms are being used also in other contexts.

### **2.3.2. Defining social media**

Social media as an umbrella term should be explicitly defined, as a starting point towards the effort to achieve an understanding of their impact on consumer behaviour. Given the variety of terms used to describe social media, it is not surprising that there is also a lack of a formal, well-accepted, definition of social media (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). The discussion below reviews the work of various scholars towards this end, and concludes by providing a definition of social media for the purposes of this study.

In their attempt to define social media, Mangold and Faulds (2009) adopt Blackshaw and Nazzaro’s (2004) definition of consumer-generated media:

“a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on education each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues.” (Blackshaw and Nazzaro 2004, p.2).

The above approach can be considered as limiting for two reasons: First, it associates social media only as sources of information, neglecting other functions such as self-expression. Second, it frames social media only within a market environment as if all content generated and exchanged through social media is consumption related.

To the other extreme, Safko and Brake (2009) adopt a more generalized approach and propose that social media are:

“[...] activities, practises and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.” (Safko and Brake 2009, p.6).

It is clear that such a definition includes under the social media umbrella not only the media per se, but also the activities, practices and behaviours of their users when interacting with these media. However, such a generalization may cause significant problems in certain aspects of academic and business research such as in the operationalization of variables (i.e. measurement of usage level for a specific medium would require an explicit list of all activities, practices and behaviours of a user when interacting with the medium). More than that, within their definition they use the term “conversational media” which, however, is not explicitly defined (e.g. can VoIP applications, such as Skype, or even web-based e-mail platforms considered as conversational media?).

Xiang and Gretzel’s (2010) attempt incorporates Blackshaw’s (2006) definition:

“[Social media] can be generally understood as Internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses [as per Blackshaw (2006)] media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers.” (Xiang and Gretzel 2010, p.180).

Xiang and Gretzel’s attempt suffers the same limitations as per the Mangold and Faulds (2009) approach that adopts the earlier definition of Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004). This limitation relates to the fact that it frames social media only within a market environment, as if all UGC is consumption related.

Solis (2007) gives emphasis to conversation and interaction:

“[...] online tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself, thus facilitating conversations and interaction online between groups of people.”

In a similar sense, Universal McCann (2008) proposes a definition, adopted also by Caputo (2009) and Microsoft (2010), that stresses the importance of interaction and collaboration:

“online applications, platforms and media which aim to facilitate interaction, collaboration and the sharing of content.” (Universal McCann 2008, p.10).

On the other hand, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) focus on the platform and the content, defining social media as:

“a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p.61).

In a more recent definition, Hoffman et al. (2013, p.29) consider as social media not only the software applications but also the tools, without any clarification on whether they mean software tools or hardware devices:

“The set of web-based and mobile tools and applications that allow people to create (consume) content that can be consumed (created) by others and which enables and facilitates connections”

At the same time they associate social media with facilitation of connections. This association may hold true for most types of social media, however not for all: It is not certain that a holidaymaker who posts a review about a hotel on TripAdvisor seeks connection with other TripAdvisor members or simply wants to reward the service providers.

Based on the above discussion it can be said that one element that has not been addressed in the definitions presented is the fact that there are websites that do not exclusively serve the purpose of creation and exchange of UGC, although they incorporate mechanisms that enable users to do so. Usually these are commercial websites, or sites that serve the online presence of traditional media. For example, OTA's websites (e.g. Expedia.com), traditional tour operators' websites (e.g. Thomson.co.uk), hotels' websites (e.g. Sheraton.com), traditional media sites (e.g. bbc.co.uk), or online retailers (e.g. amazon.com) incorporate mechanisms that allow the creation and exchange of UGC on their platforms, although their primary activity is selling or promoting goods and services. From the theoretical viewpoint, these types of websites do satisfy the criteria of Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition to be considered as social media. However, from a practical point of view, it is commonly believed that such sites cannot be regarded as social media applications, but rather as commercial websites that incorporate, as part of their functions, mechanisms that enable the creation and exchange of UGC.

Based on the definition of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), but also given the previous discussion, for the purposes of this study, **social media are defined as web-based applications that have as their primary function the development and exchange of user generated content.**

## 2.4. Taxonomies of social media

In addition, to the plurality of the terms used to describe social media and of the definitions available, the literature also evidences a plurality on the approaches towards the taxonomy of social media. Table 2.3 includes the approaches presented in five academic papers



(Constantinides 2009; Mangold and Faulds 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Kim et al. 2010; Fischer and Reuber 2011) and two approaches from prominent social media consultants (Cavazza 2010; Solis 2010). The number of social media types proposed ranges from Kim et al. (2010) approach consisting of two types (Social Networking Sites and Social Media), to Solis (2013) 26 types of social media. It is evident however, that Solis' taxonomy (Figure 2.1) includes not only social media but also tools, mechanisms and platforms that facilitate the use of social media and / or the exchange of UGC (e.g. Blog platforms).

Figure 2.1: Solis' approach on social media taxonomy: The conversation prism



Source: Solis (2013)

Table 2.3: Approaches towards a taxonomy of social media

Constantinides (2009)	Fischer and Reuber (2011)	Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)	Cavazza (2010)	Kim et al. (2010)	Mangold and Faulds (2009)	Solis (2010)
Social Networks	Social Networking Professional networking	Social Networking	Network	Social Networking sites	Social Networking sites Invitation only Business networking sites	Social Networks Blog/Microblogs Crowd Wisdom Q&A Comments Social Commerce Social Marketplace Social streams Location Niche working Enterprise Wiki Discussion & Forums Business Service Networking Reviews & Ratings Social Curation Video Content / Documents Events Music Livecasting Pictures Social Bookmarks Influence Quantified Self
Blogs	Blogs	Blogs	Publish	Social media sites  (What further divides social media sites are media types)	User-sponsored blogs Company sponsored blogs	
Microblogging						
Content Communities (Video sharing Photo sharing Social bookmarking Wikis)	Picture sharing Video sharing Social Bookmarking	Content Communities  Collaborative projects	Share		Creativity works sharing sites Collaborative websites Social Bookmarking	
Forums / Bulletin Boards	User forums		Discuss			
Content aggregators						
		Virtual social worlds				
		Virtual game worlds	Games		Virtual worlds	
			Location			
			Commerce			
					Other(*)	

Source: Author

(\*) Mangold and Faulds (2009) include under "Other": Company sponsored cause / help sites; Commerce communities; Podcasts; News delivery sites; Educational material sharing; Open Source Software communities.

Among the taxonomical approaches studied, only the one proposed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) relies on a systematic effort for the development of a classification scheme. Their approach is based on theoretical frameworks from two social media related fields: Media research (social presence and media richness) and social processes (self-presentation and self-disclosure). As presented in

Table 2.4, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classify social media into six types: Blogs, Social Networking Sites, Collaborative projects, Content communities, Virtual social worlds and Virtual game worlds.

*Table 2.4: Classification of Social Media*

		Social Presence / Media Richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation / self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social Networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn)	Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia, Wikitravel)	Content communities (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, Vimeo, Panoramio)	Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

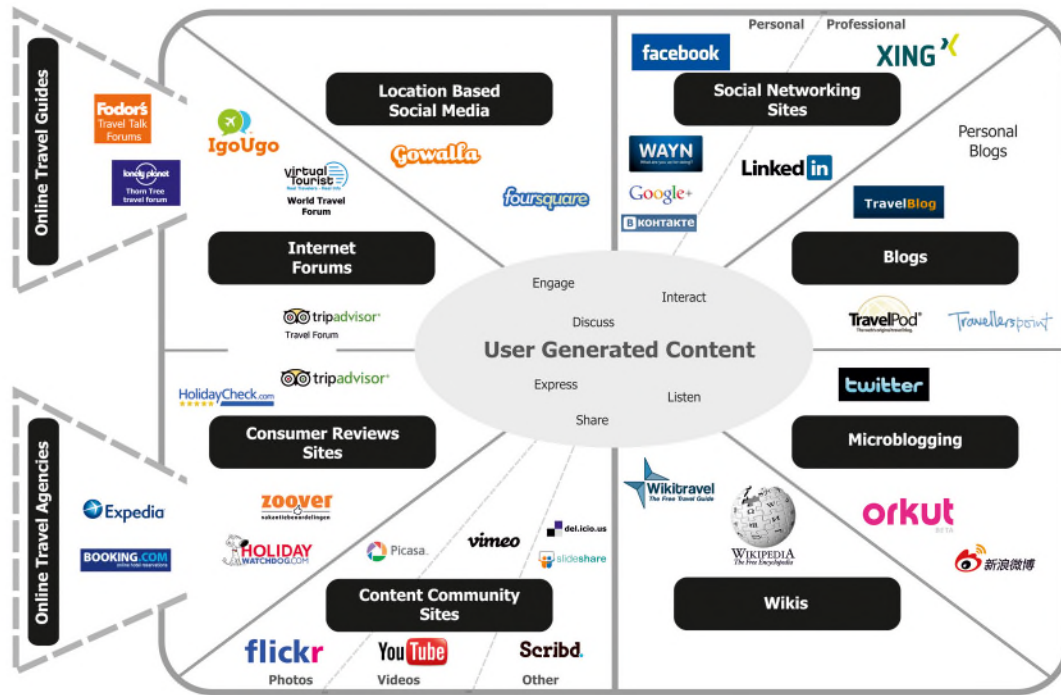
*Source: Amended from Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)*

However, such classification scheme does not make any provision to include three significant social media types: Microblogs (e.g. Twitter and similar applications); consumer review and ratings websites (e.g. TripAdvisor and similar applications); as well as location based services (e.g. Foursquare and similar applications). For the purposes of the present study, and given holiday travel as its contextual focus, Virtual social worlds and Virtual game worlds will not be further studied given that the literature review did not reveal any academic papers examining them in the context of travel and tourism. On the contrary, due to their impact on tourism, as evidenced in subsequent paragraphs of this chapter, Microblogs, Consumer review websites and Location Based Services are considered as additional types of social media and will be further studied.

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes that the current landscape of travel related social media consists of eight types of applications (Figure 2.2): Social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, wikis, content community sites, consumer review sites, Internet forums, and location based social media. These applications together with non-social media commercial sites that however contain UGC (such as OTAs and online travel guides) create a virtual space within

which users listen, share, express, discuss, interact and engage through user and brand generated content.

Figure 2.2: The landscape of social media types in travel and tourism



Source: Author

Logos included are indicative examples of social media applications

As a result of the above proposed travel related social media taxonomy, these eight types of applications are the ones that will be further studied so that to provide an integrated view on social media impact on consumer behaviour within the context of holiday travel. This taxonomy will also inform the data collection phase of this study. Consequently, it is considered imperative that a deeper understanding of each of these types needs to be gained. The following sections of this chapter serve two purposes: First, to provide insights into each of the social media types included in the proposed taxonomy. Second, to further focus the discussion on social media and tourism. For each type of social medium, a number of studies that attempt to describe the impact of social media on aspects of both generic and travel related consumer behaviour are critically discussed.

## 2.5. Types of social media

This study proposes eight types of travel related social media applications: Social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, wikis, content community sites, consumer review sites, Internet forums, and location based social media. More specifically:

### 2.5.1. Blogs

The term blog is a blend of the term “weblog”, coined in 1997 by John Barger (Blood 2000). In 1999 Peter Merholz broke the word into “we blog”, and thereafter it has been used as “blog” (Wikipedia 2011). During the same year, Pyra Labs developed “blogger”, a web-based software platform, (or blog hosting application), self-described as “the push-button publishing tool for the people” (Pyra Labs 2011) that enables anyone, without any knowledge of programming language to develop a blog, a platform that contributed significantly to the spread and growth of blogs. In 2012 it was estimated that there were more than 181 million blogs worldwide (Nielsen 2012).

The term blog describes a personal website (either stand-alone, or hosted within a hosting platform such as blogger.com or wordpress.com) that contains frequently, or regularly updated entries, primarily consisting of text, but also images, videos and links to other websites. The entries are displayed in reverse chronological order, resembling an online personal diary, or journal that conveys personal experiences, stories, thoughts, or ideas expressed in an informal, personal style (Nardi et al. 2004; Walker 2005; Akehurst 2009; Lin and Huang 2010). In terms of level of interactivity blogs are asynchronous, and in terms of communication scope they are a “many to many” medium (Litvin et al. 2008). A number of scholars, primarily from the tourism discipline, adopt an enlarged approach on what constitutes a blog considering product review sites such as TripAdvisor and Holidaycheck as blogs (Schmallegger and Carson 2008; Bosangit et al. 2009; Zehrer et al. 2011). Such an approach clearly does not satisfy two of the previously mentioned defining characteristics of a blog (regularity of entries, and diary / journal like content) and therefore is not adopted by this study.

Blogs enable personal publishing and encourage expression of feelings, communication of ideas, thoughts and commentary. It is the intimacy and the personalized tone that form the impression of spontaneity in the flow of thoughts and feelings, enabling readers to think that they look into the blogger’s real self (Walker 2005; Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005; Safko 2010). When writing blogs, users who maintain a blog usually post photos (70%), recommended websites (43%), favourite music pieces they listened (34%), videos (32%), opinions on products and brands (32%), stories from other blogs (29%), songs in the form of uploads (26%), useful widgets (18%), applications / widgets (17%) and widgets the want others to use (16%) (Universal McCann 2009). However, this thematic distribution applies only to personal blogs and neglects other blog types such as corporate and governmental.

The majority of blogs serve consumer to consumer (C2C) communications, but there are also blogs catering the needs for business to consumer (B2C), government to consumer (G2C),

business to business (B2B) and government to business (G2B) (Schmallegger and Carson 2008; Akehurst 2009). In terms of types of blogs, Smudde (2005) suggests four types: (a) Personal; (b) Corporate; (c) Topic or industry specific (e.g. travel blogs); and (d) Publication based (operated by journalists on behalf of traditional media), however a fifth type may be added, that of Professional. Thevonet (2007) considers collaborative blogs as an additional category: Usually interest-specific blog hosting platforms where registered users can create their own blogs or simply upload blogposts (e.g. travelblog.org, travelpod.com, travellerspoint.com). As a result one can, in addition to the above types, differentiate among stand-alone blogs (those with their own http address); collaborative blogs (as per Thevonet 2007); and blog-post aggregators, that is platforms that gather blog posts from various stand-alone blogs and present them in a blog-like manner (e.g. travelblogs.com).

There is a variety of motivational factors that contribute to blogging such as to document one's life, as a thinking tool, as a social commentary, as catharsis and outlet for feelings (Nardi et al. 2004), but also entertainment, self-expression, social interaction, passing time, and professional advancement (Papacharissi 2002). Hsu and Lin (2008) found that ease of use, enjoyment, altruism and reputation have the most significant influence on attitudes towards blogging, while social factors such as community identification significantly influence users to continue posting to blogs, altogether explaining 83% of the variance of intention to blog. However their study (a) is limited to a specific cultural context (Taiwan) and therefore may not be generalized due to cultural and lifestyle differences; and (b) assumes that blog users play a variety of roles and therefore does not differentiate among bloggers, comment providers, or simply readers of posts, thus does not reveal exclusive motivations of the user who initially created and maintains the blog.

When compared to non-digital forms of communications, there is evidence that blogs are being trusted more than traditional and online media by those who read blogs: Johnson and Kaye (2004) support that blogs are perceived as significantly more credible than broadcast television news, cable television news, newspapers, news magazines, radio news and talk radio shows. Similarly, blogs were perceived as more credible than online broadcast television, online newspapers, online news magazines, and online radio news. They conclude that blog users evidence distrust to traditional media and perceive blogs as an alternative that is "opinionated, analytical, independent, and personal" (Johnson and Kaye 2004, p.633). However, findings are attributed to blog reliance: The more someone uses a medium, the more credible he/she judges it. On the contrary, when blogs are compared to traditional word of mouth they were found as significantly less trustworthy (Mack et al. 2008). An exception was found in the case of users who post blogs who attribute similar levels of authoritativeness – a dimension of credibility – to

both blogs and traditional word of mouth, an evidence that the issue of medium reliance, as also supported by Johnson and Kayne, is a contributing factor of credibility.

A number of scholars attempted to examine whether blog activity has an impact on product sales. Dhar and Chang (2009) explored the relationship between sales of music albums (as expressed by Amazon.com's ranks, and online chatter before and after the album's release) to assess whether user-generated content can have predictive value for online music sales. Among five different forms of user generated content that were examined (number of reviews and ratings in music review websites; reviews in music related online media; reviews in music related mainstream media; volume of blog posts; and number of friends in social networking sites), it was the volume of blog posts that was found to be the variable with the greatest correlation to future sales. However, as Dhar and Chang (2009) suggest, such a finding does not draw a causal connection between volume of blog posts and sales, as there may be other factors such as "the quality of the artist" that is the cause for both increased number of blog posts and high sales. Towards a similar aim, Onishi and Manchanda (2010) used sales data of three specific product launches (a green tea, a film movie and a cellular phone service), as well as data from blog activity and TV advertising, to examine whether blogging activity is related to market outcomes, and whether traditional marketing actions (i.e. TV advertising) and blogs act synergistically. Their results evidenced that blogging is predictive of market outcomes; during product's pre-launch blogs and TV advertising act synergistically in the sense that advertising spurs blogging activity (that is predictive of marketing activity).

#### **2.5.1.1. Blogs in the tourism context**

Travel blogs expose "kaleidoscopic aspects of a visitor's experience at the destination" (Pan et al. 2007, p.42) revealing experiential and subjective in nature perceptions related to all aspects of the travel experience and the tourism product such as access, accommodation, attractions, dining and overall impressions. Although in a more holistic approach travel blogs are considered "expressions of tourism consumption" (Bosangit et al., 2009, p.62). Blogs are considered as digital, or online word of mouth (Dellarocas 2003; Pan et al. 2007). In an early attempt, to explore the impact of travel blogs, Lin and Huang (2006) analysed comments left by visitors in a personal blog that contained pictures from holidays in an Aegean Sea Greek island. Using the AIDA model to classify the comments left by the viewers, and found that the blog comments caused attention to 45% of the viewers, interest to 10%, desire to 39% and elicited action to 6% of them.

A number of studies that have attempted to assess issues of credibility and trust between online travel related websites examined also blogs. Mack et al., (2008) showed that personal or corporate travel blogs are significantly less trustworthy than traditional word of mouth, assuming the nature of social relationship between viewers and message creators as a possible factor to explain this difference: Reading blogs, therefore receiving word of mouth from strangers is less trusted than word of mouth coming from sources with whom viewers have strong social ties. However, they identified differences between viewers: Those who actively post blogs perceive authoritativeness of personal and corporate blogs as similar to that of traditional word of mouth, while viewers who do not post blogs perceive personal blogs less authoritative than corporate blogs or traditional word of mouth (Mack et al. 2008). The specific findings leave room for future growth of blogs' overall level of credibility as the number of those who post to blogs is increasing over time (Technorati 2010).

Yoo et al., (2009) examined the factors that influence trust, among eight types of websites that can host UGC, and how it affects their use in travel planning. They showed that UGC is perceived as more credible when posted to official tourism bureau websites, followed by travel agents websites, review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor), travel company websites and then travel blogs, personal websites, social networking sites and sharing sites (e.g. YouTube). On the contrary, Del Chiappa (2011) found that travel blogs were second only to OTA websites incorporating rating/review functions in terms of trustworthiness, influence on company image and influence on tourists' choices. Del Chiappa (2011) assessed eight types of Travel 2.0 applications (forums on a company's website, tourism-related blogs, photo-sharing, video-sharing, OTAs with booking and rating/review functions, tourism-related social networks, non-tourism related social networks and microblogging) in terms of trustworthiness and influence on tourist behaviour. In terms of trustworthiness, influence on company image and influence on tourists' choices, travel related blogs were found second only to OTA websites incorporating rating/review functions. However, the differences observed between the two media in the three variables stated above were found statistically significant only in the case of influence on tourists' choices. Del Chiappa (2011, p.339) also suggests that research on the extent to which Travel 2.0 applications affect tourists' attitudes and purchasing decisions "can be considered still poor and in its infancy". With reference to the determinants that influence travel blogs readers' intention to travel, Wang (2011) proposed a model incorporating affective, cognitive and cyber-interactive factors influencing blogs readers' destination image and affecting intention to travel that managed to explain 48% of the variance in behavioural intention to travel. The results indicated that travel blog participants perceptions of destination image could be a strong predictor of their travel intention. Factors assisting in building affective images (e.g.



generating empathy, experiencing appeal) as well as cognitive images (e.g. providing guides) and facilitating interpersonal interactions (e.g. social influence, cybercommunity influence) were found to be critical components significantly influencing bloggers perceptions of destination image (Wang 2012). Lastly, in the case of holiday travel to unfamiliar destinations, travel blogs were found to provide better advice than friends and relatives (Tan and Chen 2012; Lee and Gretzel 2014).

Based on the above discussion, in the context of this study's research methodology, travel blogs need to be assessed both as sources of information for potential travellers, but also as applications that enable and facilitate travel related self-expression.

### **2.5.2. Microblogs**

Microblogs have been defined as "internet based applications which allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011, p.106). Among the range of microblog applications are twitter, jaiku, plurk, and weibo, to name a few. However it is Twitter that is the largest of all and the one that drives the growth of microblogging (Jansen et al. 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein 2011). In 2014 Twitter has more than 255 million monthly active users who send on average 500 million tweets per day (Twitter 2014). Mobile devices are extensively used in Twitter: 78% of active Twitter users access it via a mobile device (Twitter 2014). By analysing 11.5 million Twitter accounts, Cheng et al. (2009) found that 85.3% of all Twitter users post less than one update per day; 21% of users have never posted a Tweet; and 5% of Twitter users account for 75% of all activity. The main users' intention in Twitter is chatting about the daily routine, followed by conversations with other users, sharing and seeking information and URLs, and reporting news, thus users can be classified in three categories: Information sources, friends and information seekers (Java et al. 2007).

The operational concept behind microblogging is about similar to all microblogging applications: For example in Twitter, users have their own webpage where they post messages (called Tweets) up to 140 characters in length that may contain links (usually shortened to accommodate for the limited character capacity of the message). Tweets are a priori public i.e. searchable via search engines and therefore available to all other users. Other users can subscribe to a specific person, becoming "followers" to receive his/her tweets in their own page. Followers can simply ignore the message, read it, dig into it, or even redistribute it (retweet) that find of interest to their own followers. All microblogging applications share three characteristics: (a) Short messages, limited to a specific number of characters, (b) instant

message delivery, usually supported via multiple platforms i.e. instant messaging, SMS, RSS, e-mail, Facebook etc.; (c) users subscribe to users to receive posts (Jansen et al. 2009). Microblogs, as a form of social media, are positioned between traditional blogs and social networking sites, as they are characterized by a “high degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a medium to low degree of social presence / media richness” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011, p.106).

Microblogging applications (e.g. Twitter) are different than the majority of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) in the fact that (a) the relationship with the followers does not require reciprocation: User A can follow user B but there is no need for user B to follow user A; (b) Posts are by default public and users can be followed without their approval (Yardi and Boyd 2010; Kwak et al. 2010); (c) When compared to blogging, microblogging applications are considered a faster mode of communication and more frequently updated (Java et al. 2007). Another differentiating factor between microblogging and other social media is that they offer an immediacy at the point of purchase and / or consumption: Microblogs when accessed through mobile devices, enable consumers to provide immediate expressions or reactions even during the purchase or the consumption process, thus providing feedback on the actual experience of the product or service (Akehurst 2009; Jansen et al. 2009). Finally, microblogs enable users to create communities around specific discussion topics at a touch of a button: typing # before any word transforms the word into a discussion topic that can be followed by any other user.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) recognize three success factors behind the popularity of microblogging: First, the push-push-pull nature of communication, as posts can be pushed to the pages of users who follow the sender, then pushed by followers furthermore to their own followers (i.e. re-tweets), and at the same time anyone in this chain can pull further content from links that are embedded in the messages. Second, microblogging applications provide ambient awareness that relates to the ability of a set of small posts even for trivial matters, as in the case of a series of other little behaviours, to generate feelings of closeness and intimacy between the sender and the recipient. Third, they offer a platform for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism, as all posts are accessible through search engines, therefore becoming public knowledge.

By analysing more than 150,000 microblog postings, Jansen et al. (2009) found that 19% include mentions about an organization or product. Of those, 20% mentioned an opinion or sentiment about the company or the product, while the rest 80% expressed no sentiment but were related to information exchange (providing information, seeking information, or commenting) about products or brands. Findings enabled them to suggest that microblogs are

considerably used as an information source, however the study did not relate the microblogging activity to any of the stages of the decision making process

Asur and Huberman (2010) built a linear regression model that can forecast box-office revenues for movies based on the rate that tweets are created at Twitter after the movies are released. They argued that the forecasts produced were consistently better than those resulted from industry standard sources like the Hollywood Stock Exchange, and support that social media feeds can forecast real-world performance. In a similar vein, Tayal and Komaragiri (2009) compared the ability of microblogs and blogs sentiments to predict stock prices to find that microblog sentiments outperformed blog sentiments in predicting Google and Microsoft actual stock prices with correlations that ranged between 0.911 to 0.972.

#### **2.5.2.1. Microblogs in the tourism context**

Hay (2010) assessed the opinion of DMO and hotel executives to reveal how tourists are using Twitter. Although findings represent assumptions based on professional experience it is suggested that Twitter is used (a) as a tool to learn about the destination both from other individuals but also from local organizations; (b) as a group formation platform consisting of potential travellers to a destination who are sharing information, particularly useful for first-time visitors and single travellers; (c) for communication between tourists and tourism product providers at the destination; and (d) as a reminder mechanism for past and future trips offering promotions and functional information such as official entry requirements.

Microblogs have been proposed as a tool for identifying and monitoring expression of travel and tourism related sentiment. Claster et al. (2010a; 2010b) have used a binary choice keyword algorithm to identify and measure sentiment about tourism in Thailand and in Cancun. In the study referring to the 2010 political unrest in Thailand, it was shown that tweets related to Phuket as a tourism destination were not concerned with political and security issues to the extent that this was the case in Bangkok, as if the former “have been insulated from the detrimental effects of the situation” (Claster et al., 2010a, p.91).

Within the context of travel related decision making, Twitter users tend to use travel related information they read on tweets depending on three factors: (a) Source reliability and credibility; (b) source expertise and knowledge; and (c) degree of involvement (Sotiriadis and van Zyl 2013).

Based on the above discussion, in the context of this study’s research methodology, microblogs need to be assessed primarily as sources of more specialized travel information. The fact that the

relationship between users does not require reciprocation extends the reach of the medium to sources well outside the network of friends and relatives when compared to other types of social media such as Social Networking Sites. It can therefore be investigated whether information was received both from social media contacts known in person as well as from others users not known in person. Source reliability and expertise may also need to be assessed in case information from tweets was used in any stage of the decision process. Finally, the immediacy of microblogs when compared to other types of social media may be a factor contributing to their use during the trip.

### 2.5.3. Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNS), or alternatively “social network sites” are the most widespread type of social media and their popularity continues to increase worldwide (Richter and Koch 2008, Belanche et al. 2010; Universal McCann 2010). Facebook, Google+, Wayn, RenRen, Linkedin, and Xing are considered typical examples of SNS. In United Kingdom, more than half of all adults visit a SNS at least once a week (Ofcom 2013).

In defining SNS, Boyd and Ellison (2007, p.211) use the term “network” rather than “networking” as for them the latter denotes relationship initiation, usually between strangers:

“...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

In a similar, however more restrictive, manner, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.63) define social networking sites as:

“...applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other.”

The restrictive nature of Kaplan and Haenlein’s definitions can be substantiated due to the fact that they (a) limit the connections to friends and colleagues; and (b) limit the SNS functions to profile access, e-mailing and instant messaging, thus ignoring exchange of information and other content.

Emphasizing on functions of SNS, Richter and Koch (2008, p.1-2) define them as:

“...application systems that offer users functionalities for **identity management** (1) (i.e. the representation of the own person e.g. in the form of a profile) and enable furthermore **to keep in touch** (2) with other users (and thus the administration of own contacts).”

De Valck et al. (2009) are using the term “social networking sites” to describe additional types of social media such as content communities and wikis. Others, use the term “online social networks” in a limiting manner to include only those members who share a common interest:

“Online social networks [are] defined as groups of people who share a common interest and are totally or partially connected to others by the Internet (e.g., Facebook, MySpace).” (Belanche et al. 2010, p.322).

Use of SNS is phenomenal across the globe. More than half (61%) of global active Internet users (those who use the Internet at least every other day) managed a profile on an existing social network within the last six months (Universal McCann 2010). Use of SNS sites is by no means only restricted to young adults: Among the total population of seniors (65+) in the US, 27% use Social Networking Sites, representing 46% of all online seniors (Smith 2014).

In 2014, Facebook still lead this phenomenon with more than 1.3 billion monthly, or 800 million daily, active users worldwide (Facebook 2014). Apart from Facebook, there are numerous other SNS applications such as Orkut (popular in India and Brazil), V Kontakte.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru which are Russian social networking sites with more than 79 million and 65.3 million visitors respectively (Digit.ru 2013), but also LinkedIn, Xing (both business related SNS) and academia.edu aiming at the university community.

SNS can be (a) of open access, with no restriction on who can register (e.g. Odnoklassniki.ru); or (b) of restricted access, which usually takes the form of a minimum age requirement (e.g. Facebook.com requires users to be 13 or older) or an invitation only requirement (e.g. asmallworld.net). In SNS the registered user creates a profile that contains a set of descriptors (e.g. sex, age, location, profession, personal interests and preferences etc.) and usually a photo or an avatar (as is the case of virtual identities SNS such as the Chinese tencent.com). Profiles are subsequently enriched with content (i.e. status updates, comment posts, photos, videos, links, documents etc.) and according to the specific SNS’s policy and settings can be public (e.g. accessible - as a whole, or in parts - by anyone either within the SNS or through a search engine), or private and therefore accessible only by specific set(s) of users. Users are then able to establish relationships, or connections with others who they either know already or are strangers with (called “friends”, “followers”, “fans”, “contacts” etc.). Depending on the specific SNS application, these relationships are either reciprocal, bidirectional thus requiring acceptance by both parties (e.g. Facebook personal profiles, LinkedIn etc.) or one-directional (e.g. Wayne, Academia.edu, Facebook pages etc.). Content updates from each user are distributed to its network of relationships. Depending on the SNS policy, or user settings these relationships can be visible to anyone or hidden. Other SNS features include messages, instant messaging, add-on applications, games etc.

From a communications theory perspective, Richter and Koch (2008) identified six common functional components that SNS share: (a) Identity management: Information input and levels of access rights; (b) Expert search: Components enabling criteria-based search into the network, and SNS generated suggestions about others; (c) Context awareness: Information on shared characteristics and contacts; (d) Contact Management: Components that enable maintenance of a user's network; (e) Network awareness enables by news feeds, status updates etc.; and (f) Exchange functions that include all methods that enable users to exchange information directly (e.g. messages) or indirectly (e.g. sharing of photos).

Early research suggests that users join SNS to support, maintain and reinforce pre-existing offline social relationships (Lenhart and Madden 2007; Boyd and Ellison 2007), while for youngsters to socialize with friends when this is not possible in unmediated situations (Boyd 2008). Richter and Koch (2008) findings among German SNS users also suggest that “to keep contact” (87% of users) and “to share information” (80% of users) with people they already know are the two most popular reasons for using SNS, while “to get to know people” is a reason expressed by 47% of users. Similar findings are revealed in a global survey in 54 countries: In 2010, among the activities performed in SNS 65% of users find old friends, 53% find new friends and close to 70% send messages to friends (Universal McCann 2010).

Although the impact of national culture on social media adoption and use still remains an unexplored area (Cardon et al., 2009; Ribière et al. 2010) there are evidences, based on secondary data, of differences among national markets on social media adoption and use (Gretzel et al. 2008). Penetration rates of Facebook for example may partly substantiate this claim: In Asia it is used by 5% of all population, while in North America the penetration rate is 50% respectively (InternetWorldStats 2010). However it should be noted that in a number of Asian countries (i.e. the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Iran, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) access to Facebook is banned for several reasons beyond the scope of this study.

Dhar and Chang (2009) explored the relationship between sales of music albums, as expressed by Amazon.com's ranks, and online chatter before and after the album's release, to assess whether user-generated content can have predictive value for online music sales. The number of friends in the social network site examined did not evidence any predictive value to sales. On the contrary, the volume of blog posts about a music album is the variable with the greatest correlation to future sales.

Dholakia and Durham (2010) used an experimental design to measure consumers' influence from a Facebook page and its effect on customer behaviour. They used a cafe chain's mailing

list to measure customers' store evaluations and shopping behaviour, and then invited the mailing list members to become fans of the chain's Facebook page which was updated several times per week with product pictures, news, contests, promotions, links to reviews etc. Three months later they resurveyed the mailing list and found that those who became Facebook fans increased store visits per month, visited the cafe 20% more than non-fans, generated more positive WOM than non-fans, were more likely to recommend the cafe to their friends, and reported significantly greater emotional attachment than non-fan customers. Results however suggest possible correlations rather than definite cause and effect relationships (Dholakia and Durham 2010).

#### **2.5.3.1. Social Networking Sites in the tourism context**

Expedia (2013) supports that 21% of US adults posted photos on a social networking website after they returned home from a holiday trip. It has been estimated that among US female travellers who use social media, Facebook was used more than any other social medium: 57% used it to share travel related photos and video, 38% to post status updates or comments about the trip, and 13% checked in a venue or a site using Facebook (eMarketer 2010a).

Stankov et al. (2010) stress the importance of Facebook for National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) and encourage them to exploit its features. However, their findings suggest that European NTOs do not evidence significant use of the application: As of July 2009, among all 39 NTOs (members of the European Travel Commission) examined, 51% do not have an official presence, 28% have a Facebook Page and 18% have a Facebook Group. Moreover, it is argued that finding official presence of NTOs in Facebook is not an easy task, as (a) there is a large number of search results (432 on average per country name); and (b) they use flags and scenic photos as Page and Group pictures (Stankov et al. 2010).

SNS have been found as the most popular social media type for travellers when posting photos online (Lo et al. 2011). White (2010) used content analysis and semiotics of travel related photos published in Facebook to explore their role within Facebook's environment and also the role they play in the travel plans of the users who view them. She suggested that certainly photos generate interest from friends, and identified that photos published are of two types, including human subjects and not including, suggesting that portraying humans are likely to attract a comment from a friend rather than those without humans, claiming that "one person's travel snapshots can very easily become part of another person's travel plans" (White 2010, p.128).

In a study where participants were allowed to perform travel related information search only through Facebook, it was found that the popular social networking site provided relevant information only about attractions. On the contrary, information quality on accommodation and transportation was considered as insufficient (Bulencea and Egger 2013). On the other hand, Enter and Michopoulou (2013) suggest that holiday travellers do not use Facebook as an information source before the trip. Their findings support that Facebook is used during and post trip, identifying as main motivations the need to share travel experiences, and staying in contacts with friends and family while on holidays.

Based on the above discussion, this study needs to acknowledge and take into account the increased popularity of Social Networking Sites. However, the research methodology needs to approach Social Networking Sites through an enlarged lens and attempt to identify uses and impacts during the whole travel process and beyond what is considered by travellers as information search. Moreover, emphasis needs to be placed on travel related photographs and their role in providing inspiration prior to the generic decision and therefore prior to information search.

#### **2.5.4. Content Communities**

Content communities are web-based applications that enable users to share media content such as videos, photos, documents and presentations, music and web links. Indicative examples are: YouTube, Vimeo and Dailymotion for video; Flickr, Picasa, Panoramio, SmugMug and Fotolog for photos; Scrib, slideshare.net, docstoc for documents and presentations; lastfm, ilike, ping for music; and delicious, dig for bookmarking. With more than one billion unique visitors per month, YouTube seems to be the most popular of all content communities: In 2014, over 6 billion hours of video are watched on a monthly basis, and 100 hours of video are uploaded every minute (YouTube 2014). Although less popular, but still impressive in terms of size, Flickr has 92 million users who upload around 1 million photos per day (Flickr 2010).

Jin et al. (2010) consider the act of uploading and viewing an image or video in a content community as an “implicit vote” in favour or against the subjects depicted. Therefore by aggregating data on those “votes”, the wisdom of social media crowd is revealed, enabling prediction and forecasting in areas like politics, economics and marketing. In their study, they managed to predict unit sales of popular products (music players, computers, cell phones, and game consoles) based on product-tagged photographs users posted in Flickr. Moreover, they evidenced that by studying upload and viewing trends of photos in Flickr one is able to monitor the spread, adoption and popularity of products around the globe.



#### **2.5.4.1. Content Communities in the tourism context**

It has been suggested that videos found in content communities (a) have the potential to affect tourism experiences; (b) are an important tool that intensifies interest among potential travellers; (c) generate mental pleasures, in the form of dreams and fantasies for those who have never been to the destination, and in the form of imaginations of re-experiencing the past trips for those who have been there; and (d) can be regarded as a mode of “transportation” to the destination, thus enabling sharing of, and providing access to touristic experiences (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009). Especially videos in YouTube have been considered as an information source for holidaymakers enabling them to search for specific activities, seek help and advice about their destination, or even watch live reviews (Reino and Hay 2011).

Travel related photos in Flickr have been studied as a tool to predict a user’s travel behaviour: Clements et al. (2010) proposed that a user’s geotagged photos in Flickr can predict the favourite locations in another unvisited destination for either the same user or for any user with similar travel preferences, to obtain a personalized travel recommendation. Liu et al. (2013) employed Uses & Gratifications theory to explore through a mixed-methods design the influence of food photography on Flickr members’ travel planning process. Findings suggest that active Flickr members are more likely to choose travel destinations for new food experiences, and that food photographs have a greater influence to their destination decision process.

Sharing travel-related photos in content communities has been found third in popularity among Hong Kong residents after SNS and instant messaging (Lo et al. 2011). However, online photo albums were most preferred by users above the age of 35, while SNSs, instant messaging and blogs were more popular for posting among those under 35. Such difference was attributed to the fact that younger users have a stronger need for self-presentation, therefore they post their photos to applications that enable better self-presentation management. On the contrary, older users are less concerned about self-presentation, therefore they choose applications that resemble traditional photo albums as a mean simply to share pictures with their network.

Based on the above discussion, it is clear that Content Communities although divided in three sub-types (section 2.5.4: photos, videos, and other) do consist of a very large set of applications. As a result, this study’s research methodology needs to focus on the most prominent types such as photos and videos. Given that as stated earlier (section 2.5.3) the impact of travel photos will be assessed through the perspective of Social Networking Sites, it is videos, and especially YouTube, that needs to be assessed through the perspective of Content Communities. Despite Reino and Hay’s (2011) suggestions, videos need also to be assessed not only during the

information search stage, but also during the evaluation stage of the decision process, so that to acknowledge Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier's (2009) view of videos as a mode of "transportation" to the destination.

### **2.5.5. Consumer review websites**

Consumer review websites (CRW) are social media applications that enable users to upload product related reviews and ratings. CRW can offer a wide range of features, from uploading comments and pictures, and from a product or service rating on a single variable, to an impressive range of features such as wish-lists, price comparisons, advanced search, multi variable ratings, price comparisons, price history charts, buy / hold recommendations, price alerts, deals' rankings, merchant / retailers' evaluations, personalized shopping and more.

Consumer review websites can take many forms:

- As standalone websites that have as a primary function the collection and presentation of consumer feedback, such as Yelp, Epinions, Reevo, TripAdvisor, Holidays-uncovered.co.uk, Holidaywatchdog, Holidaycheck.de (popular in Germany), Zoover (popular in Belgium and the Netherlands).
- As embedded content within websites that have as a primary function the sales of goods or services, but incorporate substantial number of reviews in an effort to facilitate consumers' decision making, such as Amazon, eBay, and within the tourism context the various OTAs websites (e.g. Expedia, Booking.com, Travelocity etc.).

TripAdvisor, among the leading CRWs, hosts more than 150 million reviews for more than 4 million businesses, and has 260 million unique monthly visitors (TripAdvisor 2014). Yelp has approximately 132 million visitors on a monthly basis and hosts 57 million reviews (Yelp 2014). In 2010, a quarter of all US residents (or 32% of US Internet users) have posted product reviews or comments online (Jansen 2010).

There are numerous studies evidencing that not only consumers are considering online reviews, but are also influenced by them when making purchase decisions (Senecal and Nantel 2004; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Dellarocas et al. 2007) and even willing to pay more for products with a higher rating (comScore 2007). For instance, Senecal and Nantel (2004) evidenced that online recommendations influence consumers' product choices more than sources of conventional recommendation. However, their set of online recommendation consisted not only

of consumer reviews but also from human experts (e.g. salespersons and independent experts), as well as expert systems (e.g. recommender systems).

Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) have evidenced that eWOM in the form of online book reviews has a causal impact (positive influence) on consumer purchasing behaviour (sales) at two leading online book sellers. In a similar vein, Lee (2009) found that (a) the quality of the arguments (i.e. supported with facts versus emotional and subjective arguments) used in reviews have a positive impact on purchasing intention; and (b) the quantity of reviews have a positive effect on purchasing intention, since large number of reviews denote popularity of a product.

Dellarocas et al. (2007) studied how online product ratings of films, shortly after the opening weekend, can predict films' revenues. Their model evidenced that the volume of online consumer reviews appearing just after the release of the film can be a proxy or early sales; and that traditional sales forecasting models can achieve greater accuracy when they take into account the volume on online reviews. Furthermore, Duan et al. (2008) evidenced that ratings, given as part of online user reviews, were found to have minimal persuasive effect on consumer purchase decisions, as they were not found to have significant impact on films' revenues. Similarly to Dellarocas (2007), they found that it was the volume of reviews that significantly influenced sales, attributing this effect to the assumption that reviews act as indicators of "underlying word of mouth" that drives film revenues (Duan et al. 2008, p.1007).

Dhar and Chang (2009) explored the relationship between sales of music albums, as expressed by Amazon.com's ranks, and online chatter before and after the album's release, to assess whether user-generated content can have predictive value for online music sales. Among (a) number of reviews and ratings in music review websites; (b) reviews in music related online media; (c) reviews in music related mainstream media; (d) volume of blog posts; and (d) number of friends in social networking sites, they found that the volume of blog posts about a music album is the variable with the greatest correlation to future sales. Contrary to the findings of Duan (2008), Dhar and Chang found that the average consumer rating is significant, while the number of consumer reviews is not.

#### **2.5.5.1. Consumer Review Websites in the tourism context**

Two thirds (67%) of US travellers seem to read reviews from other travellers during their travel related search process (Google 2014). With 260 million unique monthly visitors, TripAdvisor is a clear leader among travel related consumer review websites, hosting more than 150 million reviews for more than 4 million businesses. (TripAdvisor 2014). Expedia (2013) suggests that

15% of US adults write a hotel review after returning home from a trip. However, consumer reviews were found to be used throughout the stages of the travel planning process, increasing travellers' confidence about decisions making, reducing risk, and assisting trip planning, mainly in accommodation selection (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) showed that hotel consideration is enhanced by exposure to both positive and negative consumer reviews since both increase awareness, especially for lesser-known hotels. Expert reviews (e.g. lonelyplanet.com) were not found to change consumer' attitudes more than non-expert reviews, however they have a moderating role in hotel consideration. Positively framed reviews focusing on interpersonal service evidence higher levels of trust, and together with numerical ratings increase trust and booking intention (Sparks and Browning 2011). On the contrary, early negative reviews influence consumers especially within an overall set of negative reviews. Exploring consumers' perceptions and the utilisation of online holiday reviews for holiday purchase decisions, Papathanassis and Knolle (2011) proposed a linear behavioural model attempting to explain the generic adoption process of reviews, consisting of three constructs, namely adoption readiness, source-heuristic assessment, and content – heuristic assessment.

Based on the above discussion, this study will acknowledge the increased popularity of CRW. The research methodology needs to approach CRW not only as sources of information in the pre-trip stage, giving emphasis in the role of heuristics in content evaluation as suggested by Papathanassis and Knolle (2011), but also in the post-trip stage focusing on the motives that drive travellers to post reviews.

### **2.5.6. Wikis**

In 1995, Ward Cunningham created the first wiki, with its name referring to the Hawaiian word for “quick”. His first system, the “WikiWikiWeb”, still runs today at <http://c2.com/cgi-bin/wiki> (Mattison 2003) . Wikis have been defined as:

“a freely expandable collection of interlinked Web 'pages', a hypertext system for storing and modifying information — a database, where each page is easily editable by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client” (Leuf and Cunningham 2001, p.14)

Usage of wikis is simple and asynchronous (Désilets et al. 2005). Users are allowed to create and modify each page. As their name implies, wikis are quick due to the fact that users can read and edit at the same time. Each page develops through the contribution of various users, filling gaps which have been left open by predecessors (Lamb 2004).

Already in 2004 more than a thousand wikis existed (Chawner and Lewis 2004). Out of these, the best known wiki is Wikipedia, a multilingual, free online encyclopaedia that is written by its users (Gardner 2008). Wikipedia's facts and figures suggests that the English language version hosts more than 4.6 million articles, with 800 new articles added on a daily basis (Wikipedia 2014). In terms of visitation, Wikipedia is the 6<sup>th</sup> most visited website on a global basis (Alexa 2014).

Wikis can be either accessed by everyone, such as in the case of Wikipedia, or are limited to certain registered users; more and more organisations use wikis as “internal knowledge management tools” (Gardner 2008, p. 83) encouraging the exchange of information among their employees. Since wikis have quickly grown in popularity within the last years, involving a large number of participants. However, there are concerns that wikis are subject to a range of problems, such as anarchical structures or aging navigation paths (Buffa and Gandon 2006). The major public concern about wikis, and especially about Wikipedia, is that its entries might be full of mistakes since anyone is able to modify them. Numerous bloggers examined this concern by purposefully inserting errors in the encyclopaedia. To their surprise, the errors were discovered almost immediately and corrected (O'Connor 2005). Nevertheless, doubts remain concerning its reliability.

When assessing trustworthiness of articles, Wikipedia users rely on both content and context factors (Rowley and Johnson 2013). Content factors include authorship, currency and usefulness, while context factors include references, expert recommendation and triangulation with their own knowledge. The amount of information, satisfaction with content and external links, number of edits, and number of unique editors are also considered as attributes of high-quality articles (Yaari et al. 2011).

#### **2.5.6.1. Wikis in the tourism context**

In the travel and tourism industry, the most popular wiki is Wikitravel ([www.wikitravel.org](http://www.wikitravel.org)), a free online worldwide travel guide. Wikitravel hosts more than 62,000 articles about 25,000 destinations written and edited by the so-called 75,000+ “Wikitravellers” (Wikitravel 2011, 2014). Part of Wikitravel is also “Wikitravel Shared”, where images and other media of destinations can be uploaded by users. However, apart from wikis focused on travel, there is preliminary evidence that also Wikipedia is used as a travel related information source. A study by Tan and Chen (2012) identified Wikipedia among the travel related information sources. More specifically, it was found that Wikipedia as an information source outperformed books and magazines in all the measures except entertainment and reliance. Wikipedia was considered

as more useful among tourists travelling to Europe and USA as it provides more in-depth details. Its nature, as a source of the wisdom of the crowds, contributes to the perceived credibility of the source especially when leisure tourists are unfamiliar with the destination. In such a case, Wikipedia outperforms books and magazines as its editorial process contributes to the perceived credibility of the source.

Apart from the above study (Tan and Chen 2012) extensive search both in Scopus and Google Scholar did not reveal any studies that examine the relationship of collaborative projects or wikis (either in general or through specific tourism related wikis such as Wikitravel) with travel and tourism, or their impact on travel related consumer behaviour.

Based on the above discussion, and given the absence of studies focusing on the role of wikis on travel related consumer behaviour, this study needs to attempt to assess the presence of wikis and in particular Wikipedia, as their most prominent example, in the travel process.

### **2.5.7. Internet forums**

Internet forums (IF) can be considered as web-based virtual spaces where users who share common interests can initiate, or participate in asynchronous discussions, post messages, questions, or answers organized in threads and user-created topics (Poel 2009; Laughlin and MacDonald 2010; Carbonaro 2011). IF are also known as discussion forums, web forums, online forums, online communities, message boards, discussion boards, bulletin boards, discussion groups, or simply forums (Laughlin and MacDonald 2010). Even before the development of social media in their current form, IF have been recognized as influential sources of consumer information (Bickart and Schindler 2001). The Japanese 2channel ([www.2ch.net](http://www.2ch.net)) is considered as the world's largest IF with 2.7 million daily posts (Maslow 2011).

#### **2.5.7.1. Internet forums in the tourism context**

In travel and tourism, most Internet Forums (IF) are either stand-alone websites, or embedded within travel related websites. Examples of travel related stand-alone forums include the Disney trip planning forum (<http://www.disboards.com/>) which is an unofficial forum for Disney travel products hosting more than 40 million posts; and Flyertalk (<http://www.flyertalk.com>) a forum about frequent flyers and loyalty programs (17+ million posts). Examples of embedded forums include forums found within travel related consumer review sites, such as TripAdvisor's Travel Forum and Cruisecritic, as well as forums embedded in travel guides' websites, such as the

Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree travel forum (3.2+ million posts) and Virtual Tourist's World Travel Forum (1+ million members). Although in the case of IF there are no comparative statistics available, it is believed that TripAdvisor's Travel Forum is the most popular one: In May 2014, it hosted more than 23 million posts on 3.3 million discussion topics just for Europe and USA, and it receives approximately 2800 new discussion topics on a daily basis (TripAdvisor 2014).

Consumers participate in travel forums to satisfy functional, social, psychological and hedonic needs (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). Studying the Lonely Travel's Thorn Tree forum, Aarsal et al. (2010) supported that 31% of the forum's threads influenced members' travel planning decisions. The similarity between the user's interests and the forum's topic, as well as the user's attitude towards the forum found to have a direct relationship with intention to purchase the products discussed in the forum (Prendergast et al. 2010). During the pre-trip information search process, travel related forums provide potential travellers with direct access to residents of a destination (Aarsal et al. 2010). More specifically, residents of the destination were found to be more influential in on-site travel decisions, such as food and beverage recommendations, destination safety, and travel itinerary. On the contrary, experienced travellers were found more influential in general travel-related issues such as transportation, accommodation, and monetary issues. Sanchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluna (2010) investigated the relationship between customer purchase involvement and website design in virtual travel communities, however their description of methods does not specify if their study was focused only in IF. Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalfú (2010) studied antecedents and consequences of consumer participation in online travel communities, however they as well, included in their study OTAs websites incorporating consumer review platforms, therefore their findings are not exclusively based on Internet forums.

Based on the above discussion, this study's research methodology needs to approach IF as platforms attempting to satisfy functional, social, psychological, and hedonic needs (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). Moreover, IF needs to be approached also as sources that provide potential travellers with access to residents of the holiday destination (Aarsal et al. 2010).

#### **2.5.8. Location based social media**

Location based social media (LBSM) are web, or mobile based applications that allow users to articulate a list of other users with whom they share their geographic location at a specific point in time (referred as "check-in") which is usually associated with a specific venue or a place. In addition, comments, reviews, and recommendations about the venue may also be included.

LBSM can be considered as a subset of location based services (LBS, also termed mobile location services, or location-aware services) which are computer applications that deliver information depending on the location of the device and user (Raper et al. 2007). LBS is a much wider concept including several applications such as vehicle navigation, mobile personal guides, location based advertising and other. Examples of LBSM include Foursquare, Gowalla and Facebook Places. Gowalla was acquired by Facebook and then discontinued in 2012. In August 2011, Facebook Places ceased to exist as a separate application, and a check-in feature was incorporated within Facebook. In December 2013 Foursquare claimed it reached 45 million users and 5 billion check-ins since its foundation (Foursquare 2013). In 2011, among all US adults 4% used their mobile phones to check-in to locations using location based social media, while among adult smartphone owners this figure raises to 12% (Zickuhr and Smith 2011).

A number of motives drive Foursquare use: Fun associated with the collection of badges and points, discovering and visiting new places, coordinating with and signalling availability to friends, keeping track of places visited as a form of presentation of self, as “eavesdropping” so to know where others are (Lindqvist et al. 2011). Users were found not willing to check-in if they feel embarrassed to be seen in specific places (e.g. fast food restaurants), in places considered boring, not interesting or often visited (e.g. at work), or even at “sensitive” places (e.g. own home, other people’s homes).

LBSM gave also rise to the development of location-based mobile games that can impact the experience of individuals when moving in space and their mobility decisions through which a playful layer can be added to physical spaces (Frith 2013).

The use of LBSM raises a number of privacy concerns that have been studied within the general context of LBS (Junglas et al. 2008; Eklund et al. 2011; Zhou 2011), as well as within the context of Social Networking Sites (Fogel and Nehmad 2009; Houghton and Joinson 2010; Zhang et al. 2010). Privacy concerns are expected to act as constraints in the adoption and use of LBSM.

#### **2.5.8.1. Location based social media in the tourism context**

Travel related check-ins were the fourth most popular type after food, work, and shopping related check-ins (Foursquare 2011). It is believed that further development of LBSM in the tourism and travel context will enable companies to effectively engage in SoLoMo marketing (Buhalis and Inversini 2014). SoLoMo marketing is based around the philosophy of addressing



promotional messages to consumers' smartphones that are relevant to their current location aiming to be shared through social networking sites.

LBSM is the newest of all social media types, and as a result academic literature on consumer behaviour aspects such as adoption and usage during the travel process is very limited (Chong and Ngai 2013). Chong and Ngai (2013) employed Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2) and found that review rating, argument strength, reviewer trustworthiness, and reviewer expertise can influence users' adoption of online reviews, which in turn influence use of LBSM. Within the context of a large-scale touristic event Morais and Andrade (2014) found that tips posted in LBSM differ in relevance between residents and tourists, with those from residents found more relevant than those from tourists.

Although that an extensive literature search was conducted (using several terms describing location based services, such as "location-based social media", "location based content", "location sharing applications", "location based social networking", "location based media", "social location based services", and terms describing specific applications e.g. "Foursquare", "Gowalla", "Facebook places", in combination with the terms "travel" or "tourism") there were no other academic studies found to approach LBSM from a consumer behaviour perspective.

Based on the above discussion, this study's research methodology needs to attempt to identify at which stages of the travel process, as well as at which stages of the decision making process there is a presence of LBSM. In case such presence has an adequate volume, an attempt should be made to identify the reasons that drive users to LBSM and their benefits.

## **2.6. Concluding thoughts**

Adoption levels and usage behaviour of social media are still in a state of constant change (Universal McCann 2008; 2009; 2010). Within the travel and tourism context there is an adequate number of studies that attempt to reveal the role and impact of social media on consumer behaviour during the travel process. However, a number of scholars suggest that published research on the influence of social media and other Web 2.0 applications on tourism marketing has been very little (Schmallegger and Carson 2008), that research on the extent to which Travel 2.0 applications affect tourists' attitudes and purchasing decisions "can be considered still poor and in its infancy" (Del Chiappa 2011, p.339), or even that "the significant impacts of social media on tourists' decisions are not well documented (Liu et al. 2013, p.8). Moreover, some of the existing studies have limitations related to the nature of the samples used such as consisting entirely from students, although there are issues with the use of students in

consumer behaviour studies (Peterson 2001, Ekström 2003), or involving hypothetical travel scenarios and not actual travellers (Beaulieu & Schreyer 1985, cited Um & Crompton 1990). Moreover, almost all of the studies employ a micro approach, as they are either: (a) Application specific, that is focusing on a specific social media application (e.g. TripAdvisor, Facebook, etc.), or (b) Social media type specific, that is focusing on a specific type of social media (e.g. blogs, social networking sites etc.). At the same time, most studies are either (c) decision making process stage specific (e.g. information search), or (d) travel planning stage specific (e.g. before travel). Despite the presence of numerous such micro approaches (as shown in this chapter), still the overall picture on the role and impact of social media (a) as a whole, (b) during all phases of the travel process, and (c) during all stages of the decision making process, through a macro exploratory approach, remains unclear.

### **2.6.1. On micro and macro approaches**

The existence of micro and macro approaches, or orientations, is present in almost all social science disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and economics (Firat 1985). In consumer research in particular, there is no consensus on how the two approaches differ. Salomon et al. (2006), in agreement with Pachauri (2002), associate the micro approach with a focus on the individual; while the macro approach with a social focus thus with the study of aggregate activities or processes occurring among larger groups of consumers such as a culture or a subculture. Dholakia (2012) rejects the individual – group distinction, and perceives the difference between micro and macro as a matter of distance from which the researcher observes a phenomenon, supporting that the micro approach examines phenomena from a close range. In other instances, the focus on aggregated activities and the longer range of the macro approach is associated with a system perspective (Firat 1985). In discussing a taxonomy of consumer behaviour models, Lilien and Kotler (1983 cited Bowen and Clarke 2009), differentiate the micro from the macro approach based on whether there is a focus on a part of the decision making process or on its whole. From another perspective, Sheth (1974) uses the term macro when the unit of study is the household as opposed to the individual members, while the term micro is used when the focus is on the interaction among the family members. Hoyer and MacInnis (2010) perceive the distinction as two alternative ways to study consumer behaviour. They suggest that the micro approach focuses on the individual consumer's psychological processes relating to acquisition, consumption and disposition related decision, while the macro focuses on groups and the symbolic nature of consumption (Hoyer and MacInnis 2010).

This study adopts Dholakia's (2012), Firat's (1985), and Lilien and Kotler's (1983 cited Bowen and Clarke 2009) perspective. Therefore, the difference between the micro and the macro

approach is perceived as a matter of distance from which a researcher studies a phenomenon. Studying from a closer distance, thus adopting a micro perspective, enables focus on smaller parts of the picture. However, this is not exclusively related with the study of individuals. For example, smaller parts can be not only individuals but also cognitive processes taking place within a specific stage of the decision making process, or interactions with other consumers within specific stages (e.g. pre-consumption) taking place through specific media types (e.g. consumer review websites). On the contrary, studying from an adequate distance, thus adopting a macro perspective, enables the researcher to focus on the largest possible picture. It should be stressed again that this is not exclusively related with the study of groups. Larger parts can be systems, whole processes such as the entire decision making process as opposed to specific stages (e.g. information search), or the whole travel process as opposed to specific stages (e.g. pre-travel), or social media as a whole as opposed to specific types or applications.

As stated in the previous section, almost all of the social media travel related studies employ a micro approach, being either application specific, or social media type specific, or decision making process stage specific, or travel planning stage specific. The adoption of the micro approach has three advantages. First, although the picture gained is from a narrow angle, it is more focused, thus providing an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. For example, although it may be considered narrow to focus on only one social media type or social media application, or on only one stage of the decision making process, a study of the phenomenon has more depth since the researcher's time, effort, and other resources are exclusively devoted on the particular type, or application, or stage. Second, the micro approach enables researchers to identify predictive and causal relationships. Due to the narrow focus of the investigation, the number of constructs and relationships is, or can be, limited to a manageable number, therefore it is feasible to adopt quantitative methodologies to identify predictive and causal relationships. Third, as a consequence of the previous two advantages, the micro approach focuses mostly on explanation with an aim to predict and control outcomes.

Despite the above mentioned advantages of such micro approaches, still the overall picture on the role and impact of social media (a) as a whole, (b) during all phases of the travel process, and (c) during all stages of the decision making process, through a macro exploratory approach, remains unclear. It seems therefore that there is a need of a comprehensive, exploratory study on the overall impact of social media focusing equally on each stage of the travel process, and attempting to cover all stages of the decision making process, so to provide input on the current state of use, role, and impact of social media during the whole travel process. In agreement with Dholakia (2012), it is believed that such an enlarged approach will provide a panoramic and holistic view that will enable the development of a conceptual framework on the overall use of

social media during each of the stages of the travel process, as well as during each of the stages of the decision making process. Such an outcome will enable researchers to further focus at micro level by identifying specific areas that are currently under-researched.

At the same time, this study recognizes that the current epistemic assumption in marketing and consumer research is based on micro approaches, and that there are “epistemic barriers” that “shuns or sidesteps or devalues” macro level approaches to the extent that these are relegated to “second-class citizenship” and “tolerated but not celebrated or rewarded” (Dholakia 2012, p.220). However, this study supports Dholakia’s (2012) argument that macro approaches are imperative since they offer panoramic and holistic views of consumption processes that enable the creation of approximate maps of linkages, influences and flows. Moreover, the study adopts Firat’s (1985) position that findings from macro perspectives not only facilitate the development of micro theories, but also provide answers to questions regarding assumptions and input variables that micro theories usually accept as given.

## 3. Consumer Behaviour: Origins, theory and models

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*“If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development”*

*Aristotle*

### 3.1. Introduction

In-depth understanding of consumer behaviour, and in particular of the buying decision making process, is of paramount importance to both the industry and the academia: It enables marketers to better understand the reasons behind consumers' actions in the marketplace, and therefore to provide insights on how to influence consumers at various stages of their buying or consumption process, thus achieving effective and efficient use of marketing resources. For scholars, consumer behaviour is an academic field of enquiry, a sub-discipline of marketing (MacInnis and Folkes 2009), that generates scientific knowledge about a complex form of human behaviour. The chapter commences by discussing the phases in the development of consumer behaviour, followed by the approaches, or perspectives that are available for researchers who study consumer behaviour. A critical evaluation for each perspective is undertaken to enable the selection of the lens through which this study is conducted. A review of consumer behaviour definitions is presented and a new definition is proposed for the purposes of this study. The chapter then proceeds to a critical review of the major comprehensive consumer behaviour models. For each model an attempt is made to identify the constructs that may be affected by social media. A review of the cognitive tourism related models follows so to provide insights into the specific context of this study. The last part of the chapter is devoted in an attempt to identify tourism related constructs that may be affected by social media. The discussion on generic and travel related consumer behaviour models did not focus on any specific model or theory, but given the qualitative nature of the study, it provides a general orientating lens for the research (Creswell 2009; Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

## 3.2. The origins and development of consumer behaviour

A brief review of how our understanding about the behaviour of consumers has evolved over the years is considered a prerequisite towards the effort of describing what consumer behaviour is about. A synopsis of the following discussion in terms of the different development phases of consumer behaviour is presented in Table 3.1.

The first attempts to understand the behaviour of consumers can be found between the 1930s and the 1940s. Arndt (1986) and Ekström (2003) label this era as the “**Early Empiricist Phase**” of consumer behaviour. At a time when the concept of “economic man” was dominating, scholars’ attempts to understand consumers’ actions in the marketplace were based on classical economic theory principles. Consumers were seen as rational decision makers, performing economic calculations on how to spend their income, maximizing utility and minimizing cost (Zaichkowsky 1991, Waguespack and Hyman 1993, Ekström 2003). Sheth (1974 cited Arndt 1986) suggests that during this period there were early attempts to identify the effects of decisions in the area of distribution, advertising, and promotion. However, despite the prevailing economic paradigm, there were scholars that advocated a non-rational explanation: Pitkin’s “The Consumer: His Nature and His Changing Habits” published in 1932, supported that noneconomic factors such as age, intelligence, energy, training and emotions influence consumer behaviour, “calling for the study of consumer psychology” (1932, p.8 cited Waguespack and Hyman 1993). In 1949, James Duesenberry published his book “Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behaviour” perhaps the first to include the term “consumer behaviour” in its title. This book was primarily an economic analysis on the relationship between income and savings, but with some attention on the psychological factors that influence savings (Waguespack and Hyman 1993). Although that the “economic man” approach dominated the literature even into the 1950s, scholars started evidencing that this view (a) failed to differentiate the reasons for a decision from the decision itself, and (b) despite the difference between physical and emotional motives, neither can be measured separately (Walters and Bergiel 1989 cited Waguespack and Hyman 1993).

During the 1950s, in the so called “**Motivation Research Phase**” (Arndt 1986, Ekström 2003), scholars started investigating the impact of non-economic factors to behaviour. Consumers were seen as irrational, impulsive decision makers, open to external influences, a position clearly contradicting the so far prevailing “economic man” approach. It is the time that U.S. business schools were developing, and together with economists also psychologists joined as staff. Prevailing theories such as the Pavlovian learning model, the Freudian psychoanalytic model and Maslow’s motivation theory, were consequently employed to provide new insights

Table 3.1: Phases in the development of consumer behaviour

Phase	Dominant theoretical pillars	Dominant views about consumers	Major criticism / limitations
Early empiricist phase (1930s – 1940s)	Classical economic theory	Rational decision makers, performing economic calculations on how to spend their income, maximizing utility and minimizing cost	Non-economic factors influencing behaviour; Failure to differentiate the reasons for a decision from the decision itself; Neither physical or emotional motives could be measured separately
Motivation research phase (1950s)	Pavlovian learning model Freudian psychoanalytic model Maslow's motivation theory	Irrational, impulsive decision makers, open to external influences	Subjective interpretation of findings; Use of non-representative samples; Use of clinical & qualitative methods; Absence of formal definition & models of consumer behaviour
Formative phase (1960 -1965)	Cognitive psychology principles Cognitive – response models	Problem solvers, information processors	Limited theoretical conceptualisation; Western culture bound;
Utopian grand theory phase (1965 -1970)	Cognitive psychology principles Comprehensive grand theories of consumer behaviour	Cognitive problem solvers that consciously buy products and services to meet their needs	Addressing mainly pre-purchase processes
Information processing phase (1970s)	Cognitive psychology principles Information processing theory	“An involved information extracting individual seeking the correct decision or brand or product” (Kassarjian 1981, p.21)	Overdependence on cognitive psychology Consumers information processing skills are limited
New consumer behaviour era (1980s)	Consumption symbolism, experiential & hedonic consumption, non-positivism, Anthropological interpretive principles	From the cognitive miser of the ‘80s to the collective decision maker of the ‘90s (Zaichkowsky 1991);	New research methods seen as an enigmatic alternative
The pluralistic research family phase (1990s – beginning of 2000s)	Plurality of theoretical pillars Cross-cultural theories Micro-theoretical approaches Methodological pluralism	“Socially connected human beings participating in multiple interacting cultures” (Belk 1995, p.57); Consumer as a co-producer	

Source: Author

into consumer behaviour. Focus groups, in-depth interviews, and thematic apperception tests were used to uncover hidden motives and symbols behind the purchase of goods. Haire's "shopping list" study in 1950 provided insights on the meaning and importance of products far beyond their physical attributes (Zaichkowsky 1991; Waguespack and Hyman 1993; Ekström 2003). In 1952, Alderson's article "Psychology for Marketing and Economics" suggested marketers to use psychological concepts for marketing problems; the Committee for Research on Consumer Attitudes and Behaviour was founded, and in 1957 Howard's first edition of "Marketing management" contains a chapter on "Demand Analysis - Consumer Behaviour" (Mittelstaedt 1990). In a slightly different vein, Holbrook (1995) supports that the emergence of the field stemmed from motivational researchers such as Dichter, Martineau, Gardner and Levy who employed clinical interviews to reveal consumer motivations. Holbrook (1995) acknowledges also the contribution of Peter Drucker's "Practice of Management", as among the first attempts to shift the focus of business to the importance of the customer, giving emphasis on the concept of "customer value". Major criticism at that time was based:

- a. On the grounds of subjective interpretation of the findings, and the use of non-representative samples (Waguespack and Hyman 1993, Ekström 2003).
- b. On the fact that the majority of motivational research was employing clinical and qualitative methods, much away from the prevailing, at that time, neopositivistic perspective that dictated experimental and quantitative methods, therefore motivational research approaches failed to receive the attention they deserved (Kassarjian 1974 cited Holbrook 1995).
- c. On the generation of "knowledge for knowledge's sake" due to the absence of both formal models and a formal definition of consumer behaviour (Clark 1954 cited Waguespack and Hyman 1993).

In 1960 Ted Levitt published "Marketing Myopia" introducing the importance of "customer orientation" as a marketing and business approach. McCarthy, the father of 4Ps in his first edition of "Basic Marketing: A managerial approach" included six chapters on consumer behaviour (Mittelstaedt 1990; Holbrook 1995). Zaichkowsky (1991) stresses the contribution of John F. Kennedy as President of the U.S. in giving the consumer an "elevated status". The Consumer Bill of Rights in 1963 addressed issues such as the right to choose, the right to be informed, the right to safety, the right to be heard, and provided resources and further legislation to assure consumer protection and access to information. The early 1960s is a period strongly influenced from cognitive psychology, with scholars approaching consumer behaviour through stimulus – organism – response models, perceiving the consumer as a problem solver, as an



information processor, and studying constructs such as social class, social character, personality, perceived risk and cognitive dissonance (Ekström 2003). Arndt (1986) and Ekström (2003) entitle the period from 1960 to 1965 as the “**Formative Phase**” of consumer behaviour. Influenced primarily by the work of Katona, Bauer, and Lazarsfeld, this era welcomes the first marketing consumer behaviour specialists such as Nicosia, Engel, Cox, Carman, Cardoso and Andeersen (Arndt 1986). Holbrook (1995) emphasizes John Howard’s “seminal role” in the development of the theory of consumer behaviour: In his textbook “Marketing Management”, Howard (1963) published a chapter containing the first formal model of consumer behaviour, a logical flow-chart representation heavily borrowed from the work of the future economics Nobel laureate Herbert Simon.

In the second part of the 1960s, during the “**Utopian Grand Theory Phase**” (Arndt 1986, Ekström 2003), consumer behaviour scholars attempt a move towards integrative, comprehensive theories and conceptual models. Major contributors include Nicosia (1966), Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968), and Howard and Sheth (1969) that guided the study of the consumption process. However, Arndt (1986) suggests that those theories appeared much before their time, their conceptualizations were limited, western culture bound, and mainly addressing pre-purchase processes. Kollat et al., (1973 cited Arndt 1986) admit that although there were attempts to critically evaluate grand theories, they had little impact on empirical research. Grand theories managed to shift the focus away from the homo-economicus, utility maximizing behaviour doctrine, to the mental processes and the psychological concepts that preceded purchase (Waguespack and Hyman 1993). The end of this decade finds consumer behaviour leaving behind the “irrational psychotic purchaser” of the 1950s and early 1960s, in favour of a cognitive man and a problem solver that consciously buys products and services to meet his needs (Zaichkowsky 1991). In 1969, the Association of Consumer Research held its first conference, a significant step towards the recognition of consumer behaviour as a field of study in marketing.

The limitations of the grand, comprehensive theories formulated in the late 1960s, resulted in the development of a large number of middle-range theories during the 1970s: Ward and Robertson (1973 cited Kassarian 1982), to whom the initiative towards those theories in consumer behaviour is credited, defined middle-range theories as:

“theoretical or conceptual frameworks which do not constitute full-blown theories in and of themselves, but neither are they merely isolated empirical findings [...] suggest explanations and predictions concerning some relatively circumscribed areas of inquiry” (1973 cited Kassarian 1982, p.20).

“Adequate to account for selected aspects of a delimited range of phenomena, and subject to being consolidated with others of like kind into a more comprehensive set of ideas” (Merton 1957, p.110).

Attribution theory, attitude models, low involvement, risk, dissonance lifestyle, personality, reference groups, social class, diffusion of innovation, consumer satisfaction, decision making within the family context, and information processing were among the topics that were heavily researched in the 1970s (Kassarjian 1982; Ekström 2003). In particular, the increasing concern of advertisers in consumer information issues, and the increasing number of researchers with a marketing orientation, interested on the determinants of consumer behaviour controlled by advertising, led to a shift of research interest towards the study of information processing: Questions on how “consumers search, receive, interpret, store and utilize information in the short and long term memory” (Arndt 1986, p.25) became prominent research topics, entitling this period as **“The Information Processing Phase”** of consumer behaviour (Ekström 2003). The work of Bettman (1979) is recognized as the most influential at the time (Kassarjian 1982; Arndt 1986; Ekström 2003). In reviewing consumer research during the 1970s, Zaichkowsky (1991) concludes that consumers’ search for information depends on goals, values, skills, habits and reflexes, but more than that she emphasizes that despite the increase on the number of choices available to consumers, their information processing skills are limited. The end of the 1970s find scholars admitting overdependence on cognitive psychology: Scholars started questioning the universal assumption of “an involved information extracting individual seeking the correct decision or brand or product” (Kassarjian 1982, p.21), especially in the case of low involvement products. Going even further, Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) provided evidence that some types of purchases may not be preceded by a decision process at all.

During the 1980s, the world goes more global and marketers face a range of multicultural issues when entering Third World countries, but also basic consumptions issues when nations shift from forms of communism to forms of capitalism (Belk 1995). Anthropologists and sociologists are joining marketers to broaden their perspectives, who however bring with them a set of new research tools and methodologies. Decreased time for shopping (therefore decreased time for extended cognitive effort), but also increased choices in the marketplace make consumers adapt their strategies to the new environment, resulting in low-involvement consumers, labelled by Zaichowsky (1991, p.54) as “cognitive misers”. The **“New Consumer Behaviour”** era (Belk 1995) adopts a non-positivist, methodological pluralism based on a new set of ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions: Consumers are not seen as sterilized information processors, but as “socially connected human beings participating in multiple interacting cultures” (Belk 1995, p.57). Consumer behaviour is facing a paradigm shift, but also a schism among scholars, the positivists versus the non-positivists, which however stimulates a fruitful

discussion on new ways of seeking knowledge in consumer behaviour, as presented in Table 3.2:

*Table 3.2: Old versus new perspectives in consumer behaviour research*

Old perspective	New perspective
Positivist	Non-positivist
Experiments / Surveys	Ethnography
Quantitative	Qualitative
A priory theory	Emergent theory
Economic / Psychological	Sociological / Anthropological
Micro / Managerial	Macro / Cultural
Focus on buying	Focus on consuming
Emphasis on cognitions	Emphasis on emotions
American	Multicultural

*Source: Belk (1995)*

New research area topics that emerged in the 1980s, among other, include consumption symbolism, hedonic and experiential consumption, mood, semiotics, impulse purchases, gift-giving, rituals, collecting, and consumption as an expression of culture. Anthropological, interpretive research approaches, evidence a strong impact on the development of consumer behaviour, although for many scholars they were an enigmatic alternative (Ekström 2003).

In the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, consumer behaviour witnesses a significant growth of interpretive approaches making the “new consumer behaviour” standing equally next to the old. The plurality of the new methods and theories justifies Ekström’s (2003) view to entitle this period as **“The pluralistic research family”** phase of consumer behaviour. However, the new paradigm opened “a Pandora’s box, full of new substantive questions to be investigated” (Belk 1995, p.58) such as negative aspects of consumption, drug addiction, brand communities, brand personality, feelings in decision making, visual consumption etc. During this period, Zaichkowsky (1991) identifies a trend from individual to a collective decision making style primarily caused by two factors: (a) The decrease in purchasing power that she expects will result in increasing number of consumers who will combine households to make life more affordable; and (b) the changing culture of North America due to the increase of seniors, the aging of baby boomers, and the increased immigration from Asian cultures, all of which result in a shift towards a collective consumption style as opposed to the individual consumption style predominant in North America and the western cultures.

### 3.3. Perspectives to the study of consumer behaviour

The various development phases of consumer behaviour theory, as described in paragraph 3.2, led to the development of various approaches, or perspectives to the study of consumer behaviour. Marsden and Littler (1998) suggest that researchers seeking knowledge in consumer behaviour should develop an understanding of the assumptions of the different perspectives, as each perspective proposes different questions, methods of inquiry, and therefore different interpretation and evaluation of results. Consumer behaviour perspectives proposed by scholars range from Arndt's (1986) 18 perspectives to Mowen's (1988) approach of three. Arndt (1986) adopts an organisation theory approach, proposed originally by Pfeffer (1982 cited Arndt 1986), distinguishing the perspectives in two dimensions: The level of aggregation (individual vs. group) and the action taken (rational or quasi-rational; situationist or external control; and almost random depended on process and social construction), resulting in 18 different perspectives as shown in Table 3.3:

*Table 3.3: Categorization of theoretical perspectives in consumer behaviour*

Level of analysis	Action taken	Perspective
Individual	Purposive, intentional goal-directed, rational	Cognitive consistency paradigm
		Multi-attribute attitude models
		Information-processing paradigm
	Externally constrained and controlled	Consumer satisfaction / dissatisfaction and complaining studies
		Behaviour modification paradigm
		Situationist paradigm
Group	Emergent, almost-random, dependent on process and social construction	Consumer socialisation paradigm
		Attribution theory perspective
		Low-involvement perspective
	Purposive, intentional goal-directed, rational	Structuralist approach
		Household decision-making paradigm
		Household economics paradigm
Group	Externally constrained and controlled	Household management perspective
		Diffusion of innovations paradigm
		Comparative research tradition
	Emergent, almost-random, dependent on process and social construction	Structurally determined consumer behaviour
		Compensatory consumption formulation
		Deviant consumption view

*Source: Amended from Arndt (1986)*

The brief mention of Arndt's approach serves exclusively the purpose of demonstrating the plurality of the perspectives available. However, beyond its theoretical contribution, it should be stated that it did not manage to gain wide acceptance among scholars.

Mowen (1988), in a more simplified approach, suggests that there are three perspectives to the study of consumer purchase behaviour: The Decision Making, the Experiential and the Behavioural Influence perspective (each discussed in the following subsections). However, he emphasizes that the perspectives provide complementary rather than competitive views, and

may even occur simultaneously within the same purchase process. Mowen's work, at least as presented in his article, lacks empirical research to substantiate (a) the fact that the three perspectives provide complementary rather than competitive views, and (b) that two, or more of the perspectives may even occur simultaneously within the same purchase process.

Marsden and Littler (1998) position five "contemporary" perspectives: Cognitive, behavioural, trait, interpretive and postmodern, the first three labelled under the term "traditional perspectives" and the last two under the term "new perspectives". Pachauri (2002) adopts the classification of perspectives into those that result from the positivist paradigm labelled under "traditional perspectives" (rational, behavioural, cognitive, personality, motivational, attitudinal, and situational influence) and into those resulting from the non-positivist paradigm labelled under "emerging perspectives" and consisting of the interpretive and postmodern perspectives.

### **3.3.1. The traditional perspectives**

#### **3.3.1.1. The rational perspective**

The rational, or economic man perspective (Pachauri 2002) represents the first attempt in explaining consumer behaviour with its origins tracing back to classical and neoclassical economic theory. This perspective postulates a rational approach to decision making, stressing the effort of utility maximization with minimum effort. Utility theory is the prevailing model of this perspective dictating that choices are made according to their expected outcome. The economic man perspective requires that consumers: (a) Are aware of all available options, which necessitates availability of adequate information; (b) are rational, capable and have available time to correctly rate all alternative options, and select the optimum choice. Although the economic man perspective fails to explain several facets of buying behaviour (e.g. how product and brand preferences are formed), it provided the basis of rationalism and therefore the basis for the development of the traditional perspectives such as cognitivism.

#### **3.3.1.2. The cognitive perspective**

The cognitive, or decision making (Mowen 1988), or information processing perspective (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) views consumers as problem solvers and attempts to explain consumer behaviour phenomena by investigating consumers' information processing mechanisms. It therefore places emphasis in the way that consumers search, store, retrieve, evaluate and use information during their decision making process.

Cognitivists recognize the influential role of the environment and the social experiences, not exclusively as supported by the behaviourists' approach, but as providing stimuli in the form of informational inputs for further processing and input to decision making (Stewart 1994). Sternthal and Craig (1982 cited Marsden and Littler 1998) support that the major marketing strategy implication of the cognitive perspective's is that in order to influence consumers' behaviour they should be exposed to information. The cognitive perspective gave birth to consumer behaviour's comprehensive models and grand theories of the 1960s. Among the major criticisms of the cognitive perspective are:

- a. Its assumption that consumers are complex rational decision makers (Olshavsky and Granbois 1979).
- b. Its adoption of a "reductionist assumption of human nature" (Marsden and Littler 1998, p.7). The reductionist assumption supports that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its parts (Polkinghorne 2002).
- c. Its heavy reliance on "abstract and unobservable variables" (Foxall 1990, p.96) that cannot be easily evaluated and empirically investigated.
- d. It may lead to an unintentional negligence of other aspects of buying behaviour such as affect and impacts from the environment (Mowen 1988).

Foxall (1990) despite his radical behavioural orientation, supports that there are reasons that strengthen the cognitive perspective's position in explaining consumer behaviour:

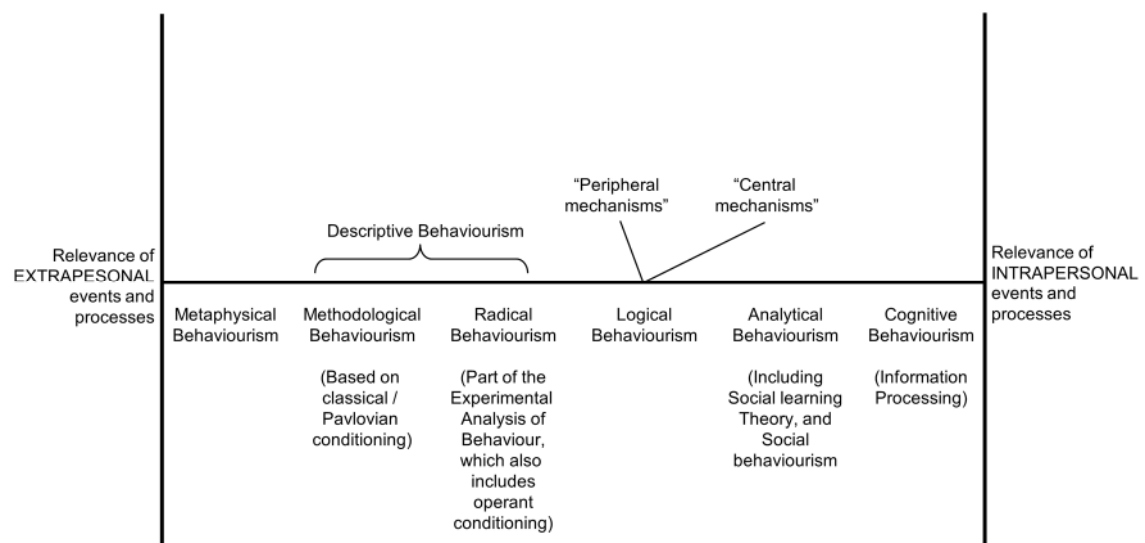
- a. It offers intuitively attractive means of explaining everyday consumer behaviour due to its "common sense" like explanations it provides.
- b. The extensive use of cognitive theory in other social sciences enables consumer researchers to borrow theoretical and methodological inputs, therefore advancing further consumer behaviour theory.
- c. It provides means to measure unity and consensus to the field of consumer research
- d. It provides an explanation of consumer behaviour that proceeds in accordance of how consumers can describe their experiences in terms of motives, needs, wants and attitudes.

In addition, Foxall (1993 cited Bray 2008) attributes to cognitivism the capacity to explain complex behaviours, whereas behaviourism cannot determine the contingencies that control response.

### 3.3.1.3. The behavioural perspective

Whilst the cognitive perspective focuses on the internal, mental processes, the behavioural focuses on the effects of environmental stimuli on consumer behaviour such as societal and group norms, advertising, situational factors and environmental contingencies (Mowen 1988). Steaming from its dominance on psychology back in the 1960s, the behavioural perspective revived in consumer research in the 1980s. In discussing the behavioural influence perspective, Mowen (1988) attempts a very limited approach, presenting only operant and classical conditioning as behavioural influence techniques, whereas Marsden and Littler (1998) describe three forms of behaviourism: (a) behaviour modification, (b) behavioural learning and (c) radical behavioural perspective. In an in-depth analysis of behaviourism, Foxall (1990) adopts Hillner's (1984 cited Foxall 1990) five dimensions (the nature of mind-body; the relevance of mental events; the location of primary determinant of behaviour; the primary locus of internal mediators; and the reducibility of central mediators to behavioural terms) to distinguish and define six forms of behaviourism placed on a continuum according to their relevance of extrapersonal or intrapersonal events and processes as depicted presented in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Forms of behaviourism



Source: Foxall (1990)

Metaphysical behaviourism denies the existence of mind and adheres to a strict monism (Foxall 1990, p.35), therefore it is located on the left edge of the continuum. Descriptive behaviourism, a family that incorporates both methodological behaviourism and radical behaviourism, attributes behaviour exclusively to environmental stimuli. It accepts that intrapersonal events exist but are considered collateral products of external causes. Methodological behaviourism,

[stated in Marsden and Littler (1998) as the “behaviour modification perspective”, and in Bray (2008) as “Classical Behaviourism”] is based on Pavlov’s and Watson’s classical conditioning theory to explain behaviour. Methodological behaviourism does not make references to consciousness, internal events or mental processes, considering them outside the scope of scientific analysis due to their private nature that sets them beyond public verification.

Radical behaviourism, founded by Skinner, acknowledges the existence of mental states but it considers them not as causative, but as dependent variables that should be explained, thus having empirical interest. To the right edge of the continuum, cognitive behaviourism accepts intrapersonal cognitive processes are causative, and are the “primary irreducible determinants of overt behaviours” (Foxall 1990, p.36).

Among the major criticisms of the behavioural perspective are:

- a. It was originally derived on experiments with animals rather than humans (Marsden and Littler 1998).
- b. It is more appropriate for explaining low involvement purchases (Mowen 1988).
- c. It is based on deterministic assumptions about the human nature (Marsden and Littler 1998).
- d. By attributing consumer behaviour to external stimuli, the behavioural perspective ignores the human abilities of inference and insight (Pachauri 2002).
- e. Behaviourism does not seem to explain adequately the diversity of responses that are generated by humans when they are exposed to similar stimuli (Bray 2008).

#### **3.3.1.4. The experiential perspective**

The experiential perspective (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, Mowen 1988) has emerged during the early 1980s. During this period the hegemony of the decision making (cognitive) perspective was challenged: Olshavsky and Granbois (1979, p.98) proposed that “a significant proportion of purchases may not be preceded by a decision process” and therefore argued that theories accepting the existence of a decision making process as a prerequisite to purchases can provide an adequate explanation only for certain types of behaviour. In a different vein, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argued the prevailing information processing model should be supplemented and enriched it with an “experiential view” that focuses on the symbolic, hedonic, and aesthetic nature of consumption. The experiential perspective recognizes the role of symbolic benefits, and subjective features in affective/experiential products such as entertainment, arts, leisure activities, or even purchase and consumption phenomena related to sensory pleasures, daydreams, aesthetic enjoyment, emotional responses, variety seeking and



impulse buying. However, despite Mowen's (1988) position, the experiential view cannot be considered as a distinct perspective. As Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) suggest, it is an attempt to supplement, enrich and enlarge the information processing perspective so as to provide explanation for consumer behaviour phenomena that were at that time ignored.

#### **3.3.1.5. The trait perspective**

The trait (Marsden and Littler 1998), or personality (Pachauri 2002) perspective attempts to explain consumer behaviour on the basis of consumers' enduring personality characteristics that are predictive of future behaviour. In this context, personality is understood "as a concept which accounts for the apparent consistencies and regularities of behaviour over time and across a variety of situations" (Pervin 1984 cited Pachauri 2002, p.328), but also as "the unique way in which traits, attitudes, aptitudes, etc. are organized in an individual" (Marx and Hillix 1979 cited Pachauri 2002, p.328), such as for example introverts-extroverts, or adaptors-innovators. The trait perspective proved useful in (a) the development of personality and AIO (Activities, Interests and Opinions) inventories employed in lifestyle market segmentation, and (b) in "exploring decision making styles and strategies" (Marsden and Littler 1998, p.8). For example, Foxall and Goldsmith (1988) studying the empirical use of the Kirton Adaption- Innovation inventory, a personality-related measure of cognitive style, suggest that consumers can be differentiated in terms of their adaptive or innovative cognitive style in their decision making. Based on such findings however, it may be assumed that the trait perspective does not represents a distinct consumer behaviour perspective, but an approach operating within the cognitive, decision-making perspective.

Criticism of the trait perspective includes: (a) Its ignorance of the individual differences due to the use of standardised research frameworks (Steenkamp et al. 1994 cited Marsden and Littler 1998); and (b) its inherent reductionism and claims of objectivity (Marsden and Littler 1998).

#### **3.3.1.6. The motivational perspective**

Pachauri (2002, p.328) recognizes as a distinct "motivational perspective" the work of psychologists, such as Dichter, who during the 1950s used psychoanalytical techniques such as clinical interviews to reveal consumer hidden motivations. She also recognizes that the dissatisfaction with the techniques employed in motivational research was partly responsible for the development of the personality / trait perspective. However, despite the contribution of motivational research to the development of consumer behaviour and its recognition as a

distinct phase of development (Arndt 1986, Waguespack and Hyman 1993, Ekström 2003), today it is not characterized as a distinct perspective.

### **3.3.2. The new perspectives**

The new perspectives of consumer behaviour, namely the interpretive and the postmodern perspectives, challenge the hegemony of positivism and its associated assumptions of the supremacy of human reason and the existence of an objective truth that can be discovered by science. The new perspectives acknowledge that consumers live in a complex world consisting of heterogeneous social cultures, and emphasize the symbolic and subjective nature of experiences and therefore the absence of a unified world view. Therefore, consumer behaviour is often seen as complex, irrational and unpredictable (Pachauri 2002). As a result consumers can be understood, and therefore studied, only in a holistic manner, as totalities (Marsden and Littler 1998). Both of the new perspectives have been criticized that are operating at an abstract level “divorced from some of the practical issues of concern to marketers and the material basis of everyday consumption” (Marsden and Littler 2008, p.18). In the same vein, Foxall (1995, p.2) suggests that the new perspectives are being “preoccupied with the philosophy of science as an end in itself”.

#### **3.3.2.1. The interpretive perspective**

The interpretive perspective has its origins in the humanistic and the phenomenological approaches employed in the social sciences. It attempts to understand consumers’ subjective nature and addresses the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption employing naturalistic qualitative research methodologies (Marsden and Littler 1998). Through the interpretive lens, buying is perceived as a matter “involving felt expectations as to how the consumption episode will be personally experienced” rather than a matter of objective calculation of the pros and the cons of buying a product (O’Shaughnessy and Holbrook 1988, p.206). The interpretive perspective focus on consumers’ fantasies, feelings and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) and research through this lens aim to identify the consumers’ meanings behind their consumption experiences (Marsden and Littler 1998).

#### **3.3.2.2. The postmodern perspective**

The postmodern perspective postulates that consumers do not have pre-given internal structures that make them behave the way they do. Consumers are considered “unknowable”, therefore researchers are suggested to inquire through multiple perspectives rather than to search for the

real nature, or the truth in consumer behaviour (Burr 1995; Firat et al. 1995; Robins 1994). Foster (1985) suggests that in postmodernism the search for truth is replaced by multiple, equally valid but also competing, representations of the world. A consumer's identity is considered to be context-based and in constant change, in the sense that it depends on the circumstances of consumption, the purpose of consumption, and with whom else the consumption is taking place with (Burr 1995). Consumers are therefore able to change themselves and their world by assuming multiple lifestyles, consumption patterns and value systems (often conflicting however without having negative feelings) so to adjust to the context of consumption (Firat 1992; Brown 1995).

However, Marsden and Liddler (2008) support that the new perspectives are operating at an abstract level, away from the practical issues of concern to marketers; and Foxall (1995) suggests that the new perspectives are preoccupied with the philosophy of science as an end in itself. In the same vein of criticism, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002, p.132) suggest that postmodernism "lacks any sort of standing in the outside world".

### **3.3.3. Adopting the cognitive perspective through a holistic lens**

Despite the apparent limitations of the cognitive (or decision-making) perspective, a number of scholars from different consumer behaviour perspectives acknowledge its hegemony. Marsden and Littler (1998, p.6) accept Foxall's (1997, p.230) proposition that the cognitive perspective "constitutes the normal science component of consumer research", clearly suggesting that "the cognitive perspective currently dominates the field of consumer research" (Marsden and Littler 1998, p.7). Erasmus et al. (2001), referring primarily to the cognitive models of consumer behaviour, and despite their in-depth criticism, support that cognitive models are still being used to structure research despite the evidence that consumer decision-making is a more complex phenomenon. Still in 2009, Foxall in an attempt to persuade that economic behaviour is reliably sensitive to environmental contingencies, accepts that consumer psychology is usually cognitive in orientation, stating however that:

"[...] scores of consumer behaviour texts assume this theoretical position without considering the philosophical implications of the concepts on which they rely to explain choice" (Foxall 2009, p. 299).

Similarly, Kassarian and Goodstein (2009, p.66) suggest that

"...this work [cognitive orientation] has had a long period of influence in the field and most certainly has carried through to the present."

It should be admitted that a researcher cannot easily resist the temptations of the ontological, epistemological and axiological claims made by the proponents of the new, emerging

perspectives, especially when attempting an exploratory approach to a new subject of enquiry such as social media. To that end the claims of Mowen (1988), Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), as well as Marsden and Littler (1998) provide adequate theoretical pillars for adopting a more holistic perspective:

Mowen (1988), despite his traditional orientation, emphasizes that consumer behaviour perspectives provide complementary rather than competitive views, and may even occur simultaneously within the same purchase process. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) do not believe that a single perspective is adequate to explain in full the complexity of human behaviour, suggesting that a holistic perspective should be adopted:

“One cannot reduce the explanation of human behaviour to any narrowly circumscribed and simplistic model, whether that model be behaviouristic or psychoanalytic, ethological or anthropomorphic, cognitive or motivational: The behaviour of people in general and of consumers in particular is the fascinating and endlessly complex result of a multifaceted interaction between organism and environment. In this dynamic process, neither problem-directed nor experiential components can safely be ignored. By focusing single mindedly on the consumer as information processor, recent consumer research has tended to neglect the equally important experiential aspects of consumption, thereby limiting our understanding of consumer behaviour” (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, p.139).

In agreement with such an approach, Marsden and Littler (1998, p.19) suggest the following two basic principles of a holistic perspective:

“[First] no part of consumer experience can be fully or meaningfully understood apart from its whole, [and second] that the combined results of different methodological, theoretical and metatheoretical approaches to consumer research will yield more insights about consumer experience than those results obtained from any one particular approach.”

More than that, they suggest a move towards a more holistic approach that combines different perspectives in an effort to yield more insights about the consumer experience. Towards this end, at the methodological level they suggest adoption of multi-method approaches incorporating both subjective-qualitative and objective-quantitative methods of enquiry. At the theoretical level they suggest a multi-conceptual approach combining different perspectives of consumer behaviour; while at the metatheoretical level they propose adoption of a multi-paradigm approach, viewing the phenomenon under study from different research paradigm lenses, to enable generation of holistic representation of the consumer experience (Marsden and Littler 1998).

As a result, this study acknowledges the hegemony of the cognitive perspective and adopts it as a starting point. At the same time, this study recognizes the limitations of the cognitive approach and therefore will maintain an open minded more holistic approach, however without being

naturalistic or interpretive, in an effort to achieve a better representation of the consumer experience.

### 3.4. Defining consumer behaviour

Attempts to define consumer behaviour started during the late 1960s to early 1970s, but still today there is an absence of consensus on an agreed definition. The early textbooks, focusing exclusively on consumer behaviour that appeared in the late 1960s did not include definitions, but instead attempted to define its boundaries. Table 3.4 provides twelve of the most cited definitions of consumer behaviour from 1967 to 2010:

*Table 3.4: Definitions of consumer behaviour 1967 – 2010*

Meyers and Reynolds (1967 cited Waguespack and Hyman 1993, p.31)	“...to review what we know about human behaviour as it relates to the buying situation.”
Engel et al. (1968, p.5)	“The acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts.”
Walters and Paul (1970 cited Waguespack and Hyman 1993, p.31)	“Consumer Behaviour is the process whereby individuals decide whether, what, when, where, how, and from whom to purchase goods and services, Consumer behaviour includes both the mental and physical activity necessary for making decisions in the marketplace.”
Jacoby et al. (1977, p.22)	“The acquisition, consumption and disposition of goods, services, time and ideas by decision making units (e.g. individuals, families, organizations).”
Engel et al. (1978, p.3)	“The subject matter of consumer behaviour – those acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts.”
Walters (1978 cited Waguespack and Hyman 1993, p.32)	“Those decisions and related activities on persons involved specifically in buying and using economic goods and services (products).”
Robertson & Kassarian (1991, p.vii).	“The scientific study of consumer actions in the marketplace.”
Loudon & Della Vita (1993, p.5)	“The decision process and physical activity individuals engage in when evaluating, acquiring, using, or disposing of goods and services.”
Engel et al. (1995, p.4).	“Those activities directly involved in obtaining, consuming, and disposing of products and services, including the decision processes that precede and follow these actions.”
Blackwell et al. (2006, p.4)	“Consumer Behaviour is defined as the activities people undertake when obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services.”
Solomon et al. (2006, p.6; 2010, p.6).	“Consumer Behaviour is the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires.”

*Source: Author*

Looking further into the above definitions, and particularly in terms of their: range of enquiry; object of enquiry; context; process duration; forms of acquisition and domain of choice (Table 3.5), it can be seen that during the course of years there are significant changes on how consumer behaviour has been defined. More specifically:

Table 3.5: Structural components of consumer behaviour definitions and their evolution 1967 - 2010

	Meyers and Reynold 1967	Engel et al. 1968	Walters and Paul 1970	Jacoby 1977	Engel et al. 1978	Walters 1978	Robertson and Kassanjian. 1991	Loudon and Della Bita 1993	Engel et al. 1995	Blackwell et al. 2001 2006	Solomon et al. 2006 2010
<b>Range of enquiry</b>	“Review what we know”	“Acts”	“Process”	Acquisition consumption disposition	Acts of individuals	Decisions & related activities	Consumer actions	Decision process; physical activity	Activities; decision processes	Activities	Study of the processes
<b>Object of enquiry</b>	Human behaviour	Individuals [“directly involved”]	Individuals	Decision making units	Individuals [“directly involved”]	Persons [“involved specifically in buying & using”]	Consumer actions	Individuals	Activities	Activities of people	Individuals; groups
<b>Context</b>	Buying situation	Obtaining; using	Marketplace	-	-	-	Marketplace	-	-	-	-
<b>Process duration</b>	Purchase [“buying situation”]	Purchase [“obtaining”] Usage	Prepurchase Purchase	Acquisition Consumption Disposition	Obtaining Using	Buying Using	-	Evaluation Acquisition Use Disposition	Preceding decision processes Obtaining Use Disposition	Obtaining Consuming Disposing	Selection Purchase Use Disposition
<b>Forms of acquisition</b>	Purchase	Unspecified [“Obtaining”]	Purchase	Unspecified [“Acquisition”]	Unspecified [“Obtaining”]	Purchase	-	Unspecified [“Acquiring”]	Unspecified [“Obtaining”]	Unspecified [“Obtaining”]	Purchase
<b>Domain of choice</b>	Purchases	Economic goods; services	Goods; services	Goods; services; time; ideas	Economic goods; services	Economic goods; services	-	Goods and services	Products; Services	Products; Services	Products; services; ideas; experiences

Source: Author

- The **range of enquiry** initially included broad generalizations such as “all aspects of knowledge” and “all that is known”. Today consumer behaviour focus on activities (mental and physical) and on decision processes.
- In terms of the **object of enquiry**, the initial focus on buyers was gradually shifted to consumers and decision making units. Nowadays it covers not only individual end-users, but also groups (e.g. family) and organizations.
- As far as **process duration** is concerned, the initial focus on the act of purchase itself, shifted to pre-purchase processes and usage, and nowadays includes a broad range of processes and activities from pre-purchase to disposition.
- In terms of the **forms of acquisition**, the initial focus on purchasing shifted to exchange so that to accommodate for (a) acquisition not necessarily obtained through purchasing such as borrowing, and (b) other forms of consumer behaviour occurring during voting, charity donations, causes, etc.
- The **domain of choices** initially covered purchases of economic goods and services. Ronald Frank, in his editorial introduction to the first issue of the Journal of Consumer Research, describes the domain of human behaviour as

“media and family planning behaviour, occupational choices, mobility, determinants of fertility rates, attitudes toward and use of social services and determinants of educational attainment” (Frank 1974, p. iv).

Nowadays, the majority of scholars include products (goods or services), ideas and experiences.

Attempting a synthesis of the current definitions, **consumer behaviour can be defined as the physical and mental activities that individuals undertake either as part of processes, or as independent acts, when they dream, search, evaluate, obtain, consume, or dispose goods, services, ideas and experiences, within physical or virtual environments.** However, for the purposes of this study, and given the service nature of its context (holiday travel) disposal is of no relevance and will not be further studied.

In contrast to the existing definitions as discussed above, the proposed definition (a) includes both activities and processes; (b) broadens the element of duration; and (c) broadens the environment within which consumer behaviour appears. More specifically:

- a. **Activities and processes:** A process, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2010) is a “succession of things in order; sequence; progression”, or

“a continuous and regular action or succession of actions occurring or performed in a definite manner, and having a particular result or outcome; a sustained operation or series of operations” (Oxford English Dictionary 2010).

In that sense, using only the term “process” in a consumer behaviour definition implies that the individual engages in a series of mental or physical actions (e.g. decision making) towards achieving a particular end (e.g. “I am in the process of buying a car”). However, this is not always the case since there are indications about the existence of (a) purchases that occur without decision making (Olshavsky and Granbois 1979), and (b) impulse purchases that occur in an unplanned manner (Rook 1987; Sharma et al. 2010). Therefore, it is suggested that apart from processes, the individual may simply engage only in acts or activities that are not necessarily part of a process.

- b. **The element of duration** is also broadened to include the stage of dreaming that may occur outside the decision making process. It has been argued by scholars that consumers may indulge in consumption dreams (D’Astus and Deschênes 2005), or day dreaming (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), or even perform information search outside a purchase process just to satisfy hedonic motives, for example to “dream away” (Hanefors and Mossberg 1998; p.750), or for fun, entertainment, and amusement (Chung and Buhalis 2008).
- c. **The environment** within which consumer behaviour takes place is broadened to include virtual environments, in order to demonstrate the importance of consumer behaviour taking place apart from the physical world of interaction, into the online – virtual world not only in the form of online purchases but also in the form of search and exchange of product related information.

The proposed definition of consumer behaviour sets an initial framework for this study that needs to include (a) physical and mental activities either as part of processes or as independent acts; (b) the stage of dreaming; and (c) not only physical but also virtual environments.



### 3.5. Consumer behaviour models

Among the factors that contribute to the complexity of the study of consumer behaviour are the large number of variables involved, and the complex interactions and influencing relationships among them. Models are among the tools devised by scholars to overcome such complexities, as they (a) identify relevant variables, (b) indicate characteristics of variables, (c) specify interrelationships among the variables, and (d) provide conceptual frames of reference (Loudon and Della-Bitta 1993, Engel et al. 1995).

A model is “a simplified representation of reality” (Loudon & Della-Bitta 1993, p.599); “an abstract conception of reality”, a mean to simplify complex variables, a blue print containing the essential elements of a larger system (Chisnall 1995, p.191). A model is also “a simplified but organized and meaningful representation of an actual system or process” that depicts the key elements of a system and their relationships such as consumers’ attitudes, beliefs, situational factors and purchasing behaviour (Zaltman and Burger 1975 cited Hudson 2000, p.18). Models “encapsulate the different elements of behaviour and also show the relationships that exist, normally in some sort of chronological order from the start to the finish of the behavioural process” (Bowen and Clarke 2009, p.58). From another perspective, Silverman (2006, p.13) defines a model as “an overall framework of looking at reality (e.g. behaviouralism, feminism)”. Such diverse views on models perhaps contributed to the argument made by Jaccard and Jacoby (2010) who suggest that the way one defines, and therefore perceives, a model relates to how he /she perceives the relationship between models and theory, as this is not always apparent:

“Various authorities contend that models are a special type of theory (e.g., Coombs, Dawes, & Tversky, 1970, p.4; Kaplan, 1964, p.263), that models are portions of theories (Sheth, 1967, p.444; Torgerson, 1958, p.4), that models are derived from theories (e.g., Pap, 1962, p.355), that models are simplified versions of theories (e.g., Carnap, 1971, p.54), that models represent correspondence between two or more theories (Brodbeck, 1968), or that theories represent specific interpretations of (i.e., are derived from) models (e.g., Green & Tull, 1975, p.42). Others consider the terms to be synonymous (cf. Dubin, 1976; Simon & Newell, 1956)” (Jaccard and Jacoby 2010, p.28).

Loudon and Della-Bitta (1993) suggest that consumer behaviour related models serve two purposes: (a) constructing a theory, and (b) facilitating learning. In addition, Chisnall (1995, p.192) also suggests a predictive function supporting that models (c) provide simplified descriptions of “market parameters or characteristics affecting purchase”, and (d) enable predictions about the likely outcomes of marketing actions. Further on, Walters (1978 cited Erasmus et al. 2001) suggests that models specify exact cause and effect relationships.

Despite how one perceives the relationship between theories and models, both models and theories involve concepts and relationships between concepts (Jaccard and Jacoby 2010). From such a perspective, this chapter reviews and discusses consumer behaviour models in an effort to gain an understanding on consumer behaviour theories and constructs. The discussion on generic and tourism related consumer behaviour models that follows, does not focus on any specific model or theory, but rather, as Creswell (2009) and Holloway and Wheller (2010) suggest, it is required to provide a general orientating lens for the research. Moreover, the discussion is necessary so that to avoid what Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to as the risk of the ignorant researcher that claims he rediscover the wheel.

### **A. Types of consumer behaviour models**

Different authors present various approaches in classifying models: Chisnall (1995) groups consumer behaviour models in two categories: Monadic and multi-variable models. Monadic are derived only from one discipline (e.g. economics, psychology) and attempt to explain consumer behaviour from a single perspective. Examples include the psychoanalytic model, the perceived risk model, the “black-box” models and those based on microeconomic theory. However, it is believed that such models fail to recognize the complexity of consumer behaviour resulting from the numerous influences and thus:

“the reliance on one source of theoretical knowledge resulted in an unbalanced view of buying behaviour. [...] this limited approach cannot contain such sophisticated behaviour and is therefore seriously deficient” (Chisnall 1995, p.194).

On the contrary, multi-variable models take into account findings and synthesize knowledge from a variety of disciplines. In this group Chisnall includes models such as the Howard-Ostlund (later refined by Howard and Sheth), the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell, the Nicosia, and the Aristotlean model. Bowen and Clarke (2009) distinguish between grand models as those that cover each stage of consumer behaviour to the most micro-detail, and market response models that relate market changes to market activities.

From a different perspective, Loudon and Della-Bitta (1993) suggest that in terms of their scope consumer behaviour models can take either of two forms, specific or comprehensive. Specific models attempt to depict a very specific aspect of behaviour, for example repetitive purchasing, loyalty, innovative behaviour. On the other hand, comprehensive models incorporate a large number of variables, thus attempting to explain a variety of behaviours although in a less detailed nature compared to the specific models. Loudon and Della-Bitta (1993) further divide comprehensive models in two categories: The traditional models and the contemporary models. Traditional are considered those that depict earlier comprehensive attempts made primarily by

economists to enable understanding of economic systems. Within such an understanding they present views on how consumers behave in the marketplace. For example the microeconomic model suggests that consumers, acting in pure rationality, will purchase products with the highest benefit to cost ratio, as expressed by the product's marginal utility to price. From a behavioural economics perspective Katona's model suggests that actual economic conditions as well as personal economic situations, after being modified by psychological factors and processes, are developing consumer sentiments that are a deciding factor of the economic behaviour of individuals and more specifically of the amount of discretionary spending on a given product (Loudon and Della-Bitta 1993). Such models are based on the rational perspective of consumer behaviour and therefore are not further reviewed in this study.

### **3.5.1. Contemporary models of consumer behaviour**

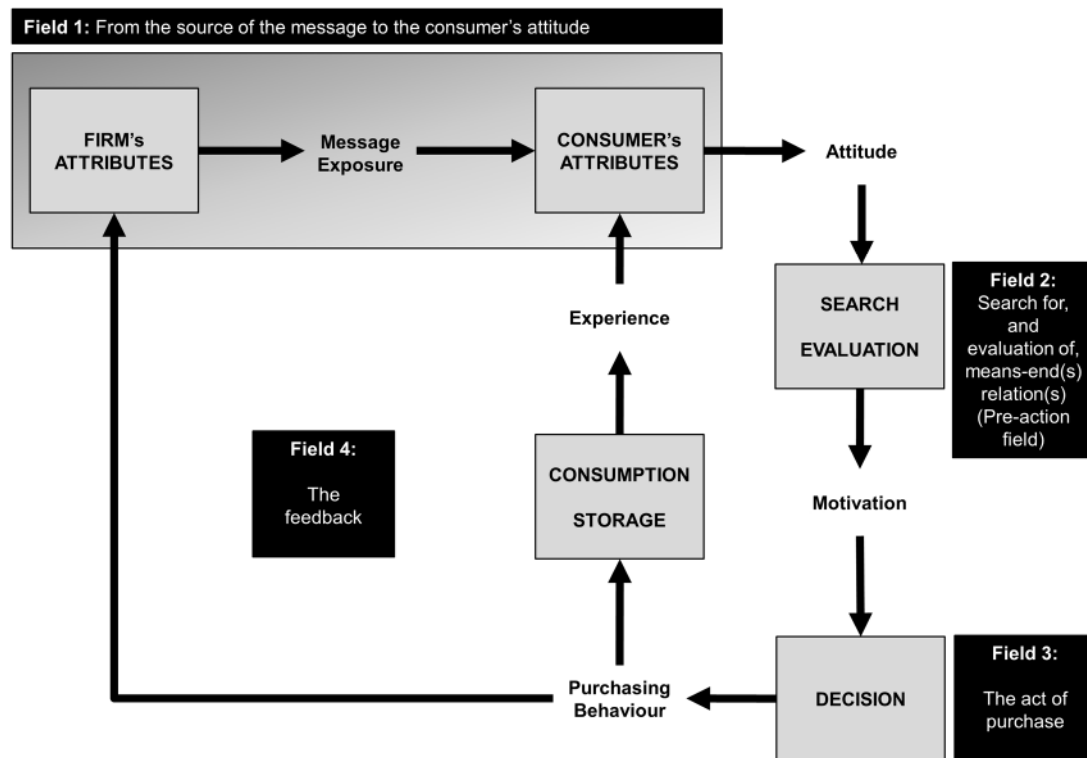
Compared to the traditional models, contemporary models (the term used as per Loudon and Della-Bitta (1993) proposed classification) have two distinctive differences: First, they place emphasis on the decision making process, and in particular on the mental activities that occur before, during and after the purchase. Second, they rely heavily on knowledge developed in the behavioural sciences. Such models are the Nicosia model, the theory of buyer behaviour (or Howard and Sheth model) and the Engel, Blackwell and Miniard model of consumer behaviour.

#### **3.5.1.1. The Nicosia Model**

Developed in mid '60s by Francesco Nicosia (1966) the model supports that there are four major components (or fields) in decision-making behaviour, as presented in its comprehensive version in Figure 3.2. Field one contains the firm's attributes, that is the communication that the company produces in form of messages, and also the consumer's attributes towards the firm or brand that result from the communication messages. As a consequence, the output of field one is a set of attitudes that actually become the input to Field two acting as motivators for further search. Field two consists of the search for information and evaluation: Search, both in internal memory and the external environment, leads to evaluation of the information. As a consequence to the evaluation, in case that the consumer favours the brand he is motivated for action and is likely that he proceeds with the act of purchase which consists Field three. According to Nicosia (1966) in the next stage, that he entitles Field four, there are two potential outcomes: (a) The firm receives feedback of the purchase behaviour, and (b) as a result of the consumption, and therefore the product experience, there is also feedback to the consumer which may lead to a potential change in consumer's attitude and especially his/her predispositions about the brand.

In their evaluation of Nicosia model, Loudon and Della Bitta (1993) identify two major limitations: First they find “quite restricting” the Nicosia’s assumption that the consumer begins his decision-making process without predispositions about the firm, and second they identify an overlap between the firm’s and the consumer’s attributes.

Figure 3.2: The Nicosia model (Comprehensive scheme)



Source: Nicosia (1966)

#### A. Constructs potentially affected by social media

Based on the functions and characteristics of social media (as presented in chapter 2), as well as in the study of the Nicosia model (as presented above but also based on the detailed version and its associated flow-charts for each of the four fields that are not presented here due to space limitations), the following discussion attempts to identify constructs of the model that are potentially affected by social media.

In field one “from the source of the message to the consumer’s attitude” there are two potential impacts of social media. First, the consumer’s attributes toward the firm are not exclusively based on the firm’s communication messages, but also a result of other consumers’ attributes

and opinions that have been posted on social media, as a result of their own consumption experience. Second, the flow of communication between the firm and the consumer is described in the model as a unidirectional. Social media enable both firms and consumers to develop bidirectional channels of communication.

In field two (“Search for, and evaluation of means-end relations”), there are two potential impacts of social media. The first potential impact relates to the search construct: Nicosia (1966, p.175) states that “the consumer seeks information from, and may be influenced by family, friends, work associates, or any other “word of mouth” channel”. Social media facilitate easier, instant access (when compared to traditional means of communication including e-mail) to family, friends and work associates as a message (e.g. a request for a product related info, suggestion, advice when still the consumer is conducting search) is being communicated in a one to many asynchronous manner. Moreover, social media provide access to those individual’s product preferences and consumption experiences as long as those have been posted on social media as a form of self-expression. In addition users have now the means to send the message to an increased number of friends and relatives that belong to their social network. The term “social network” is used here with its sociological meaning and it should not be confused with the term “social network sites”. The second potential impact relates to the evaluation construct: Social media and more specifically consumer review websites offer remarkable depth in terms of evaluation parameters, thus facilitating the evaluation process.

In field three (the act of purchase) the potential impacts of social media are perhaps less evident, compared to the other three phases, but are still present. Nicosia includes in his model the “choice of store and in-store factors” among the variables that have an impact on the decision. For example unavailability of the preferred brand may act as a constraint, or store factors may act as “filters that may enhance or detour the action orientation toward the preferred brand” (1966, p.180). In such cases smart phones enabled social media applications provide instant access to the consumer’s online social network, or even beyond that to “strangers” (e.g. via microblogs), who may be willing to offer instant alternative suggestions and advices.

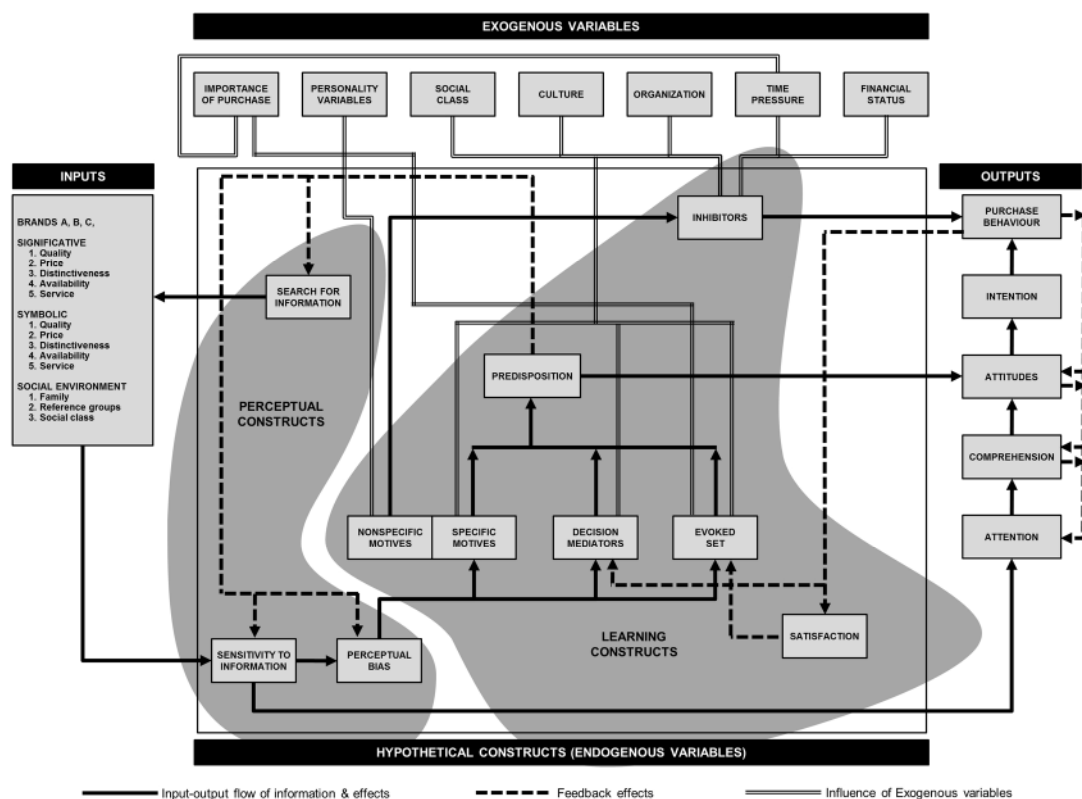
In field four (“the feedback”) Nicosia’s model describes the existence of two forms of feedback: One to the firm (firm’s loop, via multiple channels such as sales analysis records, in-store audits, survey panels etc.) and one to the consumer him/herself (consumer’s loop, via which the experience feeds into the consumer’s mental spaces establishing a new predisposition). During this field social media enable sharing of purchase feedback, consumption experience feedback, or post-consumption experience feedback with other consumers. Posts of this nature range in length and in depth from a simple textual comment posted to a social networking website or a

microblog, to elaborate lengthy in-depth reports that include multiple variable ratings, photos and videos for use by other consumers usually posted in consumer review websites, content community websites, and blogs.

### 3.5.1.2. The Theory of Buyer Behaviour

Howard and Sheth (1969) developed the “Theory of Buyer Behaviour” in an attempt to explain the buying behaviour of both consumers and industrial buyers over a period of time. Although the theory focuses on brand choice, it includes a set of wider related activities and therefore it was entitled by its authors as a “theory of buyer behaviour” rather than a theory of brand choice. In earlier texts of Howard and Sheth (1968) they contended that “our theory is an attempt to explain the brand choice behaviour of the buyer”. The theory of buyer behaviour, as presented in Figure 3.3 has four major sets of abstractions (interchangeably called by Howard

Figure 3.3: The theory of buyer behaviour, or Howarth-Sheth model



Source: Howard and Sheth (1968)

and Sheth as constructs or variables): Inputs variables, hypothetical constructs, exogenous variables and output variables. Input and output variables are considered as intervening variables as they are derived directly from the observable reality. The hypothetical constructs

are inferred from the intervening variables and describe the buyer's mental state relating to a buying decision. Finally, exogenous variables describe the contextual influences to buying behaviour (Howard and Sheth 1969).

Input variables consist of three types of stimuli resulting from the marketing and social environments: Significant, symbolic and social environment stimuli. Significant are those stimuli that are communicated through the brand object itself; symbolic are those stimuli communicated by mass media; and social environment stimuli consist of information about the brand provided by the buyer's social environment such as word-of-mouth. Both significant and symbolic stimuli are associated with a brand's major dimensions such as price, quality, distinctiveness, availability and service.

Hypothetical constructs reflect the buyer's internal state and are divided of two classes: Perceptual Constructs are those that procure and process the relevant information, whereas Learning Constructs are those that facilitate concept formation. Perceptual constructs include the following:

- Sensitivity to information: The buyer's mechanism controlling the information entering its nervous system, being a function of (a) the degree of stimulus ambiguity, and (b) the buyer's predisposition towards a brand.
- Perceptual bias: In an effort to maintain cognitive consistency, this construct may distort the cognitive elements of information received, so to match the buyer's frame of reference.
- Search for information: This construct refers to the active or passive search for information during the entire buying phase. Active search occurs when the buyer feels either ambiguity of brand meaning in his evoked set due to uncertainty of the purchase outcome, or when there is satiety and a need for change or variety.

Learning constructs include the following:

- Specific and non-specific motives: Based on learning from past purchases the buyer is motivated by expectation or anticipation. Motives constitute a continuum and are classified as general or specific according to their position on the continuum. Specific motives are related to the attributes of a product class, while non-specific motives are more general states such as anxiety, fear, power, status and prestige.
- Brand potential of the evoked set: The potential of each brand in a buyer's evoked set to satisfy his/her wants.

- Decision mediators: A set of mental rules and criteria based on which the buyer ranks alternative brands based on their ability to satisfy his/her motives.
- Predisposition towards brands: The buyer's attitudes towards the brands in the evoked set. An aggregate index expressing a summary effect of motives, brand potential and decision mediators.
- Inhibitors: Environmental forces that prevent the buyer from choosing a brand despite its ability to satisfy his/her motives. Inhibitors may include a high price, the lack of a brand's availability, time pressure, and the buyer's financial status. Although not internalized by the buyer, if they persist over time they are incorporated within the decision mediators.
- Satisfaction with the purchase of brand: The difference between the actual consequences of purchase or consumption and the buyer's expectations. If positive the buyer is satisfied and the brand's attractiveness is enhanced. If negative the attractiveness diminishes, and in cases of great dissatisfaction the brand may even be removed from the evoked set.

As far as influences from the external environment are concerned, Howard and Sheth (1969) distinguish them to those that occurred in the past and therefore are embedded in the buyer's perceptual and learning constructs, and to those that occur within the time frame of the decision making and therefore provide its context, which are the ones constituting the theory's exogenous variables, namely:

- Importance of purchase: A variable that relates to the intensity of the motive and applies to the product class.
- Time pressure: A variable that creates inhibition and affects negatively the information search.
- Financial status: The absence of financial resources creates an obstacle to the selection of the preferred brand.
- Personality traits refer to variables that identify personal differences (such as self-confidence, self-esteem, authoritarianism and anxiety) which affect motives.
- Organization: When decision making involves a consumer, this variable refers to the influences from a social organization such as family and friends. On the contrary, when the decision making involves industrial purchasing it refers to influences from the formal organization.



- Social class refers to influences from the social aggregate that affect specific motives, decision mediators, the evoked set and inhibitors.
- Culture is a variable that affects motives, brand comprehension, attitudes and intentions.

Outputs, the fourth component of the Theory of Buyer Behaviour, consist of responses that the buyer manifests based on the interactions between the stimuli and his/her internal state. There are five output variables:

- Attention: Related to sensitivity to information, attention is a buyer's response indicating the magnitude of information intake. It is interesting that Howard and Sheth (1969) differentiate attention from awareness in the sense that attention is considered as a "stock concept" and not as a "flow concept" as awareness.
- Comprehension (of a brand): A variable ranging from simple awareness of a brand to a complete knowledge of a brand's attributes.
- Attitude (toward a brand): The brand's ability, as perceived by the buyer, to satisfy his/her motives.
- Intention (to buy): Usually a verbal statement, intention is the buyer's forecast about the brand that he/she will buy.
- Purchase behaviour: The terminal act of a buyer's predisposition that takes into account any inhibitors that may be present.

The Howard and Sheth model, based also on earlier work by the authors (Howard 1963 cited Howard and Sheth 1966, Sheth 1966 cited Howard and Sheth 1966), distinguishes three levels of decision making according to the strength of predisposition towards the brand: Extensive Problem Solving, Limited Problem Solving and Routinized Response Behaviour:

In Extensive Problem Solving the buyer has a very low, or even no predisposition towards a brand, the brand ambiguity is high, the evoked set is extensive but shallow, and the buyer actively seeks information.

In Limited Problem Solving the buyer has a moderate predisposition towards a brand. Information seeking is still extensive but now it focuses on relative differences among brands. The evoked set comprises of a small number of brands however no preference is formed. Decision mediators are relatively well defined.

In Routinized Response Behaviour the buyer has established strong decision mediators, preferences among the small number of brands in the evoked set have been formed (high level

of predisposition). Active search for information is almost non-existent. Passive search is present however messages are filtered by perceptual processes or even not allowed to enter the system.

#### **A. Constructs potentially affected by social media**

Based on the functions and characteristics of social media (as presented in chapter 2), as well as in the above review of the Howard and Sheth model, the following discussion attempts to identify constructs of the model that are potentially affected by social media.

With reference to the input variables three potential impacts of social media can be identified: First, social media increase the number of stimuli received from the social environment (family, reference groups, social class) as a result of the wider access (both synchronous and asynchronous) they provide to the consumer's social network when compared to the traditional means of communication. Second, social media enrich the content of stimuli, both in length and in depth, as consumers are now enabled to have access to very detailed descriptions of products and consumption experiences. Third, social media removed the barriers of physical contact and time that were required to transmit such amount of information. For example, in the pre-social media era a holiday maker had limited ability, due to time and place constraints, to physically share holiday experiences (speech, text, photographs and videos) and as a result experience sharing (transfer of social environment stimuli) was only possible to a small number of family members, close friends, and colleagues. Social media enable the holiday maker to share extensive content of experiences with an unlimited number of people, in an asynchronous manner. As a result, word of mouth communication (defined by Blackwell et al. 2006, p.744) as "the informal transmission of ideas, comments opinion and information between two people, neither one of whom is a marketer") is enhanced.

With reference to the perceptual constructs two potential impacts of social media can be identified. First, social media contribute to make sensitivity to information and perceptual bias less operative. More specifically, Howard and Sheth (1968, p.478) suggest that sensitivity to information and perceptual bias are "less operative if information is received from the buyer's social environment" due to the fact that (a) the source of information is favourable to the consumer; and (b) information is modified by the sender to conform to the needs of the receiver. Social media enable brands and organizations, with presence in social network sites, to be accepted and therefore included in a consumer's online social network. In such a case, information they sent from organizations to consumers is likely to be affected from sensitivity to information and perceptual bias to a smaller extent. Second, social media enhance the search

options available to the consumer. This enhancement relates to a number of parameters such as quantity of information sources, degree of specialization, degree of personalisation, credibility of sources, and ease of assessing the information sources to name a few.

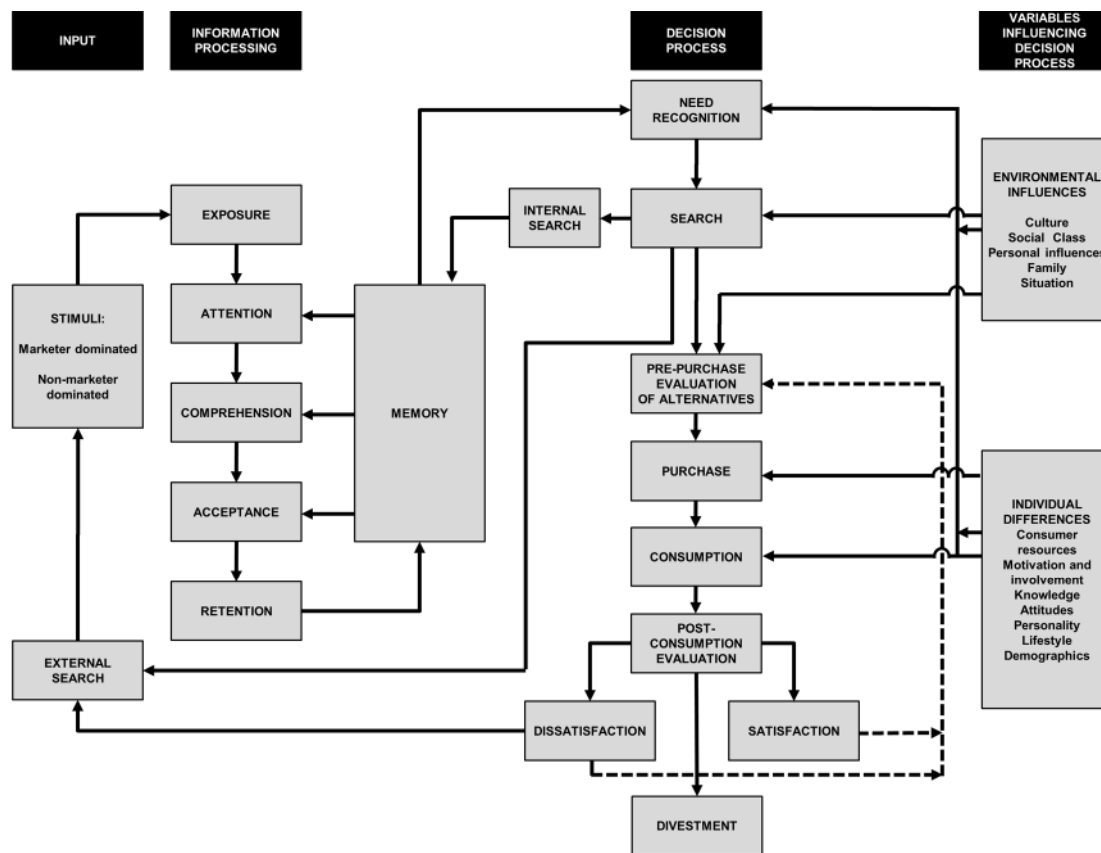
With reference to the learning constructs use of social media may have an impact on the decision mediators construct. As stated previously, decision mediators are mental rules and criteria based on which the buyer ranks alternative brands. It may be argued that specific social media types, such as consumer review websites, may complement the role of decision mediators by providing both criteria for evaluation and ratings based on those criteria. However it may be the case that the criteria provided by a specific consumer review and rating website may not coincide with the criteria a consumer considers as relevant for the decision under consideration. Still in such a case the criteria provided may complement the decision mediators providing preliminary evaluation of brands.

#### **3.5.1.3. The Consumer Decision Process model**

Originally developed in 1968 by Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, the Consumer Decision Process (CDP) model has undergone a number of revisions to become one of the most popular representations of consumer behaviour (Loudon and Della-Bitta 1993). The CDP model, alternatively also known as the Engel-Blackwell-Miniard or the Blackwell-Miniard-Engel model of consumer behaviour, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding consumer behaviour and its associated constructs and variables. As depicted in Figure 3.4 the CDP model groups variables into four major components: (a) Stimulus inputs, (b) information processing, (c) decision process, and (d) variables influencing the decision process. The CDP model, similarly to that of Howard and Sheth, recognizes a decision making continuum ranging between Extended Problem Solving (EPS) behaviour and Limited Problem Solving Behaviour (LPS), differentiated mainly by the level of involvement. Characteristics of EPS include high involvement, high-perceived risk of purchase, extended search, and thorough evaluation process. In EPS, a satisfactory purchase outcome serves as a prerequisite for assuring future brand preference and usage. On the contrary, LPS is characterized by low involvement levels, low perceived risk, low motivation for search, and non-thorough evaluation of alternatives. In LPS a satisfactory outcome encourages repurchase due to inertia (Loudon and Della-Bitta 1993).

In an EPS behaviour, the process is activated when environmental influences, individual differences and information stored in memory contribute to make a consumer aware of a discrepancy between his/her actual and ideal state, thus when a consumer recognizes a need.

Figure 3.4: The Consumer Decision Process model



Source: Blackwell et al. (2006)

The consumer then refers to his/her memory (internal search) for information regarding knowledge of alternatives, preferences, and choice criteria. If existing knowledge is inadequate (which is the case in EPS) the consumer engages in external information search seeking marketer dominated or other stimuli. Other stimuli may include for example word of mouth or product rating sources such as consumer reports (Engel et al. 1995). The moment that stimuli reach and activate one of the consumer's five senses, exposure is achieved and therefore McGuire's information processing model is activated (1976 cited Engel et al. 1995). Incoming stimuli then strive for capturing the consumer's attention that is to allow allocation of processing capacity. By processing a stimulus the consumer attempts to interpret and attach a meaning to it so that to achieve comprehension. However, a crucial stage in this process is whether the consumer will believe the interpreted stimulus and be persuaded so that acceptance occurs. In the final stage of the information processing the consumer transfers the interpretation of the accepted stimulus into his/her memory for further use and therefore retention is achieved. As a result of the information process, the consumer now has into his/her memory information about alternative products and brands; therefore he/she proceeds to pre-purchase evaluation of

alternatives (please note however that although this relationship is stated in the textual description of the model, it is not depicted by any liner connection in the graphical representation of the 2006 model): The consumer influenced by environmental factors and individual differences determines evaluative criteria so to assess performance of alternatives and a decision rule is applied to select a particular alternative. Purchase is then performed, and consequently consumption follows either instantly or at a later point in time. Given that the consumer enters the consumption stage with a number of expectations about the selected product or service, he/she then proceeds to a post-consumption evaluation: A comparison of the consumption outcome with the original expectations. In case the chosen alternative meets or surpasses expectations there is satisfaction, or in case it fails to do so there is dissatisfaction. Either dissatisfied or satisfied, the consumer updates the pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, or as stated in the Engel et al. (1990) version of the model his/her beliefs to assist future alternative evaluation. Especially in case of dissatisfaction the consumer refers back to external search. In the latest version of the CDP model, (Blackwell et al. 2006) the authors incorporated a divestment stage that represents the several options that consumers have including outright disposal, recycling or remarketing.

On the other extreme of the decision making continuum, in cases of LPS, the journey to decision and purchase is significantly shorter since a number of stages are either skipped or passed through faster. There is substantially less, or even non-existing, information search and alternative evaluation. For example, in repeat purchases, “need recognition leads to buying action; extensive search and evaluation are avoided because the purchase does not assume great importance” (Blackwell et al. 2006, p.90).

#### **A. Constructs potentially affected by social media**

Based on the functions and characteristics of social media (as presented in chapter 2), as well as in the above review of the CDP model, the following discussion attempts to identify constructs of the model that are potentially affected by social media.

Social media remove spatial and time constraints thus enabling individuals (a) to increase the size of their social network; but also (b) to increase the frequency and the content of interaction with the members of their social network. As a result, the number of environmental influences a social media user receives from his / her social network has been increased, at least when compared to the number occurring through communication taking place exclusively in the physical world. Consumers have more chances to be exposed to their networks' consumption experiences even if these are simply announced (e.g. a brief post in Facebook or a photo upload), or extensively described (e.g. in a blog) through social media. Such increased exposure

to other members' product preferences and consumption experiences may increase the number of times a change occurs in the desire state of a consumer, thus increasing the chances that need recognition takes place. For example, an individual's brief post in Facebook (or an extensive post in his/her personal blog) about his / her iPhone may cause a change in the desire state of the consumer who reads the post, thus leading to need recognition about either a new phone or an iPhone. There is no doubt that during the pre-social media era consumers were receiving similar environmental influences from their social network. However, those were much lower in number due to time and spatial constraints that were limiting the volume of interaction with members of the social network.

During the information search stage, and in particular during external information search, social media of all types provide numerous new sources of non-marketed related information ranging from extensive in-depth sources (e.g. consumer review and rating websites and blogs) to limited in length messages (e.g. via microblogs). Moreover, social networking sites provide asynchronous or synchronous access to the consumer's social network, much wider (in terms of number of contacts) when compared to traditional means of communication. Consumers have all their "friends" and members of their social network available on a 24/7/365 basis to seek direct personal advice, or even ask to provide them with additional sources of information. Moreover, blogs and content communities provide consumers access to specialized sources of information beyond the reach of their social network. What is also of importance in relation to the information search construct is that social media enable bidirectional flow of communication: Consumers have the means not only to be passive receivers of information (a known limitation of search through traditional mass media), but are also able to send requests for specific information relating directly to their specific search needs, thus are able of not only searching but exchanging information. During external information search, and more specifically during the information processing process Blackwell et al. (2006) raised the issue of acceptance of the information stimuli in a similar manner with Howard and Sheth (1968) who raised the issue of sensitivity to information and perceptual bias. Also in this case, information acquired through specific types of social media may have higher levels of acceptance when compared to other sources of information due to the fact that the source of information is favourable to the consumer, or conforms to a greater extent to his/her needs.

During the pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, social media, and in particular consumer review and rating websites provide access to elaborate consumer reviews of remarkable depth in terms of evaluation parameters. Such reviews can be qualitative, quantitative or both and it is believed that they facilitate the evaluation process. At the same time, content communities and in particular video communities (e.g. YouTube) provide numerous product reviews that range in

terms of depth and accuracy. Of interest in the potential impact of social media in this specific construct is the distinction between opinions, reviews and ratings originating from product users already within the social network of the consumer, therefore from individuals known to the consumer, or from strangers, and as a result the degree of credibility and trust the consumer attaches to those reviews, therefore the degree of influence on consumer's choice. In their effort to address such issues social media applications developed a number of relevant features: For example when a user seeks reviews about a destination in TripAdvisor the application identifies the user's Facebook friends who have already visited this destination enabling the user to contact them directly or read their reviews. In another approach, other applications provide users with the choice of filtering reviews according to basic socio-demographic characteristics in an attempt to achieve as much as possible a "similarity" between the consumer and the reviewer and therefore increase the review's relevance.

During the purchase stage Blackwell et al. (2006), in agreement to Nicosia (1966), include two phases: the choice of the retailer and the in-store choices. As stated in 3.5.1.1 A, social media provide to consumers the means for instant access to their online social network, or even beyond that to strangers, who may be willing to offer instant alternative suggestions and advices. In addition to product reviews, a number of consumer review and rating websites offer evaluations also for the retailers thus providing criteria, ratings, and qualitative comments thus contributing to retailer's choice. In addition social media enable consumers to "announce" or publicize their purchase to their social network as a mean of self-expression, or even "show-off". Such "announcement style" posts published during the purchase stage may also act as environmental stimuli to the members of the consumer's social network thus, as described in section 3.5.1.2 A (paragraph on input variables), increasing their number of stimuli received from their social environment and as a result contributing to their need recognition.

During the consumption stage social media enable consumers to (a) review their consumption experience as it is taking place, either with extensive reviews, or brief posts; (b) announce their consumption experience as a mean of self-expression or show-off; or (c) seek advice, both from members of their social network or "strangers" in order to improve the experience or overcome problems and issues they face during the consumption. The length of the consumption stage (as it varies for different products and services such as a chocolate, a restaurant dinner, a holiday trip, a laptop, a car) can be considered as one of the many factors that determine use and influence of social media during the consumption stage.

During the post-consumption evaluation stage consumers may use social media for a variety of purposes: To review the consumption experience, to simply share some of its elements, or even

post about it as a form of self-expression. In the case of an evaluation review, social media enable consumers to make their product's evaluation known (a) in various degrees of depth: from elaborate, e.g. through consumer review and rating websites, to brief, e.g. microblogs; and (b) in various audiences such as the consumers' social network only, or to everyone with access to Internet, or even to the organization that provided the experience. In such a case a consumer's review becomes a valuable source of information during the search or pre-purchase evaluation stages of other consumers' decision making processes, or even as a feedback for the organization who provided the product. Moreover, post-consumption related use of social media may be not at all related to a review of the consumption experience, but for the purpose of sharing some elements of the experience with the consumer's social network. In such a case the post can take many forms such as a photograph and / or a comment in a social network site, a photo album or video in a content community or a post in a personal blog. Lastly consumers may use social media as a form of self-expression even when there is not a predefined group who will read the post(s). For example consumers who maintain a personal blog as a life diary may post consumption experiences without the intention that somebody will perhaps ever read them.

During the divestment stage social media enable consumers to remarket, or offer for free, goods that they no longer need to members of their social network. For example, social networking sites enable one to many asynchronous access to a large number of members of a consumer's social network and also due to their ability to accommodate photos and videos may be considered among the platforms a consumer use for divestment.

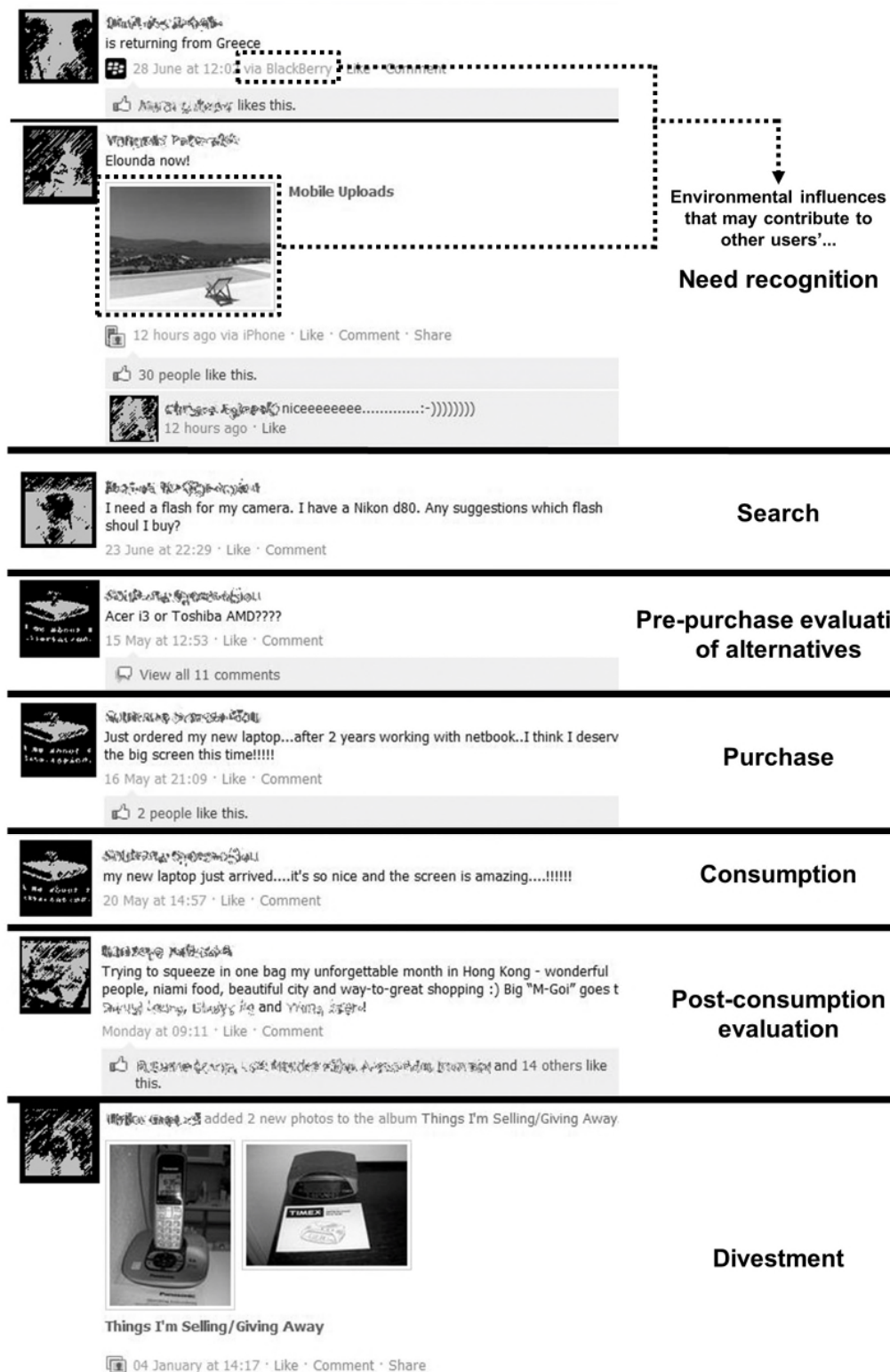
From the above discussion it may be argued that there indications that consumers employ social media during all stages of their decision process. Figure 3.5 provides indicative examples of consumers' posts in a social networking site (Facebook) during each of the stages of the consumer decision process.

### **3.5.2. Criticism of comprehensive models**

Over the years comprehensive models have received extensive criticism. Jacoby (1978) focused on limitations concerning validity, measurability and lack of empirical testing of the models. Erasmus et al. (2001) categorized criticism into four areas: the assumption of a rational decision maker; the positivistic approach in developing the models; the generalization of the decision making process; and the detail included in the models.



Figure 3.5: Posts in a social networking site during the stages of the decision process



Source: Author

From a theoretical and philosophical perspective, Firat (1985) suggests that consumer behaviour models (a) assume certain variables as given; (b) are dominated by a managerial-technological orientation; (c) evidence a “buyer” rather than a “consumer” focus; and (d) demonstrate a lack of interest in macro processes.

Critics support that comprehensive models assume a rational, problem-solver decision maker. Erasmus et al. (2001) suggest that the assumption of rationality consists of several dimensions such as: The assumption on a linear sequence of activities, or stages that consumers pass through a decision, where in fact consumers may devote little time in a stage, or even not engage at all in a particular stage of the process, thus suggesting a non-conscious behaviour during decision-making. On the same issue, Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) suggest that a significant number of purchases occur without a decision process, but as a result of necessity, culture driven lifestyles, inter-related purchases, conformity to group norms, imitation, based exclusively on recommendations combined or not with limited search and evaluation, or even on a random basis, therefore consumer behaviour models provide explanation in certain types of consumer purchasing behaviour. Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) support that even when there is a choice process, a typical consumer cannot involve in extensive data collection and evaluation (e.g. similar to those performed by Consumer Reports, the U.S. product review magazine) due to absence of time, effort, resources and expertise. The issue in this argument however is whether the route to the information is of importance: Is it necessary for the consumer to perform on his own data collection and (technical) evaluation of data, or is it adequate to locate the source of information and access the information already available? As Firat (1985) suggests, models are relevant to the context and time they were developed. But criticism to the models must also adhere to the same rule: It should be time specific. As this study demonstrated in chapter 2, the Web 2.0 and the social media in particular, enable consumers not only to have access (with relative ease) to product review related information and evaluations, but also enable consumers to generate and exchange such information with friends, members of their reference groups, or even with strangers.

A second dimension of the assumption of rationality is that the rigid structure of the models does not allow enough flexibility to cater for functional, highly adaptive, opportunistic, or even haphazard and disordered decision making (Hayes-Roth 1982 cited Erasmus et al. 2001). As a result, comprehensive models do not recognize the existence of a repertoire of consumer decision making strategies or the use of heuristics in decision making (Mishra and Olshavsky 2005). Finally, rationality implies also that consumers have the capacity to correctly rank alternatives and therefore are able to identify the best alternative. Critics suggest that consumers

have limited knowledge and skills, or access to information is limited (Schiffman and Kanuk 2000).

In an attempt to counter argue the issue of rationality Mishra and Olshavsky (2005) support that the Internet, the Web, and the associated new technologies provide to consumers powerful tools that enable them overcome the traditional constraints of decision making. They propose that technology enabled the creation of an alliance, namely the “consumer-computer system” defined as “an alliance between man and machine in which the two interact to make decisions” (2005, p.368) that can “relax” a number of the constraints imposed by rationality. They also argue that consumer-computer systems discredit “for some consumers in some choices” (Mishra and Olshavsky 2005, p.370) the three assumptions that led Simon (1955, 1956) develop the theory of bounded rationality (namely limited knowledge of individuals; costly to collect and store information; and trial and error search process required for economic behaviour): Without adding to consumers’ cognitive efforts, search engines enhance the consumers’ level of knowledge; computers enable consumers’ to store information, and due to the Web information is not costly to collect; recommendations about brands found on the Web help reduce the trial and search process.

Firat (1985) suggests that the models assume a generalized process throughout various contexts. He argues that the application of consumer behaviour models to contexts other than those originally developed for, is likely to cause imbalances; therefore models are context, time and social formation dependent. However, for the purposes of this study this criticism can be overwhelmed: Travel related models are being reviewed in the section to follow, and the study has a clear focus on holiday travel, therefore a generalized process is not assumed.

Firat (1985) also suggests that the models assume perception of some needs or consumption patterns as “given” (e.g. the generic need for a television or for a transportation mode) in specific socio-cultural settings. Although socio-cultural references are treated in the models, he believes that there is a limiting role if those influences are considered only through reference groups, information search, attributes choices and evaluation of alternatives. Thus, attempting to predict consumer behaviour within a given social formation produces a scientific weakness of the models since the attempt is explaining only brand choice. He therefore suggests that phenomena should be studied in their entirety from a variety of contexts to account for differences in a variety of contexts such as historical, political, economic, social structures and processes.

As per the managerial-technological orientation of the models, Firat (1985, p.4) considers consumer behaviour as a functional business discipline that attempts to predict buyer behaviour so to assist “businesses best exploit and gain from tendencies in these behaviours”. Due to this orientation, the predictive role of models gains over their role to provide understanding and explanation, a major indication of a technological-managerial orientation that leads to a “management science” syndrome: Emphasis is given on influencing and controlling, therefore managing phenomena within specific contexts, rather than understanding them.

At the same time Firat (1985) emphasizes that consumer behaviour theory and models, but also marketing as a whole, investigate buyer behaviour rather than consumption behaviour, thus not allowing investigation of cases where a need is satisfied by means other than buying, or even in cases where a need is not satisfied at all, an outcome that Firat considers a form of consumption behaviour.

Finally, Firat (1985) supports that consumer behaviour theory and models reveal a behavioural science rather than a social science perspective since they focus in developing micro theories instead of a macro theory. To support this argument Firat emphasizes that consumer behaviour models focus on individual buyers, or households (micro analysis), instead of investigating effects of societal structures and processes on consumer actions, and vice versa effects of consumer actions on societal institutions (macro perspective). In a similar vein, Bowen and Clarke (2009, p.61) suggest that “much decision making occurs in a group” a dimension that is not reflected in comprehensive models.

### **3.5.3. Use of comprehensive models**

Despite criticism, comprehensive models stimulated a fruitful research debate that led to new theoretical approaches: Contrary to the decision making approach, Kassarian (1978 cited Olshavsky and Granbois 1979) supported that theorists may be “attributing choice processes to consumers when no choice process occurs”. In an attempt to examine the validity of the argument, Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) provided evidence that some types of purchases may not be preceded by a decision process. These can be purchases out of necessity; derived from culturally mandated lifestyles; reflecting preferences from early childhood; resulting from group norms or from imitation to others; made exclusively on recommendation from personal or non-personal sources; on a random or even superficial basis.

However, the plethora of criticism evidences the fact that comprehensive models stimulated a wealth of research, and served as an initial framework for new theory and knowledge

generation. Despite criticism and debate, still today comprehensive models (either in their “grand” representation, or in more simplified input-processing-response versions) are used in several textbooks not only for educational but also for research purposes (Bettman 1979; Dibb 2012; Jobber 2013; Kotler 2003; Brassington and Pettitt 2003 cited in Constantinides 2004 and in Erasmus et al. 2001; Assael 1998; Hawkins et al. 2007).

Moreover, comprehensive models have been studied in recent academic literature. More specifically, Darley et al. (2010) reviewed 52 online consumer behaviour and decision making process empirical studies published in marketing and consumer behaviour journals between 2001 and 2008 and attempted to expand the Engel, Blackwell and Miniard decision making model by presenting an integrated framework for online consumer behaviour. They found that most studies focus on how external consumer behaviour factors impact the decision process. In relation to the specific stages of the decision making process, not a single study focused on problem recognition, internal search, consumption or disinvestment. On the contrary, the majority of studies focused on linking external search, behavioural intentions and the purchase constructs with individual factors and online environmental factors. Marreiros and Ness (2009) integrated the Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1995) model with the main constructs of the Total Food Quality model of Grunert (1997 cited Marreiros and Ness 2009) to develop a conceptual framework for the analysis of consumer behaviour concerning the evaluation and the choice of food products. A number of travel related consumer behaviour studies also employ frameworks that are directly or indirectly associated with comprehensive consumer behaviour models (Yadav et al. 2013; Decrop and Kozak 2014; Demir et al. 2014; Law et al. 2014; Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014).

### **3.6. Tourism related consumer behaviour models**

The grand theories, and therefore the corresponding models of consumer behaviour, although not designed initially to reflect the buying process for services, served for many years as a starting point for describing the purchase process of tourism services (Hudson 2000; Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). In many instances, the grand theories have “been borrowed often partially, without reference to the original source”, or at least “just like large supermarkets create their own brand products, utilizing their labels on leading manufacturers’ food or drink products, so tourism theorists have utilized established consumer behaviour theories” (Gilbert 1991, p.79).

### 3.6.1. Consumer behaviour, or decision making models?

A review of tourism related consumer behaviour literature evidences that the terms “consumer behaviour models” and “decision making models”, are being used interchangeably to describe the same models:

- Gilbert (1991, p.94) uses the term “models of consumer behaviour related to tourism” to refer to the work of Wahab et al. (1976), Schmoll (1977), and Mayo and Jarvis (1981). Moreover, he classifies a number of other theories and models, (such as Middleton 1988; Gitelson and Crompton 1983; Mathieson and Wall 1982; van Raaij and Francken 1984) as “secondary theories of consumer behaviour” due to their “overreliance on the grand theories” (Gilbert 1991, p.98). The fact that Gilbert is in favour of the “consumer behaviour” orientation of the models is also shown by the fact that he refers to Mathieson and Wall’s model of the tourist decision-making process as “a five-stage process of travel buying behaviour” (Gilbert 1991, p.98).
- In a similar vein, Hudson (2000) uses the term “models of consumer behaviour in tourism” to refer to the work of Wahab et al. (1976), Schmoll (1977), Mayo and Jarvis (1981), Mathieson and Wall (1982), Moutinho (1987) and Middleton (1988).
- Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) use both terms interchangeably: They use the term “models of consumer behaviour adapted for tourism” to refer to the work of Middleton (Middleton and Clark 2001), Wahab et al. (1976), Mathieson and Wall (1982), and Gilbert (1991), but at the same time in discussing “models of purchase decision-making in tourism” (p.74) they again refer to Wahab et al. (1976), Mathieson and Wall (1982) and to Moutinho (1987).
- On the contrary, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005), in a qualitative review of the tourist decision making literature, use the term “foundational models of travel decision-making” to refer to the work of Wahab et al. (1976), Schmoll (1977), Mayo and Jarvis (1981), Mathieson and Wall (1982), Middleton (1988), van Raaij & Franken (1984), Moutinho (1987), Woodside and Lyonski (1989) and Um and Crompton (1990).
- Decrop (2006), in agreement to Sirakaya and Woodside (2005), uses the term “models of vacation decision making” to refer to the work of Rugg (1973), Morley (1994), Papatheodorou (2001), Seddighi and Theocharous (2002), Crompton (1979), Woodside and Lyonski (1989), Wahab et al. (1976), Schmoll (1977), Mathieson and Wall (1982),

van Raaij and Francken (1984), Moutinho (1982), Goodall (1988), and Middleton and Clarke (2001).

This study adopts the position that purchase related decision making, as a process, is the core element of consumer behaviour, but not the only one: Consumer behaviour, as defined in section 3.4, includes a variety of processes and activities that contribute to decision making such as socio-psychological processes (e.g. perception, learning, attitudes, etc.), personal variables (e.g. motivation, involvement, personality, lifestyle, emotions, etc.) and environmental variables (e.g. social and cultural influences, interpersonal variables, situational influences, etc.). As a result the use of the term “decision making model” is considered limiting. Therefore this study adopts the term “consumer behaviour models” to describe the theories and models outlined in this paragraph and further reviewed in the following sections.

### **3.6.2. The need for tourism related consumer behaviour models**

The need for tourism related models is substantiated by the very nature of tourism. Tourism products are primarily services, therefore with an inherent intangible nature; with a high-spend aspect necessitating a high-risk decision process, thus requiring a highly interested consumer who is involved in the purchasing decision (Swarbrooke and Horner 2007). Especially holiday trips are associated with a significant portion of an individual’s disposable income, cannot be evaluated before purchase, a failed holiday has an irreversible opportunity cost, since for most people if holidays go wrong the next available vacation time, or money, will be available in a year’s time (Seaton 1994). In addition, Decrop (2006) identifies three factors that impose the need for a different perspective in explaining tourism, and in particular vacation consumer behaviour: First, the purchase of tourism services, due to the composite nature of the product, involves many decisions and sub-decisions (e.g. destination, activities, mode of transport, accompanying persons etc.). Second, vacation decisions are dynamic in nature in they spread over time and involve absolute deadlines, thus involving long decision processes with usual duration over several months (Dellaert et al. 1998 cited Decrop 2006). Third, tourism and in particular holiday trips are different to other products from a socio-economic point of view: They are an important human activity that requires time, thinking, talking about and extensive planning. They usually require a joint decision involving household member or friends, and they represent a major expense of the household budget that reoccurs in frequent intervals.

In a similar analysis, Gilbert (1991) identifies four shortcomings of the grand models of consumer behaviour to substantiate the need for travel related models: (a) They relate to the purchase of goods rather than services; (b) they involve individual decision making processes,

whereas tourist products and more specifically holidays involve family or other joint decision making processes; (c) the grand models evidence an arbitrary arrangement of the attitude – intention – behaviour sequence; and (d) present a reasonable but not empirically proved view of consumer behaviour.

To summarize the above discussion, Table 3.6 outlines the major reasons that substantiate the need for tourism-related consumer behaviour models.

### **3.6.3. Types of tourism related consumer behaviour models**

Decrop (2006) classifies the attempts to investigate the vacationer's consumer behaviour into two broad categories: (a) Those with limited scope that are studying specific aspects of behaviour and decision making such as motivation, information search, or family decision making; and (b) general conceptualizations that attempt to provide a comprehensive view of the whole, or a large part of vacation decision making. Those with limited scope are not considered further for this study since the aim of the study is to explore the impact of social media on consumer behaviour and not in specific aspects of consumer behaviour. Decrop (2006) further classifies the general conceptualizations in three groups: (a) Microeconomic models, that attempt to explain travel related behaviour using the principles of demand theory; (b) Cognitive models, that place emphasis on the mental processes involved in decision making; and (c) Interpretive frameworks, that result from a naturalistic approach. Given that this work adopts the cognitive perspective to the study of consumer behaviour (section 3.3.3), it is cognitive tourism related models that are further reviewed and discussed.

### **3.6.4. Tourism related cognitive models of consumer behaviour**

Stemming from the cognitive perspective of consumer behaviour (as presented in section 3.3.1.2) the travel related cognitive models focus on the socio-psychological constructs and processes, the core of which are perception and information processing. Consumers are seen as active problem solvers that think, develop rules and strategies. In studying cognitive models Decrop adopts Svenson's (1979 cited Decrop 2006) distinction between structural and process models:

- a. Structural models investigate the relationship between inputs and outputs. Inputs are defined "in terms of the information provided about each alternative", whereas outputs are defined "in terms of the judgement of, or choice between, the alternatives" (Decrop 2006, p.28).



Table 3.6: Substantiating the need for tourism-related consumer behaviour models

	Wahab et al. (1976)	Decrop (2006)	Wall & Mathieson (2006)	Swarbrooke & Horner (2007)
<b>Product nature</b>	Intangibility	Intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability, inseparability, temporal ownership	Intangibility, perishability, interdependency (connectivity)  Distance (to destination / consumption) is not always considered a disutility (as is the case in most economic transactions)  Multi-faceted / amalgam	Intangibility results in high levels of insecurity
<b>Nature of decision(s)</b>	Purchase is not spontaneous & capricious	A joint economic decision (i.e. family / household)  Large number of decisions and sub-decisions  Dynamic nature of decisions (plans evolve and decisions spread over time usually with deadlines)	Purchases range from spontaneous to not spontaneous (i.e. purchase of gifts & souvenirs VS destination & accommodation choice)  Also involves a multitude of small, often sequential decisions reflecting the connectivity and the multi-faceted nature of the tourism industry  Varying degrees of perceived risk	High involvement in purchase decision and high consumer commitment  Strongly influenced by other people  Long-term decisions  High risk decision making High level of information search
<b>Socio-economic factors</b>	Significant expenditure that is planned through savings over considerable time  No tangible return on the investment	A major recurrent entry in many household budgets, often the largest single repeated expenditure occurring at frequent intervals	Substantial expenditure  No tangible return on the investment	High-spend aspect
<b>Other factors</b>		Important human activity		Considerable emotional significance

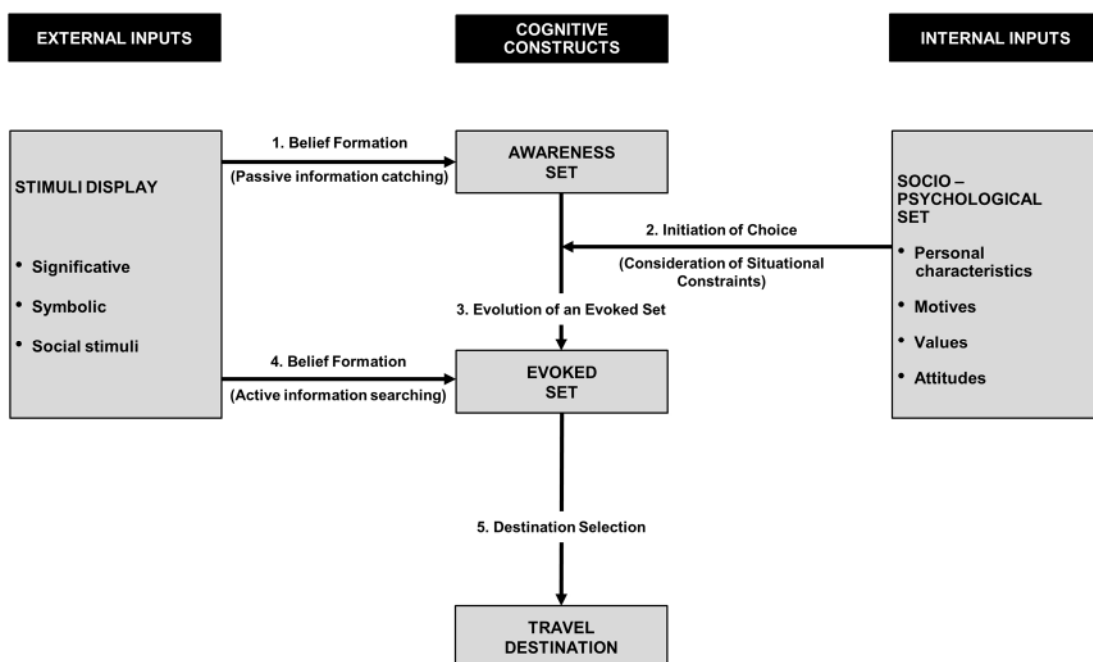
Source: Author

- b. Process models investigate how decisions are made in relation to the underlying cognitive processes.

### 3.6.4.1. Structural models

In 1977 Crompton presented a model for destination selection focusing on the role of attitudes in the pleasure travel destination choice process (Decrop 2006). The model consisted of two decision processes or phases: The first was the generic decision of whether to go on holidays or not; and the second, given a positive answer, was the decision process about the specific destination. He also suggested that the destination selection process is an interaction between pragmatic constraints (i.e. time, money, skills) and destination images. Later, Um and Crompton (1990) limited their focus to explore the second phase and presented the **pleasure travel destination choice process model**, as depicted in Figure 3.6. The model portrays three sets of variables or concepts and identifies five sets of processes. The sets of variables are: External inputs, internal inputs and cognitive constructs. External inputs – “the sum of social interactions and marketing communications to which a potential traveller is exposed” (Um and Crompton 1990, p.434) – consist of significative, symbolic and social stimuli as per the theory of buyer behaviour (Howard and Sheth 1969).

Figure 3.6: The model of the pleasure travel destination choice



Source: Um and Crompton (1990)

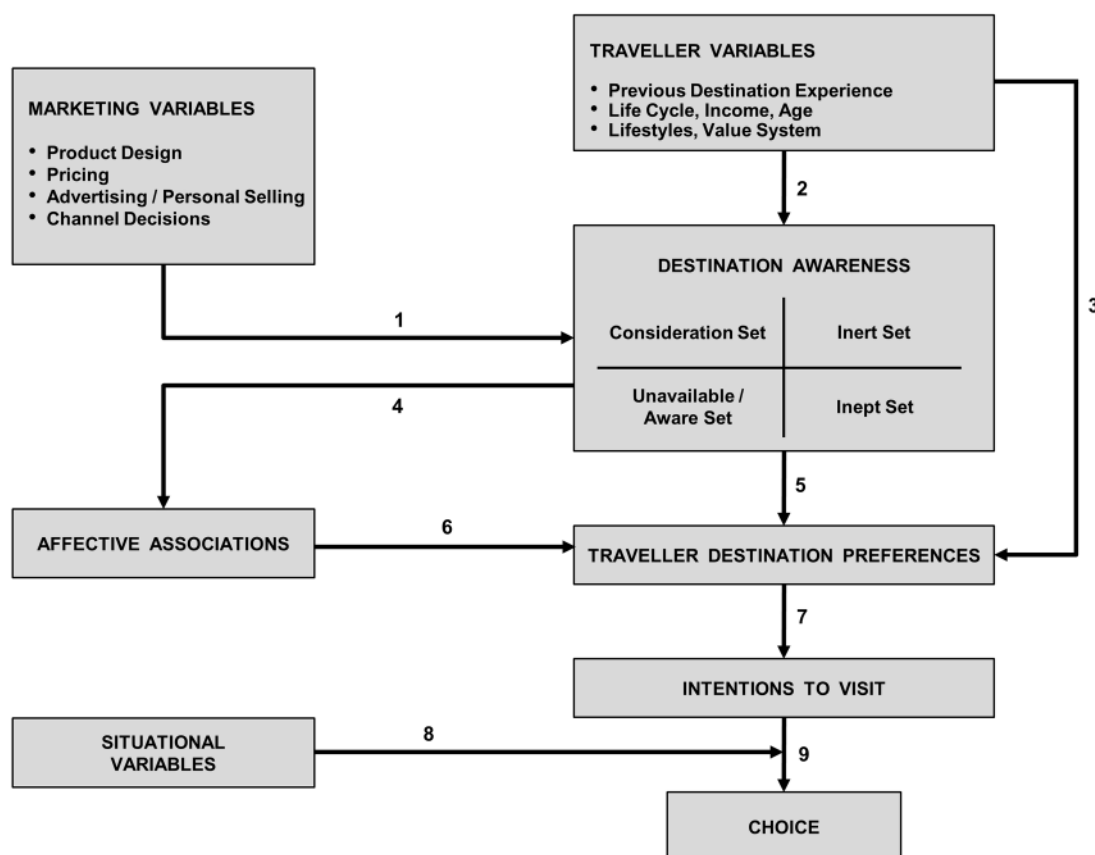
Internal inputs consist of the socio-psychological set of the potential traveller including personal characteristics, attitudes, motives and values. The external and the internal inputs are integrated into cognitive constructs that consist of the awareness and evoked sets of destinations. The awareness set includes all those destinations that the potential traveller considers as potential for travelling to without being limited by situational constraints such as time or money. However Crompton goes a step further suggesting that the awareness set consists of “all the preferred destinations of your dreams” (Crompton 1977 cited Um and Crompton 1990, p.436), therefore implying a consistency with the potential traveller’s ideal destination. Um and Crompton (1990) suggest that simultaneously or just after a positive generic decision is taken (that a pleasure trip will be taken) an evoked set is developed consisting of the reasonable destination alternatives, thus considering the situational constraints and the potential traveller’s preferences. Within this cognitive evolution, Um and Crompton (1990) identify five sets of processes that are represented as flows among the sets of variables:

- Belief formation: Through passive information catching or incidental learning, the potential traveller forms subjective beliefs about destination attributes that are included in his / her awareness set.
- Initiation of choice: After a positive answer to the generic decision, the potential traveller initiates a destination choice process taking into account the situational constraints.
- Evolution of an invoked set as part of the awareness set given the situational constraints.
- Belief formation: Through active information search the potential traveller develops beliefs about each of the alternative destinations in the evoked set.
- Destination selection: The potential traveller makes his choice on a specific destination, or destinations in case his trip involves several destinations.

In assessing the limitations of the model, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) support that: (a) it includes untested relationships; (b) it does not take into account joint decision processes, emotions and marginalizes the socialization process; (c) lacks a reflexive loop, therefore neglecting the role of the final destination choice in influencing future decisions; (d) the assumptions on the linearity of the relationships are unsubstantiated; (e) operationalizes attitudes as the difference between perceived facilitators and perceived inhibitors. Moreover, it may also be argued that the model lacks detail with reference to how the final destination choice is performed among the alternatives that consist the evoked set.

In line with the work of Um and Crompton (1990), Woodside and Lysonski (1989) presented a **general model of travel leisure destination awareness and choice**, relying to a large extent on Howard and Sheth's (1969) theory of buyer behaviour, supporting that destination choice is a result of a categorization process. The model is considered as "probably the most popular conceptualization to date" (Decrop 2006, p.30), or even as the most influential model in tourism literature, together with its recent extensions (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). As shown in Figure 3.7, the model includes eight variables and nine relationships.

Figure 3.7: The general model of travel leisure destination awareness and choice



Source: Woodside and Lysonski (1989)

Marketing variables based on components of the marketing mix, and traveller variables such as socio-demographics, psychographics but also previous experience, influence destination awareness as seen by arrows 1 and 2. In contrast to Um and Crompton (1990), Woodside Lysonski (1989) perceive awareness as a more complex variable consisting of four mental categories: (a) Consideration set that includes destinations spontaneously evoked; (b) inert set includes destinations with neither a positive nor a negative evaluation; (c) inept set destinations removed from consideration; and (d) destinations that are unavailable but aware. According to

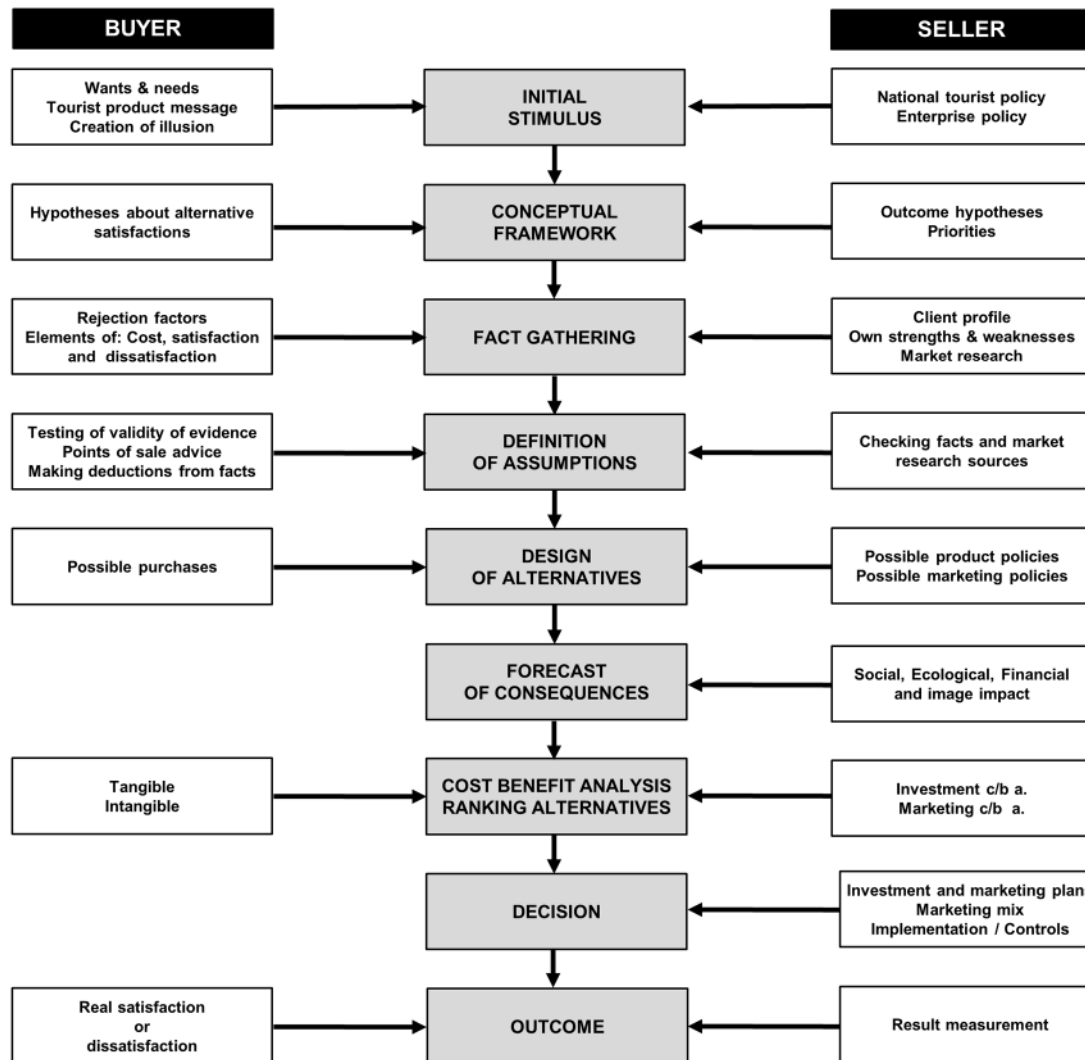
the set that each destination belongs, affective associations are created (arrow 4) in the form of positive or negative feelings: Most likely negative for those in the inept set and positive for destinations the consumer considers visiting. Based on awareness and the affective associations, preferences are created (arrows 5 and 6) in the form of assigned rankings for each destination based on relative attitude strength from most liked to least liked. Based on these rankings, intentions to visit are formed (arrow 7) expressed as “the perceived likelihood of visiting a specific destination within a specific period of time” (Woodside and Lyonski 1989, p.8). Finally, the destination choice is influenced by both situational variables (arrow 8) and intentions to visit (arrow 9).

In assessing the limitations of the model Woodside and Lyonski (1989) suggest that (a) some of the constructs and the relationships are neither described adequately nor tested; (b) the sample was small and non-representative (students); and (c) the model lacks empirical support in actual choice processes.

#### **3.6.4.2. Process models**

Decrop (2006) supports that Wahab, Crampton and Rothfield (1976) were the first to implement a sequential tourism consumer behaviour model entitled **the model of tourist buying decision** (Figure 3.8). They substantiate the need for a separate tourism related model because of the uniqueness of the tourist buying decision that is a result of (a) the absence of a tangible return of investment; (b) the considerable expenditure involved; (c) the expenditure is well planned in advance over considerable time that may be up to several months, and (d) the non-spontaneous and non-capricious purchase. Wahab et al. (1976) support that the decision-making process for any product follows the same nine steps no matter if the purchase is very instantaneous (purchase of a bus ticket) or take years to complete (purchase of an air fighter). During the initial stimulus step, the buyer who already may have wants and needs, becomes aware of a tourism product through a message directed to him, creating what Wahab et al. (1976) call an “illusion”. The buyer then formulates one, or more hypotheses about alternative satisfactions (e.g. “It would be nice to go to a sunny Greek islands this year. Let’s have a Greek holiday”), thus entering the conceptual framework step. Then the buyer moves to the fact gathering step so to search for information that will enable him accept or reject his hypotheses. These facts are divided into four groups: (a) Rejection factors, that make the consumer to completely reject the product; (b) Cost elements, that are related to the cost of the different components of the product; (c) Satisfaction elements, facts that satisfy him according to his wants, needs, personality and values; and (d) Dissatisfaction elements, facts that satisfy him according to his wants, needs, personality and values.

Figure 3.8: The model of tourist buying decision



Source: Wahab et al. (1976)

When entering the definition of assumptions step, the buyer seeks advice from friends, from word-of-mouth reputation, even from a travel agent whom he trusts, that will enable him to check the evidence offered by the seller. In the design of alternatives step, the buyer weights the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative according to his scale of values. Although the forecast of consequences step is not reviewed in the original work of Wahab et al. (1976), it may be assumed that the buyer attempts to forecast the consequences of adopting each of the alternatives based on their advantages and disadvantages. In the cost-benefit analysis step, the buyer analyses the tangible and intangible costs and benefits of each alternative. It is from this step that “whether almost unconscious and almost instantaneous, or studied and mulled over, flows the tourist’s buying decision” (Wahab et al. 1976, p.80). At the same time, the model

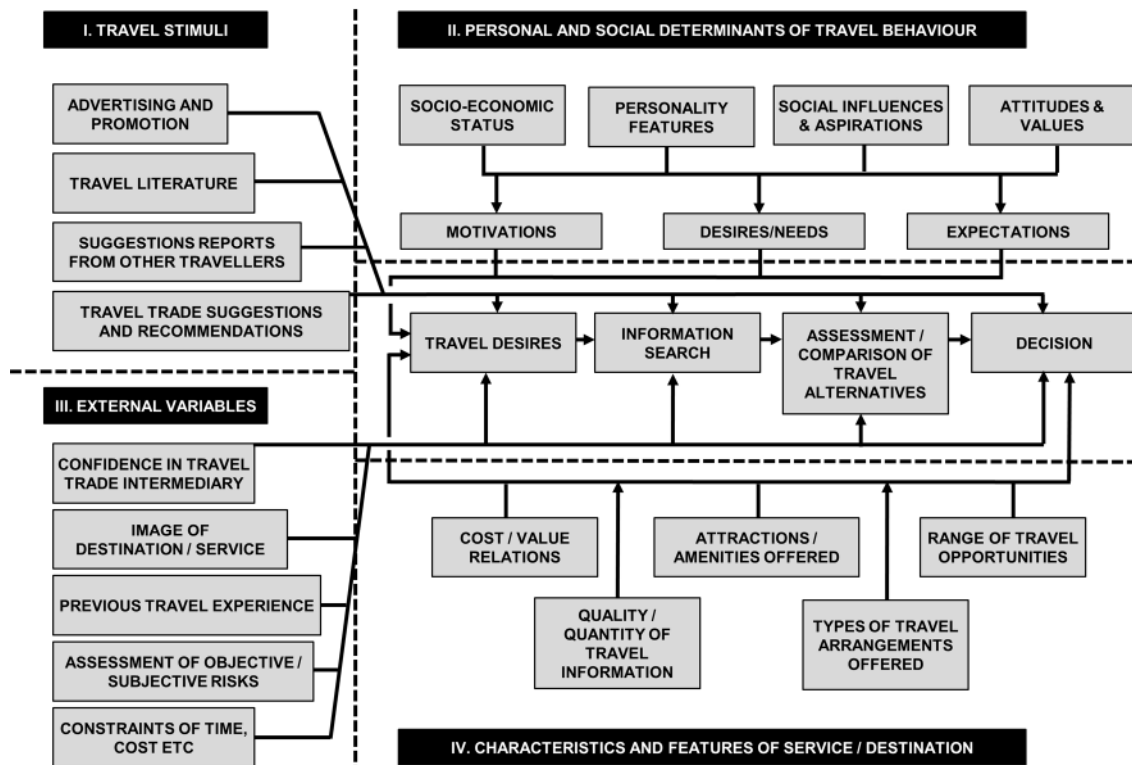
suggests that the seller “in order to conquer buying decisions” (Wahab et al. 1976, p.76) should accompany the consumer throughout all stages of the buying process and therefore adapt the marketing effort accordingly.

Assessing the model’s limitations, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) support that it: (a) considers the tourist as a rational decision maker; (b) neglects interpersonal, social and family influences, thus focusing on the individual as the decision making unit; and (c) lacks a reflexive / feedback loop to accommodate the role of the outcome of the process as an influence factor for the next decision. They also attribute to Gilbert (1991) that the Wahab et al. (1976) model has a “heavy dependency on grand models in setting up the theory base” (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005, p.818). However, reviewing Gilbert’s original work proves that this is not a valid statement. Decrop (2006) stresses that the model is stereotypical due to the authors’ belief that all purchases follow through the same sequential process.

A year later, the **travel decision process model** was proposed by Schmoll (1977) being the first sequential tourism related model based on the Howard-Sheth and Nicosia models of consumer behaviour (Decrop 2006; Gilbert 1991). Schmoll (1977) perceives the consumer as a rational decision maker that encounters a decision process consisting of several successive stages and constructs that can be grouped in four fields, as can be seen in Figure 3.9. More specifically:

The first field includes four travel stimuli: advertising, travel literature, suggestion reports from other travellers, as well as suggestions and recommendations from the travel trade. Each one influences travel desires, information search, assessment / comparison of travel alternatives and the final decision. The second field includes personal and social determinants of travel behaviour, in the form of socio-economic status, personality, social influences and aspirations, as well as attitudes and values, that determine motivations, desires/needs and expectations each of which influence travel desires. The third field includes external variables such as confidence in travel trade, the destination image, previous travel experience, the assessment of objective or subjective risks, as well as various constraints (e.g. time, cost etc.). Each influences travel desires, information search, assessment / comparison of travel alternatives and the final decision. The fourth field includes characteristics and features of service destination, such as quality and quantity of travel information, type of travel arrangements offered, cost/value relation, attractions/amenities offered and range of travel opportunities. Each influences travel desires and the decision.

Figure 3.9: The travel decision process



*Source: Schmoll (1977)*

Assessing the model's limitations, Gilbert (1991) focuses on the absence of: (a) A feedback loop, and (b) an input to attitudes and values, suggesting that the model cannot be considered as dynamic. Hudson (2000) suggests that the model is descriptive and therefore cannot be quantified, furthermore is neither a tool for prediction, nor for forecasting demand for a specific destination or tourism service. Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) stress the model's lack of parsimony, the ignorance of the uniqueness of services due to the fact that it is based on the grand models, and the difficulty to derive operational definitions for some variables.

Mathieson and Wall (1982) also presented a sequential model based on the Howard-Sheth and Nicosia models of consumer behaviour, being a

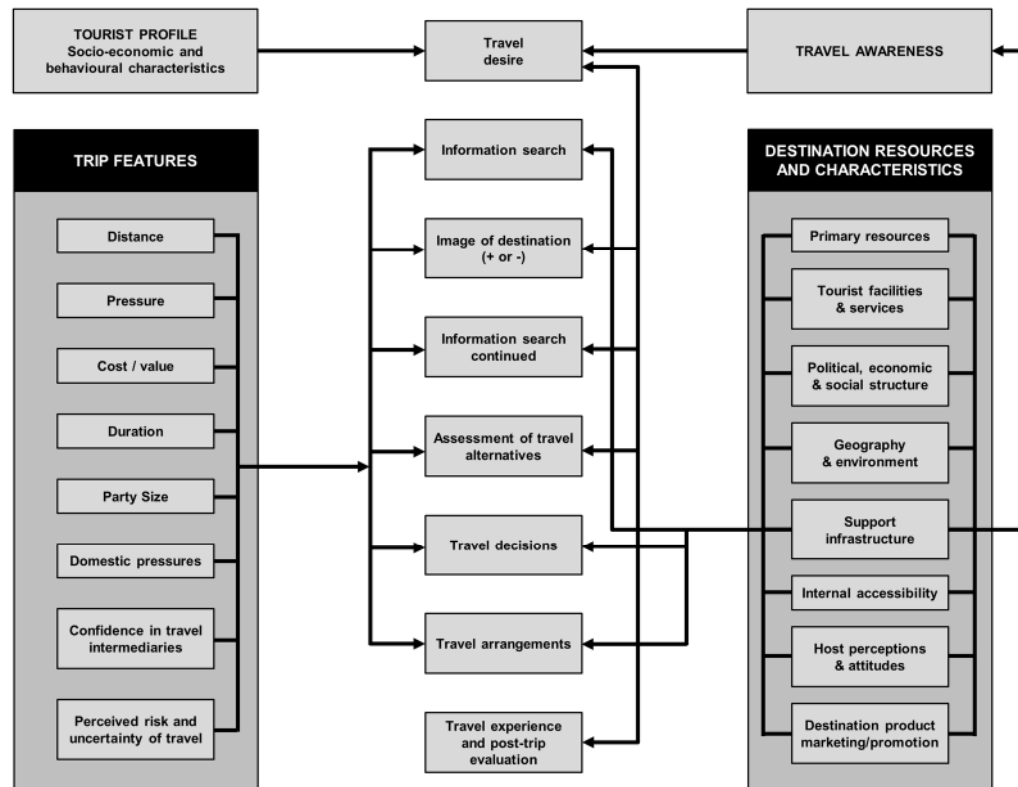
“a behavioural decision-making framework [...] for travel and tourism in an attempt to identify, understand and illustrate the factors influencing tourists’ decisions and behaviour” (Wall & Mathieson 2006, p.40).

As presented in Figure 3.10 **the travel decision making process** consists of eight constructs that are grouped in five principal or interacting phases: Travel desire or felt need, information



collection and evaluation, purchase or travel decisions, travel preparations and travel experience, and travel satisfaction evaluation.

Figure 3.10: The travel decision making process



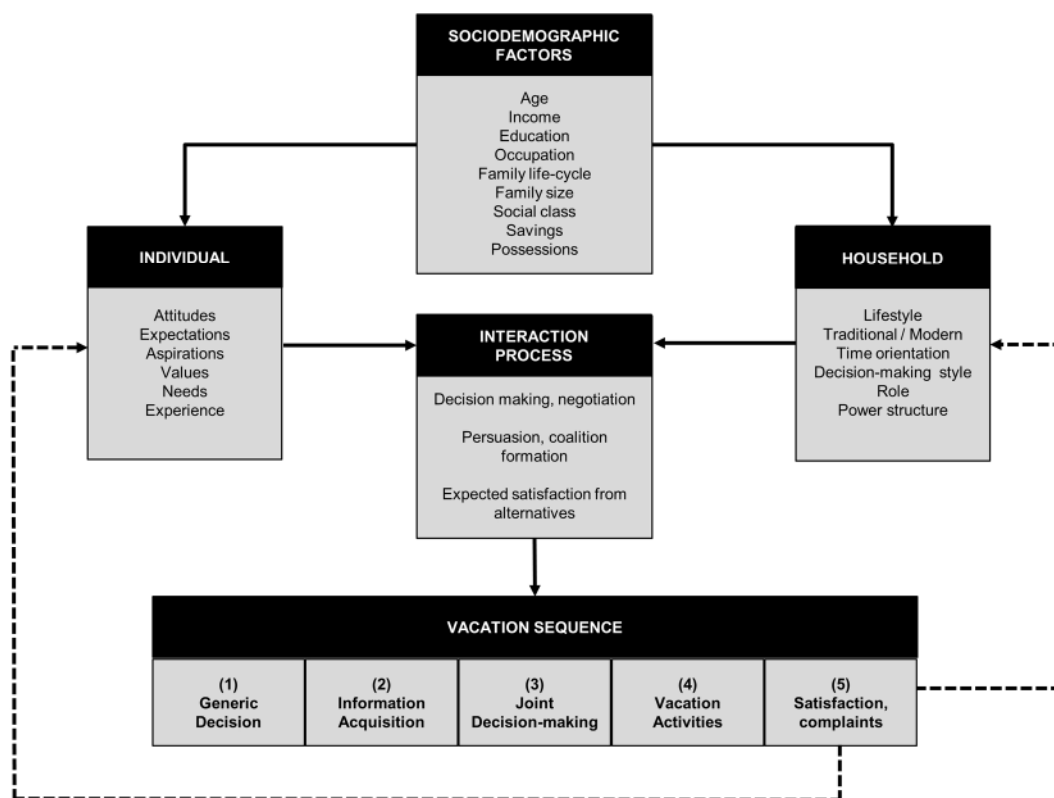
Source: Mathieson and Wall (2006)

Travel desire, as a starting point of this process, is influenced by: (a) the tourist profile, consisting of various socio-economic and behavioural characteristics as well as influences, and (b) the awareness of the destination resources and characteristics, that in the 2006 version of the model include eight elements: Primary resources; tourist facilities attractions and services; political, economic and social structure; geography and environment; type and quality of support infrastructure; internal accessibility; host perceptions and attitudes; and destination product marketing and promotion. Despite the fact that Mathieson and Wall's model is based on the grand models, it does not take into account the role of perception, memory, and information-processing (Gilbert 1991; Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). Hudson (2000) however suggests that these elements are part of travel awareness. Gilbert (1991) also supports that it is not based on a consumer behaviourist perspective but on a geographer's product based perspective. Hudson (2000) adds to the limitations the fact that the model ignores "type of holiday" among the trip

features. Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) suggest that the model offers low explanatory and predictive power and it is difficult to quantify. Finally, it should be noted that this is a descriptive model that requires further empirical validation (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

Van Raaij and Francken (1984) introduced what they refer to as “**a vacation sequence**”, as a “framework for describing the main stages of consumers’ tourist behaviour and experience” (van Raaij 1986, p.3). Based on Engel and Blackwell’s model of consumer behaviour, their model proposes the following five stages process that is influenced by a number of factors, as presented in Figure 3.11.

Figure 3.11: Factors determining the vacation sequence



Source: van Raaij and Francken (1984)

1. The generic decision, which is mainly influenced by the household's net or discretionary income; family life-cycle; ownership of vacation durables (e.g. caravan, boat, etc.); household lifestyle and values; but also by social comparison with others outside the family to enable status and prestige maintenance through the achievement of the vacation trip.

2. Information acquisition relating to the various components of the vacation, the volume of which is analogous to education level, to the level of expenditure involved and inversely analogous with familiarity with the destination.
3. Joint decision-making. van Raaij and Francken (1984) and van Raaij (1986) stress the fact that vacation planning and decisions choice involve a joint decision making between husband, wife and children. They also recognize that (a) the decision making can range from an impulsive “last minute” to a long sequence of information acquisition and evaluation of alternatives, and (b) in the case of what they refer to as “a self-organized vacation” (most probably as opposed to what in 1980s was considered a package tour) there is a sequence of additional sub decisions about meals, excursions and other vacation activities. A number of factors are considered as determinants of the decision-making process:

“Advertising by travel agents, household communication and interaction style, level of education and experience with vacations, price sensitivity and sensitivity for other vacation attributes, loyalty to destinations and type of vacations” (van Raaij 1986, p.4).
4. The vacation activities refer to the activities undertaken at the destination and can be classified in various dimensions (e.g. active – passive; individual – group, etc.), or in broader terms such as adventure, experience, education, health, social contacts, conformity and status (Meyer 1977 cited van Raaij 1986).
5. Subsequent satisfaction and complaints is the stage where consumers experience and evaluate the difference between expectations and actual performance, providing an important function for future vacations. In case of dissatisfaction, complaining is more likely when there is an external rather than an internal attribution of dissatisfaction, moreover, there is a change in own preferences and a possibility of influence in preferences of others.

Gilbert (1991, p.98) considers the model among those that he refers as “secondary theories of consumer behaviour” due to its over reliance on the grand theories. In terms of the feedback mechanism, although the model provides a reflexive loop, thus recognizing that satisfaction or dissatisfaction influences the personality of the individual. Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) support that the model undermines the role of individual decisions, provides hypothetical association among decision factors, and lacks specificity of variables and operational definitions of constructs. Finally, Decrop (2006) supports that (a) the model focuses more on group decision making and on segmentation variables rather than on the psychological variables, and (b) the assumption that the first decision to be made is the generic rests on a stereotypical postulate and unproven hypothesis.

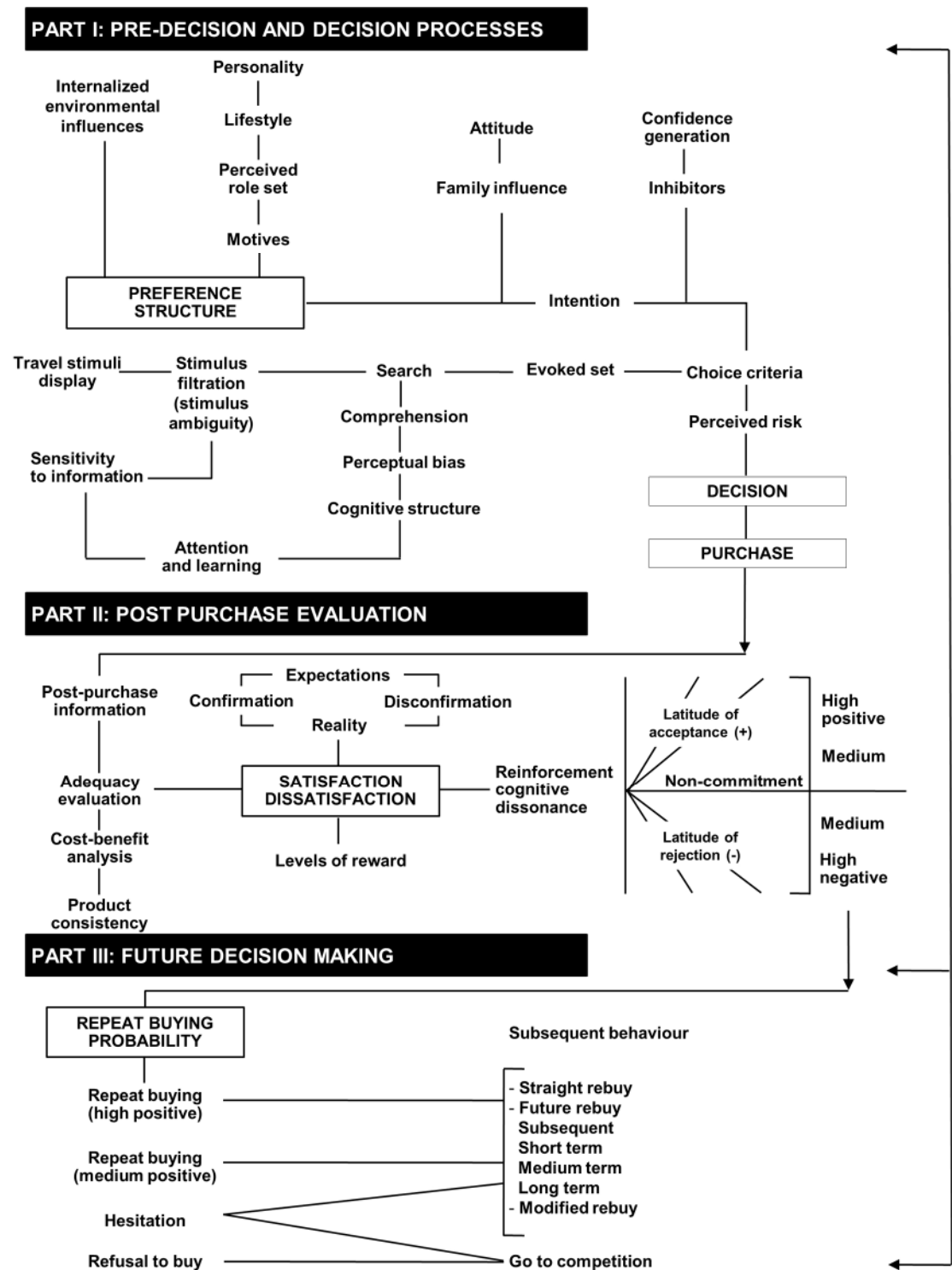
Moutinho (1987) based on the works of Nicosia, Howard and Sheth, and Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, developed the **vacation tourist behaviour model** (Figure 3.12) integrating many theories of consumer behaviour literature. Decrop (2006, p.35) acknowledges the model as

“the most encompassing process model so far [...] a comprehensive overview of all major variables that intervene in the tourist decision making process”.

According to Moutinho (1987) the vacation tourist behaviour is divided in three parts:

1. Pre-decision and decision processes, that include what Moutinho (1987, p.39) describes as “a flow of events” ranging from the travel stimuli to the purchase decision. This part consists of three fields (a) preference structure, (b) decision, and (c) purchase:
  - a. The preference structure for a specific destination is related to a set of factors that include internalized environmental influences such as cultural norms, values, reference groups, status and social class; individual determinants such as personality, lifestyle, perceived role set and motives; as well as family and attitudes. Preference structure may change over time when additional information is available, the content of which can change the above mentioned factors. The consumer’s intention to purchase depends on a summary of the previous factors that Moutinho (1987, p.39) terms “confidence generation”. However, sentiments such as uncertainty, caution, anxiety may be present that act as inhibitors causing consumers to respond in a manner different than that dictated by his attitudes for the destination. Preference structure is then divided into three sub-fields: (i) Stimulus filtration, (ii) attention and learning processes, and (c) choice criteria:
    - i. Stimulus filtration is seen as a process “to protect the tourist, since it implies the ability to discriminate facts from exaggerations in advertising” (Moutinho 1987, p.41). Exposure to mass media or personal sources creates travel stimuli, intentionally or incidentally apprehended, with varying degrees of stimulus ambiguity, causing a search for additional data.
    - ii. In the attention and learning subfield the various inputs are compared with information already stored in memory. The learning process is interrelated with cognitive structure, permitting the consumer to understand the tourist product.
    - iii. Choice criteria: Consumers’ evoked set consists of product attributes that they perceive as important when evaluating a tourist destination or

Figure 3.12: The vacation tourist behaviour model



Source: Moutinho (1987)

service. The consumer then selects the alternative with the highest perceived overall rating.

- b. Decision: The decision process results in “a psychological predisposition in terms of intention toward the buying act” (Moutinho 1987, p.42).
  - c. Purchase is “the act of buying a vacation destination [...] the outcome of psychic processes” (Moutinho 1987, p.42). The purchase of the total tourist product can be in sequences (one purchase per component) or with a single purchase act, as a tourist package. It is interesting that Moutinho at this stage in order to emphasize the diversity of purchase acts refers to Olshavsky and Granbois (1981) who suggest that a significant number of purchases occur as a result of necessity, culture driven lifestyles, inter-related purchases, conformity to group norms, imitation. It should be noted however that the core argument in the work of Olshavsky and Granbois (1981) is that these purchases result without a decision process, combined or not, with limited search and evaluation, or even on a random basis, an argument in absolute conflict with the rationale and conceptual foundations of Moutinho’s work.
2. Post-purchase evaluation is seen as a significant step in the tourist behaviour due to its impact on the tourist’s attitude set and future behaviour. Moutinho (1987, p.42) identifies three major purposes of post-purchase evaluation: (a) It adds to consumer’s “store of experiences” and therefore enriches his frame of reference, (b) provides “a check on market-related decisions”, and (c) provides feedback for future purchase behaviour. Within post-purchase evaluation, Moutinho (1987) includes adequacy evaluation as a subfield and satisfaction/dissatisfaction as a field:
- a. Adequacy evaluation: The sum of all product attributes that the tourist experiences and perceives at the destination, or by using the tourist service, referred as product consistency, enable him to perform a mental cost and benefit analysis that Decrop (2006, p.37) interprets as a “kind of quality/price ratio”. This analysis results in adequacy evaluation “a factor related to the ideal point of each attribute of the tourist product as perceived by the tourist” (Moutinho 1987, p.42).
  - b. Satisfaction / Dissatisfaction is the main field within the post-purchase evaluation part of the model and is related to the confirmation or disconfirmation between expectations and reality, the level of reward and the

cognitive dissonance mechanism. The later leads to zones or latitudes of acceptance, rejection, or non-commitment that shape subsequent behaviour

3. Future decision making is the third part of the model that presents the range of repeat buying probabilities, in the form of a field, for the repurchase of the particular destination or tourist service. The outcome of the satisfaction/dissatisfaction field, in terms of the high positive to high negative continuum, dictates the probability of repeat buying expressed in a straight repurchase, a repurchase within different time periods, a modified repurchase behaviour, or in a search for an alternative product through a competitor.

Assessing the model's limitations, Gilbert (1991) argues that: (a) part III (future decision making), could be included in the part I (pre-decision and decision processes) where attitudes, evoked set and perceptions are treated in a more complex way; (b) The subsequent behaviour of part III is already included in part II (post purchase evaluation) and more specifically in the satisfaction / dissatisfaction field that Gilbert considers as an attitude outcome and therefore reinforcement to repurchase may have already taken place; and (c) "The interrelationship between fields and the directional process towards consumer goals is not always clear" (Gilbert 1991, p.101). From a different viewpoint, Decrop (2006) and Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) argue that Moutinho's model (d) is very complex; (e) evidences operationalization issues and therefore empirical tests are difficult and it lacks formulation of precise research hypothesis. Moreover, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) support that the model (f) lacks focus on destination choice process, (g) evidences an unclear relationship between travel stimuli and the rest of the model's variables, and (h) its premises are not very clear in some instances such as in the case of destination choice and other travel related decisions. In addition to the above limitations, it may also be argued that the vacation experience itself is not adequately represented: The model moves from purchase to post-purchase information / evaluation, however in the case of tourism products the purchase does not necessarily implies consumption. Moutinho clearly misuses the term "post-purchase" to also describe post-consumption or better post-experience, an argument evidenced by the purposes he attributes to post-purchase evaluation (Moutinho 1987, p.42): First, it adds to consumer's "store of experiences" and therefore enriches his frame of reference; second provides "a check on market-related decisions"; and third provides feedback for future purchase behaviour.

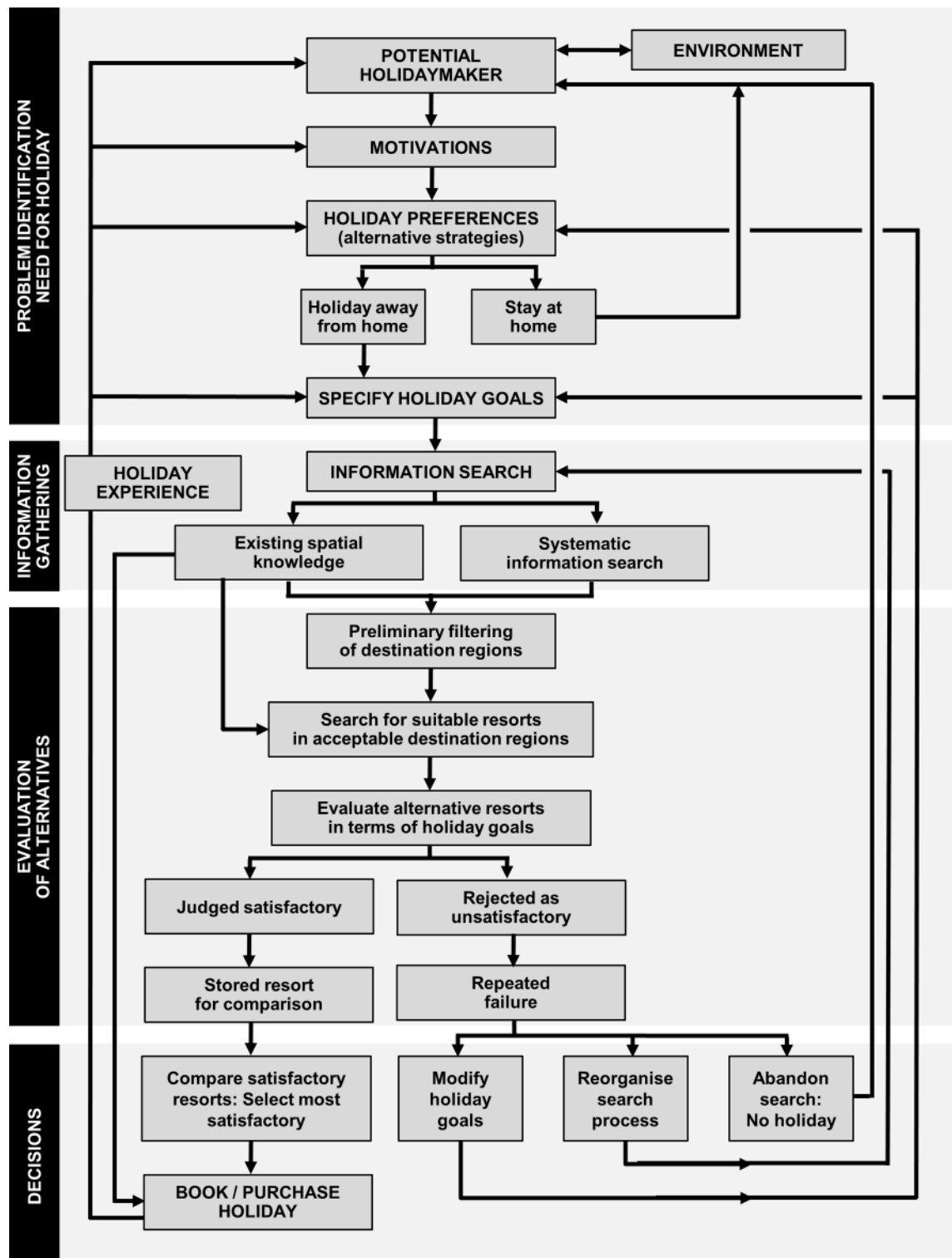
Goodall (1988, p.1) acknowledges that holidays "are a mainstay of behaviour patterns in advanced western societies", a risk purchase, require long time for planning, an action that together with anticipation constitute not only an important part of the experience but also a

potent source of satisfaction. This implies a systematic and sequential bounded rational process that a “satisficer” tourist follows “within implicit and explicit constraints of an uncertain environment” (Goodall 1988, p.2). He was the first to present a framework that differentiates between the generic decision for holidays and the choice of the resort. Goodall (1988) developed “the tourist’s annual holiday search process”, which was later renamed to “**the holiday decision process**”. The model is divided in four stages: Problem identification / need for holiday, information gathering, evaluation of alternatives, and decisions (Goodall 1991), as presented in Figure 3.13.

1. In the problem identification / need for holiday stage, Goodall suggests that the holidaymaker’s interaction with the environment (a) makes him aware of holiday opportunities and (b) shapes his motivations and preferences. At this stage, first and second order questions are answered: The generic question of whether or not to go on holidays, and then the type of holiday to be taken, the answers to both of which are influenced by basic motivations and determine the holiday goals limited by cost and time constraints.
2. In the information gathering stage, information search is initiated, however, although a continual process it ranges in nature and extent (from that of an impulse buyer who purchases a last minute package to that of a meticulous planner who purchases an individual tailor-made holiday). Information search can be internal (i.e. previous holiday experiences), or external (such as in the case of a new destination) that however is constrained by cost and time factors.
3. During the evaluation of alternatives stage, the holidaymaker filters the information acquired and forms images that he compares with his evaluative image to determine if his holiday goals are met.
4. In the decisions stage, the destination that satisfies his goals is selected, however if many destinations meet his goals, he selects the one expected to satisfy best his goals, acting within the “context of bounded rationality” (Goodall 1991, p.67). In case however that no destination matches his goals then these are modified and/or information search is reorganized. In case that failure to satisfy goals is repeated, then search is abandoned and the holiday forgone. When booking is made, the holidaymaker may continue to search for information so that to answer fourth order questions (e.g. about the destination’s attractions, arrangements for currency, visas etc.). When the holiday is taken, the experience, in terms of information (it is interesting that Goodall positions the holiday experience variable within the information gathering stage) in case it is positive



Figure 3.13: The holiday decision process



Source: Goodall (1991)

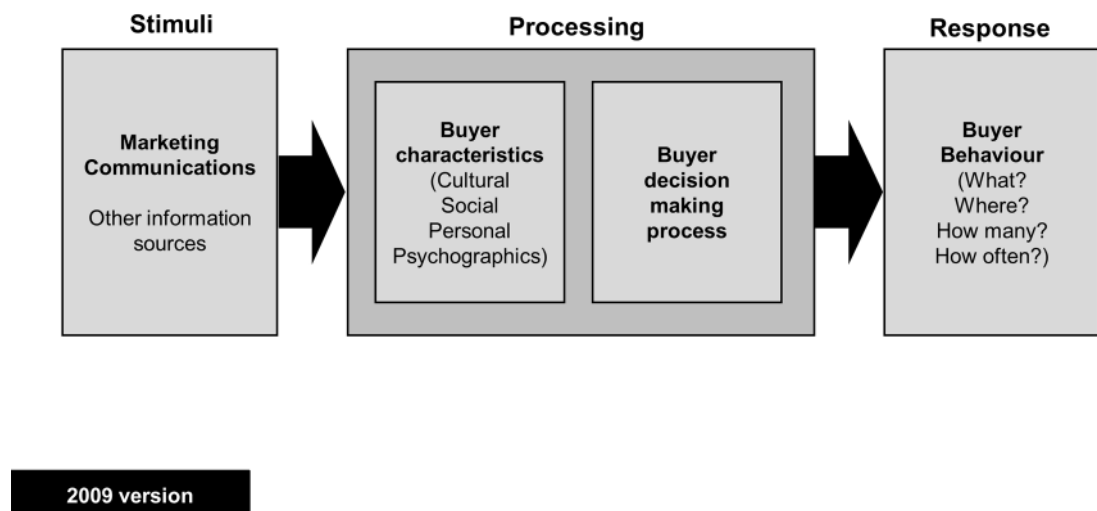
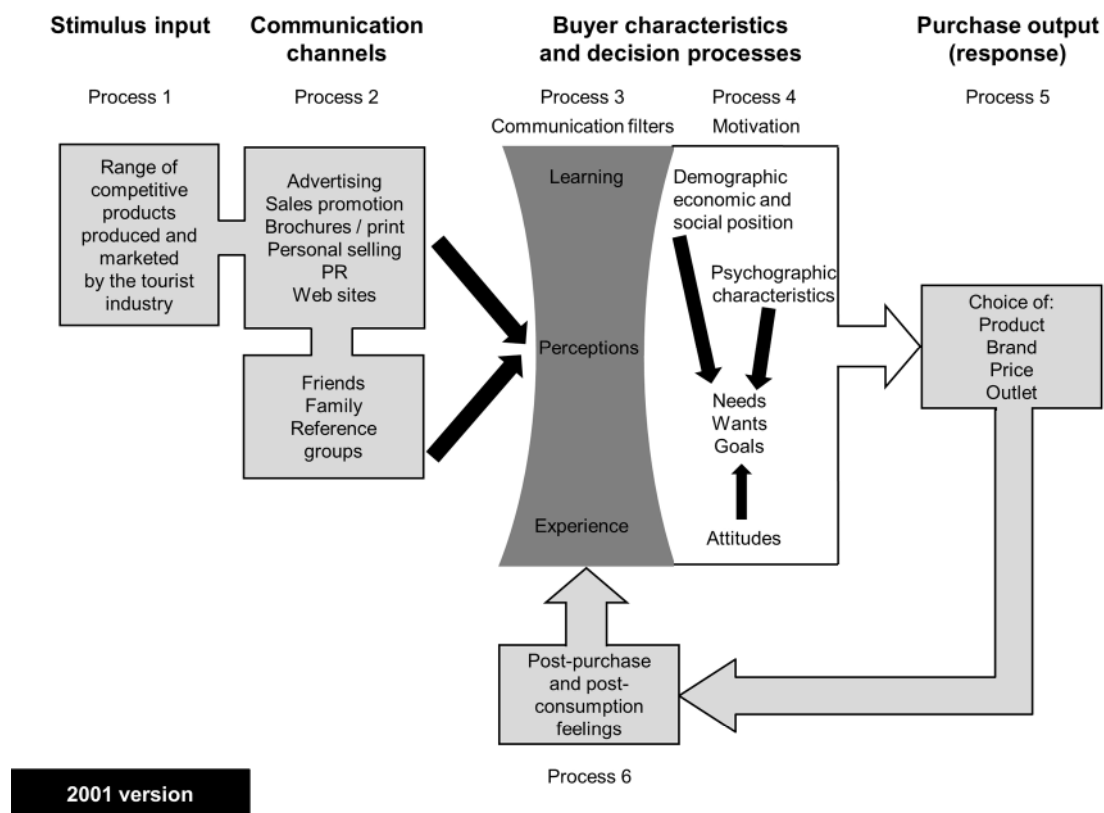
it reinforces the holidaymaker's perceptions, whereas in case is less than satisfactory the feedback adjusts the holiday preferences and goals.

In assessing the limitations of Goodall's work, Decrop (2006, p.38) questions the position of the generic decision as first among those made by the holidaymaker, and considers the high risk nature of the holiday purchase as "stereotypical postulate and unproven hypothesis". Moreover, two additional limitations can be identified when comparing the graphical representation of the model and its actual description: First, there is no relationship between the "book / purchase" construct and the "information search" to substantiate Goodall's position that when the booking is made the preparations continue with additional information search. Second, in the case that there is a repeating failure to satisfy goals and therefore search is abandoned and the holiday forgone, there is a feedback to the potential holidaymaker, whereas it can be argued that the relationship should be with the motivations construct as it may be hypothesized that failure to satisfy goals provided by an alternative may decrease motivations for a holiday.

Middleton et al. (2009) propose a "**stimulus-response model of buyer behaviour**" (Figure 3.14) that is a subsequent version of the Middleton (1988) and the Middleton and Clarke (2001) models. The model in its 2001 version (Middleton and Clarke 2001) suggests that purchasing decisions in travel and tourism can be de-constructed in four major components and six interactive processes: Stimulus input (process 1); communication channels (process 2); buyer characteristics and decision process (consisting of process 3: communication filters, and process 4: motivation); purchase outputs / response (process 5); and finally post-purchase and post-consumption feelings (process 6). More specifically:

1. The first component includes process 1 which consists of stimulus input in the form of tourist products inputs that are available in a market, in an infinite number of possibilities, although the prospective tourist is likely to be aware of only very few of the options available.
2. The second component includes process 2 consisting of the communication channels. Middleton and Clarke (2001, p.77) differentiate between the marketer's controlled channels, referred as "formal communication channels or media", and the informal channels such as friends, family and reference groups. In the 2009 version of the model both process 1 and process 2 were merged into a single construct referred as "stimuli" (Middleton et al. 2009).

Figure 3.14: Stimulus-response model of buyer behaviour



Source: Middleton and Clarke (2001); Middleton et al. (2009)

3. The third component, buyer characteristics and decision processes, consists of two processes: Process 3, communication filters and process 4, motivation. In process 3, perception acts as a filter in the buying decision process, since information and stimulus inputs “pass through a perceptual sieve or series of mental filters” (Middleton and Clarke 2001, p.80). Moreover, perception is seen as having a dynamic nature, as a result of its changes due to learning and experiences. During the motivation process (process 4), four elements determine the prospective tourist’s disposition for action: Demographic, economic and social position, psychographic characteristics and attitudes, where all three determine needs, wants and goals. The same four elements can act either as providers or reinforcers of motivation, and in other times as constraints.

In the 2009 version of the model processes 3 and 4 were merged into a single construct referred to as “Processing” consisting of two components: Buyer characteristics and buyer decision making processes. Although graphically very comprehensive, in discussing the buyer decision making processes of the model, Middleton et al. (2009) adopt Engel et al. (1978) approach, as modified by Morgan (1996 cited Middleton et al. 2009) supporting that it consists of problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice of purchase and evaluation of post-purchase experience, referred to as a “PIECE process”.

4. During the fourth component purchase outputs (response), the choices of product, brand, price and outlet are made (Process 5). These choices are directly linked to motivations (process 4) which in turn are linked to buyer’s characteristics (process 3). After choices are made, post-purchases and post-consumption feelings are created (process 6) that alter or reinforce perceptions through the experiences created.

In discussing Middleton’s view that product satisfaction is a powerful mean in influencing future decisions, and therefore the link in the model between post-purchase and decision process, Hudson (2000) suggests that there is very little research to substantiate the link between product satisfaction buyer behaviour and brand loyalty in tourism.

Assessing further the model’s limitations it can be argued that:

1. The stimulus input construct does not evidence the fact that from all available tourist product options only few are known by the potential tourist.
2. Post purchase and post-consumption feelings are represented in the same process and within the same construct giving the impression that they may occur simultaneously.

Actually between post-purchase and post-consumption the holiday experience itself is taking place.

3. Although the six processes are explicitly defined, the relationship between processes, and components, even sometimes referred as “stages” (Middleton and Clarke 2001, p.81) is not clear.
4. The 2009 version of the model is extremely comprehensive, and rather simplistic in its graphical representation, resembling more of a black-box approach. Moreover, it lacks evidence of reflexive loop as a feedback to evidence the post-purchase and post-consumption feelings.

### **3.6.5. Overview and critique on the models**

Tourism related cognitive consumer behaviour models are based on the generic comprehensive models of consumer behaviour such as the Nicosia, the Howard-Sheth and the CDP. As a result the limitations that exist about the generic models can be also applied to tourism related models. More specifically, as presented extensively in section 3.5.2, such criticism relates to the assumption of a rational decision maker; the positivistic approach in developing the models; the generalization of the decision making process; and the detail included in the models.

With specific reference to the tourism related models, Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) suggest that most of them are based on little or none at all empirical research; the majority of them are at least 15 years old and therefore do not represent or depict current developments in consumer behaviour; most have been originated by work carried out in the western world thus not reflecting potential differences in consumers from emerging markets; consumers are viewed as a homogeneous group; many models fail to recognize the impact of motivators and personal or external determinants (e.g. from an obsessive hobby to a health issue); the majority assume a high degree of rationality where in fact in travel related choices rationality is limited due: (a) to the imperfect information available to potential tourists, and (b) by the irrationality of the human nature due to own opinions and prejudices; most are generic in nature attempting to explain purchases of all vacation products no matter how different they are (e.g. a last minute, discounted all inclusive holiday to a well-planned luxurious tailor-made world-tour). In a similar vein, Hudson (2000) stresses that models are stereotypical and generalized, viewing potential tourists as homogeneous, whereas in reality the decision process may vary significantly among different tourists. Moreover he raises the issue of the absence of the time dimension, thus not indicating to the marketer the time that he/she should intervene to the process in order to influence the decision. Bowen and Clarke (2009) add that tourism models

neglect (a) group decision making, placing emphasis on the individual; and (b) technological changes that have an impact on decision making such as the Internet, social media, and smartphones.

However, apart from the criticism made for the tourism related models as a whole (Swarbrooke and Horner 2007; Hudson 2000), or for specific models (Woodside and Lysonski 1989; Gilbert 1991; Sirakaya and Woodside 2005; Decrop 2006) one should appreciate the effort of tourism scholars in attempting to adjust and adapt the generic models into the travel and holiday context. In this effort apart from the constructs already appearing in the generic models and adopted in whole, or adapted to fit the needs of the new context, a number of new constructs have been identified and included in the models to meet the needs of the travel and holiday trip context.

### **3.6.6. Constructs potentially affected by social media**

The reviews of the Nicosia model, the Theory of Buyer Behaviour and the Consumer Decision Process (CDP) have already identified a number of consumer behaviour constructs that may be potentially affected by social media (presented in sections 3.5.1.1.A, 3.5.1.1.2.A, and 3.5.1.1.3A). Based on the review of tourism related consumer behaviour models, presented in earlier sections, a number of constructs that may be potentially affected by social media can also be identified. However, given that (a) both groups of models, generic and travel related, employ the same perspective (cognitive) to the study of consumer behaviour; and (b) tourism scholars have been influenced, or even largely base their approaches in the generic models, it is not surprising that the majority of constructs appearing in travel related models are either the same, or similar with the constructs appearing in the generic models. Due to this fact, the following discussion includes only those constructs that have not been discussed earlier in this chapter (in sections 3.5.1.1.A, 3.5.1.1.2.A, and 3.5.1.1.3A).

Um and Crompton (1990) describe the role of passive information in belief formation. Browsing the Web and the social media can be considered as a form of passive information catching that also can have an impact on the size of a consumer's awareness set.

In a similar manner social media may affect the size of the consideration set as described in the Woodside and Lysonski (1989) model. In the same model affective associations may also be affected primarily because social media contain other consumers' evaluations about their holidays and as a result the consumer may be influenced in developing his / her own positive or negative feelings about destinations. The model suggests that traveller destination preferences are created in the form of assigned rankings based on relative attitude strength, therefore it may

be suggested that specific social media types such as consumer review and rating websites may contribute, or even substitute, to an extent the function of this construct.

The Wahab et al (1976) model being a process model includes constructs in a sequential manner that resembles the decision making process described in the CDP model. As it was shown in the discussion of the CDP model (section 3.5.1.3 A) all constructs of the decision process may be affected by social media.

The Schmoll (1977) and the Mathieson and Wall (1982) models are both based on the Howard-Sheth and on the Nicosia models. Therefore a number of constructs that may be affected by social media have already been identified and discussed in sections 3.5.1.1A and 3.5.1.2A. Apart from those, the Schmoll model introduces three travel related constructs that are potentially affected by social media: image of destination service, quality, and quantity of travel information. More specifically: Image of destination / service is potentially affected by social media as in the social media era the image is not only a result of marketer-generated or mass media generated messages, but also a result of the impressions, comments and reviews that other consumers are posting on social media. Quality and quantity of travel information is affected by social media: Quantity has been significantly increased as consumers are now able to share their own experiences and make them available through the web, standing equally (in terms of chances of retrieval are concerned) next to marketer or mass media generated information. Quality of information can also be potentially affected by social media in both a positive and a negative way: Consumers (ideally) are independent to the destination / firm offering the product and therefore the information they share through social media about their consumption experience is expected to be truthful, although subjective to their own interpretation of the experience. On the contrary, social media do not have yet managed to overcome issues relating to the “authenticity” of the “consumer” who is sharing the information: Did the consumer actually consume the product? Is he/she a real consumer, a competitor, someone acting on behalf of a competitor, or on behalf of the producer? Moreover a number of constraints such as availability of time, level of experience, and educational level (to name a few) may restrict consumers from offering a “quality review” if such term can be explicitly defined.

The Mathieson and Wall (1982) model includes a number of trip features that influence the decision making process. Among those are distance, cost / value, duration and party size. Such factors may influence the extent of use, and the type of social media use by travellers when planning their trip. For example planning an expensive trip, a trip of longer duration, or a long haul trip may require more in-depth information search and as a result higher level of social

media use. Apart from information search such trips may have a greater influence on the need for post-trip self-expression or post-trip evaluations that consumers may like to share through social media.

In a similar manner, van Raaij and Francken (1984) suggest that the volume of information acquisition is analogous to the level of expenditure involved and inversely analogous with familiarity with the destination. They also acknowledge two additional factors that impact the decision making process: the time of booking / purchase of the vacation and the type of vacation in terms of a packaged tour or a self-organized vacation. Such trip characteristics may also influence the extent of use, and the type of social media use by travellers when planning their holidays. In a similar manner, vacation activities (e.g. active – passive; individual – group) or in broader terms the type of holiday (e.g. adventure, experience, education, etc.) can also have a potential impact on how social media are used during trip planning.

Lastly, van Raaij and Francken (1984) acknowledge complaints as a form post-vacation evaluation, a variable that can be potentially affected by social media: Social media are becoming major platforms for hosting complaints, enabling holidaymakers to increase the reach of their complaint to much wider audiences, but also to provide evidences in multimedia form. Moreover, social media may have an impact on when the complaint is expressed: Some holidaymakers may feel that complaining through the traditional face to face method, while still on holidays, may not be as “punishing” to the service provider compared to complaining through social media as the latter achieves a much larger number of recipients.

Moutinho’s (1987) vacation tourist behaviour model is based on the Nicosia, Howard-Sheth and on the CDP models, therefore a number of constructs that may be affected by social media have already been identified and discussed (sections 3.5.1.1 A, 3.5.1.2 A and 3.5.1.3 A).

Goodall’s (1991) framework differentiates between the generic decision for holidays and the choice of the resort. As such, a number of constructs included in the framework such as search for resort, evaluation of alternative resorts and comparison of satisfactory resorts and selection of most satisfactory are all potentially affected by social media and more specifically by consumer review and rating websites. It should be stated however that resort selection, as well as a number of other decisions (e.g. selection of holiday activities, sightseeing, and selection of restaurants) can be treated as independent decision making processes. Therefore the constructs that may be affected by social media have already been identified and discussed (sections 3.5.1.1A, 3.5.1.2A and 3.5.1.3A).



Table 3.7 provides a summary of the consumer behaviour constructs that are potentially affected by social media, as discussed in this section (travel related models), and also in sections 3.5.1.1A, 3.5.1.2A and 3.5.1.3A (generic consumer behaviour comprehensive models).

However, it should be stressed at this point that the constructs identified as potentially impacted by social media (and included in the above discussions, and in the table below) are not to be tested in the primary research phase of this study. The research inquiry paradigm guiding this study, and therefore its resulting exploratory and qualitative in nature approach, as presented in detail in the next chapter, does not allow testing of specific theoretical frameworks, relationships, or constructs. As a result, the discussion on generic and travel related consumer behaviour models did not focus on any specific model or theory, but rather, as Creswell (2009) and Holloway and Wheller (2010) suggest, it was required to provide a general orientating lens for the research. Moreover, the discussion was necessary so that to avoid what Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to as the risk of the ignorant researcher that claims he rediscover the wheel.

Table 3.7: Consumer behaviour constructs potentially affected by social media

Author(s)	Construct / Relationship	Potential impact of social media
Nicosia (1966)	Consumer's attributes toward the firm	Not exclusively based on the firm's communication messages: Also a result of other consumer's attributes and opinions that appear on social media.
Nicosia (1966)	Unidirectional flow of communication between the firm and the consumer	The firm - consumer channel of communication becomes bidirectional
Howard and Sheth (1968) Blackwell et al. (2006)	Inputs Environmental influences / Stimuli	Remove the consumer's spatial and time constraints to contact his / her own social network. Increase size of consumer's social network. Increase number of stimuli received from the social environment (consumer's social network and strangers). Increase frequency of interaction with consumer's social network members. Enable access to stimuli from individuals outside consumer's social network. Enable consumers to add "strangers" into their social network and receive stimuli from them. Enrich content of stimuli and properties of interaction (length and depth).
Um and Crompton (1990)	Awareness set	As a form of passive information catching that can affect (increase) the size of a consumer's awareness set.
Blackwell et al. (2006)	Need recognition	Increased chances for need recognition to take place.
Nicosia (1966) Blackwell et al. (2006)	Search External information search	Develop new sources of non-marketer related information. Enable asynchronous or synchronous access to the consumer's social network, much wider (in terms of number of contacts) and easier when compared to traditional means of communication. Provide access to specialized sources of information beyond the reach of consumer's social network. Enable bidirectional flow of communication (exchange of information).
Schmoll (1977)	Quality and quantity of travel information	Increased quantity as consumers are enabled to post own experiences, standing equally next to marketer, or mass media generated information. Positive or negative (subjectivity, authenticity) impacts on quality
Howard and Sheth (1968) Blackwell et al. (2006)	Sensitivity to information Perceptual bias Acceptance	Decrease the effect (less operative) of sensitivity to information and perceptual bias. Higher degree of message acceptance.
Woodside and Lysonski (1989)	Consideration set	Affect the size of consideration set
Woodside and Lysonski (1989)	Affective associations	Influence in developing consumers' own positive or negative feelings about destinations

Schmoll (1977)	Image of destination / service	image is not only a result of marketer-generated or mass media generated messages but also a result of the impressions, comments, reviews other consumers are posting on social media
Howard and Sheth (1968)	Decision mediators	Complement decision mediators by providing both criteria for evaluation and ratings on those criteria.
Nicosia (1966)	Evaluation	Provide access to evaluation parameters, ratings and in-depth reviews facilitating the evaluation process.
Blackwell et al. (2006)	Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives	Provide access to the consumer's online social network, or beyond that ("strangers") to request assistance in evaluation.
Woodside and Lysonski (1989)	Traveller destination preferences	Specific social media types (i.e. consumer review and rating websites) may contribute or even substitute to an extent the function of this construct
Nicosia (1966)	Decision	Provide access to the consumer's online social network, or beyond that ("strangers") to provide alternative suggestions and advices to overcome unavailability of the preferred brand
Blackwell et al. (2006)	Purchase (choice of store; in-store factors)	(constraint), or store other limiting factors.
Nicosia (1966)	Purchase feedback	Apart from feedback to the firm (Nicosia 1966) consumer provides purchase feedback to other consumers
Nicosia (1966)	Consumption	Enable sharing of consumption experience (self-expression / show-off). Enable consumers to seek advice (from members of their social network or "strangers") in order to improve the experience or overcome problems and issues they face during the consumption. Review of consumption experience as it is taking place,
Blackwell et al. (2006)	Post consumption evaluation	Enable sharing of reviews about the consumption experience, impressions to the consumer's social network or beyond. Enable self-expression about the consumption experience.
Nicosia (1966)	Post-consumption feedback	Apart from feedback to consumer's own attributes (Nicosia (1966) consumers share post-consumption feedback for use by others or for self-expression
van Raaij and Francken (1984)	Complaints	Feedback to the firm: Increase reach of complaints to much wider audiences, evidences in multimedia form,
Blackwell et al. (2006)	Divestment	Facilitates divestment by providing access to consumer's social network or beyond that ("strangers") to remarket, or give away for free wanted products.
Mathieson and Wall (1982)	Trip features	Trip features may influence the extent of use, and the type of social media use by travellers when planning their trip
van Raaij and Francken (1984)	(Mathieson and Wall: distance, cost / value, duration and party size; van Raaij and Francken: familiarity with the destination, time of booking / purchase, type of vacation)	

Source: Author

### 3.7. The holiday travel process

Clawson and Knetsch (1966) were the first that approached the recreation experience as a process consisting of stages. They proposed a recreation experience framework consisting of five stages, namely: (a) anticipation and planning, that is thinking about and planning the trip; (b) travel to the site, that is the actual journey to the recreation site; (c) on site experiences and activities, that is the recreation activities and related behaviours taking place at the site; (d) return travel, that is the actual journey back home; and (e) recollection, that is recall and reflection about the experience.

Fridgen (1984) applied Clawson and Knetsch's framework into the tourism domain suggesting that it "provides a meaningful link between environmental and social processes, and travel tourism behaviour" (Fridgen 1984, p.23). Hall (2005; 2010) also adopts the same framework referring to it as "the stages model of the travel process" (2010, p.9). However, he renames the first stage to "decision making and anticipation" (2010, p.9) clearly indicating that the decision to visit the destination is included in this stage. Although anticipation and planning (or decision making and anticipation) is proposed as the first stage of the process, neither Clawson and Knetsch (1966), nor Fridgen (1984), or Hall (2005; 2010) clearly indicate when exactly the first stage starts, and more specifically if it starts as soon a generic need for recreation or holiday trip has been recognized, or as soon as the generic decision to go on a trip has been made. Bauer (2001) and Maher et al. (2003) although they clearly adopt the Clawson and Knetsch (1966) framework, they reduce the number of stages to three: (a) before the trip, (b) during the trip, and (c) after the trip. The three stages approach is also adopted by Werthner and Klein (1999), Woodside and King (2001), Manrai and Manrai (2011), Dippelreiter et al. (2008), and Mackay and Vogt (2012).

In later years, the notion of Dreaming as a separate stage of the travel process started appearing both in academic literature but also among practitioners (Google 2010; Fotis et al. 2011; Pearo and Carroll 2011; Neuhofer et al. 2012; Sparkler 2013). Although there is lack of a definition of the dreaming stage, there seems to be an initial consensus that the dreaming stage takes place before the consumer's active search for travel related information (Pearo and Carroll 2011). However, there is no notion in the literature in terms of when the dreaming stage begins and when it concludes. Assuming a cyclical travel process, Fotis et al. (2011) locate the dreaming stage after the post-trip stage of the last holiday trip and before the pre-trip stage of the next holiday trip.

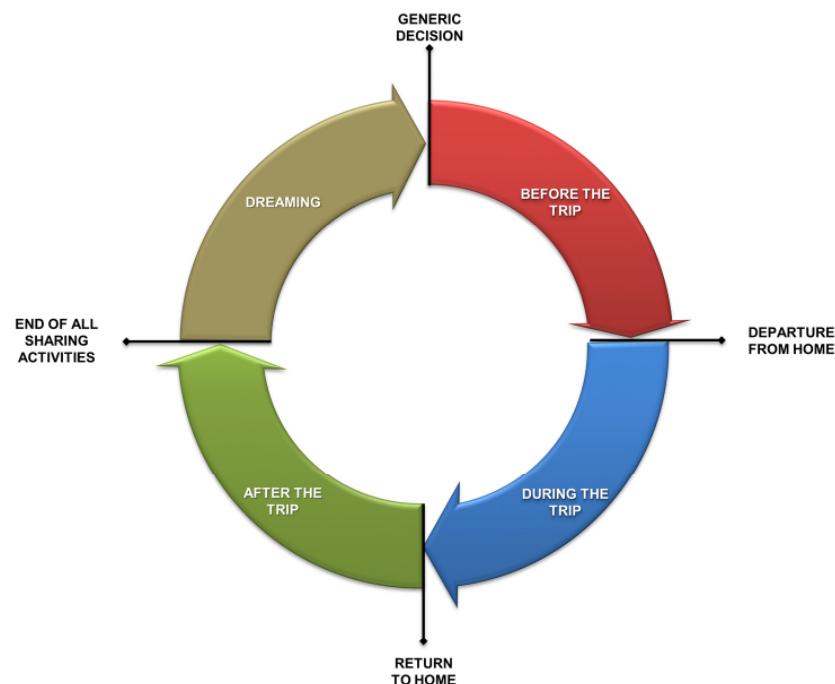
Another characteristic of the travel process is its cyclical nature. Krippendorff (1986) was the first to envision a cyclical travel process. Krippendorff (1986) considers recreation and tourism as integral parts of the industrial social system with work, habitat, leisure, and travel as its main components. He perceives this system having a cyclical form to demonstrate its repetitive nature, entitling it as the recreation cycle of the human beings in industrial society. Krippendorff supports that even after a leisure trip

“Still, the wish to leave again re-emerges quickly, for life cannot be resuscitated by means of few weeks of vacations and a few weekends. The wagon is overloaded; it overflows with wishes and longings. From this permanent repetition of unquenched and unquenchable desires, the cycle takes its dynamics: a perpetual starting over [...] roughly speaking, this enormous recreational machine operates a cycle which recurs year after year, and to which each person is more or less subjugated, without really being aware of it” (Krippendorff 1986, p.524-525)

Goodall's (1988, p.1) position that holidays are “a mainstay of behaviour patterns in advanced western societies”, as well as Werthner and Klein's (1999) tourist's life cycle, and Hall's (2005, p.932) “trip cycle” seem also to agree on the circular nature of the travel process.

Based on the above discussion, this study adopts and proposes a four stage cyclical holiday travel process consisting of: (a) the dreaming stage, (b) the before the trip or pre-trip stage, (c) the during the trip stage, and (d) the after the trip or post-trip stage as shown in Figure 3.15:

Figure 3.15: The holiday travel process



Source: Author

The pre, during, and post-trip stages are adopted from the approaches of Werthner and Klein (1999), Woodside and King (2001), Bauer (2001), Maher et al. (2003), Dippelreiter et al. (2008), Manrai and Manrai (2011), and Mackay and Vogt (2012). Given that this study focuses on the use of social media during the whole holiday travel process, the boundaries of each stage need to be clearly defined. For this purpose, given the absence of clearly defined boundaries in the academic literature, a number of a priori assumptions are made: Adopting the cyclical nature of the travel process, the dreaming stage commences when sharing of experiences about the previous holiday trip are finished. Sharing of experiences can take place in the physical world (e.g. talking in person with friends about the holiday trip) and/or in the virtual world (e.g. posting photos in social media, writing reviews, self-expression in social media about the trip). The dreaming stage concludes exactly before the generic decision about a new holiday trip has been taken. The pre-trip stage commences with the generic decision to go on a holiday trip and concludes with the departure from home. The during the trip stage commences with the start of the journey that is with departure from home, and concludes when the holiday maker returns back home after the holiday trip. This approach assumes that the journey to and from the destination is part of the holiday experience. The post-trip stage commences when the holidaymaker is back home and concludes when sharing of experiences (in the physical and/or the virtual world) have been concluded.

The above proposed approach to the holiday travel process will be among the inputs that will inform decisions about data collection and data analysis as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter on methodology.

## **4. Methodology**

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### **4.1. Introduction**

Based on the research aim, research objectives, and research questions, this chapter critically discusses the available options, and provides adequate justification, for all methodological decisions taken, describing the research process in depth.

Given that an understanding of philosophy of research is considered as an essential prerequisite in conducting research, the chapter starts with a discussion on research enquiry paradigms. Towards his effort to meet the requirements of this study's specific research problem, the researcher admits his pragmatic orientation, and provides adequate argumentation for the choice of a social constructionism perspective. The choice of the qualitative approach adopted in this study is then substantiated. Among the available qualitative data collection methods, the chapter proceeds with providing detailed rationale for the choice of focus groups. A section on focus group design follows addressing discussion strategy and approach, design of questions and individual tasks, the choice of the sampling method, as well as the actual sampling process employed. Further on, the chapter provides adequate information on the focus groups composition, size, length of discussion, number of focus groups and saturation, including a number of other considerations. The analysis of focus group data is described in depth, along with the detailed process employed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues related to the generalizability and transferability of findings, and with a discussion on the methodological limitations of this study.

## 4.2. Research aim, objectives, and research questions

The discussion in the literature review revealed that there is an adequate number of studies that attempt to describe the role and impact of social media. However, the large majority of these studies employ a micro approach, focusing either: (a) on a specific social medium application (e.g. TripAdvisor); or (b) on a specific social media type (e.g. consumer review websites); or (c) on a specific stage of the travel process (e.g. before the trip); or (d) on a specific stage of the decision making process (e.g. information search). Despite the advantages of such micro approaches, still the overall picture on the role and impact of social media as a whole, during all phases of the travel process (i.e. dreaming, before trip, during trip, after trip) remains unclear. At the same time, a number of scholars suggest that published research on the influence of social media on tourism marketing has been very little (Schmallegger and Carson 2008), or even that research on the extent to which Travel 2.0 applications affect tourists' attitudes and purchasing decisions "can be considered still poor and in its infancy" (Del Chiappa 2011, p.339). Moreover, this literature gap is further strengthened by the fact that adoption levels and usage behaviour of social media are still in a state of constant change (Universal McCann 2008; 2009; 2010; Madden et al. 2013; Dewey 2014). It seems therefore that there is a need of a comprehensive study on the overall impact of social media that is not medium or application specific, and at the same time focuses equally on each stage of (a) the travel process, and (b) the decision making process, to provide input on the current state of impact and role of social media.

The **research aim** of this thesis is to explore use and impact of social media on consumer behaviour with particular focus on holiday travel. To achieve this aim, the study focuses on active users' interactions with social media during all stages of the holiday travel process, and also during all stages of the consumer decision process.

Following the identification of the research aim, the following **objectives** have been formulated:

1. To explore social media use and impact during the entire holiday travel process.
2. To reveal the functions of social media within the context of the holiday travel process.
3. To propose a model that will act as a framework for understanding use and impact of social media throughout the entire holiday travel process, as well as throughout the holiday travel related consumer decision making processes.
4. To provide a deeper understanding of social media potential implications for travel and tourism related marketers.



To achieve the objectives, the following **research questions** have been formulated:

1. During which stages of the holiday travel process are social media used?
2. How are social media used during each stage of the holiday travel process?
3. At which stages of holidaymakers' decision making processes are social media used?
4. How holidaymakers construct social media use during the holiday travel process?
5. How social media impact active users' travel related consumer behaviour?

### 4.3. Research inquiry paradigms

An understanding of philosophy of research is an essential prerequisite in conducting research: It provides awareness of the available philosophical alternatives, but also assists the adoption of a philosophical stance that influences, or even determines, informed decisions about research strategy and methods to be adopted. In social sciences, and in consumer research in particular, the quest between the different paradigms "that guide disciplined enquiry" (Guba 1990, p.18), is evident during the last 30 years (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Lutz 1989; Hunt 1991; Marsden and Littler 1996; Marsden and Littler 1998).

A paradigm, a term popularized by Kuhn (1962), is perceived as

"...a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the world, the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts" (Guba and Lincoln 1998, p.200).

A paradigm can also be seen as a "general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds" (Creswell 2009, p.6), or even as a "net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises" (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, p.22). Inquiry paradigms relate paradigms to research and researchers, defining what is there to be found, thus creating a research culture including, in addition to beliefs, "...values and assumptions that a community of researchers has in common regarding the nature and conduct of research" (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, p.24). From a more practical stance, Sarantakos (2005) perceives paradigms as "packages" of ontological, epistemological and methodological prescriptions that guide research.

Paradigms address three fundamental questions in the form of axiomatic components, or basic beliefs (Guba and Lincoln 1998; Sarantakos 2005):

- The **ontological** question: What is the nature of reality? Objective, constructed, subjective? What is there in the world that can be known about it?
- The **epistemological** question: How do we know what we know? What is the relationship between what can be known and the inquirer (researcher)? What kind of knowledge is our research looking for?
- The **methodological** question: How do we gain knowledge in the world? How the enquirer goes about to find out what he/she thinks can be known? It should be stated however that the methodological question is not limited to a choice of **methods** (Guba and Lincoln 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2005), that is to the choice of the instruments employed in data collection and analysis. It is methods that fit into a **methodology** the latter defined as “a research strategy that translates ontological and epistemological principles into guidelines that show how research is to be conducted” (Sarantakos 2005, p.30).

The academic literature evidence the existence of a number of paradigms, and also several variations, or versions within each paradigm (Anderson 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1998, 2005; Sarantakos 2005; Creswell 2009). For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994) consider four major paradigms: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism. In their later work however they include the participatory/cooperative paradigm (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009b) add the pragmatism paradigm, however they do not present positivism since they support that this paradigm was (a) discredited after WWII, and (b) is a “poor choice for labelling quantitative researcher today” suggesting that postpositivism represents those researchers better. Similar to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009b), Creswell (2009) also accepts pragmatism, but does not present neither positivism nor critical theory, the latter being considered as a qualitative theoretical perspective and not as a paradigm.

Towards the adoption of a research paradigm for the purposes of this study, the discussion below presents briefly six of the most cited research paradigms, namely: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, participatory/cooperative, and pragmatism.

### A. Positivism

**Ontologically**, positivism is based on the pillars of naive realism proposing that there is a single reality consisting of what is directly perceived through human senses; therefore reality is considered as fixed and objective. Positivism holds a deterministic view of reality based on causal laws. Its understanding enables researchers to predict the outcome of natural and human

actions. Humans are considered rational beings, perceiving reality independently of their consciousness. Human behaviour is learned by experience and observation, guided by external sources producing consistent behavioural outcomes. **Epistemologically**, positivism proposes a dualist and objectivist view, that is the inquirer should be independent from the object of the study to avoid influence and bias so that to achieve true, objective and replicable findings. **Methodologically**, given that reality is considered accurate and precise, it can be measured through empirical, primarily quantitative methods, that are used to verify hypotheses (Guba and Lincoln 1998; Sarantakos 2005).

### B. Postpositivism

Postpositivism represents an attempt to overcome the major criticisms to positivism. Such criticisms are primarily related to positivism's assumption of the fixed and objective reality that can be truly studied and measured, as well as the rationality of the human being. Although postpositivism, similarly to positivism proposes that there is a single, objective reality, it challenges positivism's notion that absolute truth can be discovered. As a result, researchers cannot prove a hypothesis, but rather fail to reject it (Phillips and Burbules 2000). **Ontologically** postpositivism is based on the pillars of critical realism proposing that an approximate, imperfect, and probabilistic understanding of reality can be achieved only through critical examination (Guba and Lincoln 1998). Similarly to positivism, postpositivism also holds a deterministic view of reality: Reality is based on causal laws, however their understanding enables researchers to make probabilistic (not accurate or true) predictions about the outcome of natural and human actions. As a result, researchers when studying human behaviour cannot be positive about their claims (Creswell 2009). **Epistemologically**, postpositivism abandons dualism accepting that researchers are subjective and therefore able only to approximate reality. As Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.205) suggest "objectivity remains a regulatory ideal" with critical traditions and the critical community acting as guardians of objectivity. **Methodologically**, postpositivism proposes empirical observation and measurement (Creswell 2009), however, it encourages qualitative techniques to enable researchers solicit emic viewpoints, collection of situational information and use of more natural settings for research (Guba and Lincoln 1998).

### C. Critical theory

Guba and Lincoln (1998) suggest that critical theory is an umbrella term used to denote a number of alternative paradigms such as participatory inquiry, materialism, feminism and neo-Marxism, although in later work they consider participatory/cooperative as a paradigm of its own (Guba and Lincoln 2005). In contrast to Guba and Lincoln (1998, 2005), Creswell (2009)

considers critical theory as a qualitative theoretical perspective and not as a paradigm. **Ontologically**, critical theory is rooted on historical realism, accepting a single reality. However, reality is shaped by historically situated factors such as ideological, political, economic, ethnic, gender and social forces. The effects of such forces are crystallized over time into structures. At a point in time, such structures become “real and natural” to the extent that, in practice, they constitute a virtual or historical reality (Guba and Lincoln 1998). **Epistemologically**, critical theory rejects positivism’s and postpositivism’s dualism, supporting that the inquirer’s values not only influence the subject of the enquiry, but are interactively linked; resulting in value mediated subjective findings. This belief leads to a dialogic and dialectical **methodology** that attempts to uncover how historical structures may determine human actions employing all forms of qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009b).

#### D. Constructivism

Constructivism is based on the philosophical assumptions of relativism, which supports that there is no absolute or objective truth. Therefore, reality is relative, subjective, and based on how each individual sees and perceives the world or the object under investigation. As a result, **ontologically**, in contrast to positivism, constructivism assumes multiple realities that are locally constructed. Multiple realities are attributed to the belief that for the same phenomenon there are multiple contradictory, but equally valid, accounts. These realities are mental constructions (constructed reality) that are socially and experientially based, therefore their content and form are based on each individual’s understanding and interpretation of the world within he/she lives and operates (Anderson 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1998, 2005; Sarantakos 2005; Creswell 2009). **Epistemologically**, as is the case in critical theory, constructivism supports that the inquirer and the object are interactively linked. Therefore, knowledge is created as the investigation and the interaction proceeds, based on the participant’s views about the object, or the phenomenon under study (Anderson 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1998, 2005; Sarantakos 2005; Creswell 2009). **Methodologically**, constructivism adopts a hermeneutical and dialectical approach using all forms of qualitative techniques. Constructions of reality can be elicited through a dialectical interaction between the enquirer and the respondent. Those constructions are then interpreted through hermeneutical techniques, to reach a consensus for a new, more informed reconstruction. Although strong supporters of constructivism and relativism disagree with the use of any quantitative measures, the use of descriptive statistics is sometimes seen by constructivists as a representation of one of the multiple reality valid accounts of a phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009b).

### E. Participatory / Cooperative

The participatory paradigm is based on the work of Heron and Reason (1997) who argue that constructivism fails to adequately account for knowledge generated through experience, such as “knowing by acquaintance, by meeting and by felt participation in the presence of what is there” (p.277). As Heron (1996, p.10) argues “if reality is nothing but an internal mental construct, no warrant can be given for supposing that the other people being studied actually exist”.

**Ontologically**, the participatory paradigm proposes a subjective-objective reality: What can be known consists of a subjectively articulated world that is objective in relation to how it is shaped by the knower. A prerequisite to become a knower is to be known by other knowers, therefore a mutual participative awareness is required (Heron and Reason 1997).

**Epistemologically** the participatory paradigm supports that there are four interdependent ways of knowing based on critical subjectivity: experiential (direct encounter), presentational (graphic, musical, vocal, verbal act, metaphors of aesthetic creation), propositional (knowing in conceptual terms and by description as expressed in statements and theories), and practical (how to do something by skill or competence). **Methodologically** the participatory inquiry is based on cooperative inquiry not only among co-researchers, but also among the informants who are involved in all aspects of research decision making, and in the use of language grounded in a shared experiential context.

### F. Pragmatism

Pragmatism as a research paradigm, offers an alternative worldview compared to positivism / postpositivism and constructivism, as it focuses on the research problem and the consequences of the research.

Pragmatism promotes the examination of practical consequences as means to understand the importance of philosophical positions and therefore to inform decisions on the actions required to be taken in order to understand real world phenomena (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Biesta (2010) argues that pragmatism should not be considered as a philosophical position, but as a set of philosophical tools to address problems. This argument results from one of the core ideas of pragmatism supporting that philosophical activity should aim in addressing problems rather than building philosophical systems. Pragmatism has also been considered as an “anti-philosophy” since it prefers action rather than philosophizing (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). In a similar vein, Creswell (2009, p.10) considers that “pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality”.

**Ontologically**, pragmatism is oriented towards problems of the real world, however accepting that there are multiple “existential” realities (Dewey 1925 cited Feilzer 2010, p.8) consisting of different layers, or elements, each of which can be objective, subjective or both (Feilzer 2010). For Dewey (1905, p.158 cited Biesta 2010) “things [...] are what they are experienced as”, therefore whatever is experienced is real, although the experience itself does not results in any knowledge. Such realities are open to empirical enquiry, removing researchers’ constraints resulting from the dichotomy of positivism/postpositivism and constructivism (Feilzer 2010). **Epistemologically**, pragmatism supports that knowledge is both based on the reality we experience within the world we live in, but it is also constructed (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009b). **Methodologically**, pragmatism enables researchers instead of focusing on methods, to focus on the research problem, on the approaches to understand it and on its consequences to the real world (Creswell 2009). Pragmatism rejects the thesis that qualitative and quantitative research are incompatible (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009b). Such a belief enable researchers to use pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge, away from traditional dualisms (quantitative / qualitative), allowing a free, informed, movement between qualitative and quantitative methods, techniques and procedures to best meet researchers’ needs and purposes (Creswell 2009). The ontological belief that there are different layers of reality (objective, subjective, or mixture) enables pragmatism to provide the philosophical basis for mixed methods research (Howe 1988; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Creswell 2009; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009b; Biesta 2010; Feilzer 2010; Greene and Hall 2010; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010).

#### 4.3.1. Paradigms in consumer research

Consumer research has been dominated for long by the various forms of positivism such as logical positivism, logical empiricism, modern empiricism, neopositivism, foundationalism, and objectivism (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Lutz 1989; Hunt 1991). However, during the last 30 years there have been many calls for alternative paradigms, and as a result different methodologies and methods, to provide alternative means of seeking knowledge in consumer research:

Anderson (1986) questioned the scientific adequacy of various forms of positivism and proposed a critical relativism perspective: A multifaceted philosophy supporting that there is no single scientific method; knowledge is contingent on the researcher’s beliefs, values, standards, methods and cognitive aims; perceiving science as a “social and historical enterprise”.

Hudson and Ozanne (1988) compared and contrasted positivism and interpretivism as alternatives in seeking knowledge in consumer behaviour and proposed four alternatives to

address the diversity of approaches: (a) The supremacy alternative, proposing that proponents of each paradigm keep debating for persuading others for the supremacy of their paradigm; (b) the synthesis alternative, proposing a combination of elements from different worldviews through an additive process that combines strengths and minimizes weaknesses of each; (c) the dialectic alternative, supporting development of a new mode of understanding through a debate counter posing aspects of different worldviews; and (d) the relativistic alternative supporting the adoption of critical relativism as per Anderson (1986).

In his presidential address to the Association for Consumer Research, Lutz (1989) acknowledged interpretivism (referring to it as naturalism) as a strong challenger to the dominant positivism paradigm, and foresaw that the field of consumer behaviour will move either to a complete schism, or a re-integration into a pluralistic paradigm, such as critical pluralism, consisting of informed choices about seeking knowledge moving easily between positivism and interpretivism. Toward this end, Hunt (1991) attempts a rapprochement between positivism and non-positivist paradigms, proposing critical pluralism as a mean towards this end: Pluralism refers to the adoption of a tolerant stance towards new theories and methods without dogmatism, however through a critical lens that necessitates that knowledge claims should be evaluated with critical scrutiny.

In discussing alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour, Marsden and Littler (1998) acknowledge the emergence of interpretivism and postmodernism in consumer research. However they argue that both operate at an abstract level, away from the practical issues of marketers. To address the issue, they propose the use of a more comprehensive, holistic view, through a multi-paradigm lens employing multi-method approaches that combine both subjective (qualitative) and objective (quantitative) enquiries.

With reference to consumer decision making, Erasmus et al. (2001) adopt the position that consumer researchers need to explore alternatives to the positivist paradigm, and therefore to reconsider their rational approach in decision making studies. To that end they suggest the use, or incorporation of qualitative research methods to uncover consumers' true views.

#### **4.4. The choice of a paradigm**

Is research paradigm really a matter of choice? It is the researcher's own set of beliefs, developed over lifetime, that provides different answers to the three fundamental questions (i.e. ontological, epistemological, and methodological) that each different paradigm addresses. These answers result in different views of the world and how the researcher acts within it. As a result,

it is these answers that lead to the adoption of a research paradigm. Furthermore, each paradigm addresses differently a number of practical consequences, or answers to practical issues faced when conducting research, such as inquiry aim, nature of knowledge, knowledge accumulation, goodness of quality criteria, values, ethics, voice, training, accommodation, and hegemony (Guba and Lincoln 1998; Jennings 2005a; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009b). The choice of a specific paradigm further informs the choice of methods, research designs and instruments (Sarantakos 2005), although it has been suggested that “both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm” (Guba and Lincoln 1998, p.195)

Apart from the researcher’s personal beliefs, there are different views on how researchers select their paradigm. First, it should be made clear that paradigms are axiomatic, cannot be proven or disproven as they are all human constructs and therefore subject to human error (Guba and Lincoln 1998). Creswell (2009) suggests that a researcher’s worldview is influenced by (a) the researcher’s discipline area; (b) the beliefs of supervisors’ and other faculty; and (c) the researcher’s past research experiences. On the contrary, Jennings (2005a, p.214) from a rather pragmatic perspective supports that “the issue is not which paradigm is better, but rather which best serves the research purposes and the current world context”. However, Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.219) admit that “workday scientists rarely have either the time or the inclination to assess what they do in philosophical terms”.

Based on the above discussion, and also the discussion on paradigms in section 4.2, the author of this study feels the need to admit his pragmatic orientation: The choice of method should not be axiomatic and therefore dictated by an inclination towards one or another paradigm. The choice of method should rather be the result of an informed decision, based on the particular requirements of the specific research problem to be solved. Philosophical activity should aim in addressing problems rather than building philosophical systems. As a result, the author is in agreement with Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) who call for a preference to action rather than philosophizing. This does not mean that the author is a pragmatist by dogma. If this was the case, a mixed methods approach should have been adopted for this study, given that mixed methods have been closely associated with pragmatism (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003; Johnson et al. 2007; Feilzer 2010; Harrison and Reilly 2011). The author is in full agreement with Patton (2002, p.71-72) who suggests that:

“While a paradigm offers a coherent worldview, an anchor of stability and certainty in the real world sea of chaos, operating narrowly within any singular paradigm can be quite limiting. As a pragmatist, I take issue as much as with the purist, one sided advocacy of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who believe that naturalistic inquiry is the only valid and meaningful way to study human beings, as I do with the narrow, intolerant stance of Boruch and Rindskopf (1984), who assert that randomized experiments are “the standard against which other designs for impact evaluation are judged” (p.21). My



pragmatic stance aims to supersede one-sided paradigm allegiance by increasing the concrete and practical methodological options available to researchers and evaluators. [...] Being pragmatic allows one to eschew methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality, recognizing that different methods are appropriate for different situations.”

Being an industry professional for 20 years, the author has been conditioned to focus at problems, and on the selection of the appropriate, for each time, tools to solve them the best possible way given the constraints at hand.

The flexibility provided by the author’s pragmatic approach, enables him also to admit that the present study’s aim, objectives and research questions would benefit from a social constructionism perspective. In contrast to constructivism that places emphasis on the construction of meaning within the individual’s mind, social constructionism suggests that meaning is generated and constructed collectively within a social world (Schwandt 1994). As a result, construction of meaning is perceived as a social product (Bryman 2008). Although scholars such as Bryman (2008) and Patton (2002) use the terms constructivism and constructionism, as almost identical, this study adopts the distinction proposed by Crotty (1998):

“It would appear useful, then, to reserve the term constructivism for the epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on ‘the meaning making activity of the individual mind’ and to use constructionism where the focus includes ‘the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning’” (Crotty 1998, p.58).

In a similar vein, Burr (2003) suggests that in constructivism it is the individual who as an agent controls the meaning of the construction process, whereas in social constructionism the control lies on social forces. The position that knowledge is sustained by social processes is one of the founding assumptions of social constructionism (Gergen 1985). As Burr (2003) suggests, social interaction is of great significance to social constructionists since knowledge is considered as constructed between people through their daily interactions with each other in the course of their social life. Such a perspective shifts the emphasis of inquiry away from attitudes, motivations and cognitions to a interactions, social practices, and processes (Burr 2003).

Social constructionism seems that serves best the aim, objectives and research questions of this study due to the very nature of social media. As it was discussed in Chapter 2, social media facilitate the creation and sharing of user generated content. The interpretation of such shared content not only generates different perceptions among recipients, therefore different “realities”, but also acts as stimuli for further interaction among users. Within the context of holiday travel, the perception of reality about a holiday travel related object (such as a holiday destination, an

accommodation establishment, or even a sight or attraction) within the mind of the individual user is constructed within a social setting created by the social medium within which it is shared. As a result, this study adopts a social constructionism perspective: Based on the above discussion, it recognizes that social media users are not constructing the meanings of holiday travel related objects in a vacuum, but meanings are socially constructed through the interaction with other users' meanings and interpretations, therefore knowledge about reality is socially constructed.

## 4.5. The choice of the qualitative approach

The choice of a research approach, among quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, is not only a matter of epistemological and ontological orientation. As was discussed in section 4.3.F, from a pragmatist's perspective, it is also a matter of the specific study's aim, objectives, and research questions. The present study does not attempt to test a specific theory, thus to search for causal explanations. Therefore, it does not follow a deductive route that usually necessitates the adoption of a quantitative approach. The present study attempts to explore a phenomenon through a wide-angle lens, thus to provide an understanding and description of participants' experiences and life world, in an effort to contribute towards the generation of a theory. Towards this goal, the discussion on consumer behaviour models in Chapters 3 did not focus on any specific model or theory, but rather, as Creswell (2009) and Holloway and Wheller (2010) suggest, provided a general orientating lens for the research.

It was also discussed earlier (section 4.4) that the core nature of social media necessitates a social constructionism perspective to be adopted. Such a perspective involves knowledge claims based on multiple meanings of individual and collective experiences. The emphasis of the inquiry needs to be shifted from the researcher's to the participants' point of view, from numbers to words, from structured to more unstructured data collection strategies, from hard and reliable data to reach and deep data, and from emphasis on generalization to contextual understanding (Bryman 2008). Given the above, but also given the nature of the aim, the objectives and the research questions of this study, as presented in section 4.2, and following the discussion on paradigms in consumer research (section 4.3.1) and on paradigm choice (section 4.4), the adoption of a qualitative approach in this study seems as a natural choice. This study adopts Holloway and Wheller's (2010) definition of qualitative research as:

“a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way people make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live [...] to explore the behaviour, feelings and experiences of people and what lies to the core of their lives” (Holloway and Wheeler 2010, p.3).

The choice of the qualitative approach in this study is also in agreement with Creswell's (1998) pragmatic view on the five compelling reasons for a researcher to undertake a qualitative study: (1) When the topic needs to be explored; (2) When the research questions relate to "how" or "what", rather than "why"; (3) When there is a need for a detailed view on the topic; (4) When there is sufficient time and resources; and (5) when the researcher considers him/her as an "active learner" rather than an expert into the field to be studied.

## **4.6. Data collection method**

Qualitative data primarily consists of interviews, observations, and documents (Patton 2002). Interviews provide verbatim quotations providing access to participants' opinions, perceptions, experiences, feelings and knowledge. Observations usually provide field notes that give access to interactions, behaviours, activities, and processes. Documents of various types (text, photos, objects) provide access to information that cannot be observed or told. Qualitative research employs four main forms of data collection methods: (a) Individual interviews; (b) group interviews; (c) observation; and (d) review of documents (Marshall and Rossman 2006). For the purposes of the specific study, the interview method was selected, and more specifically the focus group method for the reasons that are explained in detail in section 4.6.2.

### **4.6.1. Focus groups**

Focus groups as a research method for data collection were introduced during the 1940s by Paul Lazarsfeld for the purpose of measuring audience response in radio broadcasts. Almost in parallel, Robert Merton used them to assess effectiveness of military propaganda efforts. Despite the fall in their popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, it is since the 1980s that focus groups have been rediscovered by social scientists, becoming the subject of important methodological discussions, to the extent that they have even been characterized as a very innovative research method (Acocella 2011, p.1). In tourism research, the widespread adoption of focus groups became apparent in the mid-2000s (Cater and Low 2012). Today, focus groups are considered as a form of scientific research, as a systematic and verifiable process of disciplined enquiry (Krueger and Casey 2000), and as a source of rich qualitative data (Jaccard and Jacoby 2010).

Patton (2002, p.385) defines focus groups as "an interview with a small group of people, on a specific topic" and characterizes them as a highly efficient qualitative data collection technique. Morgan (1997, p.6) emphasizes the importance of group interaction and defines them as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the

researcher”. Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) place focus groups within the broader category of group interviews, identifying however that their distinguishing characteristic lies in group interaction:

“Any group discussion may be called a ‘focus group’ as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction” (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, p.4-5).

In comparison to one to one in-depth interviews, a number of scholars claim that focus groups cannot gain so much insight, in particular when it comes to the experiences and opinions of any given participant (Fern 1982; Morgan 1997). However, others suggest that social interaction among participants often produces richer and deeper material than that of one to one interviews: It is the group setting, the natural discussion and the interaction that may lead participants to defend or explain their views, thus revealing deeper thoughts and beliefs (Rabiee 2004; Hares et al. 2010). This interaction is often seen as the hallmark of focus groups, as it enables the production of data and insights that are less accessible in personal interviews (Morgan 1988b; Flick 2006). Another distinct feature of focus groups, especially as opposed to personal interviews, is that group discussions are perceived as a mean for validating statements and views, since the group enables corrections on views that are “not correct, not socially shared or extreme” (Flick 2006, p.191). Moreover, during focus groups the contribution of any participant into the discussion can act as a catalyst for ideas and thoughtful expressions of other members of the group (Jaccard and Jacoby 2010). Moreover, it has been argued that focus groups, in contrast to personal interviews, offer a more natural environment for discussion and interaction that resembles the way that people discuss and interact in real life situations (Krueger and Casey 2000). Lastly, focus groups are considered to have a lower cost and to require less time to conduct compared to personal interviews (Flick 2006).

#### **4.6.2. Rationale for the selection of focus groups**

The aim and objectives of the study not only inform the methodological approach, that is qualitative versus quantitative, but also provide a direction for the choice of the data collection method to be adopted. Focus groups have been proposed as a data collection method when the researcher, among other goals, seeks to:

1. Orientate oneself to a new field (Morgan 1988b).
2. Reveal a wide range of ideas (Krueger and Casey 2000; Bryman 2008; Jaccard and Jacoby 2010).

3. Explore people's experiences and opinions (Morgan 1997; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999).
4. Examine people's variety of perspectives when they operate within a social network (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999).
5. Gain insights into multifaceted behaviours (Krueger and Casey 2000).
6. Support participants in remembering events (Flick 2006).
7. Collect data with limited financial and time resources (Flick 2006).

The above seven qualities of focus groups provide a very good fit with the aim and the objectives of the specific study:

1. Focus groups have been proposed as a data collection method to orientate a researcher into a new field (Morgan 1988b). Exploring social media use throughout the holiday travel process has never been studied in depth in academia. As it was seen in Chapter 2 there are numerous studies providing insights primarily during the pre-trip and the post-trip stages of the travel process. However, most are either social media type specific, or application specific. As a result, the aim of this study, to explore as a whole social media use and impact during the whole travel process, can be considered as an orientation into a new field, therefore being in agreement with the argument of Morgan (1988b) for the selection of focus groups..
2. A number of scholars propose focus groups as a data collection method to reveal a wide range of ideas (Krueger and Casey 2000; Bryman 2008; Jaccard and Jacoby 2010). Within the context of the present study it is necessary to gather as much as possible ideas and inputs not only on when social media are used during the holiday travel process, but also on how they are used, as well as the reasons for use. A wide range of ideas on those questions will provide a greater insight into social media users' behaviour. Moreover, the fact that the study is not limited to any specific holiday travel related decision (e.g. only destination selection, or only accommodation selection) stresses even more the need for a data collection method that provides more breadth rather than depth of insights.
3. Focus groups have been proposed as a data collection method to explore people's experiences and opinions (Morgan 1997; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). Within the context of the present study, exploring if and how social media are used throughout the holiday travel process requires access to people's holiday travel experiences, so that it

can be revealed if interactions with social media took place before, during and after the trip. Moreover, access to social media users' opinions about those interactions and their outcome is required so to provide insights into the impact of social media on their holiday plans and decisions.

4. Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) also propose focus groups as a data collection method to examine people's variety of perspectives when they operate within a social network. Although, it is clear (given the year of the publication) that Kitzinger and Barbour refer to the physical social network, the validity of their claim can be extended to online social networks. As it was seen in Chapter 2, social media are by default platforms and tools that enable users to interact with their physical social network providing not only the online spaces hosting such interactions, but also numerous user-friendly tools to manage these interactions. Moreover, social media extend significantly people's physical social network by enabling access to, and exchange of information from / with individuals outside the reach of their physical social network. The ability of focus groups to provide an exploration into the variety of perspectives within a social network seems compatible with the need of the present study to explore the variety of perspectives of such interactions. Finally, it is the very nature of the focus groups that is compatible with the very nature of social media: Focus groups place the participant as an active member of a discussion, as an active member of a social gathering that involves interactions with other participants, also giving participants the possibility to alter their ideas and opinions based on this interaction. In a very similar sense, social media provide online spaces for their users to host discussions and interactions based on which ideas and opinions are formed, exchanges and possibly altered. As a result, focus groups seem to provide a natural setting for this study that aims to explore consumers' interactions within social media.
5. Focus groups have also been proposed as a data collection method to gain insights into multifaceted behaviours (Krueger and Casey 2000). Travel related decisions are considered as multifaceted since for the same trip there are a number of choices (e.g. destination, accommodation, activities, trip duration) that are not independent but interrelated and evolving over time (Dellaert et al. 1998). Moreover, travel, and especially holiday travel, can be seen as the demonstration of a traveller's multifaceted behaviour either within the same holiday trip, or across a number of trips: Within the same trip the same traveller may act as a visitor to cultural sights, as gourmet, as a sportsman, as nightlifer, as a shopper. Across a number of trips, the same traveller can evidence multifaceted behaviours that may vary according to the type of the holiday trip

(e.g. a city break, a holiday under the sun, a sports oriented trip, an adventure travel), or even according to the composition of the travel party (e.g. travelling with kids, travelling as a couple, or even travelling with friends). At the same time, social media enable development and maintenance of multiple personas not only in the form of different online identities (Gonzalves 2008), but also in the form of different type of travel related content that users reveal in each platform since travel writing has been seen as the presentation of multiple personas (Holland and Huggan 2000). It may therefore be the case that such multifaceted behaviours may have an impact on usage of social media during the travel process.

6. Flick (2006) suggests that focus groups support participants in remembering events. In the context of the present study, it is required from participants to recall holiday trips that took place within the last 12 months (as it will be explained later in the chapter). As a result, a data collection method, such as focus groups, that supports participants' recall of events and experiences due to the presence and interaction with the other participants is preferred.
7. Finally, issues of cost and time were also considered for the selection of focus groups as the data collection method. As Flick (2006) suggests focus groups are considered to have a lower cost and to require less time to conduct compared to personal interviews. Given that this is a PhD study, time is a crucial factor. Focus groups were seen as the best option to enable access to the experiences, thoughts, and views of the maximum possible number of participants with the lowest possible cost, at least when compared to personal interviews.

#### **4.6.3. Limitations of focus groups**

Although focus groups have certain advantages, they are not without limitations, as is the case with any other data collection method.

When compared with participants' observation, focus groups are considered less naturalistic: They involve a researcher / moderator who not only "guides" the group into a discussion, but also influences the discussion so to maintain its focus, claims that hold true even for some forms of one to one interviews (Morgan 1997). As Jaccard and Jacoby suggest it may be the case that the conversation becomes "side tracked and off point, in which case the moderator needs to keep participants on task" (2010, p.266). Moreover, the moderator may bias the results by intentional or non-intentional provision of cues on desirable answers, or even in an attempt to

achieve consensus on specific topics or parts of the discussion (Stewart et al. 2006). As a result, the moderator may become “an instrument of influence” (Kleiber 2004, p.98).

Participants can also become sources of limitations. The presence of a dominant, opinionated, or influential participant may lead to a biased content of discussion, and therefore biased results. Such a member may also make other members hesitant to participate actively in the discussion to the extent that it can undermine the group. Group conformity can also become an issue in focus groups: Participants may not express views or experiences that they perceive as private, or simply they do not want to reveal in the presence of others. The presence of others may also influence participants on how they express their views and opinions (Stewart et al. 2006; Jaccard and Jacoby 2010).

Focus groups have also practical limitations. When compared with one to one interviews the number of questions that can be asked during a focus group is limited (Flick 2006). For example, the design of a 60 minutes focus group should take into account that eight participants should be given adequate time to respond and to interact. The same amount of time devoted to a one to one interview enables the researcher to ask a larger number of questions. Moreover, given the high level of interactions, there is some degree of difficulty in moderating and at the same time taking notes on non-verbal cues (Krueger 1998c; Flick 2006).

During the focus group design and the actual conversations, systematic efforts have been taken to minimize, as much as possible, the impacts of the above limitations. These efforts are described in detail in the following sections.

## **4.7. Focus Group Design**

This section provides an overview of the various issues that have been taken into consideration when planning and designing the focus groups within the context of this study. It provides details to substantiate the decisions that have been made relating to the discussion strategy, the questions, the sentence completion tasks, and the study’s sample in terms of selection criteria, recruitment, number of focus groups and participants, as well as group composition.

### **4.7.1. Discussion strategy and approach**

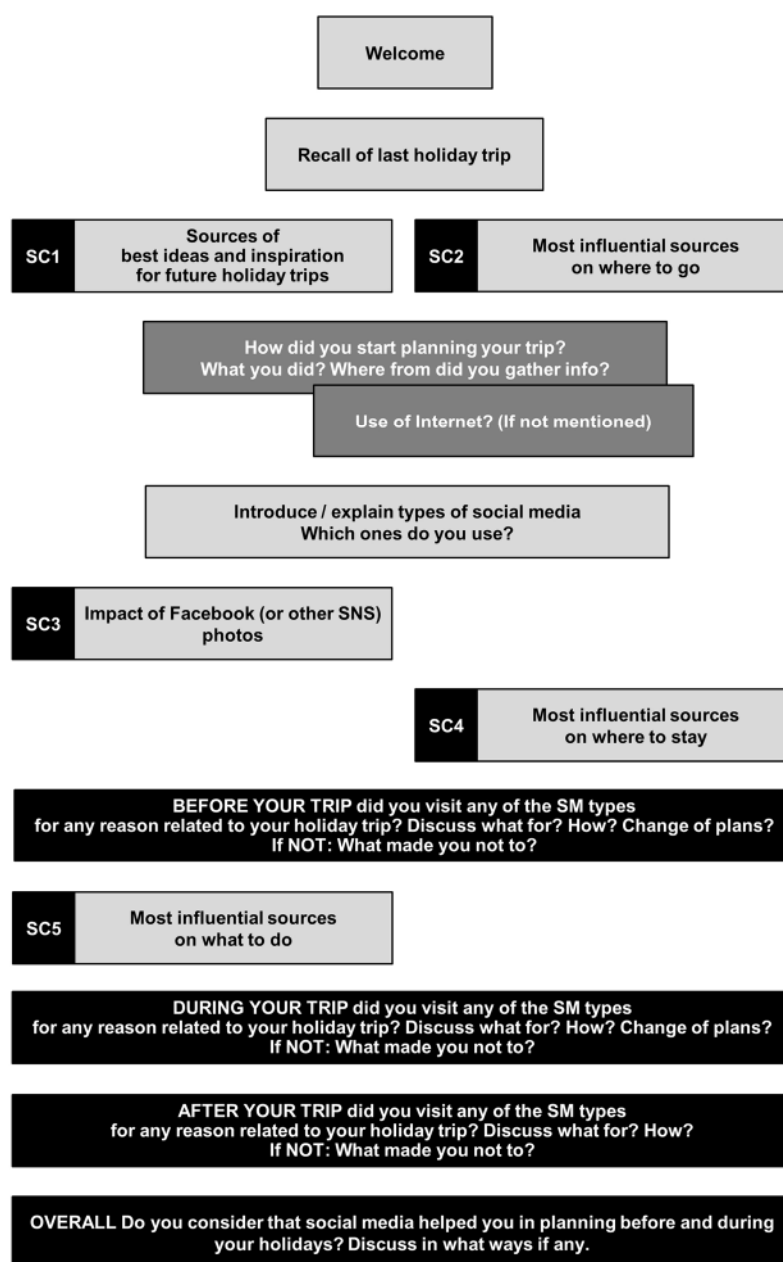
Among the three available discussion strategies, namely structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, this study employs the semi-structured approach. The three approaches seem more as overlapping areas on a continuum, rather than three discrete, distinctly separable alternatives.



A structured discussion resembles more of a positivistic, quantitative approach that places the group within a rigid framework of questions and answers, thus not allowing flexibility and diversion (Jennings 2005b). Morgan (1997, p.39) proposes the structured approach when “there is a strong, pre-existing agenda for the research”. The exploratory nature of this study, and more specifically the need to assess participants’ variety of interactions with social media during the travel process, so to reveal uses and impacts, could not afford such a rigid structure. On the other extreme of the continuum, the unstructured approach offers the ultimate flexibility, moving the control of the discussion totally to the participants, with minimum intervention from the moderator. However, such freedom limits the degree of analysis: Gathered data may become so different between the groups, thus making analysis difficult (Morgan 1997). Moreover, a skilful and experienced moderator is required (Krueger 1998b).

Given the aim and objectives of the specific study, but also the researcher’s lack of experience in moderating focus groups, a semi-structured approach was chosen. Although this strategy follows a questioning route as a topic guide, it does allow for probing and flexibility to divert in case of stimuli from the discussion (Krueger 1998b). The questioning route provided assistance to the researcher so to follow a predetermined path of discussion, but at the same time allowed for deviation if there was a need for emphasis on specific parts. The discussion path was also necessary so to make certain that all four stages of the travel process (dreaming, pre-trip, during trip, and post-trip as discussed in section 3.7) will be covered. This sequential nature of discussion, resembling the sequence of the four stages of the travel process, offers also a natural progression within the topics of the discussion (Morgan 1997). The topic guide, as presented in Figure 4.1, was developed to guide the researcher through the discussion, and provides a very good approximation of how the flow of the discussions actually took place. It also incorporates five individual sentence completion tasks (SC1 to SC5). The rationale of including individual tasks in the focus groups is explained in detail later in this section. However, it is important to note at this point, and especially in terms of the flow of the discussion, that apart from the first individual task (SC1) the exact place of SC2, SC3, SC4 and SC5 varied to each group according to the nature and content of the discussion. Moreover, the wording presented in Figure 4.1 is indicative and was not followed in all focus groups.

Figure 4.1: Discussion strategy: Topic guide and sequence



Source: Author

SC denotes Sentence Completion tasks

## 4.7.2. Questions, individual tasks and flow of discussion

### 4.7.2.1. Welcome and introduction

To open the discussion, the researcher asked participants to briefly introduce themselves to the rest of the group by providing their name, profession, and their country of permanent residence

in case the specific group involved permanent residents of countries other than the country where the group was hosted. This task was designed so that to make each participant talk right from the start of the discussion, and also to get introduced to the rest of the group. This was also designed to show that it is not the moderator who opens the discussion, but the participants, therefore it served as a very early attempt to provide an evidence of a balanced distribution of power between the moderator and the participants.

The participants were then briefly introduced to the topic of the conversation. The introduction was purposefully very general in the form of “We are here to discuss about holiday trips”: The researcher, at this point, did not want to influence participants with anything related to social media, or even Internet, given that two sentence completion tasks required unaided recall of sources of influence and sources of travel related information. During this stage, participants were asked to recall their last holiday trip and share with the rest of the group about its basic characteristics such as destination, duration in nights, nature of travel party, and time of year the trip took place. This was done in an effort to enable them to recollect their personal holiday travel experience and provide a frame of reference, for the discussion to follow, in terms of behaviours and opinions that occurred before, during and after that trip (Krueger 1998a).

#### **4.7.2.2. Sentence completion tasks**

During the next stage, participants were introduced to the sentence completion tasks. Projective techniques, with sentence completion being one of those techniques, have been widely used in consumer research (Donoghue 2000; Steinman 2009). Among the advantages of projective techniques are that they provide access to participants’ hidden beliefs, attitudes, values, motivations, personality, cognitions, and behaviours; and that they require minor cognitive demands (Donoghue 2000; Steinman 2009). There were four reasons for the inclusion of sentence completion tasks into the focus groups of this study:

1. To eliminate group bias that could occur if the same questions were to be answered verbally in front of the whole group. As it was seen in section 4.6.3, group bias is a major limitation of focus groups. Group bias can be eliminated through individual tasks, at least for the content that relates to the specific tasks (Hares et al. 2010).
2. As stimulus material to facilitate discussion (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999).
3. To ensure that every participant had the opportunity to provide input into the discussion, and

4. To ensure that all participants contribute equally at this very early stage of the focus group.

The completion tasks consisted of five sentence completion exercises. During the focus group discussion, an uncompleted sentence, printed on a sheet of paper, was delivered to each participant. They were asked to complete the sentence in private and as spontaneously as possible. After completion, all participants, one at a time, were asked to share their responses with the rest of the group and freely elaborate on their answer. The completed sentence not only revealed the participant's spontaneous answer, but also acted as a stimulus for further discussion. At the same time it provided the researcher with stimuli to reveal further insights from the participants. This task was repeated five times during focus group discussions. The incomplete sentences included in this task are presented in Table 4.1:

*Table 4.1: Sentence completion tasks*

#	Sentences
SC1	Even when I am not thinking to go on holidays,.....provide(s) me with the best ideas and inspiration about my future holidays.
SC2	When I was planning my holidays, the information I got from .....was perhaps the most influential in choosing where to go.
SC3	When I am in Facebook, or any other similar website, looking at nice photos that my friends took during their holidays makes me.....
SC4	When I was planning my holidays, the information I got from .....was perhaps the most influential in choosing where to stay.
SC5	The information I got from .....was perhaps the most influential in deciding what to do during holidays .

*Source: Author*

The first sentence completion (SC1) served the need to provide stimuli for the discussion of the dreaming stage. The aim of SC1 was to explore the range of sources that participants consider as providing the best ideas and inspiration about future holidays. The objectives of SC1 were (a) to examine if social media are considered among those sources that provide the best ideas and inspiration about holidays; and subsequently (b) to allow any social media related answers to act as stimuli for further discussion on their usage and impacts during the dreaming stage. SC1 was given to participants well before the topic of social media was introduced into the discussion, as well as before any mentions about social media, so to ensure that there was not any influence on the spontaneity of participants' self-recall. Moreover, it was well described to participants that they should limit their answers to the period before the generic decision about the holiday trip was made, so to ensure that users were found in the dreaming stage of their travel process (as discussed in section 3.7.) In the case that a social medium was reported, this served as a

stimulus for discussion among the group to examine if and how this medium provides holiday ideas and inspiration.

The second sentence completion (SC2) provided an introduction to the discussion about the pre-trip stage. Its aim was to make participants reveal the range of sources that most influenced them in their holiday destination choice. Again, in case a social medium was reported among those sources, this served as a stimulus for discussion among the group on how this medium influenced destination selection. Therefore, it was necessary that SC2 was performed before the topic of social media was introduced in the discussion so that there was no influence of any sort to the participants.

As a result of the discussion of SC2, the conversation then naturally entered the domain of participants' last holiday trip. A very general question on how they started planning their last holiday trip provided the basis of the discussion. The researcher initial plan was to focus the discussion towards information sources that participants' used. However, the semi-structured, flexible nature of the discussion enabled diversion from the original plan once there were other stimuli that were relevant to the aim and objectives of the study. As a result, other uses of social media during the pre-trip stage were identified.

#### **4.7.2.3. Introduction to social media**

At this stage social media were introduced into the discussion. The researcher distributed to participants a list with eight social media types based on the social media taxonomy proposed in section 2.4, also containing examples of popular sites for each type. The list distributed can be found in Appendix 1. The list and the examples were presented with adequate caution so that not to cause any kind of inferiority feelings to participants who were not aware or not using specific types. Phrases like "Some people think that there are eight types of social media, but this is of no relevance to our discussion", or "there is no any problem at all if you do not know, or if you do not use any of those sites. Actually there are many people who do not use them" were employed. Adequate time was devoted to explain the different types to assure participants' understanding. Each participant was then asked to tell the group which types he/she have used at least once, but the discussion freely moved to which they most used. Since this was not critical to the aim of the study, the researcher did not intervene to avoid such diversion. The aim of this part of the discussion, and this question was double fold: First, to provide participants with a common understanding of what platforms are considered as social media for the purposes of the specific study. This was particularly useful since prior to this part of the discussion the large majority of participants associated the term social media exclusively with Social

Networking Sites. Second, to trigger participants' memory on which social media they used, so that they contribute their experiences with these media during the rest of the discussion.

#### **4.7.2.4. Main discussion: Key questions and remaining tasks**

After the introduction of social media into the conversation, SC3 was delivered. The wording of the sentence was "When I am in Facebook, or any other similar website, looking at nice photos that my friends took during their holidays makes me....". SC3 was intentionally not restricted only to Facebook photos but photos also in other SNS so that participants not using Facebook but other SNS were associated with the task. However, it recognized the popularity of Facebook and that 250 million photos are uploaded daily in this specific SNS (Parr 2011). Given claims in the literature that travel photos posted in social media can become inputs in another person's travel planning (White 2010; Yoo and Gretzel 2012), the aim of SC3 was to initiate a discussion on the range of responses that holiday photos posted in SNS can trigger to social media users, so to reveal impact of social media in the holiday travel process.

SC4 was delivered to the groups aiming to reveal a range of influential sources in relation to holiday accommodation selection and provide stimulus for discussion. However, it should be stated that the timing of the delivery of SC4 was not always the same across the groups. This is due to the fact that in some groups the natural flow of the discussion brought up the issue of accommodation selection either earlier or later. The researcher did not want to intervene and alter the natural flow of ideas and issues raised.

The next stage of the discussion focused at the first key question. Participants were asked if and how they used social media before their departure from home for any purpose related to their holiday trip. Although there were cases that social media have been reported at earlier stages of the discussion, it was by this stage that all participants had a basic understanding of the types of social media. The researcher frequently had to consult his notes and go back at earlier mentions of social media by participants not only to provide stimuli for discussion and interaction, but also to assess usage and impacts in greater depth. There were participants who initially answered that before their departure they did not use particular types of social media for trip related purposes. For example this was the case for SNSs like Facebook. Some participants were not able to remember if they have used it for travel related purposes before their departure. However, when other participants mentioned for example that they posted status updates on their Facebook wall that were related to their forthcoming trip, this made other participants remember that they also did so.

The researcher paid special attention to such agreements among participants so to understand if these were cases of group conformity, or genuine actual behaviour. Although it very difficult to be certain about which of the two was the case, the researcher prompted the specific participants to give examples of such updates, or to provide some thoughts on the reasons that made them to post such updates. In other instances, the researcher felt the need to probe. For example, in a group there was a unanimous answer that they did not use Facebook before their trip for any purpose related to their holidays. The researcher felt the need to ask further by providing an example that occurred as an input from earlier focus groups “Did you post any updates to your wall announcing your trip to your friends?” This made a number of participants recall such behaviour and a discussion was initiated that brought up also other travel related uses of SNS. Although it may be argued that such intervention can be considered as guidance towards a specific answer, the researcher used only examples that appeared naturally in previous groups and not examples he had in mind beforehand or from theory. Should the researcher remained satisfied with the initial negative answer the opportunity the group would reveal further social media uses could have been lost.

After the completion of the discussion about the pre-trip stage, SC5 was delivered to participants. Its aim was to reveal a range of responses on sources that most influenced participants’ choice of holiday activities at the destination. It also provided a natural transfer to the next stage of the discussion which was related to the during the trip stage. The use of the term “activities” was intentionally avoided. Instead the term “deciding what to do during my holidays” was used. Special attention was given to explain the range of activities that participants can include in the “what to do” term, such as eating out of the accommodation, excursions, sightseeing, shopping, entertainment, sports and leisure.

The discussion then moved to the second key question. Participants were asked if and how they used social media during their trip for any purpose. The initial design of this question was to reveal travel related uses of social media, as depicted in the topic guide and sequence presented in Figure 4.1. However, it was soon discovered through the discussion in the first focus group that participants used social media during their trip for reasons other than those directly related for their specific trip. For example the need to “keep up with the world” during holidays was identified. Moreover, the flexibility and the semi-structured nature of the discussion enabled participants to reveal reasons for not using social media during the trip such as their need to “not to be connected” during holidays. As a result, immediately after the first focus group the researcher reformulated this question so to include all forms of social media use during the trip and not only the travel related uses, but also in case of negative response to include a probe on the reasons that made participants not to use them.

As the discussion moved on, participants were introduced to the post-trip stage and were asked if they used social media for any reason related to their trip when they came back home. The final key question prompted participants to enter a discussion about their overall opinion on the ways, if any, that social media provided any help in holiday planning, before and during their trip. After their input, the discussion ended by providing participants the opportunity to add whatever they thought to be of relevance to the topic. Emphasis was given by asking them “Have we missed anything?”, (Krueger 1998b) which enabled many of the participants to make general, but valuable comments, on how they perceive social media in relation to their holiday trip.

The detailed questioning route is included in Appendix 2. However, as mentioned earlier in this section, and also in 4.7.1, due to the semi-structure approach adopted, the questioning route served as a guide; therefore neither the exact wording, nor the exact sequence was maintained in all instances.

#### **4.7.2.5. Types of social media covered in the discussion**

The structure of the focus group discussion can be divided in three distinct parts in terms of how social media were brought into the discussion, and in terms of which social media types were discussed. The **first part** consists of stages 1 to 6 of the questioning route (Appendix 2). This part includes the welcome, the recall of the last holiday trip, an introductory question on pre-trip information search, as well as sentence completion tasks #1 (sources of best ideas and inspiration) and #2 (most influential sources on where to go). As it was discussed in sections 4.7.2.1 and 4.7.2.2, during this first part, both in relation to the introductory questions as well as in relation to the sentence completion tasks the researcher left participants to self-recall (via unaided mention) any interactions or experiences with any social media type. Any mention to social media during this first step was unprompted and unaided, therefore this part of the discussion was not restricted to any specific type of social media.

The **second part** of the discussion consists of stage 7 of the questioning route (Appendix 2). During this second part, participants were introduced to the different types of social media. As discussed in section 4.7.2.3, the different types of social media (as per the taxonomy presented in section 2.4) were introduced into the discussion, and explained in detail, in order to assure that all participants shared a basic level of awareness and understanding for each of the eight types. A photocopy containing a list of the eight social media types (as included in Appendix 1) with indicative applications as examples for each type was distributed to each participant to act as a reminder of the different types during the remaining discussion. Access to such a list during



the discussion provided to each participant the opportunity to self-recall instances of travel related behaviours for any type of social media.

The **third part** of the discussion consists of stages 8 to 15 of the questioning route (Appendix 2). As it was discussed in section 4.7.2.4, this part included sentence completion tasks #3 (impact of Social Networking Sites photos on the dreaming stage), #4 (most influential sources on where to stay), and #5 (most influential sources on what to do), as well as key and final questions relating to social media use before, during, and after the trip. Apart from sentence completion task #3 that was type specific (the rationale of which is explained later in this section), in tasks #4 and #5 any mention about social media was unaided and self-recalled, therefore not restricted to any specific type of social media. Moreover, the key questions relating to the pre, during, and post-trip stages, were structured so that to include the phrase "...did you visit any social media of these types" referring to the types included in the distributed list of social media types. Therefore, any mention that participants made to social media was unprompted, although the distributed list with all social media types and examples may have acted as a stimuli providing aided recall.

From the above it can be seen that the researcher during the whole discussion (apart from SC3 as explained in the next paragraph) consciously avoided focusing, or restricting the discussion to any particular type of social media or specific application. By adopting such an approach, the researcher left participants to have complete control over which social media types and applications were mentioned. Moreover, neither the objectives nor the research questions necessitated focus on a particular type or application. In a similar manner, the researcher did not focus, or restrict the discussion on any particular type of social media content (i.e. text, photos, videos) unless this was mentioned by participants when they referred to their social media travel related experiences. In all cases of self-recall, once a specific type of social medium or application was brought into the discussion by the participants, the researcher prompted to reveal its associated usage patterns and related behaviours. However, it should be mentioned that only when participants did not self-recall a particular type, the researcher prompted about specific types using aided recall mainly using examples of social media applications taken from the already distributed list of social media types.

During the discussions, the only instance that the researcher limited the discussion to a specific social media type was in sentence completion task #3 (SC3). The exact wording of SC3 (Table 4.1) was: "*When I am in Facebook, or any other similar website, looking at nice photos that my friends took during their holidays makes me .....*". SC3 together with SC1 aimed to explore the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process. While SC1 aimed to explore usage by identifying

a range of sources that users considered as inspirational during their dreaming stage, SC3 aimed to explore impact by identifying a range of responses when users were exposed to holiday travel related stimuli during their dreaming stage. As it was technically impossible (due to restrictions in discussion time) to test all possible interactions through all types of social media, it was considered imperative to select a specific social media type that best fits to the aim of the specific sentence completion task. The social media type chosen had to satisfy three requirements. First, given that during the dreaming stage users are outside of a specific holiday travel related decision making process, there was a need for a medium type that enables instances of passive attention to information. Second, given the importance of friends and relatives in holiday travel related decisions, there was a need for a medium type that assures high interaction with friends and relatives. Third, there was a need for a medium type with the widest possible acceptance among participants so to increase the range of responses collected through the discussion. Based on the discussion in section 2.5, it can be said that Social Networking Sites (SNS) is the social media type that is considered to best combine (a) exposure to information through passive attention primarily through its News Feed feature; (b) provides continuous interaction between users and their real life friends; and (c) due to its popularity it was most probable that it had the widest possible acceptance among focus group participants. Especially, in terms of (c), as it was shown in Chapter 2, more than half (61%) of global active Internet users manage a profile on a SNS (Universal McCann 2010). A rather similar pattern exists in United Kingdom where more than half of all adults visit a SNS at least once a week (Ofcom 2013). At the same time, given claims in the literature that travel photos posted in social media can become inputs in another person's travel planning (White 2010; Yoo and Gretzel 2012), it was decided that SC3 in terms of content type should focus on photos. Although there are other social media types that specialize on photo management and sharing (e.g. mainly content community sites such as Flickr, Picasa etc.) their characteristics and usage patterns do not enable passive attention to information, at least to the extent that this is achieved through SNS. Sentence completion task #3 (SC3) offered an opportunity to initiate a discussion on the range of responses that holiday photos posted in SNS can trigger to social media users, so to reveal impact of social media in the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process. Within the context of holiday travel, SNS have been found as the most popular social media type for travellers when posting photos online (Lo et al. 2011) with Expedia (2013) supporting that 21% of US adults posted photos on a SNS after they returned home from a holiday trip. Exclusively for the purpose of facilitating understanding among participants, the term Social Networking Site was purposefully avoided in the wording of SC3. Instead it was decided to use a specific SNS application as an example. To enable participants to associate easier with the task, Facebook was chosen as a very popular SNS application. However, as mentioned in 4.7.2.4 the

wording of the sentence was intentionally not restricted only to Facebook photos. By stating “*When I am in Facebook, or any other similar website,...*” participants using other SNSs (e.g. Wayn, Google+, etc.) could also associate with the task. The choice of including Facebook as an indicative example in the wording of SC3 was exclusively due to its extreme popularity among users: With more than 1.3 billion monthly, or 800 million daily active users worldwide Facebook is the specific application that drives growth and popularity of SNS. Independently of the stage of the travel process (pre, during, or post travel) eMarketer (2010a) supports that 57% of US female travellers who use social media employed Facebook to share travel related photos and videos. Finally it should be stated at this point that intentional use of SNS during the discussions, and Facebook in particular as an indicative example of SNS, was employed only in SC3. In all other instances during the discussion, SNS and Facebook in particular were self-reported or self-recalled.

#### **4.7.3. Sampling and the study sample**

As opposed to quantitative research, the qualitative predominantly uses non-probability samples. The emphasis on participants’ selection is on specific characteristics that they possess that are meaningful to the aim and the objectives of the study, enabling them to provide rich data, rather than on the equal chances that they have to be selected (Patton 2002; Ritchie et al. 2003). As Patton (2002, p.230) suggests: “Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations”.

##### **A. Choice of sampling method**

In qualitative research scholars seem to have different approaches on the types of sampling methods available: Marshall (1996) proposes three broad approaches: Convenience sample, judgement (or purposeful) sample, and theoretical sample. Patton (2002) considers that all sampling in qualitative research is purposeful and proposes 15 strategies for sample selection with convenience being one of those (Creswell 1998, p.118) acknowledges that “the purposeful selection of participants represents a key decision point in a qualitative study” and recommends researchers to examine Miles and Huberman’s (1994) 16 strategies for purposeful sampling. From a different perspective, and especially when data are collected through focus groups, Morgan (1996) proposes a segmentation-based sampling. However his approach seem more appropriate for the marketing industry’s needs, lacking the rigour of sampling strategies proposed by qualitative research scholars.

It is not among the aims of this study to further discuss the taxonomical issues of qualitative sampling. However, it is evident that convenience sampling, thus selecting the most convenient and accessible participants, is the least rigorous strategy. This convenience is at the expense of credibility and quality of data (Miles and Huberman 1994; Marshall 1996) and therefore it is not adopted in this study. Theoretical sampling, or “theory based” sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994) is usually proposed for grounded theory studies: “The investigator chooses participants based on their ability to contribute to an evolving theory” (Creswell 1998, p.118). In theoretical sampling the sample is growing progressively: Initially there is a selection of a homogeneous sample based on which a theory is developed. A heterogeneous sample, or more, are then selected so to confirm or disconfirm the theory, a process resembling a continuous iteration between participants and the emerging theory (Marshall 1996; Creswell 1998; Coyne 2008). Given that the present effort is not a grounded theory study, theoretical sampling is not adopted.

Purposive (or purposeful or judgement) sampling is a typical choice in qualitative research (Marshall 1996; Bryman 2008), to the extent that Patton (2002) proposes that all sampling in qualitative research is purposeful. In contrast to convenience sampling, where participants are selected among those conveniently available by chance (not randomly) to the researcher, purposive sampling recruits participants that are relevant to the research questions (Bryman 2008). This relevance is often assured with specific criteria that participants should meet, a reason behind the fact that Ritchie et al. (2003) use the term “criterion based sampling” as a synonym to purposive sampling:

“The sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study. These may be socio-demographic characteristics, or may relate to specific experiences, behaviours, roles, etc.” (Ritchie et al. 2003, p.78).

Scholars, such as Patton (2002) and LeCompte et al. (1993) who suggest that all sampling in qualitative research is purposive, do propose criterion sampling as one of the sampling strategies. Within the context of the present study, purposive sampling was used as a sampling method, in an effort to achieve higher quality of data and credibility at least when compared with convenience sampling.

## **B. Sampling strategy and process**

Given the selection of purposive sampling as the sampling method, a combination of sampling strategies were used based on the typology proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). More specifically it was Criterion sampling that provided the foundation for all recruitment activity.

In addition, participants for specific focus groups were chosen based on Intensity, Homogeneous and Snowball sampling strategies. More specifically:

The **Criterion sampling** strategy ensures that all participants meet some criteria and also provides quality assurance (Miles and Huberman 1994). In terms of the selection criteria, given that this study attempts to explore social media impacts in consumer behaviour within the context of holiday travel, it was considered essential that participants in focus groups should meet the following two criteria:

1. To have been on a holiday trip during the last 12 months.
2. To be an active social media user.

In terms of the first criterion, the time frame of 12 months is a usual practice in tourism and travel related research (Woodside et al. 1987; Plog 2002; Kim et al. 2004; Tanford et al. 2011). In addition, for a clear definition of the criterion, a definition of the holiday trip seemed necessary. In their study Nawijn and Peeters (2010) adapt the 2002 definition of UNWTO focusing on leisure tourists, defining a holiday trip as:

“a trip where people are ‘travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure purposes” (Nawijn and Peeters 2010, p.385).

Haukeland (1990) adopts OECD’s definition which:

“defines a holiday trip as comprising of a minimum of four nights away from one’s normal residence, where the purpose of the trip is predominantly recreation” (Haukeland 1990, p.173).

Nawijn and Peeters’s (2010) definition does not include a minimum stay and therefore a same day excursion may be considered as a holiday trip. On the other hand, the OECD’s definition imposes a minimum of four nights; therefore it excludes mini-breaks and city-breaks which may be considered as holiday trips. For the purposes of the present study, a holiday trip has been defined as travelling to and staying in a place, or places, outside the usual environment for at least one night and not more than one consecutive year for leisure or recreational purposes. The term “usual environment” is defined by United Nations (2010) as:

“the geographical area (though not necessarily a contiguous one) within which an individual conducts his/her regular life routines” (United Nations 2010, p.12).

In terms of the second criterion: The academic literature does not provide a definition of an active social media user. Moreover, also in the industry, the term has not been officially defined. This is suggested by the fact that the term is absent even in the 2014 edition of the Manual for Measuring ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals, developed by the International

Telecommunication Union (International Telecommunication Union 2014b). For the purposes of the present study an active social media user is anyone who maintains a profile in at least two social media types and visits them at least every other day. Social media types are considered those proposed in social media taxonomy presented in Chapter 2 (section 2.4), namely: Social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, content community sites, consumer review sites, Internet forums, wikis, and location based social media.

In addition to the criterion sampling strategy, also **intensity sampling** strategy was employed during the first two focus groups. Intensity sampling seeks “information-rich participants that manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely” (Miles and Huberman 1994, p.28). The choice of intensity sampling during the first two focus groups was chosen to enable the researcher’s exposure to a wide range of social media related behaviours. Such a wide exposure in the early stages of the data collection was necessary so in later focus groups the researcher could provide a pool of probing stimuli, if necessary, based on data collected, that is participants’ behaviours, rather than stimuli that were based on his own thoughts and understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher during his role as part-time lecturer of a postgraduate course in Bournemouth University had the opportunity to discuss about social media in his class. During his lectures he observed that most of his students were intense users of social media. At the same time the composition of the class in terms of national and cultural backgrounds was very diverse. Given that in the literature there are early notions of differences on social media travel related usage behaviour between national cultures (Gretzel et al. 2008; Fotis et al. 2011) it was decided that participation of different national cultures into the study’s sample, could enrich the understanding of the phenomenon since the study’s aim was not limited to residents of a particular region or country.

Although the literature evidences that among consumer behaviour scholars and marketers the use of university students as samples is prevalent (Yoo et al. 2000), the author is well aware and acknowledges the validity, transferability and ethical issues associated with the use of students in academic research. The concern in the use of student samples, primarily relates to the question of whether students, and especially undergraduates, are representative of the general population, thus raising issues of external validity and transferability of the findings. The debate is present in academic literature for more than five decades and opinions vary with a significant number of scholars being in favour (Weick 1967; Oakes 1972; Flere and Lavrič 2008; Snook 2012), as well as against (Schultz 1969; Abelman 1996; James and Sonner 2001; Peterson 2001) of the argument. However, it should be stated that most of the above concerns are related to studies where samples were exclusively made of students. In the present study, students were only a part of the sample (14 out of 51 participants, consisting two of the seven focus groups

conducted). Moreover, the employment of students in the data collection served three very specific purposes:

1. Students were considered as “rich informants” for a study on social media, a characteristic that is desirable in exploratory qualitative studies (Marshall 1996), therefore serving the purposes of an intensity sampling strategy. College students have been considered as a “highly relevant population and tend to be comfortable with all sorts of emerging Internet formats” (Darley et al. 2010, p.109); but also deserve attention due to their significant number and interactions in the virtual world (Lim and Dubinsky 2005).
2. The specific group of students could enrich findings due to their diverse national and cultural backgrounds, so to address the claims of Gretzel (2008) and Fotis et al. (2011) on cultural differences in travel related use of social media.
3. To achieve a **homogeneous sample** during the first two focus groups. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p.28) homogeneous sampling “focuses, reduces, simplifies, and facilitates group interviewing”. Given the researcher lack of prior experience in conducting focus groups, it was thought that a homogeneous group of students with whom he feels comfortable could facilitate the process and ease his first two sessions into the world of focus groups.

In terms of the ethical issues, the intention to employ a number of students as part of the sample was first announced to the School of Tourism Research Ethics Representative for an informal consultation. After his initial approval, details about students’ participation were included in the Research Ethics Checklist document that the researcher submitted. The checklist was formally approved by the Research Ethics Representative in consultation with Bournemouth University’s Research Ethics Code of Practice. In addition to the above, the students were informed several times both verbally (when the initial announcement was made to them), and in writing, at least three times (two emails and one consent form) that their participation in the focus groups is voluntary and is not part of their academic studies at Bournemouth University. Moreover, it was clearly said and stated in written that their decision to either take part, or not take part in the focus groups will have no impact at all on their marks, their assessments, or their future studies. All announcements were made after class hours and the focus groups took place outside the normal teaching hours. From the above it can be seen that the use of students as part of the sample was an informed choice and not a matter of convenience.

In addition to the criterion sampling strategy, a **Snowball sampling** strategy was employed during FG3, FG4 and FG5. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p.28) snowball or chain

sampling “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich”. In FG3 a relative of the researcher who met the criteria for participation was contacted and asked to provide access to individuals within her social network who can also meet the sample selection criteria. This resulted into a focus group (FG3) with seven participants. In FG4 a managing director of a local (Bournemouth) business acted as the initial contact. He announced the invitation to his staff and five of them met the criteria and accepted the invitation to participate. In FG5, a local public relations professional, who was known to the researcher as an active social media user was contacted for the same purposes. Given her extensive professional and social network she was able to recruit five additional participants who met the criteria.

Participants in FG6 and FG7 were recruited with the assistance of Bournemouth University’s Marketing Research Group (MRG). MRG used two mailing lists to send an open invitation for participation: The first mailing list consisted of members of a qualitative panel of individuals who live in Bournemouth and who have agreed to participate in qualitative research projects of Bournemouth University. The second mailing list is a “survey mailing list” consisting of all students, academics, administrative and other staff of Bournemouth University. However, the recruitment through this second list aimed only at administrative and other staff, thus excluding academics and students.

### **C. The study sample**

The study’s sample consists of 51 individuals who participated in seven focus group discussions: 29 females and 22 males, aged between 23 and 60 years old. The discussions took place between 6 June 2011 and 10 October 2012. In terms of their nationality, the sample consists of 28 British, and 22 of other national origin: Cypriots (7), German (3), Greeks (3), Chinese (2), Kazakhstani (2), Taiwanese (2), French (1), Libyan (1), Macanese (1), and Russian (1). At the time the focus groups were conducted, most of them (44) were living in the county of Dorset in southwest England, and seven were living in Cyprus. Appendix 3 presents a synopsis of their profiles including their profession, as well as the types of social media they were using during the time the focus groups were conducted. Moreover, all self-declared that they have been on a holiday trip during the last 12 months.

### **D. Focus Groups composition**

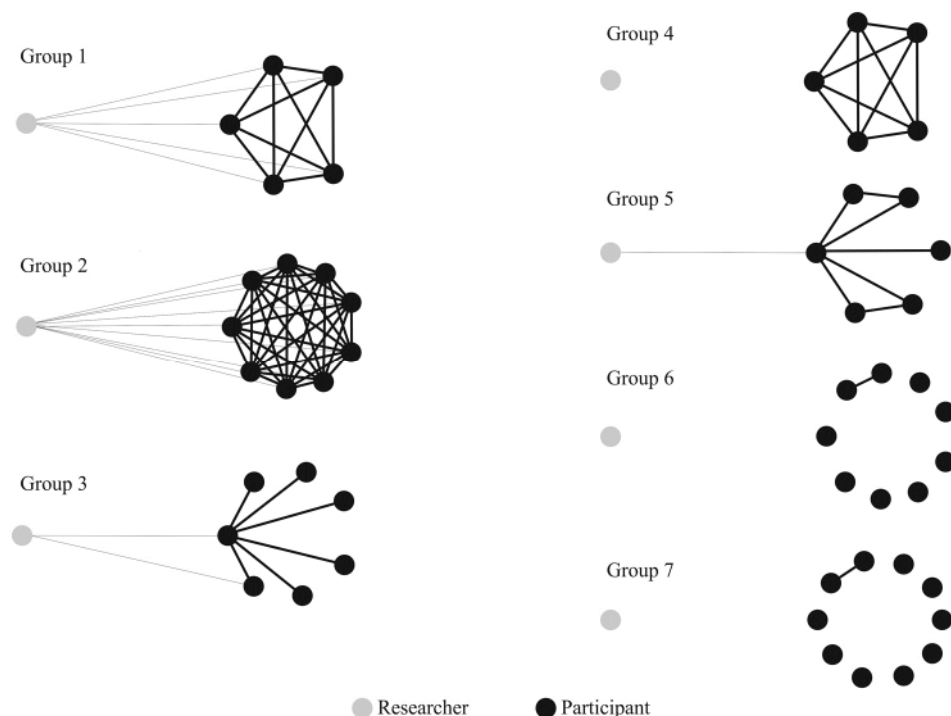
There is an extensive debate on whether participants in each group should, or not, know each other beforehand (Morgan 1997; Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) support that in market research practitioners favour groups consisting of strangers to avoid



effects of existing relationships among members and to encourage more honest expression of views. On the other hand, social researchers favour pre-existing groups consisting of acquaintances acknowledging the existence and importance of social networks in idea formation and decision making. For example Kitzinger (1999) proposes the use of pre-existing groups in an effort that members relate more to one another thus being able to challenge each other's views. Morgan (1997) supports that the decision criterion should be on whether the discussion topic can be comfortably accommodated in a useful way to the researcher in any of the two compositions.

In this study the researcher decided to employ both approaches so to take advantage of both merits: FG1, FG2 and FG4 can be considered as pre-existing given that all members knew each other before-hand. On the contrary FG3, FG5, FG6 and FG7 were not pre-existing, although in each of FG3 and FG5 there was one participant who had some prior connection with another member. In both groups it was this participant through whom the group was recruited. Figure 4.2 presents the pre-existing relationships among participants, but also shows if there was a pre-existing relationship, or not, between the researcher and any of the participants for each group.

Figure 4.2: Pre-existing relationships among participants and researcher



Source: Author

In addition, it should be stated that four couples participated in the study (two in FG5, one in FG6, and one in FG7). Such inclusion was decided to acknowledge the fact that in many cases

decisions about holiday trips is a joint exercise between the couple or the family (Jenkins 1978; Decrop and Snelders 2005; Decrop 2006; Hyde and Decrop 2011). Moreover, as Pollock (1955 cited Flick 2006, p.191) suggests

“Studying the attitudes, opinions and practices of human beings in artificial isolation from the contexts in which they occur should be avoided.”

Although it was not among the study’s objectives to reveal differences in social media use and impact between couples and non-couples or among the couple members, it was decided that a small number of couples should be included so to reflect views and insights also from a couple’s perspective.

### **E. Group size and length of discussion**

Opinions on the ideal size of a focus group vary among scholars: From five to six (Green and Hart 1999; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999), six to eight (Krueger and Casey 2000; Patton 2002), five to ten (Cater and Low 2012), six to ten (Patton 2002) or even up to 12 participants (Stewart et al. 2006). Morgan (1996), although does not quantify his position, proposes small groups for discussion topics that are likely to generate high levels of participants’ interaction such as emotionally charged topics; and larger groups for topics that are expected to generate low levels of interaction such as “neutral topics”. Among the advantages of small groups is that they provide more time per participant to express him/herself, and that are easier for moderation. On the other hand larger groups may provide a wider range of views, therefore may provide data with more breadth.

Based on the above, an effort was made in this study to keep the group size between five to eight participants for a number of reasons: (a) To provide adequate time for each participant to express his/her views; (b) to create a natural discussion environment; (c) to enable the researcher to manage the group and the discussion easier given his lack experience with focus groups. As a result, FG1 and FG4 consisted of five participants, FG5 of six, and FG3 of seven. Over-recruitment was made for all groups at the level of 20% to cover for non-shows (Morgan 1997) As a result of this over-recruitment FG2 and FG6 consisted of nine participants, and FG7 of 10 due to the fact that there were not any non-shows among the invited participants.

The discussions varied in duration from 1 hour 6 minutes to 1 hour 40 minutes mainly depending on the extent of the interaction, on how talkative the participants were, and on the size of the group.

## **F. Number of focus groups and saturation**

Scholars' approach on the required number of focus groups ranges from three or four groups, to over 30 (Gamson 1992), depending on the research question, range of people to be included, time and resource limitations (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). Morgan (1996, p.144) suggests that "the most common rule of thumb is that most projects consist of four to six focus groups". However, there seems to be an agreement that the key point behind the decision on how many focus groups are required is based on the concept of data saturation. It is suggested that the researcher should run focus groups until when answers become repetitive and there is a clear pattern of findings (Morgan 1996), therefore "new categories, themes or explanations stop emerging from the data (data saturation)" (Marshall 1996, p.523). In the same vein, Bryman when discussing saturation and sample size adopts Guest's et al. (2006) proposition describing data saturation as the number of interviews "needed to get a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within [their] data" (Bryman 2008, p.462). From another perspective, Morse (2000) warns researchers to avoid too much data as this may result in a large study which however is not necessarily richer.

For the purposes of this study, data saturation was considered to be achieved when collected data from focus groups (a) were not able to reveal any new uses of social media that participants experienced during their travel process, however not in a per medium basis but as a whole, and (b) new categories and themes in terms of impacts stop emerging. During the FG6 discussion it became apparent that the point of saturation was reached, which was confirmed during FG7.

### **4.7.4. Other considerations and proceedings**

#### **A. Information Sheet**

A focus group information sheet was prepared and sent by email to all participants upon the confirmation of their participation and prior to the discussion. The aim of the information sheet (included in Appendix 4) was double fold: First, to provide participants with all necessary information and answer potential questions they might have. Second, to provide them with adequate assurance on the protection of their anonymity and confidentiality, thus to enable them express their views and opinions as freely as possible. The information sheet was structured in a question – answer format providing answers in the following ten questions:

1. What is the purpose of this study?
2. Why have I been invited to participate?
3. Are there any requirements I need to fulfil to enable me participate?

4. What is the focus group about?
5. Do I have to take part?
6. Will what I say in this focus group be kept confidential?
7. What will happen to the results of the research project?
8. Who is organising and funding the research?
9. Who has reviewed this study?
10. Whom can I contact for further information?
11. How can I take part in the focus group?

Depending on the specific focus group, there were minor differences in the information sheet content. The one delivered to students (FG1 and FG2) had a section about the fact that the focus group was not at all related to their course. The one delivered to participants in FG6 and FG7 had an additional section relating to the cash incentive for their participation.

### **B. Focus Group location**

Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) outline the characteristics of an appropriate location for a focus group: Easily accessible, quiet, comfortable, protected from observation free from interruptions, including among others even classrooms and people's own homes. As a result, given that FG1 and FG2 involved students, a meeting room within the School of Tourism at Bournemouth University was selected to host the discussions. For the same reason, FG4 was conducted in a meeting room within the participants' place of employment, as their own working environment would reinforce the feeling of natural conversation. Moreover ease of access was also taken into consideration. FG3 and FG5 were conducted in the researcher's place of residence in Cyprus and Bournemouth respectively in an effort to reinforce the natural setting of the conversation. The use of the researcher's home, as a location for hosting focus groups is an accepted practice in an effort to create a comfortable and open for discussion environment (Gill and Williams 1994). FG6 and FG7 were conducted in Bournemouth University in a quiet meeting room at the Poole House, nearby the main Reception area.

### **C. Welcome of participants**

There were two different approaches in terms of welcoming participants. In the five focus groups that took place in locations other than the researcher's home, upon participants' arrival they were welcomed and offered coffee, tea, and juice, as well as a selection of biscuits so that the whole atmosphere becomes as informal as possible. This also assisted the researcher in waiting for all participants to arrive. In FG3 and FG5 a variety of snacks and pizzas were offered to achieve the same results.

**D. Participation incentive**

This study adopted two approaches in terms of provision of a participation incentive. Participants in FG1, FG2 and FG4 were not offered any incentive at all. Participants in FG3 and FG5 were offered a snacks and pizzas as a form of non-monetary incentive for their participation, but also as means to enable the creation of a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Participation in FG6 and FG7 was motivated through a modest £20 cash incentive per participant to cover for their time and transport to and from the university. The use of a modest cash incentive for participation in qualitative studies, and especially focus groups, is well substantiated (Krueger and Casey 2000; Morgan 1998b). Moreover, the use of the monetary incentive in this study was included in the Research Ethics Checklist and was approved by the Ethics Representative of Bournemouth University's School of Tourism.

**E. Consent forms**

Prior to the opening of the discussion the researcher asked participants if they have in questions in relation to the topics raised in the information sheet and gave a number of hints and tips about the discussion. A consent form (Creswell 1998) was then presented asking for participants' agreement in participating, in audio recording, and in the potential use of anonymized quotes in academic publications. The consent form used can be found in Appendix 5.

**F. Style of moderation**

The researcher made a conscious effort to fulfil the required characteristics of a moderator as set by Barbour and Kitzinger (1999), Flick (2006), Puchta and Potter (2004), and Fontana and Frey (2000): He attempted to create a liberal climate so that every participant contributes openly: Statements like "all opinions are welcomed", "there are no correct or mistaken views" were frequently used. He took care that participants were not feeling inferior compared to others, for example when someone was not using a particular type of social medium he/she was told that this is a normal behaviour and that the majority of people are like him/her. He made every effort to be a good listener, empathetic, objective, preventing specific participants from dominating the discussion, encouraging reserved members to express themselves by asking them directly for their opinion on every discussion topic, encouraging interaction, and avoiding being judgemental. Moreover, he made a conscious effort not to present himself as an expert of social media or tourism both by not using any jargon but also by clearly and directly stating this several times during the discussion. Every effort was also made so that to avoid steering the discussion, but rather to moderate it in a non-directive manner (Flick 2006). Despite the fact that the presence of an assistant moderator is advised (Krueger 1998c; Flick 2006) to take notes on

non-verbal cues and in assisting the whole process, this was not possible during any of the focus groups.

### G. Voice recording

All sessions were voice recorded using a digital voice recorder that stored discussions in digital sound files. The recorder was equipped with an additional, very small in size, high quality multidirectional microphone. Although participants were informed about recording prior to their consent, every effort was made to keep the recorder out of their sight during the whole conversation, keeping only the microphone on the table. In an effort to produce a natural atmosphere, most of the times it was attempted that even the microphone was out of the participants' sight, by placing drinks, and snacks around it. To enable the identification of the speakers during the transcription, each discussion started with each participant presenting himself / herself that also acted as a voice check (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999).

## 4.8. Analysis of focus groups' data

Approaches to focus group analysis can be seen on a continuum ranging from the elaborate, rigorous analysis required for an academic social science research study in which focus groups are the exclusive data collection tools, to an oral briefing report with practical recommendations usually required within a broader marketing research project. It is therefore the goal of the study that usually dictates the extent, the level of detail and rigor, and the nature of analysis, alongside with the available resources of time and cost (Knodel 1993; Morgan 1997; Stewart et al. 2006). Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that focus group analysis should be systematic, sequential, verifiable and continuous:

The analysis is considered **systematic** when it is deliberate, planned, documented, understood, open for inspection, and can be clearly articulated by the researcher. Procedures aiming at systematic analysis aim to ensure that findings are as authentic as possible (Krueger 1998a). A number of steps have been taken to ensure that the analysis is systematic: First, the analysis employed thematic analysis, a method described as a “foundational method for qualitative analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.78) and followed specific stages (details are provided in following sections) suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Second, the analysis is well documented: Section 4.9 provides adequate documentation on all stages and actions taken during the analysis. Third, the analysis is open for inspection: All data, such as recordings of discussions, transcripts, analysis files, mind maps, and charts are available in digital form for inspection. Moreover, in the analysis files and the mind maps there are information (such as

time stamps and sentence numbering) that can directly point to the trail of evidences. Moreover, the use of a computer to assist in the data management and analysis is also considered by Krueger (1998a) as an additional indication of a systematic process.

The analysis is considered **sequential** when it involves a clearly defined process. As it is discussed in detail the next section (4.9), the analysis in the present study is based on the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis is considered **verifiable** when there are sufficient data to constitute a trail of evidence. In the present study a number of steps have been taken to ensure that analysis is verifiable: Discussions were digitally voice recorded, were transcribed and all relevant files are available for verification. Moreover, as it is explained in later sections, data analysis was computer assisted and as a result the analysis file is available for verification. Also available for verification are a number of files containing mind maps that were developed to assist in the analysis.

Unlike quantitative research where data entry begins after all data have been collected and analysis begins when all data are entered, in qualitative analysis this is not the case. In focus groups, as well as with most forms of qualitative data, the analysis is considered **continuous**: Analysis usually begins after the first focus groups, but more than that coding, categorizing and theme development is a continuous process as the research evolves. In this study continuous analysis was employed as discussed in section 4.9 and presented in Figure 4.3.

#### **4.8.1. Basis for data analysis**

In terms of basis for the analysis of focus group data there are four options: transcript based, tape based – abridged transcript, note based, or memory based (Krueger and Casey 2000). Transcript based analysis was employed in this study as it is generally considered as the most rigorous and time-intensive method of analysing focus group data in social science research (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009a). During the transcription process the original first names of the participants were replaced by pseudonyms, not only to preserve confidentiality but also to indicate sex, and assist the reader in gaining a sense of the participant's personality (Vicsek 2010).

#### **4.8.2. Method of data analysis**

In selecting a method of data analysis it is important that the method matches “what the researcher wants to know” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.80), therefore matches the requirements of

the project's aim and objectives. As a result it is the aim and the objectives that inform the choice of the data analysis method.

In the present study, it is important that the selected analysis method should be able to provide patterns for organizing: (a) social media uses during each of the stages of the holiday travel process, and (b) their impacts on consumer behaviour. Those patterns should at the minimum assist in organizing and describing the phenomenon under investigation (social media use during the holiday travel process and their impacts on consumer behaviour), or at maximum provide interpretation in some aspects of the same phenomenon. Moreover, given that there is no prior research on the phenomenon, at least in studying (a) social media as a whole within the context of the whole travel process, the patterns should be generated inductively from the data, rather than deductively that is from theory, prior research, or existing framework.

In qualitative research there are numerous data analysis methods that provide identification of patterns or themes such as Conversation Analysis, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Thematic Analysis, or even Grounded Theory (Braun and Clarke 2006; Bryman 2008). However, most of them are tied to specific epistemological and theoretical traditions. For example Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is associated with a phenomenological epistemology, while analysis via a Grounded Theory approach is directed towards development of a theory. On the contrary, thematic analysis is seen as a flexible method that is independent of theory and epistemology, therefore "it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.78). For the same reason, Boyatzis (1998) does not consider it as a specific method, but as a technique used across different methods. Based on the above discussion, as well on the researcher's pragmatic approach in this study (as discussed in section 4.4) it was decided that thematic analysis should be employed as the data analysis method.

Thematic analysis has been defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.78). In the following passage, Boyatzis (1998, p.vi-vii) provides the essence of thematic analysis:

"Thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information. The encoding requires an explicit "code". This may be a list of themes; a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are causally related; or something in between these two forms. A theme is a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. A theme may be identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon). The themes may be initially generated inductively from the raw information or generated deductively from theory and prior research."



Thematic analysis has been described as “one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis” (Bryman 2008, p.554); as a “foundational method for qualitative analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.78); and as a “way of seeing” (Boyatzis (1998, p.1). Two advantages of thematic analysis is that (a) it provides a set of generic analysis skills that can be commonly shared among a variety of qualitative analysis methods (Holloway and Todres 2003); and (b) it is more appropriate for novice qualitative researchers as it does not requires the theoretical and technological knowledge of other analysis methods such as grounded theory and discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis (Table 4.2), served as the basis for the analysis process employed in the present study.

*Table 4.2: Phases of thematic analysis*

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

*Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)*

The following section describes in detail how the above framework was employed in the data analysis process of the present study.

## 4.9. The analysis process

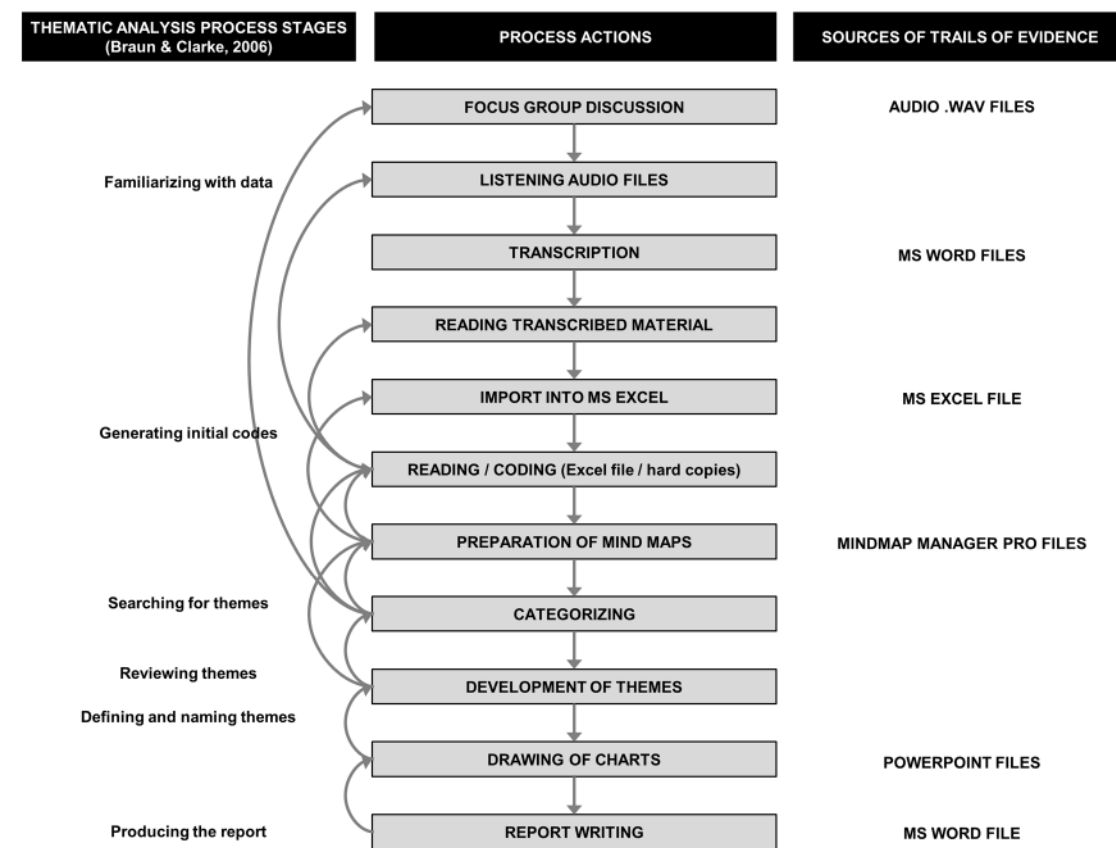
Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach, at least as presented in Table 4.2, provides the initial impression that the six phases are distinct and separable, however this is not the case in actual practice. The analysis process is not linear, but recursive: The researcher felt the need to perform continuous loops, moving back and forward to different phases, especially during the

coding and the search for themes phases, but also during the writing phase. Braun and Clarke (2006) fully acknowledge this need, not only as a characteristic of their suggested process, but as a requirement for analysis. They even suggest that:

“writing should begin in phase one, with the jotting down of ideas and potential coding schemes, and continue right through the entire coding/analysis process” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.86).

Moreover, in practice a number of actions were taken by the researcher within each stage during the data analysis of the present study. Figure 4.3 depicts the extended analysis framework that was employed in the study, its relationship with Braun and Clarke’s phases of thematic analysis, as well as the types of documents generated that are available as trail of evidences:

Figure 4.3: Extended thematic analysis framework



Source: Author

The following sections discuss how each for the above phases has been implemented for the purposes of the present study:

#### **4.9.1. Familiarization with data**

As soon as each focus group discussion finished, the researcher listened to the audio file and took preliminary notes on the overall feeling of the discussion, but also of specific quotes that seemed relevant to the objectives of the study.

Then, the discussion was transcribed by the researcher himself by listening to the audio files again and typing the conversation into Microsoft Word. A multimedia keyboard was used with dedicated buttons for pause / play, instead of foot pedals, to pause and start the audio. It took approximately seven to nine hours for the transcription of each discussion. In total the material consists of nine hours and 56 minutes of discussions and more than 59,000 words of transcript.

Each MS Word file was printed and read again. Highlighters were used to mark specific quotes that, at that point, seemed of interest to the study.

Given the unknown, at that time, number of focus groups needed, as well as the expected length of all discussions, it was decided that data analysis should be facilitated by computer software. Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) differs significantly from quantitative data analysis. In quantitative analysis, it is the software that performs the analysis, whereas in qualitative analysis it is the researcher who performs the analysis: The software takes care of a number of manual tasks such as marking / coding chunks of texts; retrieving and pasting together pieces of texts marked within the same code; sorts texts, codes, categories and themes. CAQDAS does not decide on the codes, categories, themes to be assigned, neither interprets the data. This is among the reasons that in qualitative research the use of CAQDAS is not universally embraced among qualitative researchers (Bryman, 2008). Morgan (1988a) suggests use of CAQDAS when the work is likely to be audited or reviewed by others. Considering that the analysis of focus groups performed within the purpose of a PhD study should be available for further audit or review, it was decided that analysis should be computer assisted. After a week of a hands-on experience with NVivo 9 software, the researcher decided for an alternative route: Most of the NVivo features, in relation to the specific analysis tasks required in the present study, were also offered by Microsoft Excel. Given the researcher's almost 20 years of experience in using MS Excel it was clear that the coding, sorting, pasting tasks could be performed in a quicker and more effective (at least for the researcher) way. Meyer and Avery (2009) work on using MS Excel as a CAQDAS tool also influenced the researcher towards this direction and provided significant insights into specific features. It should be made clear at this point that although MS Excel is widely known for its calculative characteristics, in this study none of the data analysis tasks involved any kind of quantitative

measurement or calculation. The use of Excel was exclusively related to its data management capabilities such as multiple levels sorting, as well as searching and retrieving.

As a result of the decision to use CAQDAS the phase of data familiarization also included data preparation: Word files were imported into an MS Excel spread sheet. The import process was designed in a way so that each one sentence of the discussion was imported into a separate row of the spread sheet. As a result, each sentence was assigned a section number. In combination with the focus group number (FG1 to FG7) this creates a numerical code for each sentence, such as “FG3 235”, that is unique throughout the study. This enables effective trail of evidence throughout the study. Additional columns were devoted to participants’ pseudonyms, codes, categories, comments, notes, themes, and various notes. The only disadvantage of this approach was that in case a sentence was assigned more than one thematic codes, then the row containing the specific sentence was copied into another row. Figure 4.4 presents an indicative screen capture of one of the MS Excel spread sheets, although all columns cannot be depicted:

Figure 4.4: Screen capture of the data management Excel spread sheet

FG_ANALYSIS_WORKSHEET v26 - Microsoft Excel																	

Source: Author

#### 4.9.2. Generation of initial codes

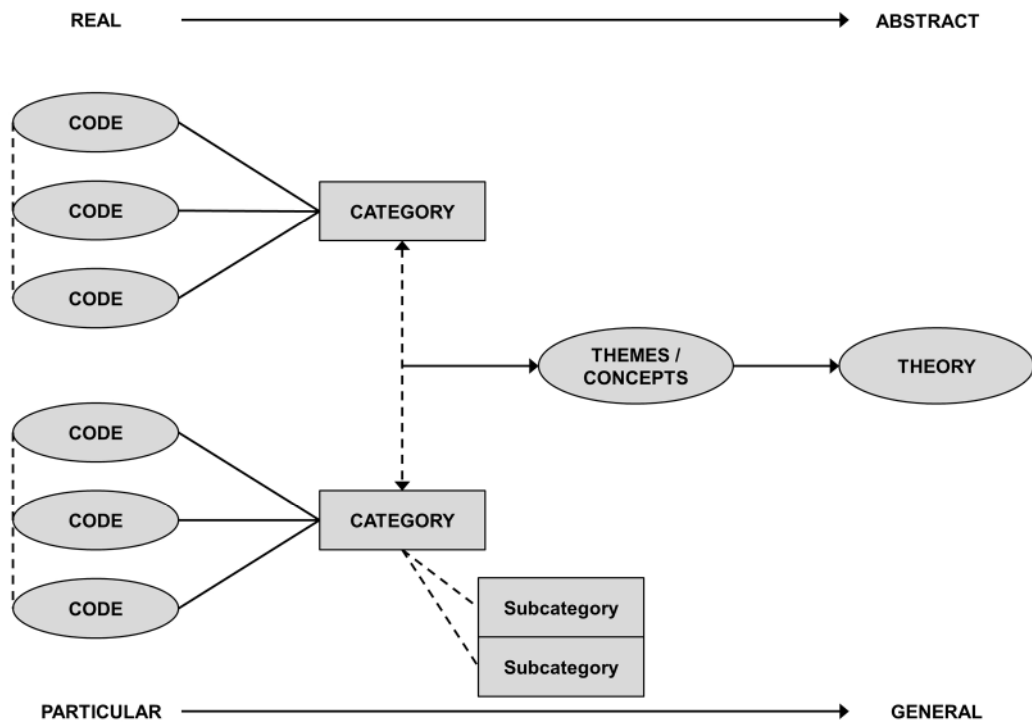
In qualitative research data analysis is a search for patterns but also for ideas that provide assistance towards the explanation for the existence of those patterns (Bernard 2006). An initial step towards this goal, is coding. Coding has been defined as a method for organizing and

grouping “similarly coded data into categories or “families” because they share some characteristic – the beginning of a pattern” (Saldaña 2009, p.8). A code has been defined as:

“A word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña 2009, p.3).

Although a number of scholars use the terms code and category interchangeably, this study adopts Saldaña’s (2009) view that codes facilitate the development of categories: Based on their similarity and regularity, that is by identifying a pattern, codes, are grouped together into categories (Figure 4.5) that is “a word or phrase describing some segment of your data that is explicit” (Rossman and Rallis 2003, p.282).

Figure 4.5: A streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry



Source: Saldaña (2009)

Although there are numerous methods of coding (Miles and Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2009), none of the methods claims hegemony over the others. More than that, from a pragmatist’s perspective Saldaña (2009) not only suggests using the right tool for the right job, but also prompts researchers to adapt any method to fit specific analysis needs.

Although coding requires the researcher to “wear” an analytic lens, it is the lens’ filter that each researcher uses that influences how data are perceived and interpreted (Saldaña 2009). In this research I feel the need to state that my filter, therefore the way I perceive and interpret data, is influenced by my marketing education and professional background and also by my pragmatic worldview.

Coding is seen as a two cycle process. During the first coding cycle, initial coding was necessary to enable better data management to facilitate further data analysis. Two types of coding methods were employed during initial coding: attribute coding and structural coding. After that, the first cycle coding continued with descriptive coding, and provisional coding. The second coding cycle was conducted with pattern coding. More specifically:

**Attribute coding**, or otherwise stated as descriptive coding (Miles and Huberman 1994), refers to the logging of participants or other essential information for the purposes of future management and reference (Saldaña 2009). In this study, attribute coding was used to code information such as focus group session, participants’ gender, age, nationality, profession, total number of types of social media use, and use or no use of each specific type of social media were coded. Given the objectives of the study there was no need to make cross-group comparisons, or examine differences between subgroups based on different gender, age, or other characteristics. Therefore most of the attribute codes did not directly contribute to data analysis. However, attribute codes provided a better understanding of each data extract since they provided a number of insights for the participant with whom the specific extract was associated with.

**Structural coding** serves the purpose of categorizing the corpus of data into segments representing broad topics relating to research questions so that each segment forms the basis of further analysis within or across topics (MacQueen et al. 2008; Saldaña 2009). In this study, structural coding was used to categorize the data in segments such as: Dreaming, before trip, during trip, after trip, so that to further facilitate the analysis. As a result of structural coding, nine additional sheets were created in the Excel data management file: One for each of the four stages of the travel process, and one for each of the five sentence completion tasks. Conversations from each of the seven FG were copied and pasted into the new sheets. This was done so that relevant parts from all seven discussions were grouped into one sheet to enable further study and coding.

The researcher then focused on each of the above nine sheets in his effort to gain an understanding of how each discussion topic was treated throughout the focus groups, that is how

social media are used and their impacts in each of the four stages of the travel process. The first cycle coding continued with descriptive coding, and provisional coding for the data contained in each of the nine sheets:

**Descriptive coding** was applied within each of the segments previously generated through structural coding. Descriptive coding assigns a word or short phrase to identify the topic of a passage of qualitative data and is considered a prerequisite for Second Cycle coding (Wolcott 1994; Saldaña 2009). For some descriptive codes more detailed subcodes were created (Miles and Huberman 1994).

**Provisional coding** applies to the data a predefined list of codes that can be based on literature review, the conceptual framework, the research questions, or even the researcher's previous experience and knowledge (Miles and Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2009). In the present study, one of the research questions is related to how social media are used throughout the stages of the decision making process. In examining this research question, provisional codes such as need identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, consumption, and post-consumption evaluation were developed to code instances of social media use. Adequate caution was exercised to allow openness for new ideas beyond the predefined list (Saldaña 2009). In practice, this is evidenced by the fact that despite the provisional coding as per the decision making process stages, other uses of social media have been identified outside the decision making process.

The second coding cycle was conducted with pattern coding: **Pattern coding** is a method used in second cycle coding and is appropriate for the generation of major themes and the creation of theoretical constructs (Saldaña 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe pattern codes as explanatory or inferential, identifying emergent themes or explanations, but also as meta-codes that bring meaning to data. In the present study, after the development of codes during the first cycle, data were sorted so to group together similarly coded passages. First cycle codes were then extensively reviewed to assess meaning and commonality. A pattern code, in the form of a short phrase, was then assigned to those with similar meaning. Thereafter, pattern codes were used as stimuli for the development of statements describing major themes, patterns of actions or constructs (Saldaña 2009).

#### 4.9.3. Searching for themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that searching for themes starts when all data have been initially coded. The process involves sorting and collating codes and their associated data

extracts into initial or potential themes based on the researcher's analytic reflection. A theme can be described as "a phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit processes" (Rossman and Rallis 2003, p.282), or as a cluster of linked categories. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82) suggest that a theme represents

"something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set."

An important question addressed by Braun and Clarke (2006) is the size of a pattern or theme to be considered as such. Given the nature of qualitative research, there is no minimum size to serve as a cut-off point. As a result:

"A theme might be given considerable space in some data items, and little or none in others, or it might appear in relatively little of the data set. So, researcher judgement is necessary to determine what a theme is. [...] Furthermore, the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures / but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.82).

Theme identification can be performed at two levels: semantic (or manifest, or explicit) and latent (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006). Semantic level theme identification focuses on what has been said, on what is visible and apparent in the data. Latent level focuses beyond what was said, that is on the underlying ideas, in an effort to interpret and provide meanings of the phenomenon under study. Although "a thematic analysis typically focuses exclusively or primarily on one level" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.84), an attempt was made in this study to provide themes from both levels. This required extensive reading of the transcripts and continuous reviewing of codes, categories and themes.

MS Excel proved a very helpful tool in the search for themes. The researcher used Excel's elaborate sorting functions to produce numerous sorts of the data extracts. Similar codes were grouped and regrouped together in a continuous process. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the search for themes can be facilitated with some sort of visual representations such as tables or mind maps. The Excel spread sheets were already in table format, and were therefore printed in A3 size paper. Highlighters were used during reading and re-reading in an effort to identify and review themes. However, due to the existence of numerous columns in the Excel spread sheets they proved not that practical for data visualization: Printouts had to be either several pages wide, or in case the whole spread sheet was forced to fit into one A3 page the resulting font size was so small to read. At the same time, the idea of mind maps seemed attractive given the researcher's prior professional experience in using mind mapping software during the analysis of brainstorming sessions.



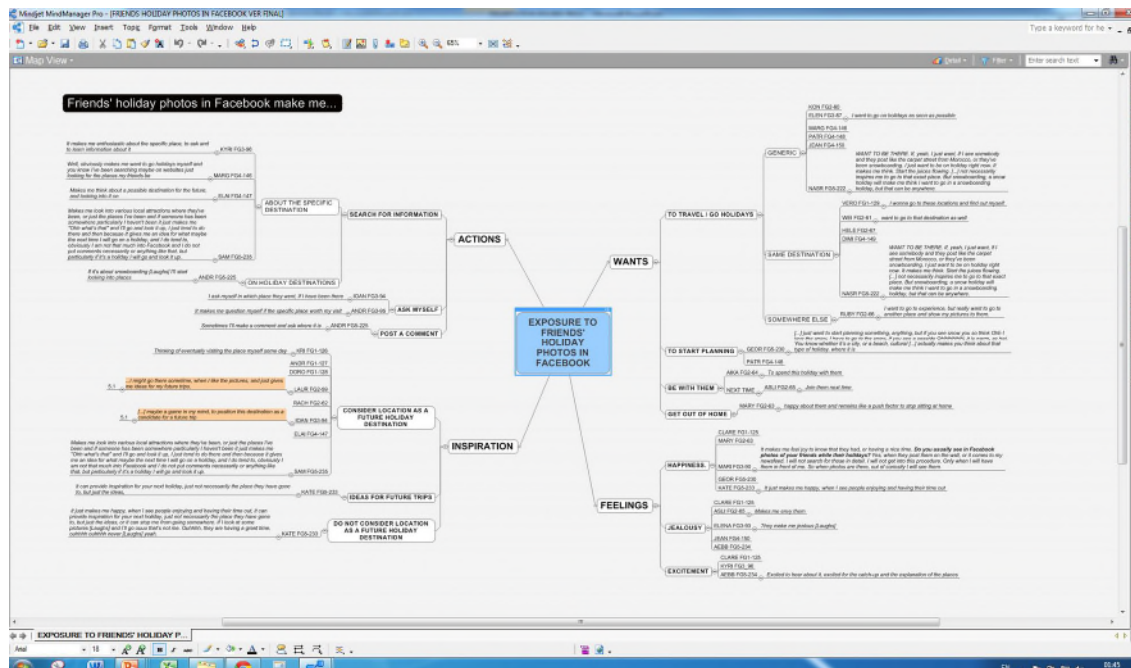
In an effort to improve data visualization and therefore to facilitate identification of themes the researcher employed **mind mapping**. This decision was influenced by Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith (2010) who proposed the use of mind mapping techniques for rapid qualitative data analysis. In general, a mind map is

“a diagram used to represent concepts, ideas, or tasks linked to and arranged radially [sic] around a central key word or idea. Primarily branches represent the major ideas or themes around the central topic, and secondary branches tend to include more concrete illustrative examples” (Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith 2010, p.407).

Although Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith (2010) propose thematic mapping as a tool for the analysis of qualitative data, their approach is completely different from the one followed in this study: They propose mind mapping as part of the focus group discussions, and later during the analysis as an alternative method to thematic analysis. Although this approach was not adopted in the present study, the researcher used the same technique as a visual tool to facilitate theme identification, theme reviewing, and report writing.

Mindjet MindManager Pro software was used to develop the mind maps. Each of the nine MS Excel spread sheets was reviewed carefully and the initial codes have been copied into the mind map: For each coded data extract an entry in the mid map was created consisting of an identification code in the form of FGX-YYY where FGX the number of the FG discussion, and YYY the section number of the specific data extract. This was made (a) to facilitate reference to the original data extract; but also (b) to enable trail of evidence. A selected number of data extracts were also copied into the mind map to provide an illustration of the code. Figure 4.6 provides the final version of one of the mind maps created for the analysis of the impacts of social networking sites holiday photos during the dreaming stage of the travel process. This was indeed a very time consuming and elaborate process since data transfer between MS Excel and Mindjet MindManager Pro had to be made manually via simple copy and paste of the data extracts and typing of additional information. However, the effort paid off since the mind map software provided an excellent workspace where data extracts and codes could be easily moved between codes, categories and themes. A total of 6 mind maps were prepared to assist in data analysis. Working versions of the mind maps are included in Appendix 6. Each map was printed on an A3 paper and studied in parallel with the transcripts and the Excel files. This process involved continuous loops between codes, categories and themes to the transcript, the audio files, the Excel and the mind maps. Data extracts were reviewed continually in relation to the new categories and themes and had to be moved also in the mind map.

Figure 4.6: A sample mind map created during the searching for themes phase



Source: Author

#### 4.9.4. Reviewing themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the reviewing themes phase begins after all initial themes have been formed. At first, themes were inspected for internal homogeneity by reading all coded data extracts that belong to each theme, and for external homogeneity by examining the existence of adequate differentiation among themes (Patton 2002). This process is also suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a two-level theme reviewing.

The internal homogeneity check required that a number of data extracts had to move to other themes, or even to be disregarded from the analysis. The use of mind mapping software proved valuable at this stage since it enabled a very user-friendly way to move the data extracts to various places around the mind map. This process also involved a continuous move between transcripts, audio files, the Excel file and the mind maps to ensure that every change contributed to the formation of a coherent pattern within each theme. The external homogeneity check also required substantial work to assure that there was adequate differentiation among the formed themes. The entire data set was read and re-read several times for this purpose. Additional data extracts that were left un-coded during the coding process were identified and had to be coded, or even re-coded to fit into other themes. These changes on the additional coding proved that coding is an on-going process that does not take place only as part of the phase two (generation

of initial codes). The reviewing process terminated when the thematic map seemed satisfactory, taking into account the advice of Braun and Clarke (2006) for the danger of an infinitum coding and theme generation.

#### **4.9.5. Defining and naming themes**

The thematic mind maps developed in the previous phase served also the purpose of defining the themes as they provided a visual representation of the themes and their associated categories. However, defining and refining themes goes beyond that. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p.92) suggest:

“By ‘define and refine’, we mean identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures.”

Short descriptions have been developed for each theme that included its scope and content in relation to the research questions. Moreover, data within each theme have also been analysed in order to examine the existence of potential sub-themes. In the present study the themes derived cover the whole travel process, which may be considered as a relatively large area of investigation. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) sub-themes provide (a) structure to large and complex themes; and (b) hierarchy of meaning with the data.

In terms of naming, working titles that have been developed during the previous phases have been finalized taking into account that themes’ names should be concise and able to provide a clear sense of what the theme is about.

At the end of this phase the researcher also started preparing a number of graphs to help readers visualize the themes and sub-themes. This was thought to be necessary given that the mind map software provides analytical rather than presentation graphs. MS PowerPoint was a convenient choice for this purpose since apart from its presentation features, it provides elaborate graph design capabilities.

#### **4.9.6. Producing the report**

The purpose of the report (in the context of the present study the report consists of the findings chapters that follow) is “to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.93). The report provides thorough descriptions for each theme and sub-theme, and includes adequate vivid data extracts to substantiate their existence. The production of the report presented a real challenge

for the researcher: Given his extensive quantitative background due to his professional exposure to market and marketing research, he found it difficult to produce the report and convey the story in a qualitative language. This was mainly evident during the early stages of writing and required extensive conscious effort to overcome it.

#### 4.9.7. Other considerations in analysis

A number of additional elements were considered during the analysis, as suggested by Krueger (1998a). Responses and comments were always examined within the **context** of the particular stimuli that triggered the response or the comment. Attention was also given to **tone and intensity** of oral speech. This was achieved by listening to the recorded discussion several times during the analysis and not by placing in the transcript the special signs that indicate tone and intensity. **Internal consistency** was also considered, recognizing that changes in opinions evidence that participants felt and function in a normal, natural manner during the discussion. **Frequency, extensiveness and intensity of comments** were also considered. Frequency relates to the times something is said, or a concept emerged during the discussion, although not relating only to the number of participants who said that. This is not to assume that frequency is a selection criterion for valuable comments. There were cases that a comment made only by one person provided a valuable insight to the specific question. Extensiveness relates to how many participants talked or raised a particular issue. Intensity relates to the passion or depth of feelings at least as expressed by changes in participants' speaking patterns. The **specificity of responses** was primarily considered during the design stage of the focus groups. As explained in the section on focus group discussion strategy (4.7.1), participants were asked to recall their last holiday trip and the largest part of the discussion was based on the specific experience. However, specificity was also considered during the analysis giving attention for example to comments expressed in the first person thus resembling personal experiences as opposed to third person answers. The analysis also considered **what was not said**, as this was also indicated by adopting an unaided recall questioning strategy in the beginning of the discussion.

#### 4.10. Generalizability and transferability of findings

Can findings of a focus group be generalized to a larger population? Vicsek (2010) distinguishes between six types of generalizations:

1. **Statistical**, that requires a representative sample, something found only in quantitative methodologies.

2. **Tentative or incidence**, when researchers find common findings across a specific social category and assume that it is likelihood that the population within the same social category might share similar opinions, thus leading to hypothesis development and not to a final conclusion.
3. **Variation-based**, when variations of opinions are observed in focus groups and researchers assume that those variations are also present in the population. Such a generalization assumes that the study managed to reveal all versions of a phenomenon, a claim that is usually not true.
4. **Existence** generalization relates to the existence of a specific response but acknowledges that there may be others as well.
5. **Theoretical** generalization which occurs when based on focus groups material the researcher proceeds to theoretical statements characterized by a level of universality. This generalization is not examining if the sample is representative but acknowledges that a claim can be made about a general principle behind a phenomenon.
6. **Analogical** generalization occurs when findings from a small group with particular characteristics are generalized to another small group sharing similar characteristics.

Vicsek (2010) supports that analogical generalization relates to transferability, at least in the form defined by Guba and Lincoln (1989 cited Vicsek 2010, p.128) as the “empirical process of checking the similarity between sending and receiving contexts”. In that context also Krueger (1998a) agrees that focus groups results can produce findings with transferability. Vicsek (2010) suggests that focus groups can provide mainly theoretical and analogical generalizations and in some cases tentative or incidence generalizations can be made acknowledging however the risk of error:

“We do not of course argue that our focus group results are statistically representative. However, the fact that there were strong convergences among many of the groups and similar clusters of opinion appeared again and again in the groups, supports the assumption that the results have significance beyond their particular situated location” (Vicsek 2010, p.125-126).

#### 4.11. Limitations

Despite the detailed attention given to every step of the research design, this study has the following methodological limitations:

#### **4.11.1. Self-declaration of meeting the requirements of criterion sampling**

The criterion sampling strategy employed (section 0) required that focus groups participants should meet two criteria: (a) to have been on a holiday trip during the last 12 months; and (b) to be active social media users. The fact that participants self-declared satisfaction of the two criteria represents a limitation of the study. The researcher decided not to require presentation of any factual evidence during the selection process, considering that such an action would a priori undermine trust between the researcher and the participants.

#### **4.11.2. Students as participants in two focus groups**

The participants of two focus groups (FG1 and FG2) consisted of postgraduate students of Bournemouth University, who were students of the researcher at the time the focus group discussions took place. Although, as shown in section 0B (a) the use of students as part of the sample was an informed choice and not a matter of convenience; and (b) the use of students in academic studies is prevalent (Yoo et al. 2000), and has both supporters (Weick 1967; Oakes 1972; Flere and Lavrič 2008; Snook 2012) and opponents (Schultz 1969; Abelman 1996; James and Sonner 2001; Peterson 2001), this study acknowledges as a limitation that participants may have been influenced by the presence of their lecturer as the focus group moderator. In such a case, participants' opinions, thoughts, or even social media travel related behaviours might not have been truthfully reported. The researcher in his effort to minimise the impact of such a possible effect, took every step not only to address all ethical concerns and adhere to university's research ethics guidelines, but also to provide a relaxing environment. Moreover, during the focus group discussion the researcher assured the participants several times that opinions need to be expressed freely and that the discussion will not be revealed to any third party with their real names, or will not influence their grades or class performance. Based on the participants' reactions and on the style and mood of the conversation the researcher believes that his role as the participants' lecturer did not influence their opinions, thoughts, expressed feelings and social media related behaviours reported.

#### **4.11.3. Selected use of aided-recall**

The topic under discussion in the focus groups proved to be very wide, both in terms of the time span of the travel related behaviours required to be self-recalled (holiday trip taken during the last 12 months), but also in terms of the types of social media employed throughout the travel process. In addition, the fact that the last holiday trip could have been taken months ago, presented a challenge to some participants in being able to recall travel related behaviours. The

interaction with other participants during the discussion enabled some of the participants to self-recall easier. To overcome the issue, in some instances, the researcher employed aided-recall techniques with minimal intervention into the discussion. However, such an intervention may be considered as a limitation of the data collection process, as it may have potentially influenced participants to express behaviours that were not true. Although there was no evidence of such untruthful responses, this limitation needs to be acknowledged.

#### **4.11.4. Types of social media covered in the discussion**

In section 4.7.2.5 it was shown that the researcher avoided focusing, or restricting the discussion to any particular type of social media or specific application. The researcher left participants to self-recall any social media type or application they have used during their travel process. In a similar manner, the researcher did not focus, or restrict the discussion on any particular type of social media content (i.e. text, photos, videos) unless this was mentioned by the participant when he/she referred to his/her social media travel related experience. In all cases of self-recall, once a specific type of social medium or application was brought into the discussion by the participants, the researcher prompted to reveal its usage patterns and related behaviours. However, it should be mentioned that only when participants did not self-recall a particular type, the researcher prompted about specific types using aided recall mainly through the distributed list containing the social media types. One limitation at this point is the fact that due to time constraints specific social media types were omitted from the aided recall. More specifically, while Content Communities consist of videos, photos, and other sub-types (e.g. social bookmarking, documents and presentations sharing as seen in section 2.5.4), apart from videos, none of the other types were included in the aided recall techniques. As a matter of importance, priority was given at videos given the popularity of social media applications like YouTube and Vimeo. Photos were included both as part of a sentence completion task #3 that was exclusively devoted to photos in social networking sites, as well as through aided-recall. However, photo sharing applications like Flickr and Picasa were neither self-reported from the participants except from one instance, nor they were included in the aided-recall techniques. Moreover, the impacts of social media during the dreaming stage of the travel process were assessed exclusively through photos in social networking sites (sentence completion task #3) for the reasons explained in detail in section 4.7.2.5. Although this restriction is a limitation, it is believed that exposure to photos found in other social media types (e.g. Flickr, Picasa) are likely to produce similar impacts. In the same vein, when discussing Consumer Review Websites, the hegemony of TripAdvisor during the discussions was more than profound. Therefore, no other

consumer review application was included in the aided-recall techniques, unless of course self-reported by any of the participants.

Moreover, the social media landscape is in a continuous change since new applications are emerging. For example, Instagram, a photo and video sharing application, that can be considered as a Social Networking Site, significantly gained popularity in 2014 reaching over 300 million users (Sloane 2014). Given that focus groups were contacted between June 2011 and October 2012, there were no references to Instagram during the discussions, since participants mentioned only these applications that were known to them at that time.

#### **4.11.5. Absence of post-discussion participants verification**

Another limitation is that there was no participants' verification of the focus group discussions. To ensure that the researcher adequately understood participants' intent, it has been suggested (Krueger 1998a) that participants should be given the opportunity to summarize thoughts and feelings. This can take place either during the discussion, or post-discussion by means of a further communication with the participants. Participants verification serves two main purposes (Krueger 1998a): (a) to ensure that findings are correct, (b) to encourage participants provide other interpretations of findings. Time constraints did not allow post-discussion participants verification by means of further communication. Participant verification was conducted informally in FG3 and FG5. After the end of the voice-recorded discussions, participants remained at the venue and were offered a light dinner as a form of non-monetary incentive for their participation, but also as means to enable the creation of a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The researcher took advantage of the available time and made a small synopsis of the discussion. All participants at that time agreed that their opinions were correctly reflected in the verbal synopsis provided.

#### **4.11.6. Language**

One of the discussions (FG3) was conducted in Greek language. As a result the transcript required translation into English. The translation may have resulted in some sort of data distortion given that the researcher is not a trained translator, and therefore should be acknowledged as a potential limitation. However, it should be mentioned that the topics discussed involved aspects of daily life and everyday language without the use of technical terms. As a result chances of data distortion are reduced and the potential limitation is minimized.



## **5. Social media use during the dreaming stage**

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### **5.1. Introduction**

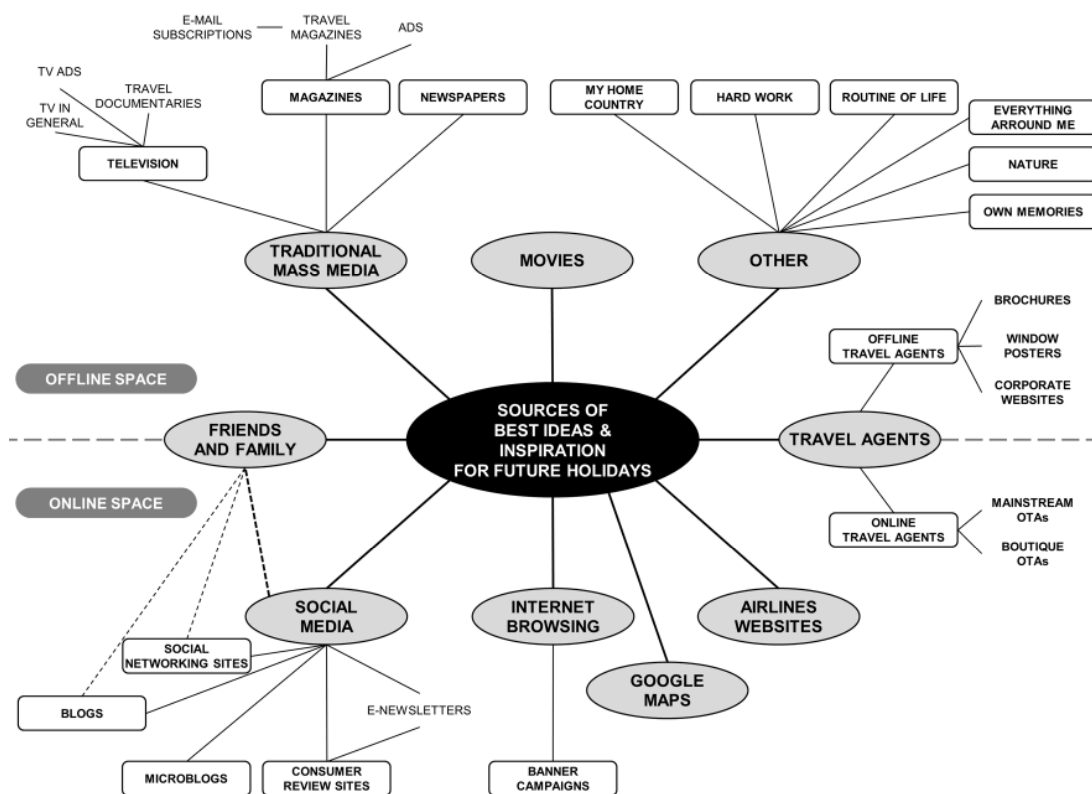
The literature review (Chapter 2) showed that the majority of consumer related academic research studies on social media, within the travel and tourism domain, examines their use, impacts and related issues in a post generic decision stage: after a decision to go on a trip has been made. Such an approach can be considered as limiting, since it studies social media only from within a consumer decision making perspective. For example, there is adequate research focus about social media (a) on how and to what extent they inform consumers' decisions during the information search and the evaluation of alternatives stages of the decision making process (DMP); and (b) as an output of a DMP, such as in the form of feedback and evaluations in terms of product and experiences reviews. Exploring social media use and impacts outside the decision making process, that is before the generic decision to go on a holiday trip has been made, provides a more holistic consumer behaviour perspective. Such a perspective may provide preliminary insights and drive further research on social media role as providers of significative, symbolic, or social stimuli, as well as their influence on the formation of (a) awareness, consideration, and evoked holiday destination sets (Woodside and Lyonski 1989; Um and Crompton 1990); and (b) beliefs during passive information catching (Um and Crompton 1990).

Towards this goal, this chapter provides insights on holiday travel related use and impacts of social media during the dreaming stage of the travel process. First, it is examined whether focus group participants consider social media as sources of inspiration for future holiday trips. Within this section, different sources of social media content, as well as different types of information acquisition are identified. Second, the role of holiday photos posted in social networking sites as holiday travel related stimuli is explored and a number of responses from such exposure are identified.

## 5.2. Social media as sources of inspiration for holiday trips

Towards the effort of gaining an in-depth understanding of social media use and impact during the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process, a sentence completion task (SC1), as described in section 4.7.2.2, was delivered to focus group participants to provide further stimuli for discussion. Participants self-reported a number of sources that provide best ideas and inspiration when they are outside of a specific holiday travel planning process. Figure 5.1 presents a thematic overview of all the sources identified.

Figure 5.1: Sources of inspiration for future holiday trips during the dreaming stage



Source: Author

It is not within the objectives of this study to provide a full list of such sources. What is of importance is to examine whether social media are present among the sources reported and their impact on consumers during this stage. As it can be seen in Figure 5.1, social media are indeed considered among the sources that provide best ideas and inspiration about future holiday trips even before a generic holiday trip decision has been taken. Although this is a qualitative study, therefore purely for indicative purposes, it can be stated that one in four focus group participants self-reported a social media type or application among the sources of best ideas and inspiration for future holiday trips. Four specific social media types have been mentioned within this context: Social networking sites (SNS), blogs, microblogs, and consumer review sites. It is

recognized that this list cannot be exclusive, due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of this enquiry. Further analysis of the focus groups conversations reveals two findings:

First, as it was expected, friends and family are considered among the top sources of inspiration about future holiday trips. The importance of friends and relatives as sources of information for travel related decisions has been prominent in the literature (Gitelson and Kerstetter 1995; Bieger and Laesser 2004; Murphy et al. 2007; Decrop and Kozak 2014) and are often referred as the most influential source (Crotts 1999; Hawkins et al. 2007). However, now it is social media, and in particular SNS and blogs, that enable active users to access their friends' and family members' holiday experiences (depicted as dashed lines in Figure 5.1). As the participants suggest, holiday experiences of friends and relatives found in social media may become sources of ideas and inspiration for their own future holiday trip:

"I just read recently, went on Facebook and saw a blog of a friend she was travelling in South America and she posted pictures. She writes a blog regularly and makes me really curious to go there" (Delma, FG1).

"[...] Also other people's Facebook photos [Laughs] look at their timeline or elsewhere, then I may be inclined to go and make an investigation on that particular place. **So Facebook photos give you stimuli for\***... Yeah maybe of holiday jealousy" (Sidney, FG7).

(\*) Phrases in **bold** found within quotes denote a question asked by the focus group moderator

Second, SNS, as well as other social media types, such as consumer review sites and microblogs, enable users to find out about holiday experiences of strangers. Although there is no social connection in the physical (offline) world between the users and those strangers, the latter's consumption experiences and product preferences may become ideas and inspirations for the former:

"I really find very triggering some tourism boards like "Visit Greece" or "Berlin" that have pages on Facebook, and they let people who follow them upload pictures. They are really really nice, so I am really inspired by those" (Veronika, FG1).

In the physical world direct, non-mediated, exposure to strangers' consumption experiences and product preferences is uncontrolled, by chance, and primarily through observation. On the contrary, social media provide direct access to like-minded strangers, the ability of two-way communication with them, and even continuous monitoring of their posts especially in platforms that do not require reciprocity such as Twitter, or personal blogs.

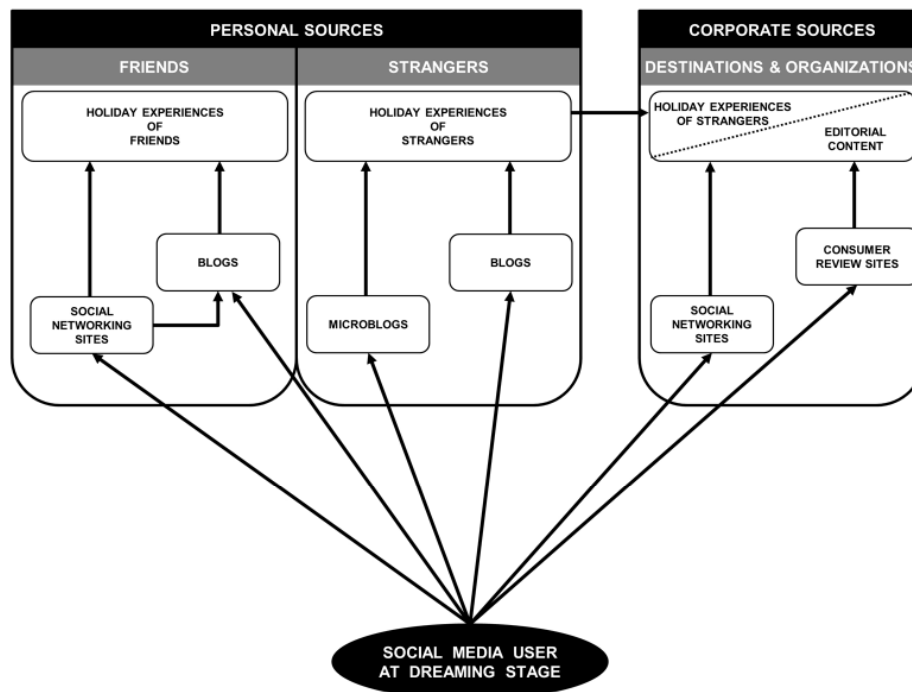
The following two sections provide an in-depth analysis into the above stated findings. Section 5.2.1 identifies the different social media related sources of ideas and inspirations, and section 5.2.2 looks into the alternative forms of information acquisition. Further on, section 5.3 explores holiday photos in social networking sites as a prime example of social media stimuli that users

receive during their dreaming stage and attempts an identification of their impact on active users' holiday travel related behaviour.

### 5.2.1. Holiday travel related inspirational stimuli: Types of sources

The analysis of focus group discussions reveals that during the dreaming stage active users have access to holiday travel related inspirational content from two types of social media related sources: personal and corporate. As it can be seen in Figure 5.2, personal sources can be either friends, or strangers. Corporate sources refer to destinations or other travel related organizations

Figure 5.2: Holiday travel related inspirational stimuli: Types of sources



Source: Author

that have presence on social media. For the purposes of this study, friends are considered as known social media contacts, that is those people, among their social media contacts, who users know and with whom they share a social connection in the physical world. On the other hand, strangers are considered those people with whom users do not have a connection either in the offline or in the online world.

#### A. Friends as personal sources of inspiration:

In relation to friends as personal sources, it is social networking sites (SNS) and blogs that have been mentioned as providing access to holiday experiences of friends. In almost all instances,

participants reported photos as the vehicle through which inspiration is provided. Text has also been reported. The following passage is from Delma (FG1) who completed her sentence completion exercise by writing:

“Even when I am not thinking of holidays... *pictures / photos in Facebook, experiences of friends, Internet...* provide(s) me with the best ideas and inspiration about my future holidays”.

During the discussion, Delma elaborated on her thoughts:

Delma: I just read recently, went on Facebook and saw a blog of a friend she was travelling in South America and she posted pictures. She writes a blog regularly and makes me really curious to go there.

Moderator: When you say experiences of friends, where do you find that? You mentioned Facebook. Is that the case or am I wrong?

Delma: Yes, not only Facebook but also just personally, face to face.

Moderator: And then you mentioned photographs...

Delma: Yes, pictures and photos.

Moderator: Would you like to elaborate on that?

Delma: Yes, for instance on Facebook when someone has been on holidays and posting nice pictures [...] Yeap.

In a similar vein, Haley (FG6) turns to friends and relatives through Facebook and not through face to face:

Haley: Mine is friends and family. I do not think I have a wish list of places that I want to...

Moderator: When you say friends do you mean face to face contact?

Haley: I might pick couple of Facebook saying you know thinking of going somewhere for a long weekend, anybody got any ideas, somewhere in the UK, or somewhere in Europe, so I kind have got ideaish...

Moderator: You get a stimulus from them?

Haley: Because my holidays are so precious I do not want to risk going somewhere that maybe, somebody else hasn't already. (Haley, FG6).

Both of the above passages show that SNS do provide to their users access to their friends' holiday experiences that act as inspirational stimuli for their own future holiday trips.

The content of those experiences can be posted exclusively within the SNS, or in other types of social media such as blogs. In this later instance, the SNS may provide the gateway (via a link) to the blog. The visit to the other social medium that accommodates the actual content can take place within the same user session, as in the case of Delma, or at a later stage upon the user's convenience as the following passage with Karla (FG1) illustrates:

Karla: And also like Delma [who talked about Facebook and blogs].

Moderator: You follow them systematically, using the “Follow” button?

Karla: No, when I see a post in my latest news in Facebook, then I really follow the link, and otherwise when I have some free time and I am thinking of them then I just go directly to their website [blog].

Therefore, social media further enhance the role of friends and relatives as sources of product related information and consumption experiences such as holiday experiences. Consequently, social media may also enhance friends and relatives' role as influencers of consumer related decisions. Prior to the development of social media, the interactions between the consumer and his/her friends and relatives were limited due to time and spatial constraints. A synchronous contact was the prime mode of interaction, either interpersonal or mediated, although other asynchronous modes (e.g. mail and e-mail) were available alternatives. Social media, and in particular SNS removed those constraints, enabling instantaneous asynchronous access to virtually all friends and relatives (as long as they are members of a SNS), but also enriched the content of the interaction with photos and videos.

#### **B. Strangers as personal sources of inspiration:**

Participants also seem to be inspired by holiday experiences of strangers that are provided either directly by themselves through their own social media profiles, or indirectly through corporate sources such as destinations and other travel related organizations. More specifically:

Inspiration and holiday ideas provided directly by strangers were mentioned by participants who were microblog users, or who follow travel related blogs. The following passage from FG5 illustrates both cases:

Gill: [...] or somebody puts something on Twitter about "you should check these amazing holidays", you know and there is a link to something.

Moderator: So Twitter acts sometimes as stimuli for you?

Gill: Yeah, yeah, definitely and then I'll go and find, I will try to do everything I can [...].

Moderator: Nadimah, following any blogs?

Nadimah: Yes, quite a few actually.

Moderator: Any travel related blogs?

Nadimah: Mostly food. Food slash travel, I like about food culture.

Therefore, in contrast to the physical world where the direct non-mediated exposure to strangers' consumption experiences and product preferences is uncontrolled, by chance, and primarily through observation, in the social media world users can: (a) have direct access to like-minded strangers; (b) establish two-way communication with them; and (c) systematically monitor their posts, especially in platforms that do not require reciprocity such as blogs and microblogs. Such characteristics of social media increase significantly the amount of consumption related stimuli that users receive from personal sources, due to the fact that the

number of people from whom they can get those stimuli is not limited only to their friends and relatives, but it extends to include a very large number of like-minded strangers. Moreover, the relevance of those stimuli is also higher, given that users are able to select from whom they receive stimuli, or in social media terms who they “Follow”, “Like” or become “Friends” with. For example, an active social media user who has Hawaii in his holiday destination consideration set can interact for hedonic purposes with strangers who follow a Hawaii related group from whom he can get inspiration and ideas. The fact that in the social media world a two-way communication between a user and a stranger is an acceptable behaviour (in contrast to what is considered in the physical world) increases the impact of social media: Users have the ability not only to passively receive stimuli from strangers, but also may further enhance their consumption behaviour by opening and maintaining a dialogue with those strangers asking questions and making comments that further enhance the quality, the relevance and the impact of the strangers’ consumption experience into their own consumption behaviour.

### **C. Access to strangers through corporate sources of inspiration**

Access to holiday experiences of strangers can also be provided indirectly through corporate sources. Examples of corporate sources are destinations’ and other travel related organizations’ pages in SNS that enable individuals to share their travel experiences. The following quote illustrates such access to strangers’ holiday experiences:

“I wanted to add about Facebook that I do not really care where everybody else has gone, and I do not feel really inspired to go where people that I haven’t spoken for a while have gone, but I really find very triggering some tourism boards like “Visit Greece” or “Berlin” that have pages on Facebook, and they let people who follow them upload pictures. They are really really nice, so I am really inspired by those” (Veronika, FG1).

Moreover, the above quote from Veronika also illustrates that within an SNS environment, a holiday experience shared by a user does not necessarily makes it inspiring for all his/her friends. It may be the case that a user considers a holiday experience as inspiring only if it is shared by a friend who is within a close social distance with the user. In the case of Veronika, it seems that the absence of a recent communication acts as a mental filter not allowing her to perceive the shared experience as inspiring.

Other participants have mentioned that they are inspired by consumer review sites (CRS) such as TripAdvisor. They either visit CRS as part of their Internet browsing behaviour, or they are subscribers to e-newsletters that originate from social media applications as part of users’ preference towards e-mail subscriptions. The following passage from FG5 illustrates this behaviour but also that the inspirational stimuli may not be exclusively based on travellers’

holiday experiences but also based on editorial content that is included in e-newsletters originating from social media applications:

Agnes: I picked TripAdvisor, because it's people's own experiences and they go on to this main site and say about where they've been, where they've stayed, and they will give it a rating themselves.

Moderator: So even now, after your holidays, after you have posted your comments, you still look into TripAdvisor?

Agnes: Yeah, Yeah. Because they give inspirational ideas of where to go as well, like the top ten pics.

Gill: I have said email subscriptions and travel magazines.

Moderator: Email subscriptions? So you subscribe to where?

Gill: Like TripAdvisor, Wanderlust, oh I forgot, it is four or five a week I get. [Laughs]. I don't know.

### 5.2.2. Holiday travel related inspirational stimuli: Types of information acquisition

During the dreaming stage, acquisition of holiday travel related information may take place either through passive attention, or as part of an ongoing search. Passive attention to information occurs without intentional seeking (Wilson 1997). Within the dreaming stage, social media users may experience instances of passive attention during their visit to a SNS when they are exposed to holiday travel related content posted by a friend:

“[Even when I am not thinking of holidays] on Facebook when someone has been on holidays and posting nice pictures [provides me with the best ideas and inspiration about my future holidays]” (Delma FG1).

“When they post them [talking about photos] on the wall, or it comes to my newsfeed. I will not search for those in detail. I will not get into this procedure. Only when I will have them in front of me. So when photos are there, out of curiosity I will see them” (Manolis, FG3).

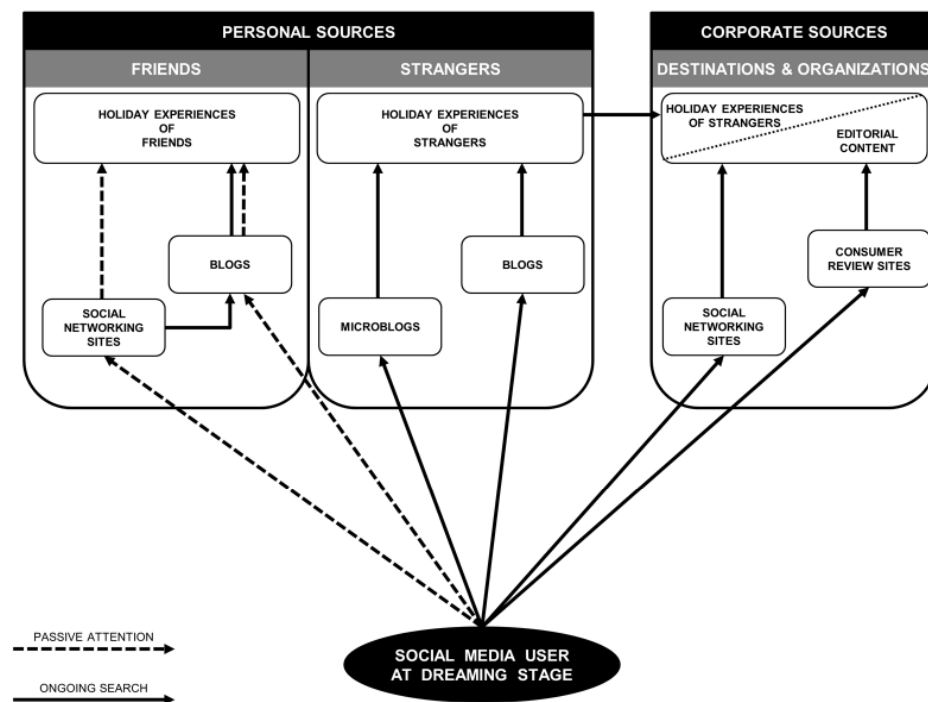
Similarly passive attention to holiday travel related information may occur when the user finds such information in friend's blog although his / her intention for the specific visit was not to find travel related information:

“[...] when I have some free time and I am thinking of them [friends who maintain a blog] then I just go directly to their website [blog]” (Karla, FG1).

Therefore, passive attention is associated with interactions between the user and personal sources and in particular with friends, as shown in Figure 5.3. On the contrary, other participants reported intention with their information acquisition although this was independent of specific holiday plans, but as a part of an ongoing search process (Bloch et al. 1986; Fodness and Murray 1999).



Figure 5.3: Holiday travel related inspirational stimuli: Types of information acquisition



Source: Author

The following passage is from Theo (FG7) who completed his sentence completion task by writing: “Even when I am not thinking of holidays ...*friends and the Internet social network* ... provide(s) me with the best ideas and inspiration about my future holidays”. During the discussion, Theo was asked to elaborate on his thoughts:

Moderator: What do you mean as Internet or social network?

Theo: Ahhmm. Normally an email from friends, so just regular trips, or part of clubs online.

Moderator: Such as?

Theo: Well Facebook and then there are groups within that. I have an old vehicle and the people who are interested on that organize things and I hear about them and I might go.

Theo is a member in a Facebook group about old vehicles that organizes trips. Such behaviour shows intention in following the group which clearly resembles an ongoing search process for leisure activities part of which are holiday trips. The group provides ideas some of which may be considered as inspiring for Theo. Similarly, the case of Veronika illustrates intention when she “Liked” the Facebook pages of Greece and Berlin suggesting that ongoing search can be associated with interactions between users and corporate sources:

“[...] but I really find very triggering some tourism boards like “Visit Greece” or “Berlin” that have pages on Facebook, and they let people who follow them upload pictures. They are really really nice, so I am really inspired by those” (Veronika, FG1).

Similarly, in the case of interactions with strangers there is evidence of intention, suggesting that social media interactions with strangers are also associated with ongoing search. Nadimah (FG5) intentionally follows travel/food related blogs and Tweeter users with similar interests whom she considers trustworthy although she doesn't know them in person:

Moderator: Nadimah, following any blogs?

Nadimah: Yes, quite a few actually.

Moderator: Any travel related blogs?

Nadimah: Mostly food. Food slash travel, I like about food culture.

Moderator: Would you consider yourself, I mean generally not only in terms of travel, a Twitter guy, or a Facebook guy?

Nadimah: Ehhmm at the moment I am more Facebook, but that's why I want to communicate with my friends, but in terms of interests and finding information and stuff DEFINITELY\* Twitter, DEFINITELY a Twitter. [...] I like to get it [information] from my trusted people that I'm following, and they are following me, and you will probably never meet them [Laughs] but you can tell alike.

Moderator: How can you trust them if you do not meet them?

Nadimah: Because you can read what, most of them have blogs, or most of them post things like “that is really interesting” and you check it and say actually this is really. So they qualify, you know, if I am not really visiting somebody's, or not reading their tweets then I'll just delete them after few months, because it doesn't make any point. So you filter.

(\*) Phrases in CAPITAL denote significant emphasis in the participant's tone of voice

In this section it was shown that social media are considered among the sources that provide inspiration for holiday trips during the dreaming stage of the travel process. Prior to a generic decision, personal and corporate sources provide such inspirational content. Personal sources are further divided to friends & relatives, and strangers. Social media and in particular SNS have removed spatial and time constraints enabling instantaneous asynchronous access to virtually all friends and relatives, but at the same time enriched the content of the interaction with photos and videos. Social media also enable two way communication with strangers, an acceptable social media practice in contrast to what is the case in the offline world. Such information acquisition, which can take the form of passive reception and / or ongoing search, further enhances the quality and quantity of inspirational holiday travel related stimuli during the dreaming stage, since it enables active users to contact like-minded individuals, and therefore improve the relevance of the stimuli to their own holiday lifestyle preferences.

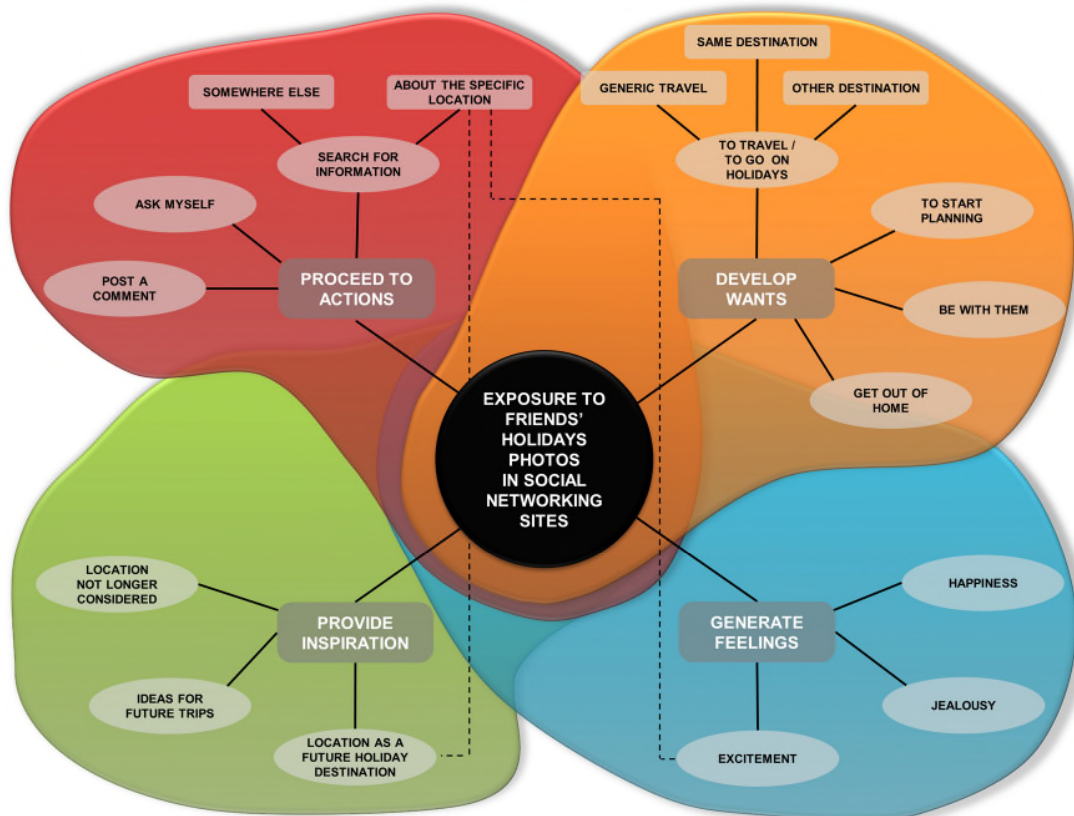
### 5.3. Photos in social networking sites as holiday travel related stimuli

Focus group participants were given a sentence completion task (SC3) to explore the range of their responses when they are exposed to holiday photos posted by their social media contacts in social networking sites. The sentence was “When I am in Facebook, or any other similar website, looking at nice photos that my friends took during their holidays makes me.....”. Section 4.7.2.5 provided a detailed rationale for the selection of social networking sites (SNS) in this particular task, as well as for the selection of Facebook as an indicative example in the wording of this task. All participants admitted exposure and attention to friends’ holiday photos when posted in SNS. This was the case even for those who supported that they are “not that much into Facebook”:

“Obviously I am not that much into Facebook and I do not put comments necessarily or anything like that, but particularly if it’s a holiday [picture] I will go and look it up” (Scott, FG5).

The analysis revealed that exposure to social media contacts’ holiday photos posted in SNS impacts active social media users in four ways (Figure 5.4):

Figure 5.4: Outcomes of exposure to social media contacts’ holiday photos in SNS



Source: Author

It makes them develop wants, it generates feelings, it provides inspiration, and for some of them even leads them to actions. More specifically:

### 5.3.1. Development of wants

Half of the participants supported that exposure to friends' holiday photos made them develop a want that was related to travel on holidays, to start planning, to be with their friends, or even simply to get out of home. Most of the times this want was related to a need to travel or to go on holidays. This want was often generic, that is not related to the specific destination, or the type of holiday depicted in the photo:

"I want to go on holidays as soon as possible" (Eleftheria, FG3).

"WANT TO BE THERE. If, yeah, I just want, if I see somebody and they post like the carpet street from Morocco, or they've been snowboarding. I just want to be on holiday right now. It makes me think. Start the juices flowing. [...] not necessarily inspires me to go to that exact place. But snowboarding, a snow holiday will make me think I want to go in a snowboarding holiday, but that can be anywhere" (Nadimah, FG5).

In few instances, the want to travel was related to the specific destination depicted in the photo:

"Want to go to that destination as well" (Fion, FG2).

In rare cases, the want revealed was related to travel, but to another destination than the one featured in the photo:

"I want to go to experience, but really want to go to another place and show my pictures to them" (Ning, FG2).

For very few participants, the want revealed was more specific, as they wanted to start planning:

"[...] just want to start planning something, anything, but if you see snow you so think 'Ohh I love the snow, I have to go to the snow', if you see a seaside 'OHHHHHH, it is warm, so hot'. You know whether it's a city, or a beach, cultural [...] actually makes you think about that type of holiday" (Gill, FG5).

The above passages clearly suggest that active social media users when exposed to holiday travel related photos posted by their social media contacts may generate holiday travel related wants. These wants can be either generic holiday travel related, or destination specific, or even holiday type specific.

### 5.3.2. Generation of feelings

Some participants expressed that they generated feelings as a result of their exposure to friends' holiday photos. Happiness and jealousy were the most common feelings encountered:

“It just makes me happy, when I see people enjoying and having their time out” (Kelly, FG5).

“They make me jealous [Laughs]” (Harmonia, FG3).

Excitement was also observed among few participants:

“Excited to hear about it, excited for the catch-up and the explanation of the places” (Agnes, FG5).

### 5.3.3. Inspiration

Some participants suggested that their friends’ holiday photos provide them with inspiration for future holiday trips. This inspiration may result in considering the featured photo location as a future holiday destination, or simply in providing ideas for future trips not necessarily at the same destination:

“Thinking of eventually visiting the place myself someday” (Karla, FG1).

“[...] maybe a game in my mind, to position this destination as a candidate for a future trip” (Ino, FG3).

“I think for me if someone has put up some pictures of a really lovely holiday they have been on, it’s gonna make me think Oh I wanna go on holiday. If they have been somewhere that I haven’t been to before, it might make me want to investigate where they have been and I am gonna have that in my list of places to look up in the future” (Lindsey, FG7).

However, it has been observed that a friend’s holiday photo may result to the relocation of a specific destination from the user’s consideration set to the inept set. Although this was a single incidence, a participant stated:

“it just makes me happy, when I see people enjoying and having their time out, it can provide inspiration for your next holiday, just not necessarily the place they have gone to, but just the ideas, or it can stop me from going somewhere. If I look at some pictures [Laughs] and I’ll go “ouuu that’s not me”. “Ouhh, they are having a great time, ouhh ouhh never [Laughs] yeah” (Kelly, FG5).

The above passages clearly suggest that exposure to holiday travel related photos posted by active users’ social media contacts, may have an impact to the formation of the users’ holiday destination or holiday activities awareness, consideration, inert, or even inept sets.

### 5.3.4. Actions

Few participants suggested that their friends’ holiday photos led them to some kind of action, primarily related to the search for information about either the specific destination featured in

the photo, or in general for holiday destinations, that however were related to the type of holidays or leisure activities presented in the photo:

“Well, obviously makes me want to go holidays myself and you know I’ve been searching maybe on websites just looking for the places my friends be” (Madeline, FG4).

“[...] Also other people’s Facebook photos [Laughs] look at their timeline or elsewhere, then I may be inclined to go and make an investigation on that particular place” (Sidney, FG7).

“Ehmm, for the Facebook sometimes I will make a comment and ask where it is. If it is somewhere, you know, if it is particularly nice but I don’t know where it is. If again, if it’s someone snowboarding [Laughs] I’ll start looking on places” (Adam, FG5).

It should be noted that further analysis of the focus group discussions suggests that emotional engagement resulting from exposure to social media contacts’ holiday related photos triggers further action in the form of information search. More specifically, it was found that all participants who ended searching for information about the specific destination featured in the photo, have also reported some other form of response such as excitement, a generic want to travel, or considering the location as a future holiday destination. Although, within the context of a qualitative study, the existence of such causal relationship cannot be further substantiated, it can provide stimulus for further quantitative research.

## **6. Social media use before the trip**

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### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter provides insights on holiday travel related use and impacts of social media during the pre-trip stage of the holiday travel process. As suggested in previous sections, for the purposes of this study the pre-trip stage commences with the generic decision for the holiday trip. The analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that social media serve three functions before the trip: First, as collaboration platforms among members of the travel party; second, as platforms for travel related self-expression; and third as information sources providing inputs to holiday travel related decision making processes. Although all three functions are further discussed in this chapter, the natural flow of the focus group discussions focused on the third function of social media: their use as information sources. Within this particular function, three alternative routes of information search have been identified and are discussed in depth. Moreover, the focus groups analysis identified a number of heuristics that active users employ to evaluate holiday travel related social media content.

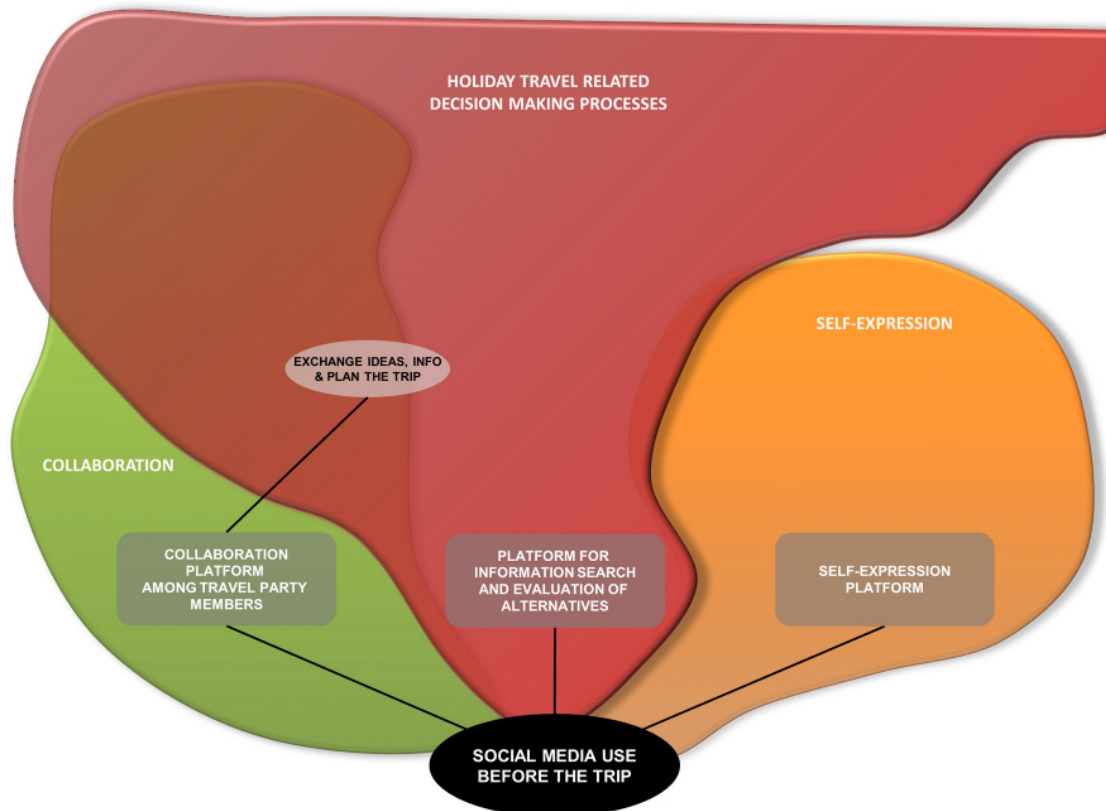
## 6.2. Social media as travel related collaboration platforms

Few participants reported that they used social networking sites (SNS), primarily Facebook, as a platform to enable them communicate with members of their holiday travel party (Figure 6.1). In all such instances reported, either the travel party members were not living in close proximity with each other, or the size of the party was such that an SNS group had to be created to facilitate effective communication among the members:

“I got some friends who I only see when I go on holidays with them, so we just talk, keep in touch where to go really, discussion on it. That’s on Facebook. Because they do not live in Bournemouth, they live all over the country. [...] In one of those inbox, private inbox messaging thing. [...] Someone will just say an idea and someone will say another idea, and get sort of decide what we are gonna do” (Jacques, FG3).

“I think it was group discussion. Some of us have been to Amsterdam, and said it was great and others haven’t. I cannot really remember. Was it how it all happened? [Asks his wife] Facebook thing. What we were gonna do the New Year’s. Let’s go to Amsterdam. **So you interacted with those friends in Facebook, or they just posted something and you picked it up? How it happened?** Ehmm. I think it started with a group that we invited 30 people or so. Some yes let’s go. Some can’t do it. And then went down to the 12 of us who were going. Was emails and phone calls between us all. Ehmm” (Jonathan, FG7).

Figure 6.1: Social media use as a collaboration platform among travel party members



Source: Author



Primarily this form of social media use facilitated the trip planning process by enabling the travel party members to exchange ideas and information about their future trip as part of a group decision making process. Moreover, it seems that this method of communication is sufficient to enable travellers reach a group decision on particular aspects of the trip. All participants who reported such use of social media preferred private messaging through SNS and not any other form of communication that is visible to other social media users (e.g. posting on their friends' Facebook wall). Such use may suggest that specific types of social media, and in particular SNS, start replacing other forms of interpersonal communication (e.g. e-mail, instant messaging clients, telephone) within the context of a product purchase.

### 6.3. Social media as platforms for pre-trip self-expression

Focus group discussions revealed that participants used social media as a platform for travel related self-expression before their holiday trip. Although different cultures (e.g. individualist vs. collectivist) differ in their views and practice of self-expression, for the purposes of this study self-expression is considered as the projection of one's own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences into the world (Kim and Sherman 2007; Kim and Chu 2011). Based on the above, and given the context of this study, social media enabled travel related self-expression can be considered as the projection into the world of one's own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences about the holiday trip through social media.

Participants who engaged in travel related self-expression primarily used social networking sites (SNS), and particularly Facebook, to announce to their online social network their decision, or other aspects of their forthcoming holiday trip. The discussion during the focus group did not intend to reveal the actual content of the self-expression as it was considered that participants may not remember what exactly they shared before their last holiday trip. On the contrary, the discussion attempted to reveal the reasons that drove participants to self-express about their holidays.

As it can be seen in Figure 6.2, the analysis of focus group discussion revealed five drivers to pre-trip holiday travel related self-expression. More specifically:

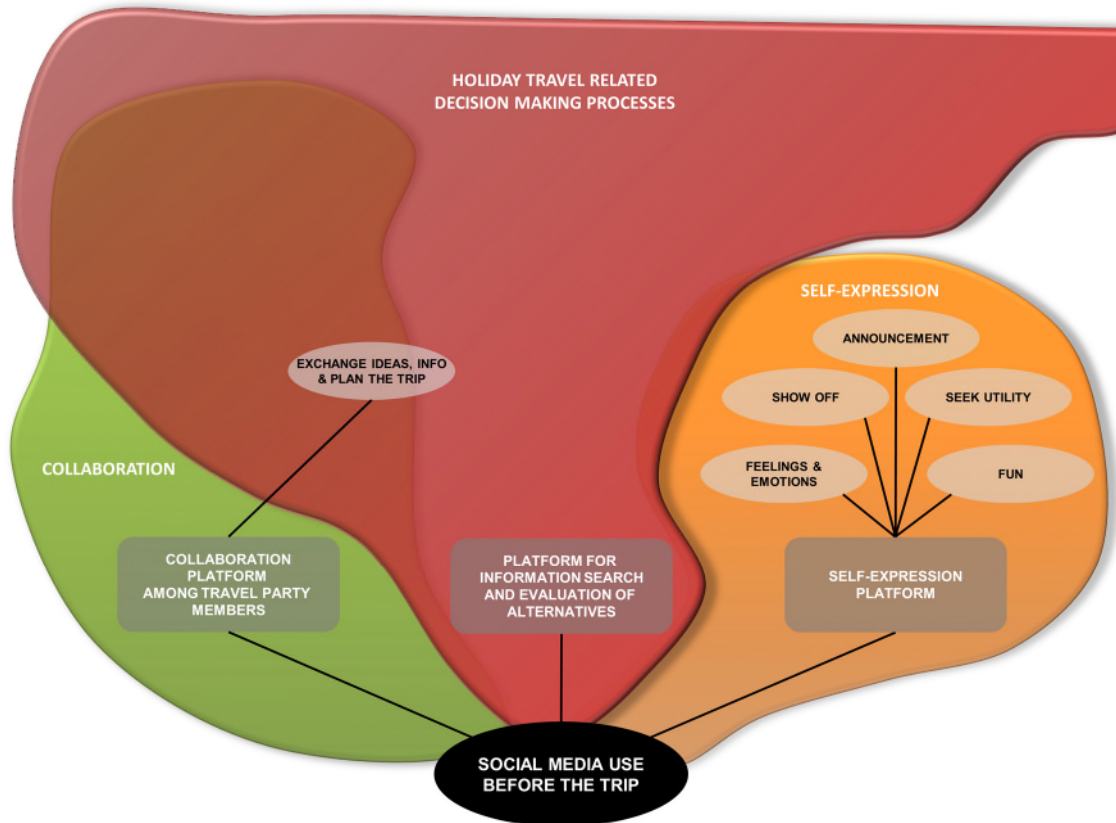
Participants self-expressed to **share feelings and emotions** about their forthcoming trip such as happiness, excitement, and even relief before travelling, as the following two quotes illustrate:

"I announced my trip to Facebook, because I was happy to see my family and to go on a holiday with them, so I shared it with my friends" (Ludwiga, FG2).

"When we found a nice place to stay. We put faces in it. We spent a DISPROPORTIONATE amount of time trying to find something nice to stay in Cornwall, and as soon as we found it we said YES [screams] HURRAY [shouts and

Laughs]. **So you shared it with your friends because you were happy?** Yeah, excited. [...] And it is a bit like HA HA [Laughs]” (Gill, FG5).

Figure 6.2: Social media use before the trip as a platform for travel-related self-expression



Source: Author

Few other participants admitted that they announced their trip simply to **show off**:

“Yes, always [announcing trips to Facebook]. So that they know if something happens to me where they can find me [Laughs]. Yes this was a good reason. [Laughs] It's a lie. [...] It's show off” (Veronika, FG1).

Other individual instances of self-expression included **fun**, **announcement**, or even seeking some form of **utility**. For example, Chen announced his trip hoping for some advice that will save him time and effort, while Fion admitted she shared her decision just for fun:

“I told them [my friends] just for fun” (Fion, FG2).

“Like an announcement almost” (Roy, FG6).

“Yes [...] Perhaps to get some professional advice, to make me save some money, save time, or to go to the most popular places” (Chen, FG1).

## 6.4. Social media as information sources providing inputs to decision making processes

Among the focus group participants the most common use of social media before the holiday trip was as information sources providing inputs to a number of holiday related decision making processes (DMP). More specifically, the discussions revealed that social media were used during four groups of such decision making processes: (1) The holiday destination, or destinations DMP; (2) the holiday accommodation, or accommodations DMP; (3) the holiday activities DMP; and (4) other DMPs that cannot be grouped into the previous three groups. For the purposes of this study all decisions that relate to any kind of activity taking place at the holiday destination(s) such as dining, entertainment, visiting sites and attractions, sports, and leisure have been grouped under holiday activities.

For example, Paul, in the following passage from FG4, illustrates the use of Wikipedia for information search during the **holiday destination DMP**, but also during the holiday activities DMP:

Paul: [...] TripAdvisor, is certainly the one which I have used and Wikipedia as well.

Moderator: Wikipedia, how did you use Wikipedia?

Paul: In searching sort of what to do on that holiday, and in making some sort of decision about where to go. It's unlikely that Wikipedia will give you the original concept of the idea, but you would need sort of think, is it going to be an enjoyable holiday, and you need to convince yourself.

Moderator: So it gives you a first impression, is that?

Paul: Yeahh, I mean Wikipedia in going to Mallorca, in going to Germany, in certain places and when you go on holiday you might have an original, sort of, concept of, you gonna need to convince yourself where to go on the holiday.

Other participants revealed use of social media during the **accommodation DMP**. The following passage (FG2) illustrates how Anastasiya moved between offline sources for information search (physical visit to a travel agent) and an Internet Forum for the evaluation of the alternative accommodation choices that she found through the offline sources:

Anastasiya: Last time we went directly, in person, to the travel agency and ask them to recommend us. After their recommendation we went home and look at their website, and then we just looked at the opinion of other people who have been there before.

Moderator: Where did you look for the opinions of other people?

Anastasiya: In different Internet forums, but cannot remember the names.

Moderator: Did you decide during your visit to the travel agency?

Anastasiya: No we didn't decide there, we just listened to them to their opinion and we had three hotels that they recommend us [...] When got back home from the travel agency we went into forums, to see what people who have been there before said about these hotels.

Some other participants used social media during the **holiday activities DMP**. In the following passage, Agnes (FG5) illustrates that a social networking site can be a platform for information search both from strangers, but also from people that users know in person:

Agnes: I joined the Budapest site on Facebook. [...] People said on there, it is kind of like a mini Twitter, but it is more, personal because of the small amount of people that use this certain page on Facebook and it was just saying about certain tentative places to try to go to as opposed to sort of posh restaurants, certain landmarks and things like that.

Moderator: Did you find any type of information there that influenced you either on what to do in Budapest or where to stay perhaps?

Agnes: I think it was more on certain things to eat [Laughs].

Moderator: Did you finally go there?

Agnes: Yeah it was, sort of types of food they have there and they said to try, like pastry rolls and things like that and it was nice because I have a Hungarian friend who is on there as well so I read her posts and I trust what she has written because she is my friend.

Moderator: Did you actually go there, to the restaurant?

Agnes: Yeah, and tried the things there.

Other participants employed social media for more than one holiday related DMP. In the following passage, Victoria (FG6) apart from using Customer Review Sites for searching her accommodation, and Internet Forums for her activities, she also finally admits that it was her friend's blog that influenced her to choose the specific holiday destination:

Victoria: I used the Customer Review Sites, Internet Forums such as Lonely Planet has lots of forums places to go, my friend's blog because she went to Canada as well, and that was probably it.

Moderator: What drove you to this kind of sites?

Victoria: Ehmm. The TripAdvisor I probably used only for hotels, because we travelled across Canada we were staying in lots of different places, we used TripAdvisor for hotels kind of, Internet Forums when we wanted to know something specific about the place or a question like what's the best time of year to go here, or where we can go trekking in the national park.

Moderator: How about your friend's blog?

Victoria: It was probably just, I don't think perhaps I used it to book the holiday, it was probably more of interest to do with the country rather than actually booking any part of my holiday, but it did probably spark off where she went was Victoria island, and we went there actually because she suggested it. So yeah, thinking about it now it directly relates to that we went there because she mentioned in on her blog.

There were also cases of participants that turn to social media to cross check suggestions provided by friends and relatives. As the following passage illustrates, Matthew (FG7)

employed Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare to make sure that his friends' suggestions were satisfying his requirements and personal preferences:

"I did some social media stalking because I was invited to stay with my friends so I went to Facebook, Twitter and all those kind of things to see where they actually live, to make sure the night, and then... **Twitter, how did you go about that?** They keep twitting like where they have been, they use Foursquare and checking in places and things like that, I haven't been away for 15 days in the last five years, so I wanted to make sure it's a nice place where I am going, so I checked all the pictures and check that it was nice".

The above passage provides preliminary indications that content in social media may be considered, by some active users, as more trustworthy than information received from friends and relatives, or at least it is of equal trustworthiness so that it enables cross-checking of information received from friends and relatives.

Focus group discussions revealed two instances where participants employed social media to search for information relating to a number of **other holiday related DMPs** such as transportation within the destination:

"[I used] Internet forums and blogs to find others' opinions about that place, mainly for shopping places, or for attractions, even for the transportation, how long will be the journey, or how's the transportation on the destination, traffic jams" (Ning, FG2).

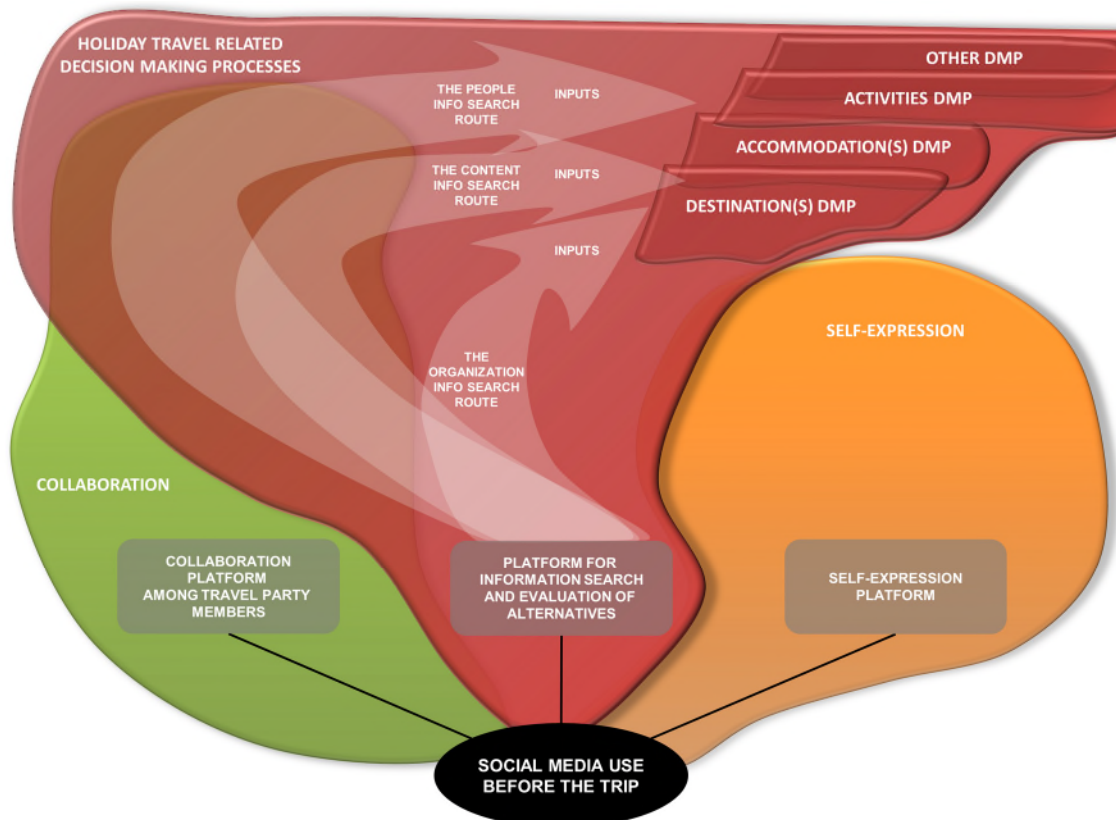
"In Egypt we travelled across the country and I read a blog about how to do that, effectively and there's a chap he writes about train tickets and how to do it and how to buy online and which train to get it's gonna be a good one and so. **Were you influenced by that? The information that you found was accurate? Did it influence a particular aspect of your trip?** Ehh yes. Absolutely. It's really far between the destinations, so the choice to book a hotel for three nights here and three nights there was completely dependent on whether you could be able to get the link, or its gonna be expensive and difficult to travel between the evenings" (Addie, FG7).

Given that (a) use of social media as information sources for DMPs other than the holiday destination, accommodation and activities was revealed only by two of the participants; (b) the limitations in the time available for the focus group discussions; and (c) the word limit of this thesis, it was decided that this study will not further explore other holiday related DMPs, and will focus only in the three most prevailing ones: the holiday destination DMP, the holiday accommodation DMP, and the holiday activities DMPs.

### 6.4.1. Information search routes

Analysis of focus group discussion revealed that active users who employed social media as information sources during the pre-trip stage of their travel process followed three information search routes, that are neither alternative nor mutually exclusive (Figure 6.3):

Figure 6.3: Routes in using social media as an information source platform



Source: Author

1. The people route: Users purposefully contacted, or at least attempted to contact, people from within their social media contacts with some kind of destination experience so that to request holiday travel related information.
2. The organization route: Users employed social media to communicate with organizations that is somehow related to their holiday trip.
3. The content route: Users searched for holiday travel related user generated content provided from users with whom they do not have any prior connection, that is from people located outside their social media contacts.

The following discussion provides a closer look into each of the three routes.

#### 6.4.1.1. The people route

A number of participants purposefully contacted people from within their social media contacts to seek holiday travel related information. In nearly all of the cases this was achieved through a social networking site, although microblogs were also mentioned as a platform to achieve the same purpose. As the following passage from FG5, and the following quote from FG1 illustrate, participants contacted, or attempted to contact people, among their social media contacts, who have some experience with the destination. Such experience can be the result of either a prior visit, or permanent residency at the destination:

Kelly: I used Facebook, I asked if anybody had any ideas about Marrakesh because quite a lot of my friends travel, sadly no one came back with anything.

Moderator: Did you post something to ask?

Kelly: Yeah, if anybody got any ideas of good places to stay in Marrakesh. We were going there for, you know, a holiday, whatever.

Moderator: So you posted that on your wall?

Kelly: Yeah, and nobody had anything to say about Marrakesh

“[...] if I know someone who has been there or lives there I would often contact him via Facebook to find out more about what they know about the place” (Christine, FG1).

As it can be seen in Figure 6.4, those social media contacts were either known in person to the participants, or not, as the following two quotes illustrate:

Ning: Before I go to one place I check, I wonder, if I have a friend or a classmate in that place, from my studies or from my work, and ask them for the local information, for the attractions not only for tourists for the really interesting places for the local people.

Moderator: How do you contact your friends?

Ning: I contact my friends through MSN or Facebook (FG2).

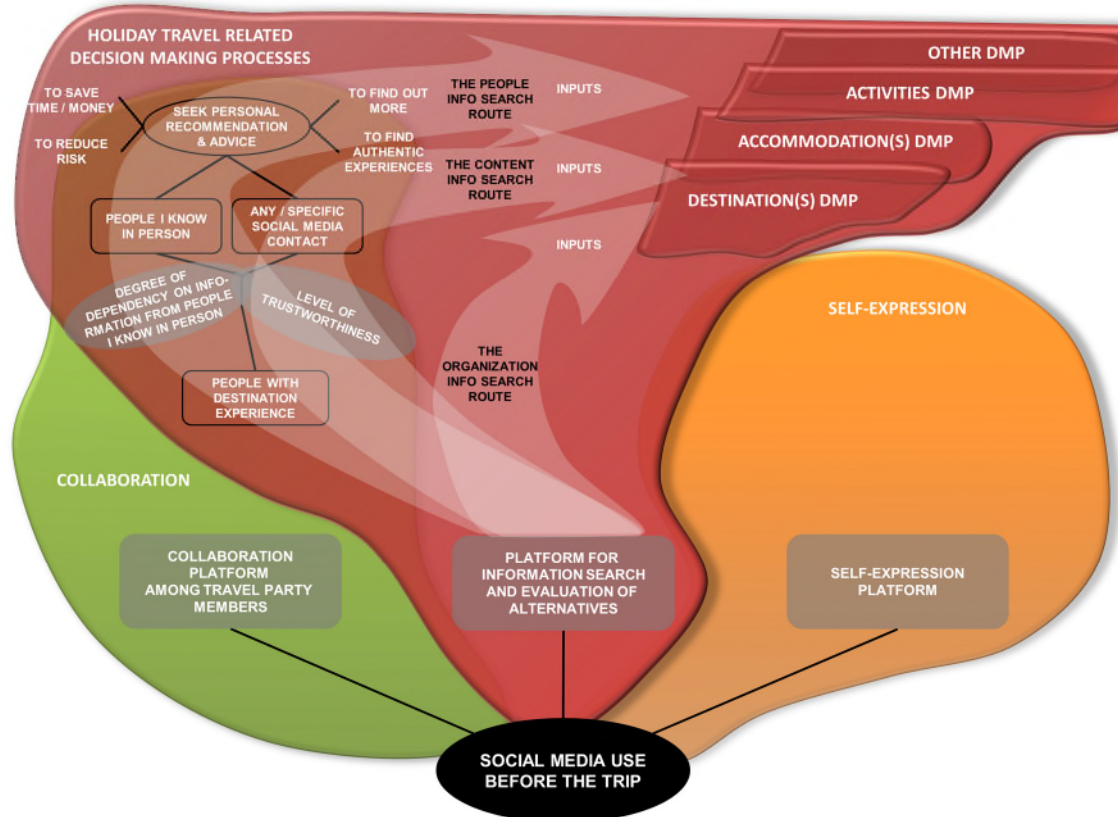
“Yes. I looked, actually, I do not know many persons of my Wayn [Wayn is a SNS that does not require reciprocation] friends in person, so when some of them already visited the places I write them some messages, but to be honest I did not get that much specific information out of those Wayn messages” (Karla FG1).

Social media also provide access also to friends of friends:

“Facebook once we knew where we were going to go, to seek recommendations from friends for restaurants or, trips, or things to do. **So you asked your friends...** Yeah. Post on Facebook if anybody been to Rome? **Did they respond?** Yeah I had quite a few people that did. And if it wasn't, it was people who were friends of friends, which is great so kind of expand...” (Haley, FG6).

The choice on whether to contact someone known in person to the user or not, seems to be related on two factors: First, on the degree of dependency towards information coming from people users already know in person, as opposed to information coming from strangers.

Figure 6.4: Social media contacts as sources of holiday travel related information



Source: Author

Second, on the level of trustworthiness they associate with a specific individual independently of whether he/she is known to the user. More specifically:

The first factor is the **degree of dependency towards information coming from users already known in person**. Some users may feel more comfortable receiving information from people they already know in person. This may be a simple preference to this type of sources, or even a dependency. This preference or dependency may, to an extent, be related to the subjectivity associated with information coming from people who the participants do not know in person. The following two quotes are illustrative of these cases:

“[...] if I know someone who has been there or lives there I would often contact him via Facebook to find out more about what they know about the place, but I am dependent on information from people I know rather than people I do not know. So, like you know, in TripAdvisor obviously I wouldn't know the person, ...like the word of mouth thing, it's from my network of people” (Christine, FG1).

“I also had a look already at TripAdvisor and things like this, but I wouldn't too much rely on it because I think it's really, really, subjective and if you do not know the person, you do not know what really makes them thinking it was a good experience or a bad experience. The recommendations vary a lot, you have really positive and really



negative, so I think it's really subjective and if you do not know the persons, I would be careful to rely on these information" (Delma FG1).

The second factor is **the level of trustworthiness**. For some users it is not a matter of whether the source of information is known in person or not, but a matter of how trustworthy the source of information is. The following passage (FG5) illustrates this point:

Nadimah: In terms of interests and finding information and stuff DEFINITELY Twitter, DEFINITELY a Twitter.

Agnes: It's, more tailored to you individually.

Nadimah: Ohh it's SO MUCH tailored. And you can put a question up to Twitter, guys I'm thinking of going to ... what do you think? And then you just get PUUUCHHHH. [...] but again, as I like to get it from my trusted people that I'm following, and they are following me, and you will probably never meet them [Laughter] but you can tell alike.

Moderator: How can you trust them if you do not meet them?

Nadimah: Because you can read what, most of them have blogs, or most of them post things like "that is really interesting" and you check it and say actually this is really. So they qualify, you know, if I am not really visiting somebody's, or not reading their tweets then I'll just delete them after few months, because it doesn't make any point. So you filter.

The passage above also suggests that there are cases in which the trustworthiness of an individual is assessed on a continuous basis through the information he/she provides to social media.

In any of the two cases presented above (communicating with people known in person to users or not) the purpose of the communication was primarily to seek personal recommendations and advices for the forthcoming holiday trip to further inform the decision making processes. Apart from general in nature recommendations, participants reported contacting their social media contacts to find what they consider as authentic experiences, to save time and, or money, to find out as much they possibly can about their forthcoming trip, or to reduce the risk of a wrong choice.

#### **6.4.1.2. The organization route**

Active social media users follow the organization search route when their purpose is to communicate directly with an organization that is somehow related to their holiday trip. In the following quote, Todd talks about his wife who visited a hotel's Facebook page in order to find further information about the accommodation:

"We mainly used Facebook for when we just book in Cyprus because we stayed in a Tsokkos hotel chain of hotels and my wife was going to their Facebook sort of page and she posted questions about which rooms are best and things like that and then got replies from Mr Tsokkos and my wife seems to think that the Chief Executive answered

her [Laughter]. [...] Yeah, communicating with the chain of hotels through their Facebook page on offers and things” (Todd, FG6).

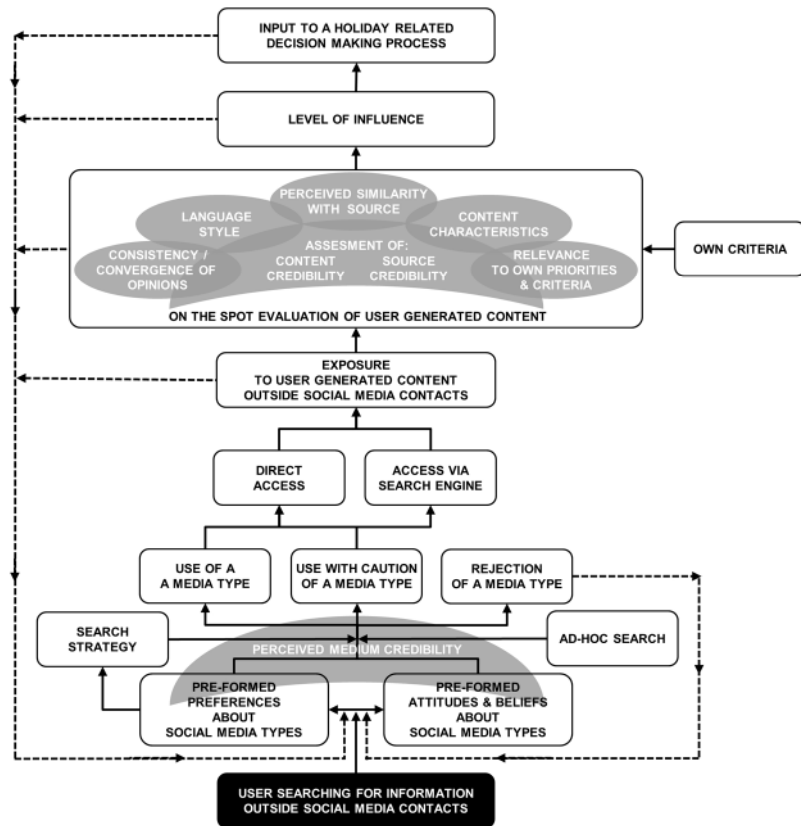
Social media provide a platform for continuous and direct communication between the social media user and the holiday service providers. In such a case, social media seem to replace other, already long existing communication platforms such as telephone and e-mail. Although not supported by findings in this study, users may follow this route to seek answers to specific questions, or seek information that will enable them to evaluate alternative options. A number of factors may drive users to this route: They may feel more comfortable with the specific application (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) as it is already part of their daily life not only as a networking platform but also as a communication tool. Also they may expect to receive more accurate, more relevant information tailored to their needs, or they may have found insufficient information on the organization’s website or other formal corporate information. The small sample size of this qualitative study was not sufficient to reveal adequate employment of the organization route.

#### **6.4.1.3. The content route**

Most participants employed social media to search for holiday travel related user generated content produced from users with who they do not have any prior connection that is from people located outside their social media contacts. In such a case, the search focuses on the content of the information, rather than on whether there is a pre-existing connection with the information provider. Given that this route was the most popular among the participants, adequate time was devoted into the discussion so to provide in-depth insights of the factors and processes involved. Focus groups participants revealed that for this purpose they employed all social media types, apart from Location Based Social Media. Figure 6.5 attempts to depict factors that were found to influence this search process.

Throughout all focus group discussions it became apparent that participants following the content route seem to start their search for information with **pre-formed attitudes and beliefs** about specific types of social media. The term “pre-formed” is used here to denote that these attitudes and beliefs exist before holiday related usage of social media, and therefore before exposure to social media content that is related to the forthcoming holiday trip. More specifically, these attitudes and beliefs seem to be related with how participants perceive the credibility of each type of medium. When talking about specific types of social media participants used words such as “trust”, “subjective”, “objective view”, “accurate”, “reliable”, and “wouldn’t know the person”. Such attitudes and beliefs seem to have a role in determining the selection of the social medium or media to be used in the information search process.

Figure 6.5: Access to content outside social media contacts



Source: Author

The perceived social medium credibility seems to be determining if a user will reject, use, or use with some caution a specific type of social medium. The following quotes were selected to illustrate the above argument:

Scott, Manolis, and Kelly are examples of focus group participants who have a pre-formed attitude or belief that results in **rejection** of a specific type of social medium. This is the case even with Manolis who although does not accept the term “rejection” he indeed accepts that he is not taking into account reviews from TripAdvisor:

“So, Wikipedia, I mean, no I wouldn’t use that, for example, because it can be updated, it is not necessarily that strictly accurate thing perhaps” (Scott, FG5).

“Ehhh, Usually I do not take them [TripAdvisor reviews] into consideration. **Do you read them or you reject them at all?** No I do not reject them at all. I may read the first ones, one or two, but I do not go further. This does not mean that I take them into account, or influence me when I read them” (Manolis, FG3).

“I wouldn’t go Wiki for anything, I wouldn’t trust it at all” (Kelly, FG5).

On the contrary, Aristotle, Kostas, Chrystalla, and Nadimah are examples of participants who have a pre-formed attitude or belief that results in **acceptance and therefore usage** of a specific type of social medium:

“In blogs you get the impressions of real people. There are many bloggers who love to travel, so over there you have a more objective view [...] When I get in blogs and find several opinions I consider that those opinions are much more objective. [...] What I want to say is that I trust blogs more” (Aristotle, FG3A).

“[Talking about TripAdvisor reviews] Yes I use them always [...] I consider them reliable” (Kostas, FG3).

“I have more trust in Wikipedia, independently from what Aristotle said before, I think that there are serious people who contribute” (Chrystalla FG3).

“Ehhmm at the moment I am more Facebook, but that’s why I want to communicate with my friends, but in terms of interests and finding information and stuff DEFINITELY Twitter, DEFINITELY a Twitter. [...] Ohh it’s SO MUCH tailored. And you can put a question up to Twitter, guys I’m thinking of going to ... what do you think? And then you just get PUUUCHHHH. [...] I like to get it from my trusted people that I’m following, and they are following me” (Nadimah, FG4).

Other participants had pre-formed attitudes and beliefs that resulted in a **cautionary use** of specific types of social media. Delma, Masha, and Aristotle provide some examples:

“The recommendations [talking about TripAdvisor] vary a lot, you have really positive and really negative, so I think it’s really subjective and if you do not know the persons, I would be careful to rely on these information” (Delma, FG1).

“I cannot say that I do not trust TripAdvisor and some things like that, but I do not know their preferences, maybe their level of wealth of those people, maybe something that is good for me is bad for them, or good for them is bad for me” (Masha, FG2).

“I start from there [talking about Wikipedia] for general information for a specific place, but I do not trust it too much. Simply it’s perhaps the only website that gives you many things of general nature” (Aristotle, FG3).

For few participants these pre-formed attitudes and beliefs may be related with a **pre-formed preference** in using a specific type of social medium as a starting point of their search for holiday related information. The following passage from FG5 reveals different starting points among participants:

Adrian: Just TripAdvisor that’s always where I gone first and use it.

Gill: I never ever go there first. I wait until I am inspired by something like an e-newsletter, or I find an article or somebody puts something on Twitter about “you should check these amazing holidays”, you know and there is a link to something. [...] I go to TripAdvisor as last, because I think it can be quite deceiving.

Nadimah: Ehhhhmmm at the moment I am more Facebook, but that’s why I want to communicate with my friends, but in terms of interests and finding information and stuff DEFINITELY Twitter, DEFINITELY a Twitter.

Few additional instances of such preferences as starting points were also observed in participants on other groups:

“I do Google search, but most of the times, I do not know why, by instinct I start from Wikipedia, and then I proceed to what “clicks” me, I open separate windows and I see where I need to focus [...] for information for the destination and for travel related comments that may be of interest to me (Ino, FG3).

“I start from there [Wikipedia] for general information for a specific place [...] Simply it’s perhaps the only website that gives you many things of general nature (Aristotle, FG3).

“I collect information from online blogs and books from bookstores (Haley, FG2).

It seems therefore that for some active users the existence of pre-formed social media preferences may, over time, result into a **search strategy**. Hyde (2007, p.66) defines a search strategy as “the combination of information sources the tourist uses”. Within the context of this study, such a strategy denotes the search steps and the social media types and applications that the user considers appropriate to use during each step of the search process. The strategy is then maintained, and perhaps improved, across a number of different holiday trips. The below passage from FG5 and quote from FG6 are illustrative:

Adam: Just TripAdvisor that’s always when I gone first and use it.

Gill: I never ever go there first. I wait until I am inspired by something like an e-newsletter, or I find an article or somebody puts something on Twitter about “you should check these amazing holidays”, you know and there is a link to something.

Moderator: So Twitter acts sometimes as stimuli for you

Gill: Yeah, yeah, definitely and then I’ll go and find, I will try to do everything I can, I go to TripAdvisor as last, because I think it can be quite deceiving.

“My process for searching is I will put in for example Lanzarote tourist info. I will then just hit the first seven things that come in Google and then I will scan from those, whatever grasp me and then follow that route” (Roy, FG6).

The above quotes suggest that for some users search is not based on an ad-hoc selection of sources. The specific social media types, or the specific social media applications employed in the beginning of the search process, and in some cases in the following steps of the process are not random choices made in the spur of the moment (e.g. what comes first Google results). On the contrary, there are indications of the existence of a pre-formed search strategy that dictates which types or application will be used first in the search process, and how the process will continue. Obviously the existence of such a strategy was not the case with all participants.

On the contrary, there are others users who followed an **ad-hoc search process**. Time limitations did not enable the researcher to focus adequately on the ad-hoc selection of social media, however there are indications that such a selection may be the result of a “Google search approach”, that is employment of a search engine rather than a direct visit to the website of a specific social media application.

Although most of the participants **accessed the social medium directly** that is by directly visiting its website, few others seem to **access it via a search engine**. For example, this second route was the preferred method for all those who ended up visiting blogs:

“[...] and then I checked personal blogs. I can use this to plan the whole trip, for example how many days... **Those blogs, how do you find them?** Just use Google and type the keywords” (Chen, FG1).

“Internet forums and blogs to find others’ opinions about that place, mainly for shopping places, or for attractions, even for the transportation, how long will be the journey, or how’s the transportation on the destination, traffic jams... **You mentioned blogs and Internet forums. Do you have some in mind that you prefer or every time you search for another blog or Internet forum?** Not any in particular. Just use the Google engine, type the destination’s name and blog” (Ning, FG2).

Upon usage of a specific medium, either with caution or not, participants are **exposed to the user generated content** (UGC) within the medium of preference. At this level participants seem to proceed to an **on the spot evaluation of the UGC**. Due to limited time available for each focus group discussion, it was not possible within this study, to assess how users evaluate UGC from all types of social media they used. However, it was decided that emphasis should be given in further examining the evaluation of UGC found in Consumer Review Sites. This decision was based on the fact that among all focus group discussions it was the Consumer Review Sites that appeared to be the most popular type of social media used at this stage of the travel process for all three types of decisions (destination, accommodation, activities) being examined in this study.

#### 6.4.2. Evaluation of social media content: The role of heuristics

Upon exposure to UGC, social media users seem to proceed to an evaluation of the content in terms of its credibility. The focus group discussions revealed that participants have developed some sort of mental heuristics that is simple rules that enable them to quickly assess both content and source credibility. The result of this assessment determines the level of influence that the specific piece of information will have on users’ decision making. The following

passage from FG5, where participants describe their use of TripAdvisor, clearly illustrates this argument:

Scott: You do receive what people complaint about and go “ok it doesn’t matter for us”. It’s usually Americans for whatever reason, but.... you are like “oh no, that doesn’t matter, that doesn’t matter” but actually it sounds like an alright place. I mean generally the ratings are generally fairly accurate for me, for places that I have been.

Adam: Yes, if you get one really really crazy complaint you say “Oh there’s something wrong with that particular person, his personality or someone else’s something...”

Moderator: So what you are suggesting is that, and tell me if I am wrong or not, that despite the fact that you may read some bad TripAdvisor reviews you have developed a set of criteria in your mind [interrupted].

Gill: Hmm.. Yes

Agnes: Yes

Adam: Yes, it is like a mental filter

In the case of evaluating information in Consumer Review Sites, five heuristics have been identified through the analysis of the focus group discussions: (a) Consistency / Convergence of opinions; (b) Style of language; (c) Relevance to own priorities and selection criteria; (d) Perceived similarity with the reviewer, and (e) Content Characteristics. More specifically:

#### **6.4.2.1. Consistency / Convergence of opinions**

Participants suggested that consistency or convergence, either negative or positive, of opinions from different reviewers, seem to contribute to the credibility of an argument expressed in a Consumer Review Site. The following passage from FG5 illustrates the point:

Gill: Also take St. Ives, we were definitely going to go to St. Ives. Definitely, definitely, definitely. I then went on TripAdvisor and all the reviews were really negative so we didn’t bother.

Moderator: So it influenced you on a negative way?

Gill: Yeah we didn’t go.

Moderator: Exactly so initially you were thinking or planning perhaps to go and the fact that you saw some negative reviews made you not to go. Is that the case?

Gill: It was the consistency. It was consistently negative, not one or two you would like to say it might take with a pinch of salt, but it was consistent so we changed our minds.

Other participants expressed this consistency in terms of the quantity of comments supporting the same argument. Chrystalla (FG3) suggested that “*when I see three to four persons saying the same thing, I believe it’s valid*”. Other participants were not that specific, suggesting that they believe a review if most of the other reviews, or a lot of them, are in agreement:

“I think for me it’s all about the amount of weight there is on TripAdvisor, the number of people that say something. Because when you start to look at one or two reviews, that person is miserable about that hotel would be scientifically interesting to look at their

reviews of other hotels and that might just be a miserable kid. [Yeah yeah from the group]. But when hundreds and hundreds of reviews then you've got something" (Roy, FG6)

Few other participants took an extra step and sought this consistency of opinions in other online sources that do accommodate reviews such as the websites of Online Travel Agents. These websites, although they do host UGC in the form of reviews are not classified as social media for the purposes of this study (section 2.4). Despite this fact, they still provide information that serve as input for the consistency/convergence of opinions heuristic.

#### **6.4.2.2. Style of Language**

Few participants supported that the reviewer's style of language enables them to assess the credibility of a review. They suggested that they reject reviews from further consideration when they contain, what they consider as, exaggerating comments, or even comments written in an enthusiastic style, as the following passage from FG3 illustrates:

Chrystalla: Simply I will not take into consideration some people who get excited saying it's fabulous, perfect. I do not take them into account, I think maybe they are written from the hotel themselves. I do not consider those that include very enthusiastic comments.

Aristotle: I remember one hotel recently, where it was said gorgeous. I mean o.k. (laughter).

Moderator: So you agree with Chrystalla?

Aristotle: Yes I agree

For other participants, the presence of issues in writing style and syntax decreases credibility of UGC:

"For me it depends on the style of how they write. Because if someone writes something, if the writing doesn't make sense to me, or what they are writing about isn't interesting to me, then I will probably not gonna read their blogs, or their reviews. Say I am a bit more selective, obviously I will be looking for certain things I want to do, so it does makes a difference to me" (Seth, FG7).

It is interesting to note that such comments are not simply rejected from further consideration but also, as suggested by Chrystalla, may provide evidence that the review is fake in the sense that it is not written by a consumer but by a company or an organization itself.



#### **6.4.2.3. Relevance to own priorities and selection criteria**

Some other participants stressed the importance of their own holiday related criteria and priorities when assessing a specific review. In this case, the judgment is not whether the comment is trustworthy, but whether it is relevant with the reader's selection criteria and holiday trip related priorities. The following quote clearly illustrates that a number of hotel room characteristics, although judged negatively, may be irrelevant with the reader's priorities and therefore not considered further. On the contrary, other criteria that are relevant to the reader may influence her selection:

“Ehhh. Yes I look at reviews. I trust them up to the point, that is of interest to me. I mean it happened sometimes that I read comments that the hotel was dirty, or for example that there were construction works outside the hotel so there was some dust inside. I am not interested about these. The hotel was finally clean. Ehhh up to a point I trust them. If for example they say that the area is not safe, its dark, or its away from the centre etc., then I believe these comments” (Harmonia, FG3).

#### **6.4.2.4. Perceived similarity with the reviewer**

Few participants suggested that they assess reviews by how similar they feel with the reviewer. This similarity is assessed through construction of a mental image of the reviewer based either on the content of the review, and / or with other known characteristics of the reviewer. The following quote illustrates the construction of the reviewer's picture based on the content of the review:

“Yeah. I would think that in booking the hotel I was influenced by the reviews, sometimes especially if the reviewer is, you can get a picture of who the reviewer is as well, I am not that type of person, this is not going to impact me, or they seem to be a bit of grandeur, or what they quite like as being good, in this particular hotel isn't going to be very impressive for me. So you do kind of get an imaginary picture of who the reviewer is, and you decide whether the review is relevant to you” (Paul, FG4).

The reviewer's mental image can also be formulated based on factual characteristics that are displayed as part of the reviewer's profile:

“I was gonna make a point earlier, you said it's a complete stranger on TripAdvisor, but I look for people who are like me, because it identifies people who are a couple or in your age bracket, or what they are interested in, and so I look at the reviews of the people who I identify with, and then I take more seriously what they say, so there is a way to connect with people even if you don't know them at all. I value their kind of judgment and I see like them as a person like as me” (Abbott, FG7).

As in the case of the previous heuristic (relevance to own priorities and selection criteria), also in this case the judgment is not whether the comment is credible, but whether it is relevant with the reader's selection criteria and holiday preferences. On other instances, the mental image was

influenced based on the nationality of the reviewer. During the discussion in FG5 most of the participants agreed that they do not consider reviews for further evaluation if posted by U.S. Americans, as the following quote illustrates:

“[...] and I double checked everything on Hit Morocco with TripAdvisor, but not the critique from US people. Because they expect it to be CLEAN and nice and it is a totally different experience to us. So if it is has a got a bad US review I KIND THINK IT WILL BE OK [very intensive laughter]” (Gill, FG5).

#### **6.4.2.5. Content characteristics**

Few participants suggested that they assess reviews based on specific content characteristics mainly related with spelling and syntax:

Seth: [...] And there are some people with so bad English [Laughter] if someone misspells or cannot write a basic sentence I am not interested what they are saying about

Jonathan: Oh I was just agreeing, spelling and grammar is, if it is atrocious I do not really, and it's not just for this, it's for anything on the Internet. (FG7)

Others suggest that the age of the content, that is how recent it is, may contribute to their assessment of credibility:

“I tend to go for the more recent ones. So sort of like if you go towards the end of the season look up the ones [yeah are heard from the group] relating to that period of time. If there is nothing on there that's fairly recent, then that's sort of rings alarm bells, because you know sometimes reviews don't get posted because they are bad, but that's how..” (Rosemary, FG6).

“Yeah the same I mean...and then you think oh I got to check the hotel on TripAdvisor, you hope there are reasonable reviews, normally would read the good ones and couple of the bad points you know and if the toilet was bad back in 2006 [laughter from the group] you know, they should have sort it by now, it will be all right [laughter] but if this was something really bad then we listen to it” (Alan, FG6).

“I don't think I take as much notice of TripAdvisor as I used to. I used to kind as almost what was said is what you believed in the early days and now you read between the lines and you know if you then go online to the hotel website's and they have a refit in the last two years and that person was annoyed because it was horrible room three years ago, you kind you weight up now. I do not think I will take it at face value as I used to. Yeah definitely” (Haley, FG6).

#### **6.4.2.6. Combined use of different heuristics**

Use of the different heuristics is not mutually exclusive, but they can also be used in combination. For example, users may employ the perceived similarity heuristic by constructing an image of the reviewer based both on the content of the review and also on the reviewer's

characteristic, while at the same time employing the style of language heuristic. The following passage from FG5 illustrates this point:

Kelly: They are a great starter. They can help inspire you, then they can help qualify. If you find something you really want to see, they can help qualify whether or not it's worth it, or, and you find people with the same values and you can discard people who do not have the same values, you can tell what's important.

Moderator: You said about values. What do you think as values?

Kelly: You can read into how people talk about, people who work in hotels, whether or not they are serving them as servants, or whether they serve them as amazing people who know their country, and so you can work out quite quickly, about the food, if a menu is bad because it's only got three choices, rather than because it's an AMAZING three choices

Agnes: Or it took more than five minutes to serve breakfast, I am not happy about it

Kelly: Yeah

Agnes: You can work out where you want to go

Kelly: Sorry I have got American friends, [Laughs] but I just don't go where they go [Laughs]

#### 6.4.3. Information Search loops

Independently from which of the three information search routes (people, organization or content) is followed by active social media users, once the result of the search becomes an input to further stages of the decision making process, users may repeat the search. This repetition resembles a series of search loops during which users choose to follow either a different, or the same search route. For example, there may be instances where a user initially follows the people route, then follows the content route in an effort to reconfirm the advice and recommendations provided by social media contacts, so to further minimize the risk of a mistaken choice. The below quote from FG7 illustrates such search behaviour:

"I went to visit to see friends so they were like my major source of information. They tell me what was gonna happen, what we're gonna do and everything else. But then I went to the Internet to make sure that what they were saying is [...] When I was planning it we were talking via Skype, or Facebook or anything to exchange information. [...] I did some social media stalking because I was invited to stay with my friends so I went to Facebook, Twitter and all those kind of things to see where they actually live, to make sure the night, [...] They keep twitting like where they have been, they use Foursquare and checking in places and things like that, I haven't been away for 15 days in the last five years, so I wanted to make sure it's a nice place where I am going, so I checked all the pictures and check that it was nice" (Matthew, FG7).

Matthew initially follows the people route, employing Facebook to get suggestions from friends. Once this is achieved he continues further following the content route employing "Facebook, Twitter, and all these kind of things" including Foursquare, so to "make sure what they [his friends] were saying is accurate" and "make sure it's a nice place where I am going".

## **7. Social media use during the trip**

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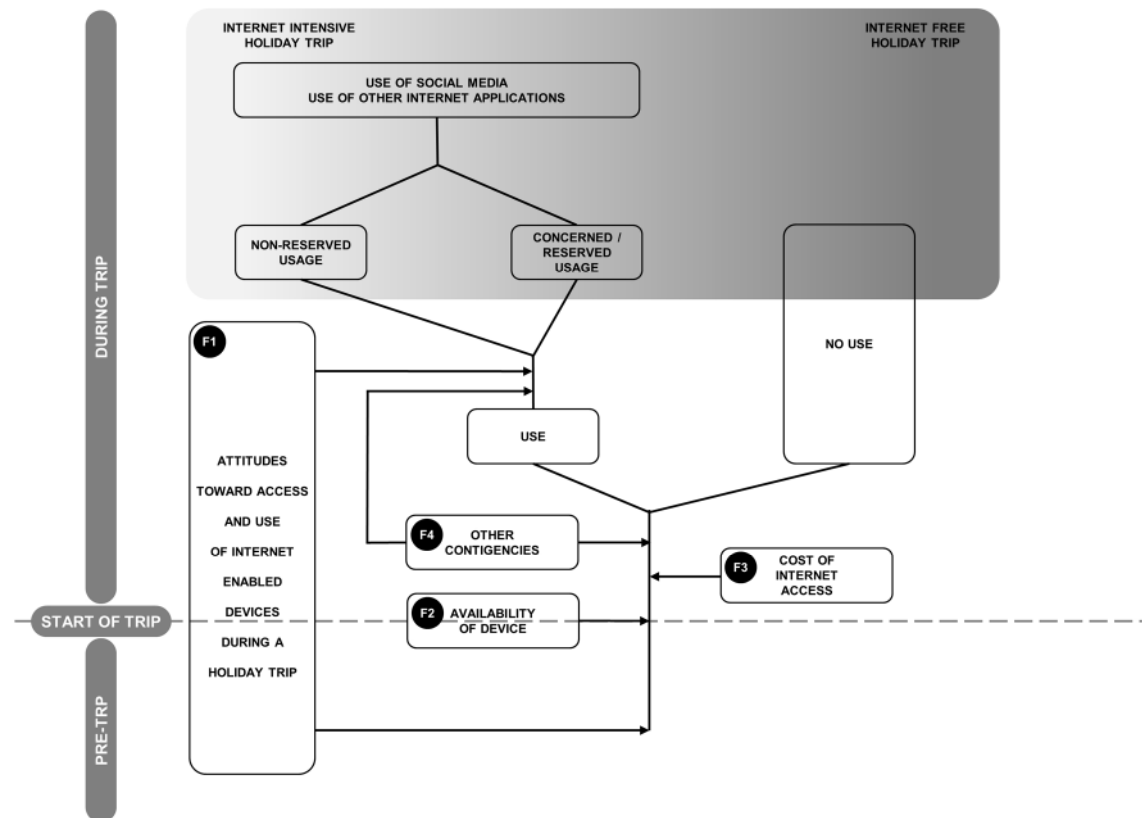
### **7.1. Introduction**

This chapter provides insights on holiday travel related use and impacts of social media during the holiday trip. An essential prerequisite for use of social media during the holiday trip is access to Internet. Given this prerequisite, this chapter begins with a section providing insights on access to Internet. Four factors that determine whether a social media user will use Internet during the holiday trip are identified and discussed in-depth. In the second section, the analysis reveals that social media serve four functions during the trip: First, as communication platforms to enable active users to keep in touch with their social media contacts; second, as platforms providing inputs to, and outputs from, holiday related decision making processes; third, as platforms for travel related self-expression; and fourth as entertainment platforms. Each function is presented and discussed in detail.

## 7.2. Access to Internet-enabled devices and related issues

During the focus group discussions it became apparent, as it was expected, that social media use during the trip is closely associated with use of Internet during the trip. The discussions revealed four factors (Figure 7.1) that determine whether a social media user will use Internet during the holiday trip. The first factor (F1) relates to a set of attitudes that the user holds towards access and use of Internet-enabled devices during the trip. The second, (F2) relates to the availability of an Internet-enabled device; the third (F3) is the cost of Internet access; and the fourth (F4) groups a number of contingencies that the user may encounter during the holiday trip which may determine use of Internet or not. Given that Internet access is a prerequisite for social media use during holiday trips, the discussion below provides further insights into those factors.

Figure 7.1: Access to Internet-enabled devices during the trip



Source: Author

### 7.2.1. Attitudes towards access and use of Internet enabled devices during holidays

An essential prerequisite not only for social media use, but also for any Internet use during the holiday trip is the user's access to an Internet-enabled device (IED). As it will be further

discussed in the following section, most participants had access to such a device. However, all participants who did not report access to an IED revealed the presence of a **negative attitude towards the use of such a device during holidays**:

“No I did not have any access but I must admit that I really like it not to be connected for a week or so, so that I do not check my e-mails ten times a day, I really enjoy having no access to Internet for a week, or something, to get really relaxed” (Delma, FG1).

“This is what I want at holidays, not to look at the screen for a few days, and just have a break, you are outside more and you are more active, than you know, keeping yourself busy” (Jacques, FG4).

For those participants it seems that no use of an IED, and consequently lack of Internet access, seems as a favourable and desirable element of their holidays. For them, the absence of Internet access contributes to a more relaxing holiday, but also it seems as a desirable break from their normal routine of being “connected”, or working in front of a screen. Moreover, there were indications that this attitude is not exclusively related to the specific holiday trip, but it exists in general, or at least it existed before the specific holiday trip under discussion.

Those participants that had access to an IED did not self-reveal any predisposition towards using the Internet during holidays. However, the fact that they had access to a device, and actually used it, may provide evidence that for them accessing the Internet during holidays is an acceptable behaviour that fits naturally within their holiday time. More than that, the specific behaviour itself (using the Internet during the trip) may serve as an indication of an absence of a negative attitude and the presence of **a neutral, or even a positive attitude towards the use of such a device during the trip**:

“I think it is convenient [talking about taking his laptop with him during holidays]. For example if I had a trip myself, or with my wife, we always bring our laptop, so to check something to visit, some restaurants to eat” (Chen, FG1).

From the above discussion it may be suggested, as it can be seen in Figure 7.1, that participants hold a set of attitudes that determine whether it is appropriate for them to have an IED with them during the trip, and whether they consider it appropriate to use it for accessing the Internet. The fact that most participants had access to such a device and used it may serve as an evidence of a favourable or a neutral attitude. However, there are also those who despite being social media users during their daily routine, they have a negative attitude towards accessing Internet during their holidays, preferring what might be called as an Internet free holiday. This set of attitudes seems (a) to pre-exist before the trip; and (b) to influence the decision of whether or not an IED should be taken with them during the trip.

In addition, the same set of attitudes seems also to influence the level of use of such devices. A small number of participants revealed some **concern and reservation in using IED during their holidays**. Although this attitude was not adequate to stop those participants from using IEDs, the following quotes show that they were somehow reserved in using Internet during their holidays, sometimes even to the extent that they set a self-limit in terms of number of minutes they stay connected:

“Ordinarily on a holiday I wouldn’t take a laptop. But often in the hotels that I stay there is free access. So if there is free access I usually I pop up for let’s say 10 minutes but I wouldn’t be very dependent. Doing Facebook. Just, seeing what I am missing out. [Laughs]. But I wouldn’t spend a vast amount of time. Maybe 10 minutes. Or if it was raining and I didn’t want to go out of the hotel, then I might spend an hour on it. But certainly it wouldn’t be a main focus” (Christine, FG1).

“No. [When asked if he visited any social media sites including Facebook during holidays]. I’ve kind of get in [the Internet] 15-20 minutes and then the rest is my holiday time, so you don’t spend it too much on that” (Paul, FG4).

“I was doing that [to speak, I mean if I have messages, if I have some notifications, maybe someone had his birthday, or a name day, so send wishes] about once every three days” (Aristotle, FG3A).

The number of participants that expressed such a concern and reservation is not adequate to allow for further analysis. However, it may be suggested that this reservation is somehow related to a conscious effort to minimize the time spent in accessing the Internet, an activity that is not perceived, by them, as valuable when compared with other holidays activities, or is not seen as an “accepted activity” during holidays.

### 7.2.2. Availability of device, cost of Internet and other contingencies

Most participants revealed that they had access to an IED during their holidays. More specifically, all participants without a negative attitude towards access and use of Internet during holidays revealed that they had access to, and therefore **availability of an IED**. Laptops, either owned by the participants, or shared with a member of their travel party; smartphones; tablets; but also public personal computers available at either within the accommodation, or at Internet cafes were devices that participants had access to during their holiday trip.

The **cost of Internet access** during the trip is also another factor that seems to determine use of an IED. All except one of the participants who had access to an IED but did not use it during the trip reported the cost of Internet access as the reason for not using such a device. The following passages and quotes illustrate this finding, but also show that the issue of cost applies both to data roaming and to paid Wi-Fi:

Moderator: Did you access the Internet at all during your holiday?

Kelly: No, it was too expensive [Laughs].

Moderator: You took something with you, or not?

Kelly: Yeah, iPhone” (FG5).

Moderator: I would like to ask you is if you had by any means Internet access during your holidays.

Madeline: No, no Internet access. [...] I mean I do take my phone with me when I go abroad, but I do not use it for expensive reasons.

Jean: Well it’s actually the same, I could have used my phone but it would cost a lot of money” (FG4).

“Yes, I was at the airport, I took out my ipad. **During your stay did you use any of those [social media] sites? Even for a reason not related to your holidays?** No I did not. I was at the airport and I was waiting for our shuttle bus from the B&B, so I checked if I could use Internet at the airport, but when we arrived at the B&B we didn’t want to pay so we just enjoyed our holiday” (Haley, FG2).

Similarly, it was found, as expected, that free Wi-Fi contributes to Internet usage. As the following quote illustrate (in response to the question if they used Internet during their holidays) it seems that there are users who access the Internet only if there is free Wi-Fi access:

“When I went for a coffee and we had free Wi-Fi, or at the hotel, or any place with free Wi-Fi access” (Ning, FG2).

In addition to the above factors, a number of **other contingencies** may not only determine whether the user may have access to Internet during the trip, but also may influence usage levels (Figure 7.1). For example, the **existence of signal** (either Wi-Fi, or telephone signal for data roaming) is a factor that determines if a user can access the Internet:

“No, not once [In response to the question if she had Internet access during the trip]. I took my laptop but there was no Internet at all, barely a fair signal” (Nadimah, FG5).

In addition, in a single instance it was found that **the weather** can influence Internet usage levels. As Christine points out a day with a bad weather may influence users to stay inside their holiday accommodation and due to lack of other leisure activities this may result in increased Internet usage:

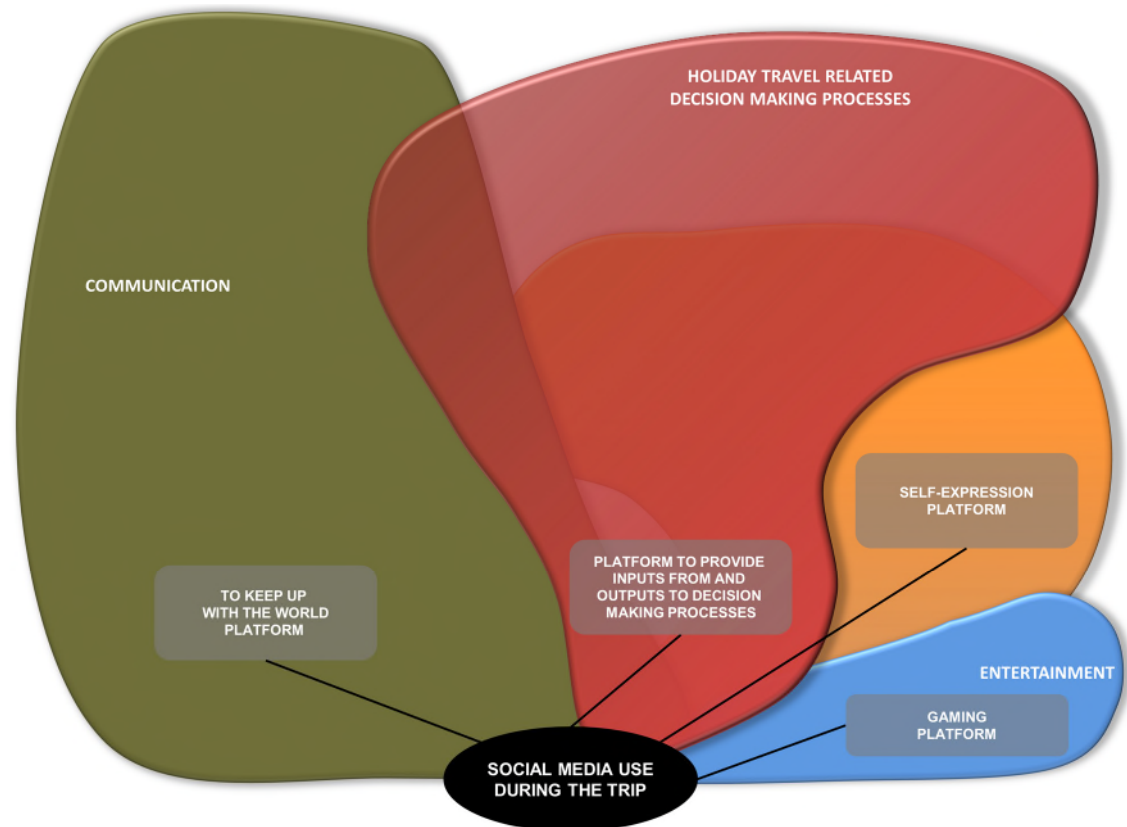
“So if there is free access I usually I pop up for let’s say ten minutes but I wouldn’t be very dependent. Doing Facebook. Just, seeing what I am missing out. [Laughs]. But I wouldn’t spend a vast amount of time. Maybe ten minutes. Or if it was raining and I didn’t want to go out of the hotel, then I might spend an hour on it” (Christine, FG1).



### 7.3. Social media use during the trip

More than a third of focus group participants reported that they used social media during their holiday trip. Although a quantitative comparison is strictly indicative, it should be noted that those participants who used social media during the trip are half of those who used social media before the trip. The analysis of the focus group discussions revealed, (Figure 7.2), that during the trip social media are used (1) as communication platforms to enable users to keep in touch with their social media contacts; (2) as platforms providing inputs to, and outputs from, holiday related decision making processes (DMPs); (3) as platforms for travel related self-expression; and (4) as entertainment platforms. Two of the above four themes, namely DMPs related usage and self-expression platforms, were also observed before the trip. The discussion in the four following sections attempts to provide an insight on each of the above four themes.

Figure 7.2: Overview of social media use during the trip



Source: Author

#### 7.3.1. Social media as communication platforms

Analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that users' need to communicate with friends and social media contacts is the most popular among the four reasons that drive users to social

media during their holiday trip. It should be noted that (a) this theme was found across all seven focus groups; and (b) that such usage behaviour was observed even among those participants who expressed some concern and reservation in using Internet during holidays. Communication with friends and relatives was primarily achieved through the use of Social Networking Sites, and to a much lesser extent through Microblogs.

The prime reason that seems to drive this type of social media behaviour seems to be the need to **keep up** with friends and relatives, or even to keep up with the world. The following passage, and the below quotes are illustrative of such behaviour:

Veronika: Yes in London I did have my laptop with me even though I went there for two days and I had Wi-Fi access.

Moderator: So did you do any kind of searching in relation to the specific trip?

Veronika: No, nothing. Just Facebook and e-mails.

Moderator: What did you do in Facebook during your trip?

Veronika: Check other people photographs. [Laughs]. Keep up. Keep with the world.

Moderator: Did you visit any other of social media websites during your visit?

Veronika: Tweeter perhaps, but that's it." (FG1)

**"And you also said on Facebook?** Yeah, this was just keeping up to date with friends and relatives" (Agnes, FG5).

Active users may also employ social media during their holiday trip in their effort to fulfil what they perceive as **social obligations**. Users feel somehow socially obliged to send wishes to friends on their birthdays and name days, or even to receive wishes from friends, as they normally do during their normal social media routine:

**Did you use Facebook? I mean despite that you didn't have your own laptop with you did you use Internet for any other reason as long as you were there?** [Yes] To speak, I mean if I have messages, if I have some notifications, maybe someone had his birthday, or a name day, so send wishes" (Aristotle, FG3).

"I used Facebook when I was there, but I didn't use it for the purpose of the trip as such. The trip was actually on my birthday so I was getting a lot of messages and things like that, so I interact with my friend, family and so" (Seth, FG7).

It seems that for these users being away on a holiday trip is not considered as a legitimate excuse to avoid what they perceive as a social obligation. They feel the need to stay present and show that they can fulfil their social obligations even if they are away from home.

Finally a number of **contingences** may drive active users to social media: For example a day with bad weather that results in an unexpected or extended stay in the hotel, or a below

expectations experience with an aspect of the trip that results on feelings of boredom may offer the opportunity for users to communicate or keep up. The following quotes are examples of this behaviour:

“I checked Facebook and Skype. Facebook because sometime I was bored in the hotel and wanted to chat with my friends” (Fion, FG2).

“So if there is free access I usually I pop up for, let’s say, ten minutes but I wouldn’t be very dependent. Doing Facebook. Just, seeing what I am missing out. [Laughs]. But I wouldn’t spend a vast amount of time. Maybe ten minutes. Or if it was raining and I didn’t want to go out of the hotel, then I might spend an hour on it. But certainly it wouldn’t be a main focus” (Christine, FG1).

Although not supported by findings in this study, such behaviour during the holiday trip, may also be a result of an addiction syndrome related to excessive SNS usage (Kuss and Griffiths 2011).

From the above it seems that active social media users who do not have a negative attitude towards using Internet during their holidays, do feel the need to keep-up with the world and therefore continue their social media routine, at least regarding their visits to social networking sites. Independently of the reasons behind use of social media as platforms to keep up with the world, it is mobile devices that facilitate such behaviour, offering ease of access and round the clock availability, as well as real-time and on the spot interaction, especially when compared to Internet access provided through laptops or publicly available personal computers. It is believed that as popularity and ownership levels of mobile devices increase the interaction during the trip will become continuous especially when roaming costs will decrease.

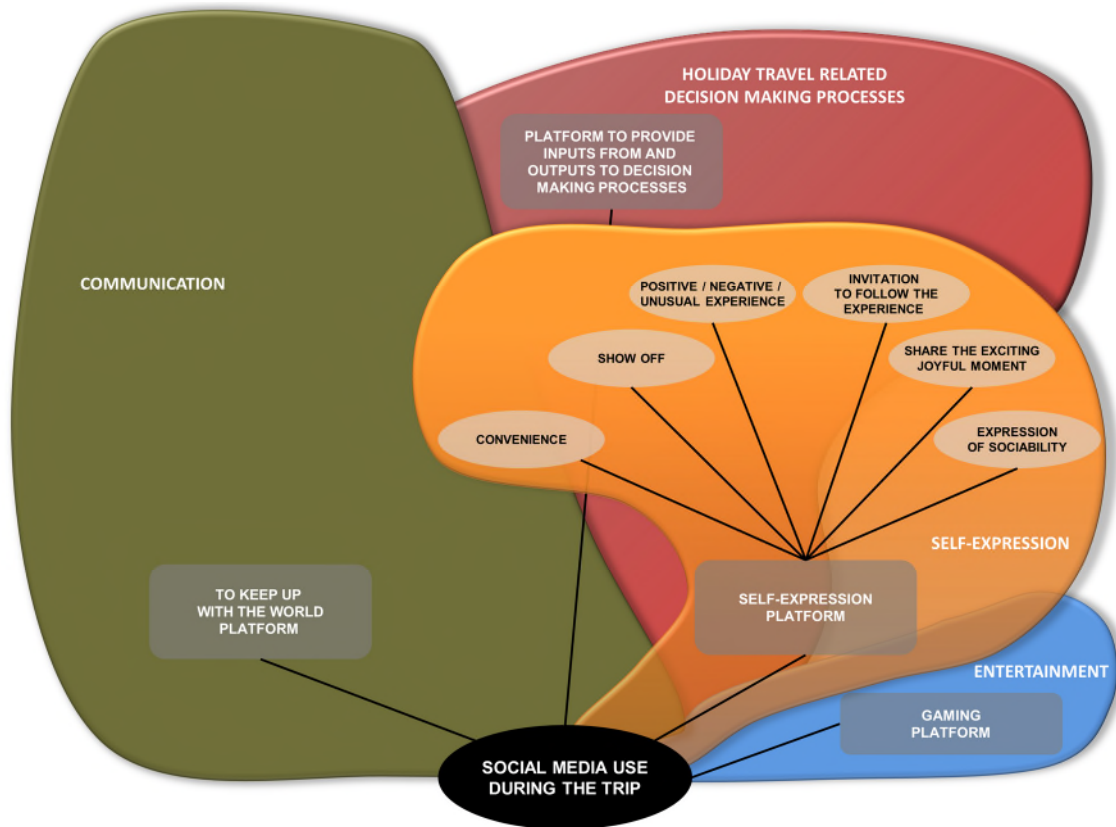
### **7.3.2. Social media as platforms for self-expression during the trip**

Similarly to what was the case before the trip, focus group discussions revealed the use of social media as platforms for travel related self-expression during the trip. As it was discussed in section 6.3, social media enabled travel related self-expression can be considered as the projection into the world of one’s own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences about the holiday trip through social media. The following quotes and discussion illustrate this behaviour and provide some insights on the forces driving it (Figure 7.3):

“Yeah “5 o’clock, having a coffee in Heathrow”. Just to bring people into the trip” (Kelly, FG5).

Kelly posted to Facebook before her departure to the holiday destination, while still at the airport. As Kelly suggests with such a post she sent, to her social media contacts, an invitation to follow her trip, or better an **invitation to follow the holiday experience**. Although there is no evidence from the discussion that she continued posting material during her trip, she perhaps

Figure 7.3: Drivers of self-expression during the trip



Source: Author

created expectations to her social network that she would share with them some parts of the holiday experience.

On the other hand, Aristotle (FG3) posted his arrival in the holiday destination to make his social media contacts aware of where he is:

“I went [at Facebook] and uploaded some stuff, through my own account. **So you said that I am in Jordan or something similar...** Yes, yes. [...] I do not know. Simply to make them know. Maybe it’s a trend of sociability, but o.k. those trends are not always good for the reasons that those people who said that they do not give information” (Aristotle, FG3).

Aristotle perceives such behaviour as an **expression of sociability**. It seems that few social media users want to remain, what they perceive as, “sociable” even during their holiday trip, since for them informing contacts about their current location is perceived as socially required.

In the case of Aristotle, and in combination with his visits to Facebook during his trip to exchange wishes with friends on their birthdays (as presented in the previous section), it seems that by announcing his arrival he attempts to satisfy what he perceives as a social norm. He admits however, that this norm can be a “trend”, a result of a fashion.

This need to “make others know about where I am” can be satisfied through multiple ways: For example, a post to Facebook can be accompanied with a photo to **share the joyful moment** of being somewhere nice, or even via a check-in through a Location Based Social Medium such as Foursquare or Facebook check-in:

“Mostly Facebook to check-in places [...], and here I am in the beach and take a picture of some nice scenery of the holiday and upload the pictures” (Gill, FG5).

“I was in LA and I was going to the Beverly [inaudible] coffee, so put it in Facebook and say oooh [Laughter]. And every five minutes my friends saying Woowww yeah you are there. I didn’t want to make people jealous. It was just being childish and go oh my God I am going where Pretty Woman was, although I went to Disneyland as well. It was excitement, I wanted to share it with my friends, because I was happy” (Matthew, FG7).

Encountering something “unusual”, “strange”, or “interesting” during the holiday trip may also result in self-expression during the trip. The **presence of an unexpected positive, a negative, or even an unusual experience** with a particular component of the holiday trip resulting in excitement (or disappointment) may drive self-expression:

“[...] we did check some restaurants opening time, but yes Facebook posted couple of pictures. **During the holiday?...** Yes couple of the most unusual ones. We stopped at [inaudible] one day, so I snapped few of the flows and I put them on because it was strange and interesting” (Sean, FG7).

Users also employed social media during the trip to check-in at places, or post photos and/or comments about places they visited to **show off** and make others jealous:

“I normally turn my phone off. But on the last holiday I had it with me all the time, and then if there was Wi-Fi I was checking in and tag all these places to make everyone jealous [Laughter]” (Matthew, FG7).

Lastly, another driving force behind self-expression during the trip may be **convenience**. The following passage from FG1 is illustrative:

Karla: I wrote a blog during my trip to New Zealand and Australia when I did work and travel over there and it was so hard to get in touch with all the people at home and so just writing on the blog and everyone could go there, read it and visit the blog to see the

pictures, that was really convenient for me, so even if I hadn't got all their e-mails addresses I could just say...

Christine: Was that pre-Facebook or post-Facebook?

Karla: Pre-Facebook.

Christine: Yeah, I can understand the value of it before Facebook, but now that we have Facebook, Facebook almost acts as a similar platform, without having to be, without writing so much.

Karla: Yeah, but I think my aunt for instance and my uncle wouldn't go in Facebook, but they would go on my blog.

Christine: Yes. That's true. My parents wouldn't know how to use Facebook, or my dad would go into my blog, yeah. I suppose as a platform, if you are away from home and you want to keep in touch with everyone, I understand that, but my husband is talking about me writing one on a daily basis. But I do not think I do anything interesting enough, on a daily basis [Laughs].

Karla preferred to post her travel experiences into her blog for convenience. It seems that she saved time by referring all her friends and relatives to her blog rather than contacting each one individually to provide information about the trip. Christine seems to disagree preferring a social networking site to achieve the same objective, but finally agrees with Karla given that SNS require membership, a feature not perhaps satisfied by all of Karla's friends and relatives. Such a drive for during the trip self-expression could be easily fitted within the "Communication" theme. However blogging has been long recognized as a form of self-expression (Guadagno et al. 2008; Law and Cheung 2010). This study accepts that travel related blogging for such convenience purposes can fit in both themes, a claim also depicted in Figure 7.3 by placing Convenience at the overlapping section between the Self-expression and the Communication themes as shown in Figure 7.3.

Similarly with self-expression before the trip, it is Social Networking Sites that were also reported to be used for the same activity during the trip. Apart from this similarity the analysis of the discussions revealed that there are indications for a number of differences between pre-trip and during the trip self-expression:

First, during the trip self-expression seems to be far less popular as an activity when compared to pre-trip self-expression, as there were only very few participants who reported engagement in the former activity. A number of participants reported the cost of access to Internet as a limiting factor. Second, engagement in pre-trip self-expression does not seem to be related with during the trip self-expression, as most participants who engaged in such pre-trip activity did not engage in the same activity during the trip. Both of those two differences may be attributed to a negative attitude towards Internet usage during holidays, but also to the cost of Internet access, to the availability of an Internet-enabled device, or to other contingencies as discussed in sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.2. Third, whereas the content of pre-trip self-expression consists of text

and / or pictures, during trip self-expression can also take the form of check-ins via Location Based Social Media where users share their presence at a location without necessarily an accompanying textual or visual element.

### **7.3.3. Social media as entertainment platforms**

Use of social media during the holiday trip as an entertainment platform, although reported only by a single participant, should be noted as a separate theme. Entertainment in this theme relates exclusively to social games that are games played within the environment of a Social Networking Site (SNS). In the following quote Gill admits that she used Facebook, among other reasons, also for playing Farmville, one of the most popular SNS games:

“Mostly Facebook to check-in places and generally go to the Farm [Laughs]” (Gill, FG5).

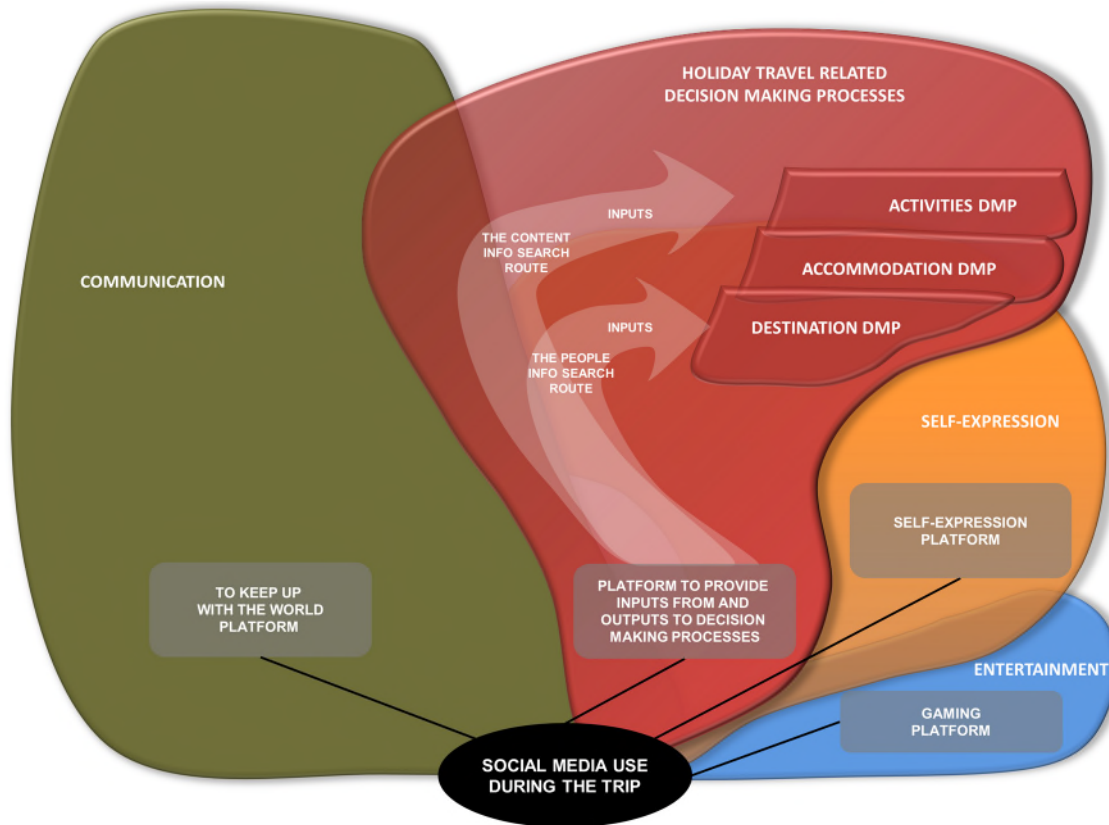
Social media and gaming enjoy a “symbiotic relationship” (Hjorth and Arnold 2012, p. 27). There are more than 7000 SNS games available as applications to Facebook users only, the most popular of which are enjoying usage rates in the area of 35 million monthly active users (Socialbakers 2012). As time devoted to online games is part of leisure time (Martinsons 2005), it seems expected that SNS games are part, or even conflate with other leisure activities during holiday travel. This may hold true especially for games that include not only social interaction, but also social polemics that require the player’s active participation at specific, frequent time intervals, to the extent that they are perceived even as a form of social labour (Hjorth and Arnold 2012). However, such characteristics may substantiate the presence of some degree of order and pressure to the player that resemble a feeling of compulsion which may be considered as incompatible with both the recreational nature of holiday trips (Clawson and Knetsch 1966), and with freedom as a definitional element of leisure (Page and Connell 2010). As popularity of SNS games moves away from youngsters, there are early signs of a growing concern for addictive behaviours associated with excessive use of both SNS games and SNS in general (Kuss and Griffiths 2011; Rooij 2011). Although there are no academic studies examining use and impacts of online games during holiday travel, anecdotal business research found that 25% of all British holidaymakers who accessed Internet during their holidays were engaged in playing online games (Bloomberg 2011).

### **7.3.4. Social media as platforms providing inputs to and outputs from decision making processes**

Analysis of focus group discussions revealed that during the trip active social media users employed social media as platforms to enable them (a) to access information sources to provide

inputs to their holiday related Decision Making Processes (DMPs); but also (b) to provide outputs from their holiday related DMPs (Figure 7.4). The following discussion attempts to provide insights into both of these uses.

*Figure 7.4: Social media as platforms providing inputs to and outputs from holiday travel related decision making processes*



Source: Author

#### **7.3.4.1. As sources providing inputs to holiday related decision making processes**

As was observed also in the before the trip stage, participants used social media during their holiday trip as information sources to provide inputs to their holiday related DMPs. Usage for such a purpose during the trip does not appear to be as popular as usage reported for the same reason before the trip. Such difference may be attributed to the overall lower usage levels of social media during the trip, as discussed in sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.2, primarily due to: (a) the negative attitude towards Internet usage during holidays; (b) the cost of Internet access; (c) the availability of an Internet-enabled device; and (d) to other contingencies.

Few focus group participants used social media during their trip for information search and evaluation of alternatives as part of their **holiday activities DMPs**. This was to some degree



expected since at this stage users are already at their holiday destination, therefore destination and accommodation DMPs do not need any further inputs. This can hold true unless the trip is a multi-destination independent travel that requires multiple destination and accommodation choices to be made en route (Hyde and Lawson 2003). To inform their holiday activities DMPs participants, similarly to what was found during the before the trip stage, followed two routes that were found neither alternative nor mutually exclusive: (a) The people route: Active users continued contacting people from within their social media contacts to request further holiday travel related information; and (b) The content route: Active users searched social media for holiday travel related content generated by people with whom they do not have any prior connection, that is from people located outside their social media contacts. The following discussion provides a closer look at both routes.

#### **A. The people route during the trip**

In the previous chapter (section 6.4.1.1) it was shown that a number of participants used social media before the trip in an attempt to communicate with individuals, from within their social media contacts, who have some experience with the holiday destination. Although not all attempts were successful, the following passage from FG5 illustrates that once such communication was achieved, it may have continued also during the trip:

Agnes: It was my friend Lotte who is Hungarian, gave me a lot of, at Facebook, saying what she recommends.

Moderator: Before your holidays or during?

Agnes: Both before and during.

Moderator: So even when you were there, you chatted, or you communicated with her through Facebook?

Agnes: Yes. She was like “How are you? Are you enjoying it? Have you been to”, or you know “I’ve spoken to my grandma and she said you have to go here”.

Moderator: While you were on holidays?

Agnes: Yes, and then TripAdvisor. [...] I trust what has she written because she is my friend.

Although use of social media during the trip to communicate with a social media contact was reported only by a single participant, it is considered as important to be represented as a separate theme, since it is a continuation of a theme observed also before the trip. The above passage illustrates a conversation between two friends that started before the trip, also continues during the trip. Apart from feedback on the, so far, holiday experience, the conversation also includes further provision of suggested activities at the destination. Moreover, the element of trust to the content provider seems to play a determinant role, however in this case trust is attributed to a pre-existing social tie between the two individuals.

## B. The content route during the trip

The focus group discussions revealed that during holidays participants employed social media to access holiday related content created by individuals outside their social media contacts. Therefore emphasis was placed on the content rather than on the existence of a social media connection. Access to such content as part of users' information search and evaluation of alternatives informed **holiday activities DMPs**. The following quotes illustrate the use of consumer review sites for **information search** primarily for en route decisions (Fesenmaier and Jeng 2000) such as choice of a dining venue, but also for secondary decisions such as attractions to be visited. (Please note that as stated in section 6.4 for the purposes of this study all decisions that relate to any kind of activity taking place at the holiday destination(s) such as dining, entertainment, attractions, sports, leisure have been grouped under holiday activities).

“Most of the time it was probably TripAdvisor. Again looking at restaurants, and also attractions that were nearby. Simply because it was such a, because it was a two week holiday, normally if it was a shorter holiday I would have done all that beforehand” (Scott, FG5).

Agnes: TripAdvisor to find advice on vegetarian restaurants, vegetarian friendly restaurants [Laughs] big difference.

Moderator: Did you find it easier to look at TripAdvisor on your phone, rather than for example asking the hotel reception desk?

Agnes: Ehhm yes because reception was often busy, it was a quite popular hotel and often very busy, and it was just easier on the afternoon with a bit of a cake to sit on the bed and [Laughs] look it up.

Moderator: Among those ones that you found in TripAdvisor did you actually visit any of those?

Agnes: Yes, we did. [...] it was the best food I ever had.

In the first quote, Scott attempts to justify his use of social media during the trip for information search by relating it to the duration of his holiday trip. For him, a two week trip seems to be more demanding in terms of volume of a pre-trip planning when compared a shorter trip. However, he indirectly admits that he couldn't afford such a volume of planning effort before the trip, and as a consequence he engaged in information search during the trip. This approach to information search, although preliminary in nature, seems to be in contrast to prevailing research findings suggesting a positive relationship between length of stay and (a) amount of pre-trip planning as measured by the size of the planning horizon (Gitelson and Crompton 1983; Hyde 2008; Choi et al. 2012); but also (b) amount of time devoted to information search and number of sources used (Fodness and Murray 1997, 1999). Therefore, it may be suggested that social media users seem comfortable to postpone some volume of information search to take place during the trip, rather than before, even in the case of what they consider as lengthy trips.

From another perspective use of social media for information search during a lengthy trip may be contributing to tourists' desire for planning flexibility (Hyde and Lawson 2003).

In the second passage, Agnes presents a Consumer Review Site (CRS) as a preferred alternative source of information when compared to the hotel's staff. Although the focus group discussions revealed a number of participants who favoured personal sources of information such as local residents and accommodation staff (DiPietro et al. 2007; McDonough and Ackert 1986) it can also be the case that for some users social media may be perceived not only as an easier and more convenient alternative, but also one that is more fitted with leisurely social activities while in-room.

Apart from information search during the activities DMPs, social media were also employed for the purposes of the **evaluation of alternatives**. The following lengthy passage from FG3 clearly illustrates how Aristotle and his travel party used, and got influenced by, Internet Forums, Content Community Sites, and Wikis during their evaluation of attraction choices to be visited during their holiday:

Moderator: During the trip, did you use any of those sites [...] for some part of your journey?

Aristotle: Not me personally since I didn't have my own laptop with me. [...] The other guys, yes, they did visit such sites. Because there was an obscuration in some topics in the Lonely Planet guide we had with us. Ehh... and on the other side we had to deal with those excursions that are organised by the hotels, ehh.. that they were promoting to us, so we wanted to crosscheck: Is it indeed of any value, or we need to go alone, or to we had to find some transportation means?

Moderator: How did you perform that crosscheck?

Aristotle: Usually the guys were visiting forums. And the other that we did a lot especially during this year's trip was Google maps that also give you the distances.

[...]

Moderator: During your stay did you need to see any YouTube videos?

Aristotle: Yes we saw.[...] Again to see... We had, let's say a dilemma. To go on an excursion that we thought was not worth it, because we were gonna lose precious time, we were gonna lose a whole day at the excursion. And we got into YouTube to see what is there, it was about some castles, so we saw a video about that castle, and we decided that ...oh mate it is not worth it finally. So we decided to go for the other excursion.

Moderator: Do you remember either in the journey we are discussing about, or in your recent journey, to have made a holiday related decision and then change it due to information that you found in such media?

Aristotle: Yes. ...Yes, yes especially this year. There is a city at Croatia that is called Reika, if I can remember correctly. From some persons, in real life not online, we have heard that it worth a visit. We saw that our program was not convenient, so we decided to go to some lakes that are within a National Park, so we cancelled the excursion to have some more available time. To save time.

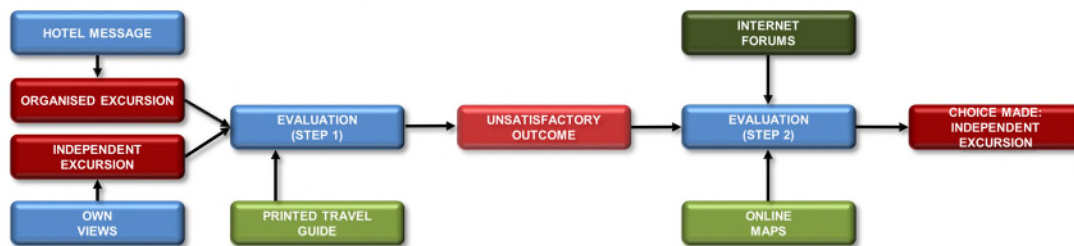
Moderator: Do you remember what contributed to that decision? What information did you find and from where?

Aristotle: Yes. We have visited Wikipedia I think. Yes, it was Wikipedia. [...] we sat down the three of us, we entered in the beginning at Wikipedia, but the information was obscure. Because it is written text, it is theoretical, so directly after we entered YouTube and we saw, and said mate OK this is a nice town but let's do not waste our time visiting it instead of other more important sites, and we also visited the lakes we wanted to go, to evaluate the two destinations. So the decision was in favour of the lakes. It was YouTube that contributed very much. It is the image, it is the video, that makes you... because you see there the exact things as they are. It is different to read and different to see them.

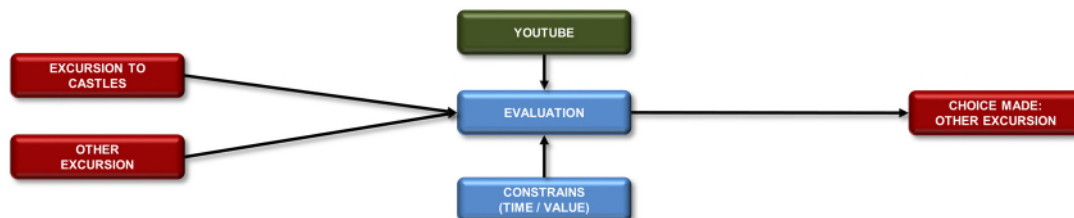
Based on the above passage, Figure 7.5 presents an attempt to illustrate Aristotle's travel group's evaluation processes, in an effort to understand social media contribution to the evaluation of alternative holiday activities on three different occasions:

Figure 7.5: Use of social media in holiday activities evaluation processes

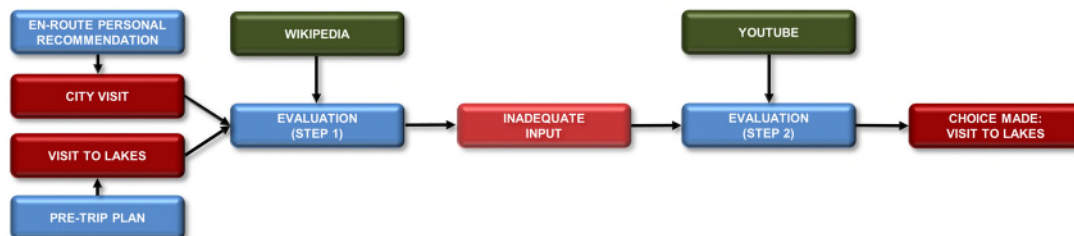
**Evaluation #1: Organised vs Independent excursion**



**Evaluation #2: Castles vs Another excursion**



**Evaluation #3: Visit to City vs Visit to Lakes**



Source: Author

To summarize the three evaluations, in evaluation #1 the travel party members were in the need to “crosscheck” the value of an organised visit to a sight as proposed from their hotel staff, with an alternative that consisted of visiting the sight through independent arrangements. A printed guide was used to provide input to the evaluation, but the information found was considered

“obscure”. Further information inputs were needed and Internet Forums, as well as on-line maps were employed. The group decided in favour of the independent approach.

In evaluation #2 there was a “dilemma” between a visit to a castle and a visit to another sight. Time and other constraints did not allow visit to both sites. A YouTube video about the castle enabled the travel party members to gain an impression of what they were about to find there. As a result of the video the travel group rejected the visit to castles in favour of the other attraction.

In evaluation #3 the travel party members had to choose between a visit to a city, proposed by personal sources of information, and what seemed to be an already planned visit to a national park. A visit to Wikipedia with an intention to find more information about the city did not provide adequate input to the decision as it was limited to textual and what was considered as “theoretical” information. On the contrary, it was “YouTube that contributed very much”: Watching videos for both attractions provided adequate and sufficient inputs that enabled the group to reject the visit to the city in favour to the visit at the national park.

A number of observations can be drawn for the above analysis:

1. Social media can be present, during the evaluation stage of the decision making process.
2. Social media can be present in any step of the evaluation process: In evaluation #3 (Figure 7.5) social media were used in both steps (first and second) of the process; while in evaluation #1 only in the second step. Practically this may mean that even for the same user, social media do not have a predetermined position as a preferred medium of choice during an evaluation process. For example in evaluation #1 a printed travel guide was used first as an input, and wikis were subsequently employed when the guide was not able to provide adequate inputs for the evaluation. On the contrary, in evaluations #2 and #3 social media were used directly from the first step of the evaluation process.
3. Social media can be used by the same person either in combination with traditional offline travel information sources (e.g. travel guides in evaluation #1), or can exclusively be used as stand-alone information sources, thus being the only source to provide input in an evaluation process, as shown in evaluations #2 and #3.
4. Although social media users may have preferences over specific social media types, a plethora of different types may be used, especially in group decision making processes, as each type may offer different advantages.

5. It seems that social media do have an impact on the evaluation process: In all three evaluations described, the presence of social media did influence the evaluation and therefore the final choice. This by no means suggests that any type of social media can always provide adequate input for effective evaluation. As it is seen in evaluation #3, a Wiki provided inadequate input, therefore the evaluation moved to a second step using a different social medium.

#### **7.3.4.2. As platforms providing output from holiday related decision making processes**

Although reported only by a single participant, social media have been used during the holiday trip to provide outputs from holiday related DMPs. In the following passage from FG3, Harmonia admits the use of a Consumer Review Site to provide post-consumption feedback during the trip as an output from her **accommodation DMP**:

“Yes, reviews. After leaving each hotel we wrote reviews. **Is it something that you usually do? Yes**” (Harmonia, FG3).

Such accommodation reviews are usually provided in the post-trip stage. However Harmonia suggests that in holiday trips that involve more than one destinations some users may decide to write accommodation reviews during the trip. The number of users who will provide reviews during the trip will further increase in the near future. The increased popularity of Internet enabled mobile devices, in combination with (a) the increasing numbers of accommodation establishments that provide free Wi-Fi, and (b) the reduction of roaming costs, at least within the E.U. will be among the factors that will contribute to such an increase.

## **8. Social media use after the trip**

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### **8.1. Introduction**

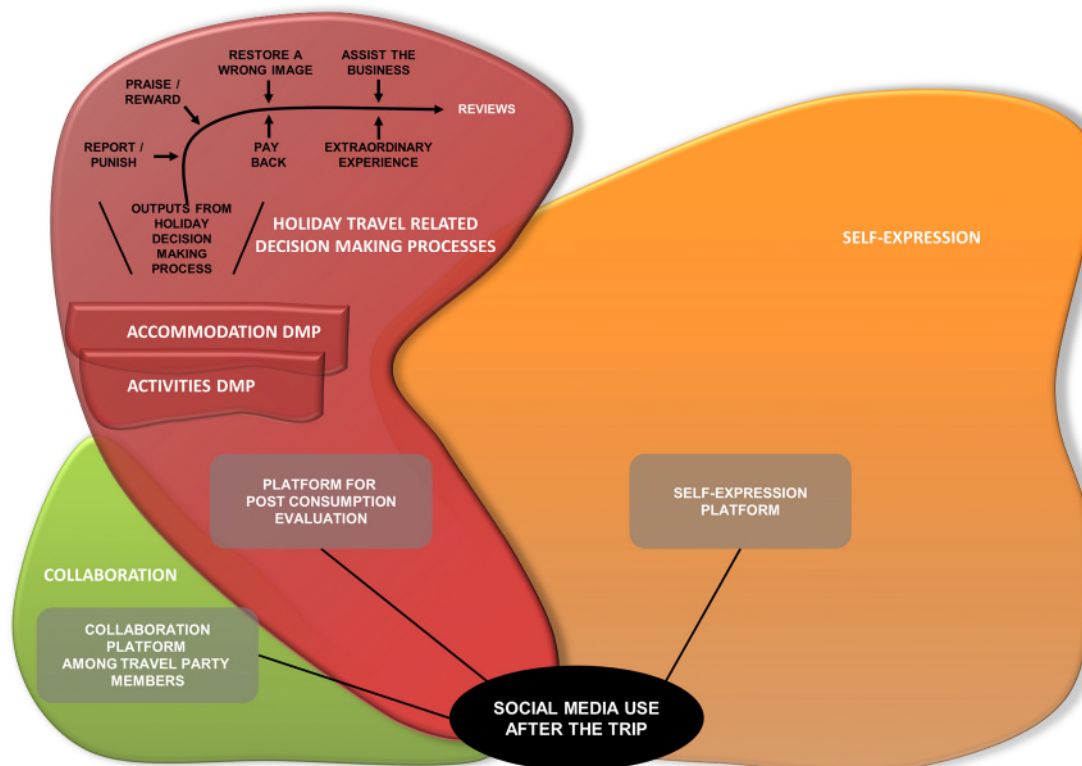
This chapter provides insights on holiday travel related use of social media and their impacts during the post-trip stage of the travel process. The focus group discussions revealed that more than half of participants used social media for travel related purposes after their trip for three functions: First, as platforms enabling post consumption evaluation during holiday travel related decision making processes (DMPs); second as platforms for travel related self-expression; and third as platforms for post-trip collaboration among the members of the travel party.

The first part of the chapter provides insights on the use of social media as platforms for post-consumption evaluation, and identifies six driving forces that motivate users to post reviews. The second section explores post-trip self-expression. Seven factors have been identified and presented as drivers of post-trip self-expression. A discussion on the characteristics of post-trip self-expression follows. The third section discusses use of social media as platforms for post-trip collaboration among the members of the travel party.

## 8.2. Social media as platforms for post-consumption evaluation

As was the case in the during the trip stage, also in the post-trip stage active social media users employ social media as platforms to provide outputs from their holiday travel related decision making processes (DMPs). More specifically, the analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that few participants used social media after their trip, as platforms to enable them provide post consumption evaluation for their holiday activities, and / or from their accommodation experience (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1: Social media as platforms providing outputs from holiday travel related decision making processes



Source: Author

The following quotes illustrate the use of Consumer Review Sites as platforms that provide outputs, in the form of reviews and feedback, from **holiday activities DMPs**:

“I’ve posted something on TripAdvisor, after a day trip of snorkelling in New Caledonia, I was so blown away by it” (Christine, FG1).

“Pretty much the same [expressing agreement with other participants of the group who also provided reviews]. Normally go and do some reviews on TripAdvisor” (Gill, FG5).



In other instances, the post consumption feedback was related to the accommodation experience, therefore it can be regarded as an output from **accommodation DMPs**. The following quotes are illustrative of participants using Internet Forums and Consumer Review Sites to provide feedback for their accommodation:

“[...] used the Internet forums again to left some message for my opinion of this hotel” (Anastasiya, FG2).

“Yeah, I’ve done probably two or three times, I think one time it was just do that, and another two times the place where I actually bought it from sent me an e-mail saying please review your hotel. And I thought why not” (Paul, FG4).

“Yeah, TripAdvisor [Laughs]. **To review what?** The hotel we stayed” (Agnes, FG5).

The case of Paul illustrates that users may not be restricted to one review only. The quality of the experience, being either very positive or very negative, or even a reminder in the form of an e-mail from the accommodation provider, or the booking intermediate, are factors that seem to trigger more than one reviews.

It is of interest to note that apart from those participants who posted reviews on social media, there was an equal number of participants who posted reviews in OTAs (e.g. Booking.com, Expedia) and official corporate websites that incorporate feedback mechanisms. The discussions did not reveal the reasons for such a preference. However, based on surrogate indicators of those participants’ online behaviour, it may be suggested that OTAs and corporate websites were preferred also during the information search process as well as the booking process. In other words, users who booked their accommodation through an OTA seem more likely to provide a review on the specific OTA’s website.

Another point of interest is that participants did not reveal provision of feedback, or evaluation for the holiday destination. Despite the fact that a number of travel related Consumer Review Sites do provide sections for destination reviews, it seems that provision of feedback is associated mostly with specific activities and experiences rather than more generic experiences such as the overall experience within the destination itself.

### 8.2.1. Driving forces to post-consumption evaluation

The focus group discussions revealed a number of factors that motivate active users to review on social media (Figure 8.1). The factors differentiate according to whether the experience was positive or negative. In case of a positive experience:

An experience well above users' expectations, an **extraordinary experience** to their own eyes, may motivate users to provide a review:

"I've posted something on TripAdvisor, after a day trip of snorkelling in New Caledonia, I was so blown away by it" (Christine, FG1).

"I reviewed when I got back, yeah, just because it was the best food I ever had" (Agnes, FG5).

The motivation may also lie on the need to provide some form of **assistance to the business** being reviewed, especially when users understand that such a review may assist the service provider.

"I did [review] when I was in Panama I stayed in a hostel, at Panama city. It was just like a little oasis in the chaos there. They were so great, and I knew they were just, you know buckling the odds there, so I made a review there, it was thoroughly deserted but I did it because I really wanted just chip in, you know they were trying to succeed and it was deserted so that's why I did it" (Barry, FG7).

Users may also want to **restore a wrong image** conveyed by existing reviews from other holidaymakers, in an effort to fix injustice. The following passage from FG4 illustrates this point:

Emily: I did go to the hotel when we got back, to the hotel's website and did a review on that. Because I found it really good and I've read some bad reviews, so I did that.

Moderator: So you've read some bad reviews in the hotel website, not in TripAdvisor or somewhere else.

Emily: Yes it was when I looked it up to have a look at some pictures of the hotel and look for more information about it I found some bad reviews so when we got back I did review.

Moderator: Once again, was that in the hotel's website?

Emily: Yes.

Moderator: So you felt that this was needed to balance out because you said you read some bad reviews.

Emily: Yes, absolutely.

Moderator: If the hotel didn't have a place where you could put reviews would you think that you were going also to do the same?

Emily: Yes, I would have done that.

Moderator: So you thought perhaps that this was unfair, I mean the fact that there were negative reviews, you wanted to contribute your positive reviews.

Emily: Yes, yes.

Other active users are motivated by the need **to reward, or praise**, the service provider for the pleasant experience offered:

"I've done it once. We stayed in a hotel in UK once last summer. We stayed in a lot of different chains, like Holiday Inn, we stayed there and it was really a good one, so I said I will give a review to the best one" (Todd, FG6).

In the case of a negative experience, active users may be motivated by their need to balance, what seems in their mind as, an unfair exchange through some form of **punishment, or report** of their negative experience to the world. This may also take the form of a warning to other users so not to encounter the same negative experience:

“Yes, [...] it was only for the ones that probably we had a problem with, and we did have good intentions and say let’s put really good reviews or brilliant but we, just time ran away, something came up probably. So it was only the ones we felt we have been cheated, or something was really bad that we put our review on” (Victoria, FG6).

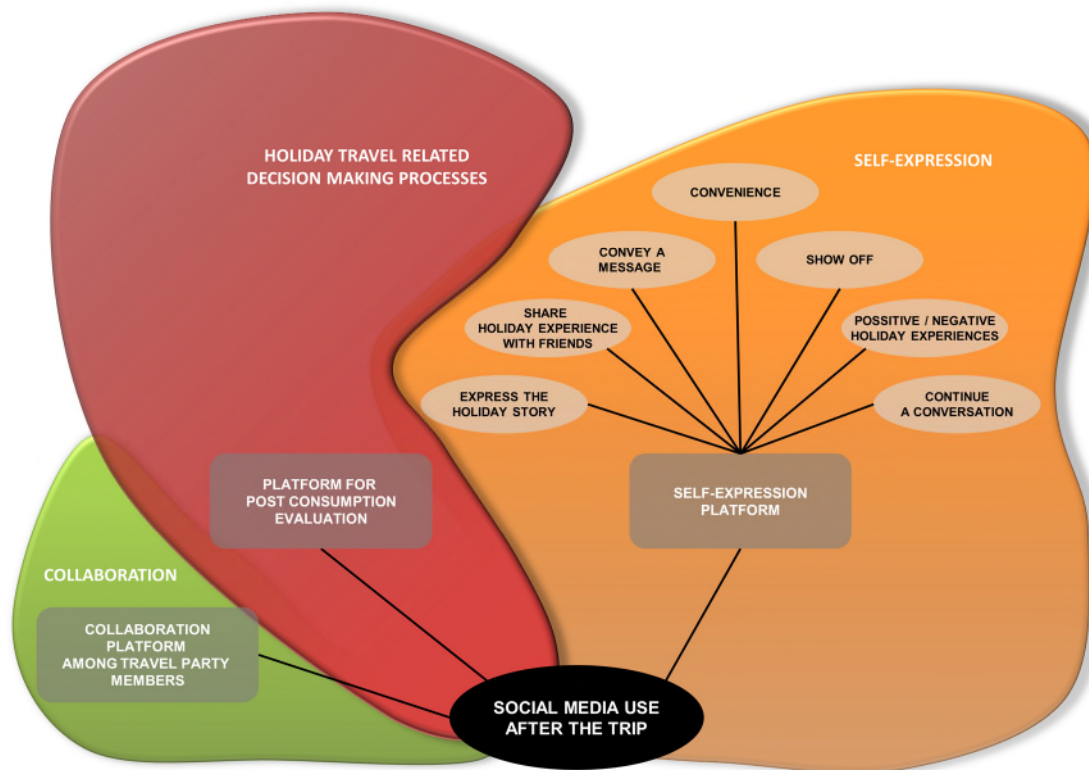
Independently from whether the experience was, positive or negative, active users may feel the need to provide a review as a duty, as a way **to pay back**, to fulfil their obligation to other holidaymakers, or even to the specific social media application, that provided the reviews that initially assisted them during their own pre-trip planning.

“Yeah. On TripAdvisor. Yeah because I’ve used TripAdvisor to pick them so when I went back and have my says and add to the thread about... **What made you go there and make a review for the hotel?** I don’t know. I think just to pay them back really. Because it has been so useful reading about it. And all the time I was reading it I was thinking when I’ll get back I must contribute. So I did. Feeling like I should, so as about a duty almost” (Addie, FG7).

### 8.3. Social media as platforms for post-trip self-expression

Similarly to what was observed both before, and during the trip, focus group discussions revealed that after the trip participants used social media as platforms for travel related self-expression. Self-expression took place mostly through Social Networking Sites such as Facebook, but also through Microblogs (e.g. Twitter). Primarily the content of self-expression consisted of photos, however text posts were also mentioned. For indicative only purposes, it should be stated that more than half of participants engaged in post trip self-expression, a number which is higher than what was observed in pre-trip and during the trip self-expression. The next section provides insights on the seven driving forces to post trip self-expression that have been identified (Figure 8.2).

Figure 8.2: Driving forces to post-trip self-expression



Source: Author

### 8.3.1. Driving forces to self-expression

As Figure 8.2 illustrates, the focus group discussions revealed a number of potential reasons that drive users to post-trip self-expression. The need to **share the holiday experience with friends** was apparent among a number of participants:

[Talking about uploading photos] “Russian version of Facebook [Vkontakte] to upload some photos to share with my friends” (Alina, FG2).

“I uploaded some pictures in my Facebook and also to share with my friends” (Ning, FG2).

For others, this form of experience sharing may be driven from their need to **express the holiday story**:

“Yeah, I think we do take photographs, in addition to showing people where you have been, just a story, and then your friends can see it” (Paul, FG4).

Travel related story-telling is a usual post-travel engagement in our travel culture, and it has been argued that it is especially pictures that support storytelling activities (Gretzel et al. 2006).

Post trip self-expression may also be the result of a need to **convey a message**, such as in the informing contacts the end of the holiday trip, as is the case with Kelly:

“Photos. That’s it. I’m back and that’s the view from my bedroom from Morocco”. (Kelly, FG5).

For other users the post trip self-expression seems to be driven by their need to **continue a conversation** with like-minded individuals that started within a social medium before, or during the trip, or even in the physical world among members of the travelling party:

“No I didn’t put anything on Facebook. I twitted again. **What sort of tweets? That you had a nice time, or you gave some feedback or what?** Just that we spent some time with this guy who is an expert and you know what we found, and also twitting with the, some of the other guests on the holiday who had similar interests and telling them ok there were no mushrooms in France because it was too hot, but we have been mushrooming a week and we found this, this, and this. The dialogue continued, but it was very SPECIFIC again, but no I didn’t put anything on Facebook” [Laughs] (Nadimah, FG5).

Other participants felt the need to convey, through self-expression, the **positive, or negative experiences, and associated feelings** that they encountered during their holiday trip. Such experiences and feelings act as drivers for self-expression:

“I came back and post pictures on Facebook. [...] We did a lot of food photos, [Laughs]. **Why food photos?** Because I like what we eaten [Laughs]” (Adam, FG5).

“I liked this trip so much that I did upload comments” (Aristotle, FG3).

“And maybe I might post something on Twitter if I had fun” (Veronika, FG1).

Others, such as Fei-Fei, admitted that they self-expressed in order to **show off** to their social media contacts:

“Just want to show off sometimes [Laughs] just sometimes” (Fei-Fei, FG2).

The need for show off was also observed as a factor contributing to pre-trip self-expression as was discussed in section 6.3.

Finally, **convenience** was also identified as a driving force to post-trip self-expression. As was also the case with convenience as a factor contributing to during the trip self-expression (section 7.3.2) convenience refers to participants’ need to save time and effort in sharing holiday photos to friends and relatives. Participants upload their photos on a SNS so that everyone can see rather than sending them to each one of them. The following quote from FG7 illustrates this point:

“Ehhhhh yeah I guess plenty of [photos]. **Plenty or, tell me about it. What made you really upload photos?** Well, actually because it is a really easy way for my sort of close friends and my family to look at my photos so I take them and rather than taking a

disc and putting them and go all around my friends and saying, because they wanted to see them. **Can I describe that as convenience?** This is totally convenience. So instead of going around to show the photos... I know you can do it like Flickr and stuff, you can do the same thing, but being on Facebook already just have it, there it is" (Barry, FG7).

### 8.3.2. Characteristics of self-expression

The analysis of focus group discussions identified four variables that characterize self-expression. These characteristics provide insights into how participants used social media to self-express after their holiday trip. The following discussion attempt to describe each of these four characteristics:

#### 8.3.2.1. *Number and types of social media employed in self-expression*

Almost all participants who engaged in post-trip self-expression used a single social media type:

"I uploaded some photos in the Russian Facebook [Vkontakte]" (Masha, FG2).

Only very few participants used more than one type of social media:

"Yes I might upload some pictures after I retouched them a little bit. And maybe I might post something on Twitter if I had fun. So yes, these two" (Veronika, FG2).

"I also uploaded photos to Facebook and I also uploaded to my own blog about the trip I had" (Haley, FG2).

Social Networking Sites seem to be the preferred medium for self-expression. All, except one participant, who self-expressed after the trip, employed SNS for such behaviour. For very few participants this choice was supplemented by microblogs or blogs. The only exception was a participant in FG5 who although a Facebook user she chose a microblog site to self-express.

The following quote is illustrative of her choice and behaviour:

"No I didn't put anything on Facebook. I Twittered again. **What sort of tweets? That you had a nice time, or you gave some feedback or what?** Just that we spent some time with this guy who is an expert and you know, what we found, and also twitting with the, some of the other guests on the holiday who had similar interests and telling them ok there were no mushrooms in France because it was too hot, but we have been mushrooming a week and we found this, this, and this. The dialogue continued, but it was very SPECIFIC again, but no I didn't put anything on Facebook [Laughs]" (Nadimah, FG5).

In earlier parts of the conversation the same participant admitted that the specific type of social medium (e.g. microblogs) was chosen due to the nature of the specific trip:

"It was sort of a niche holiday. [...] It was, I may sound like a total geek, a mushroom finding holiday. [...] I didn't [announced my trip to Facebook before departure] because I don't want all my friends to know that I am such a mushroom geek, but I did do on

Twitter because the guys on Twitter like the same things as me.[...] I put that on Twitter because I knew they would be interested” (Nadimah, FG5).

Being on a holiday trip with a very specific interest, it seems that Nadimah did not feel comfortable to share her experiences through Facebook as this application connects her with friends who, to her opinion, have different travel interests. It seems that she fears to use Facebook because her contacts could characterize her as a “mushroom geek”. On the contrary, she felt much more comfortable in Tweeter where she is connected with like-minded individuals.

The choice of medium, or media, for self-expression may be related not only with general social media type preferences and habits, but also with ad-hoc preferences that are related to the nature of the specific holiday trip and its compatibility with the interests of the potential audience.

### **8.3.2.2. Content of self-expression**

Holiday photographs seem to be the predominant content ingredient of post-trip self-expression. All, except one, of participants who engaged in post-trip self-expression shared at least one photograph from their holiday trip:

“Russian version of Facebook [Vkontakte] to upload some photos to share with my friends”. (Alina, FG2)

“Yes me too. I uploaded some photos in Facebook” (Anastasiya, FG2).

Participants seem to be divided almost in half between those who self-expressed exclusively through holiday photos, and those who provided textual comments in addition with the photographs:

“I uploaded some pictures in my Facebook and also to share with my friends and give some suggestions in which places I took these pictures and how about the place” (Ning, FG2).

“Photos. That’s it. I’m back and that’s the view from my bedroom from Morocco” (Kelly, FG5).

From the above it seems that holiday photo sharing represents a major form of post-holiday related self-expression, whether this consists exclusively of photos, or with associated comments.

Not all participants share the same **volume of pictures**. Although the qualitative nature of this study does not allow for quantitative estimations, it should be stated that participants seem to differentiate on the number of photos they share, as the following quotes indicate:

“Yes, I would come into my Facebook, maybe put a picture or two, and then say I had a really good time” (Madeline, FG4).

“I uploaded some photos in Facebook” (Anastasiya, FG2).

“[...] and lots of photographs on Facebook” (Gill, FG5).

Fion: I uploaded some photos, not all because they are too much [Laugh]

Kyriakos: [for Fion] there is limited space in Facebook. Seriously. [Laughter for the whole group, implying that Fion uploads that many photos that even the Facebook storage space provided is limited for her needs ]

Madeline for example posted only “a picture or two”, whereas Anastasiya posted “some”, and Gill “lots of photographs”. However, there is an obvious subjective element as to what each user considers as “some” and what as “lots”: When Fion refers to the photos she uploads as “some”, a close friend of her, Kyriakos, reacts rather ironically to her, suggesting that even Facebook is limited as a virtual space for her photo uploading needs.

Due to time limitations of the discussions it was not within the objectives of the focus groups to reveal the underlying reasons for such a differentiation.

### **8.3.2.3. Timing of self-expression**

Focus group participants seem to differentiate also in their approach as to when they self-express after their holiday trip. The following quotes illustrate the different approaches:

“I came back and post pictures on Facebook” (Adam, FG5).

“Photos. That’s it. I’m back and that’s the view from my bedroom from Morocco” (Kelly, FG5).

“I am not very good in doing this. A year later I usually upload some of my holiday photos up to Facebook, but I am not one of those people who does it very soon after the photos are taken, its normally about a year or later after I come back. Why so long? Busy lady [Laughs]” (Christine, FG1)

From the above it can be seen that post-trip self-expression may occur at any time after the end of the holiday trip: From almost immediately after the social media user returns back home, as in a form of an “I’m back” message as indicated by Kelly; to after quite a lengthy period of time as indicated by Christine. Of interest in this latter case is that the need for self-expression seems to remain being perceived as a pleasant leisure activity, despite the long period of time between the trip and the self-expression.



At the same time, post-trip self-expression can take place in a two, or even in a multiple stage process:

“I didn’t upload my pictures yet. But I probably will. I put one picture on mine, and I don’t remember maybe I put a message” (Ludwiga, FG2).

As illustrated by the above quote the user may satisfy his/her need for self-expression rather immediately after the trip by uploading one, or a small number of photos, and postpone uploading a larger number when available time allows such a task.

#### **8.3.2.4. Frequency of self-expression**

Despite the presence of post-trip self-expression among a large number of participants in this study, such behaviour should not be considered as given in all of their holiday trips. The following quotes provide some further insight:

“Yes I did. It was one of the very few cases. I liked this trip so much that I did upload comments” (Aristotle, FG3).

“Yes, I would come into my Facebook, maybe put a picture or two, and then say I had a really good time” (Madeline, FG4).

“And maybe I might post something on Twitter if I had fun” (Veronika, FG1).

“I came back and post pictures on Facebook. [...] We did a lot of food photos, [Laughs]. **Why food photos?** Because I like what we eaten [Laughs]” (Adam, FG5).

In all of the above quotes the post-trip self-expression is associated with a pleasant, fun, satisfactory holiday experience. Adam goes a step further suggesting that satisfaction, or excitement with even a single element or component of holiday experience (i.e. food in this case) may be sufficient to generate self-expression for the particular holiday aspect.

It seems therefore that for few users a pleasant holiday experience, either resulting from the trip overall, or derived from specific components of the holiday experience, acts as a prerequisite for the generation of post-trip self-expression.

## **8.4. Social media as platforms for post-trip collaboration**

Analysis of focus group discussions revealed that after the trip social media were also used for collaboration among the members of the travel party. Although only one participant demonstrated post-trip collaboration through social media, it is considered important to include

it in the findings since it shows a continuation of the collaboration theme found in the pre-trip stage (section 6.2). As it is explained in the following passage, travel party members set-up a Facebook group before the trip that was also maintained after the trip:

“[...] we set up a group for the trip and everyone that was on the trip... **The setup of the group was after the trip?** Before. Just because it’s easier to communicate you know things like times and organizing things [...] **It continued during the trip at all?** No. The Facebook group we set up before the trip was actually to organize the trip and used it afterwards for comments and things like that, but not during [...] Yeah we put [photos] when we got back. But yeah as I was saying it’s quite restricted as to what I put up there [...] I put things like that on Facebook it will be before the people that without the time so they can enjoy the photos and the memories, and go back and say oh I remember where that was. It’s not really, thinking of it, all of my friends pretty sure that they are not all that interested but it’s a convenient way for people who were on the trip to go yeah, memories and stuff like that” (Seth, FG7).

As it was shown in section 6.2, in the pre-trip stage the emphasis of the collaboration was placed on the exchange of ideas and information about the forthcoming trip, so that to facilitate trip planning and the group decision making processes. However, in this section it was shown that after the trip the emphasis of the collaboration shifts to content sharing and conversation among the members of the travel party. Maintaining the SNS’s group operation during post-trip may also be perceived as an effort from the group members to maintain the cohesiveness of the group.

## **9. Social media and the consumer decision making process**

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### **9.1. Introduction**

The discussion of findings as presented in chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 aimed at exploring social media use and impacts during the four stages of the holiday travel process: dreaming, before, during, and after the holiday trip. The analysis of findings presented in this chapter seeks to reveal social media use during each of the stages of holiday related decision making processes (DMPs). Three holiday related consumer DMPs have been examined in this study: The destination DMP, the accommodation DMP, and the holiday activities DMP. The discussion includes findings resulted from both primary analysis of the focus group discussion as well as from a synthesis of the findings already presented in chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8. In an effort to provide a holistic view to the DMP, the analysis is not limited to the five stages of the DMP (need recognition, information search, pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, consumption, post-consumption evaluation) proposed by the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006). The analysis employs an enlarged approach examining also how social media are used prior to the initiation of the DMP, thus prior to the generic decision for the holiday trip, but also post the completion of the DMP.

## **9.2. A note on the stages of the consumer decision making process**

As stages of the consumer decision making process (DMP), this study adopts the five stages proposed by the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006) that were discussed in detail in Chapter 3: need recognition, information search, pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, purchase, consumption, and post-consumption evaluation. Divestment although proposed by the Consumer Decision Process model as a separate stage is not further considered in this study due to the service nature of the holiday products. Despite criticism and debate, still today comprehensive models, and especially the Consumer Decision Process model, are employed not only for educational but also for research purposes (Bettman 1979; Constantinides 2004; Hawkins et al. 2007; Darley et al. 2010; Dibb 2012; Kotler 2012; Jobber 2013; Penz and Hogg 2013). Even today, the five stages are still used as a framework to guide academic research (Martin and Woodside 2012; Yadav et al. 2013; Decrop and Kozak 2014; Demir et al. 2014; Law et al. 2014; Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014).

Three holiday related consumer DMPs have been examined in this study: The destination DMP, the accommodation DMP, and the holiday activities DMP. It should be clarified at this point that in most trips the holiday activities DMPs are numerous: This study adopts that their number is equal to the number of activities the holidaymaker undertakes during the trip (e.g. excursions to local sights, restaurants, nightlife entertainment, sports activities). However, in the following sections the holiday activities DMPs are referred as one. This is not to assume that they all take place within the same DMP, but that they all share similar cognitive and behavioural characteristics. Therefore, the discussion about the holiday activity DMP is generic, thus it applies for any given holiday activity DMP under investigation. The same holds true for the holiday destination and the accommodation DMPs: There are holiday trips that involve multiple destinations and therefore multiple accommodations. Despite the fact that such trips require more extensive planning, in the context of this study it is assumed that all destination and accommodation DMPs are similar in nature.

## **9.3. Social media presence and impact prior to the decision making process**

It was shown in chapter 5 that holiday trip related interactions with social media start prior to the holiday trip generic decision, thus prior to the initiation of any holiday related DMP. Active social media users, as part of their social media routine, receive through passive attention, but also through ongoing search, numerous holiday trip related stimuli in the form of users' or

organisations' generated content (section 5.2). It was also shown (section 5.3) that exposure to holiday travel related stimuli, such as pictures posted by their friends on Social Networking Sites (SNS), impacts users' behaviour in at least four ways: They generate feelings, provide inspiration for future holiday trips, develop wants for holiday travel, and make users proceed to actions such as writing a comment or start searching for information about the depicted destination or holiday activity.

Information search prior to any generic travel decision, thus prior to the initiation of the destination, the accommodation, or the holiday activities DMPs, is not motivated by functional needs. It can be regarded as leisure, or recreation-based, thus satisfying hedonic, innovation, aesthetic or sign needs (Vogt and Fesenmaier 1998). Exposure to holiday travel related user generated content may also provide inspiration and ideas for future holiday trips. In such a case, from the perspective of the Pleasure Travel Destination Choice Model (Um and Crompton 1990), social media may have an impact on the formation and the size of the awareness and evoked sets that are formed through social stimuli. However, it may also be the case that social media have also an impact in the formation and size of the inept set (Narayana and Markin 1975) that is the set of destinations that the user is aware but not interested for further consideration. The user may be exposed to content that features a destination already in the awareness set, but the social media contact who generated it, or the activity depicted, or the context in which the destination is presented, is such that the destination is rejected from further consideration, and therefore moved into the user's inept set.

## **9.4. Social media presence and impact during the decision making process**

### **9.4.1. Need recognition**

In section 5.3 it was shown that exposure to holiday travel related stimuli such as pictures posted by social media contacts on SNS, among other outcomes, may also contribute to the development of holiday travel related wants. These wants can be either related with generic holiday travel, or can be destination specific:

“Looking at friends' holidays photos in Facebook makes me] I want to go on holidays as soon as possible” (Eleftheria, FG3).

Haley: Want to plan a trip. I want to travel as well.

David: The same [...] I want to travel as well. I do not know if I want to travel specifically where they are but it makes me want to go somewhere.

Victoria: Similar to David Just makes me want to go away and start thinking of my next trip (FG6).

“So a friend had been to Canada [...] and was talking about it [at her blog] and rethought how much I actually wanted to visit it” (Victoria, FG6).

Wants can also be holiday activity specific:

“It makes me think. Start the juices flowing. [...] not necessarily inspires me to go to that exact place. But snowboarding, a snow holiday will make me think I want to go in a snowboarding holiday, but that can be anywhere” (Nadimah, FG5).

From a consumer behaviour perspective, need recognition occurs when environmental influences, individual differences, and information stored in memory contribute to make a consumer aware of a discrepancy between the actual and the ideal state (Blackwell et al., 2006). Given that a want is seen as a “particular form of consumption chosen to satisfy a need” (Solomon 2013, p.613) it can be argued that need recognition is demonstrated by the expression of a want. Therefore, holiday travel related stimuli, found in social media, do contribute, among numerous other factors, to the need recognition for generic holiday travel. These stimuli also contribute to the need recognition stage of the holiday destination and the holiday activities DMPs as demonstrated by the expression of relevant wants.

Social media were not found present in the need recognition stage of the accommodation DMP. This absence is expected to an extent given that the need for holiday accommodation is a subsequent result of the generic holiday travel decision, as well as a direct result of the holiday destination DMP. In daily practice, it is assumed that most of the times an accommodation DMP cannot be initiated unless there is a final choice on the destination DMP. Although not supported by findings in this study, one should not exclude the likelihood that there may be cases where holidaymakers are attracted by a stimulus from an accommodation establishment (e.g. an online flash sale) and as a result they become indifferent about where the accommodation is located, therefore they become indifferent about the holiday destination. In such a scenario interactions with social media may also have an impact on the need identification stage of the accommodation DMP.

#### **9.4.2. Information Search**

During the information search stage of the destination, the accommodation, and the holiday activities DMPs users interact with a variety of social media types. As shown in section 6.4.1 active social media users perform information search through social media following three search routes that are neither alternative nor mutually exclusive: the people route, the organization route, and the content route. Following the people route, users seek advice from

within their social media contacts, either known in person to them or not, who have some degree of experience with the holiday destination for which they seek information:

“I used Facebook, I asked if anybody had any ideas about [accommodation in] Marrakesh because quite a lot of my friends travel” (Kelly, FG5).

“For myself, [...] if its camping that I have never been before, I put it on Facebook, and some of my friends who live locally, have been there or, write what people think” (Norman, FG6).

Following the organization route, users employ social media to contact organizations that are directly related with the ingredients of the holiday experience, usually as suppliers or intermediaries:

“...joined the Budapest site on Facebook. [...] People said on there [...] about certain tentative places to try to go to as opposed to sort of posh restaurants, certain landmarks and things like that” (Agnes, FG5).

Choosing the content route, users place emphasis on the medium and the content rather than on the provider of the information, who - in the vast majority of cases - is unknown to them. Access to social media content through this route is gained either by visiting specific social media platforms directly (e.g. visiting a specific travel blog, or a travel forum), or through search engines (e.g. searching via Google for blogs about holidays in Florida):

“I used Wikis [...] just to [...] decide where we wanted to base ourselves [in Lanzarote], so we decided to go somewhere in the middle so everything was within driving distance” (Roy, FG6).

“Probably TripAdvisor was pretty big part of it. **How TripAdvisor influenced you in choosing the destination?** Just what was in the resort, what was there available and other people’s experiences, because I didn’t want to get somewhere it was a Club 18-30. We are not 18 to 30 [Laughs]” (Sidney, FG7).

“Yes, before going to my trip, I searched blogs and Internet forums and some websites about Ireland. [...] **When you go on blogs, for which particular aspect of the trip are you looking for?** Probably hotels and attractions, where is best to go” (Cindy, FG2).

“Internet forums and blogs to find others’ opinions about that place, mainly for shopping places, or for attractions” (Ning, FG2).

During users’ search for information, apart from the search activities, users also interact with social media for collaboration and for self-expression. Using social media for holiday travel related collaboration among members of the travel party is more evident when users are not living in close physical proximity, when synchronous communication is not feasible, or when the size of the travel party is large.

**“Since they [talking about the other members of his travel party] are away from Cyprus how do you communicate with each other?** Classically through either Facebook, or MSN in earlier times, now through Skype. **So did you use Facebook to initially coordinate the trip?** That’s right, yes. If you see our Inbox you will find conversations between the three of us, through messages, and indeed each one of us can attach a link from something that he found so the rest can see it and decide” (Aristotle, FG3).

Self-expression during the information search stage, although very limited in volume, has also been reported: Chen while searching for accommodation he also self-expressed about his forthcoming trip by announcing his trip to Facebook:

“Yes [...] Perhaps to get some professional advice, to make me save some money, save time, or to go to the most popular places” (Chen, FG1)

Users, possibly due to their cultural and personality characteristics, may not feel comfortable in contacting their social media contacts, especially those who are not known in person to them, to directly ask for a piece of advice. Instead they self-express aspects of their trip in anticipation of a response that will provide some form of utility, or even increase the value of the trip.

### 9.4.3. Pre-purchase Evaluation of Alternatives

During the pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives stage, users interact with social media in their effort to correctly rank alternatives (destinations, accommodations, holiday activities) found during the information search process. Critics of consumer behaviour comprehensive models have been, for long, supporting that consumers’ limited access to information, as well as their limited knowledge and skills, do not allow them to correctly rank alternatives (Erasmus et al. 2001, Schiffman and Kanuk 2000). Social media, and especially consumer review and ratings websites (e.g. TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck) removed those constraints by offering an impressive range of features that enable consumers to perform elaborate ranking tasks through user-friendly interfaces:

“Yeah TripAdvisor is the big one. [...] We call off the top few per cent who say everything is fantastic, and kind of bottom people saying that where we went was all dying and the worst holiday in the world, and we just look at the middle ground and actually get a real feel for it and if it’s not where we want to go, or it doesn’t feel right, then we will change hotel, change resort, or do whatever, just based on reviews. [...] If you put it on TripAdvisor and it comes out as hotel number 188 or 189 [...], or the city we are going to, then you know, and if there is a fantastic deal on wherever but that’s not what we are not going to do, let’s look elsewhere” (Theo, FG7).

“They [consumer review sites] can help inspire you, then they can help qualify. If you find something you really want to see, they can help qualify whether or not it’s worth it” (Kelly, FG5).



“[...] there was probably other things though reading Internet forums, [...] along the way in accordance to what we wanted to know, for instance we wanted to visit another national park and we decided it was too far away, because someone said Oh it takes long time to get there etc.” (Victoria, FG6).

Social media users during their pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives stage, primarily employ consumer review and ratings websites, but also Internet forums. In forums although there are no rankings available, there are other users who provide direct inputs to the evaluation process. Wikis and content communities, primarily those that include videos (e.g. YouTube) are also being employed during the evaluation process:

Moderator: During your stay did you need to see any YouTube videos?

Aristotle: Yes we saw.[...] Again to see... We had, let's say a dilemma. To go on an excursion that we thought was not worth it, because we were gonna lose precious time, we were gonna lose a whole day at the excursion. And we got into YouTube to see what is there, it was about some castles, so we saw a video about that castle, and we decided that ...oh mate it is not worth it finally. So we decided to go for the other excursion.

Moderator: Do you remember either in the journey we are discussing about, or in your recent journey, to have made a holiday related decision and then change it due to information that you found in such media?

Aristotle: Yes. ...Yes, yes especially this year. There is a city at Croatia that is called Reika, if I can remember correctly. From some persons, in real life not online, we have heard that it worthed a visit. We saw that our program was not convenient, so we decided to go to some lakes that are within a National Park, so we cancelled the excursion to have some more available time. To save time.

Moderator: Do you remember what contributed to that decision? What information did you find and from where?

Aristotle: Yes. We have visited Wikipedia I think. Yes, it was Wikipedia. [...] we sat down the three of us, we entered in the beginning at Wikipedia, but the information was obscure. Because it is written text, it is theoretical, so directly after we entered YouTube and we saw, and said mate OK this is a nice town but let's do not waste our time visiting it instead of other more important sites, and we also visited the lakes we wanted to go, to evaluate the two destinations. So the decision was in favour of the lakes. It was YouTube that contributed very much. It is the image, it is the video, that makes you... because you see there the exact things as they are. It is different to read and different to see them.

The impact of interaction with social media, and especially with consumer and ratings websites has been extensively studied in academia (Gretzel and Yoo 2008, Vermeulen and Seegers 2009, Sparks and Browning 2011, Papathanassis and Knolle 2011) and therefore it was not further assessed in this study.

#### **9.4.4. Choice and Purchase**

Choice (or the decision as such) is not presented in the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006) as a separate stage of the DMP. On the contrary, it is featured in tourism

related consumer behaviour models (Woodside and Lysonski 1989, Wahad et al. 1976, Schmoll 1977, Mathieson and Wall 2006), and it is especially Moutinho (1987) who proposed both decision and purchase as two separate stages in his vacation tourist behaviour model. This study adopts Moutinho's (1987) view that choice (or decision) and purchase are two separate stages of the DMP. This is due to the fact that in the case of holiday travel related products it is clear that there may be a substantial period between the final choice and the moment of purchase. Such period, or gap between the two stages facilitates active users to interact through social media about their choice and the forthcoming purchase, which usually takes the form of a booking. During the choice and the purchase stages, social media are employed as platforms of self-expression:

Victoria: Yeah. Well when you booked it I put Yeah I am going on holidays to Canada or wherever. [...]

Russ: Yeah I will do the same. Getting out of here [laughter].

Haley: I think when it was booked yeah, but it was not a massive thing (FG6).

“[Posted about the trip in Facebook] When we found a nice place to stay. We put faces in it. We spent a DISPROPORTIONATE amount of time trying to find something nice to stay in Cornwall, and as soon as we found it we said YES [screams] HURRAY [shouts and Laughs]” (Gill, FG5).

“[...] after we decided where we were going to, and the places [...] this festival was going on, we did go on YouTube to have a look on the promotional video of the event because it was quite unique. The ones were done previously so to have a better idea. And once I looked at YouTube and found this promotional video of the festival, I then put it on Facebook” (Sean, FG7).

As shown in section 6.3 active social media users employ social media to announce their decisions, or purchases, to their social media contacts, in an effort to show-off, to express feelings and emotions, to seek utility, or simply for fun.

#### **9.4.5. Post-choice and post-purchase information search**

Post-choice information search as well as post-purchase information search are not presented as stages of the Consumer Decision Process (Blackwell et al. 2006), or in any of the tourism consumer behaviour models reviewed in this study. In the tourism and travel literature there are instances (Leung et al. 2013, Moutinho 1987, Middleton and Clarke 2001) where “post-purchase” refers to the post-travel or post-experience stage of the travel process, that is to the post-consumption stage of the decision making process. For example, Moutinho (1987) in his vacation tourist behaviour model associates post-purchase with post-consumption as it relates it with adequacy evaluation, and with satisfaction / dissatisfaction from the travel experience. In a similar manner, Middleton and Clarke (2001) in their stimulus-response model of buyer

behaviour, refer to post-purchase and post-consumption as a process during which feelings are created that alter or reinforce perceptions through the travel experiences created.

Contrary to the above perception that locates the post-purchase stage within post-consumption, this study adopts post-choice and post-purchase as stages that take place prior to the holiday experience, therefore prior to consumption. This approach gains continuous attention in the generic consumer behaviour and information search literature (Chang et al. 2010; Hu et al. 2014). In contrast to pre-purchase information search where the focus is among products in the consideration set, in post-purchase information search consumers mainly focus on the products they have already purchased (Hu et al. 2014).

Unless there is a decision for the so called “last minute trip”, in DMPs that involve holiday travel related products there may be a substantial time period between purchase and consumption. This time period (known in the industry practice as the “booking window”: the number of days between the booking date and arrival at the destination or the accommodation), may in some cases be 6 months, or even more. As a result, holidaymakers do have adequate time between purchase and departure from home to perform information search for reasons other than those for which they perform pre-purchase information search. In the same sense there may be a difference between choice as a cognitive action and purchase as a performed action. For example, a user may make the choice to visit the island of Rhodes for his holiday trip and may also make a final decision about the accommodation in hotel X, however the actual purchase may be performed a number of days later. Again in this case, holidaymakers do have some time between choice and purchase to perform information search for other reasons than those for which they perform pre-purchase information search.

Social media facilitate post-choice and post-purchase information search. In the holiday travel context, this study supports that active users interact with social media during the post-choice or post-purchase information search stage. For cognitive oriented users this interaction seems to be driven by the users’ need **to confirm their choice**, and **get assured that the decision was right** supporting the claim of Chang et al. (2010):

“I did some social media stalking because I was invited to stay with my friends so I went to Facebook, Twitter and all those kind of things to see where they actually live, to make sure the night, [...] I haven’t been away for 15 days in the last five years, so I wanted to make sure it’s a nice place where I am going, so I checked all the pictures and check that it was nice” (Matthew, FG7).

Other users seem to employ social media at this stage for information search as a form of **mental preparation for the forthcoming unknown travel experience**, or even **to reduce anxiety**:

“After your decision for the specific place in Jordan do you remember if you visited again social media sites? Mainly I visited again YouTube, to see images, what I was about to visit. It’s different. The image, the video, prepares you, so I visited many times, also the other guys did so. [...] also to get the picture, the atmosphere of the place” (Aristotle, FG3).

“[...] and I have used YouTube before [...] Ammm I was at a stable holiday to Colorado and I haven’t been there before so I thought to see if there were any videos around, to see what was like out there, quite a lot of people posted videos. **Was it for the choice of excursions, where to go, or activities?** No it was just to see what was like, because we were staying with friends who ‘ve got a condo out there, so just to see how it was like before we went there” (Carol, FG6).

“I used it [phone with Internet access] every time someone was saying we are going to go there because everyone else knew were we’re going I didn’t, I get my phone out and check where we were going, how far it was, look it on a map so to have a better idea of where we were going” (Matthew, FG7).

Others **seek pleasant feelings** by reading positive feedback provided by others who previously visited the same destination, or accommodation, or engaged in the same holiday activity:

“Simply, if I have already booked into a specific place, and I see very positive comments it may influence my psychology somehow, subconsciously. Perhaps I will feel nice” (Ino, FG3).

At this stage (post choice or post purchase) social media may also be used as platforms to enable users communicate with providers of specific components of the trip (accommodation and activities), as part of their pre-trip planning, in their effort to assure a smoother holiday experience:

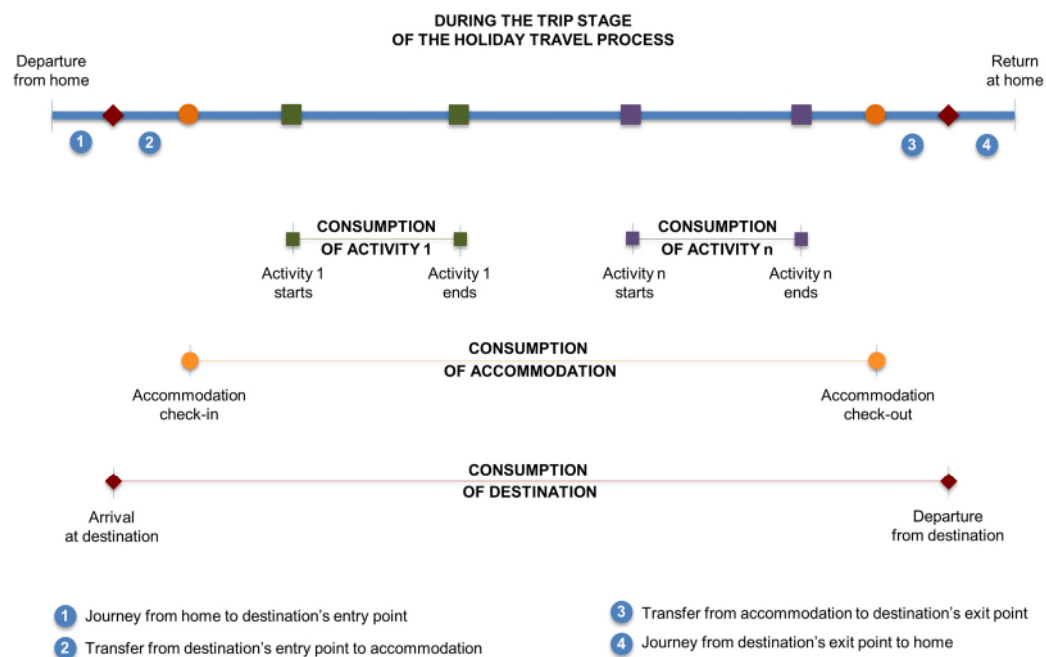
“We mainly used Facebook [...] when we just book in Cyprus because we stayed in a Tsokkos hotel [...] and my wife was going to their Facebook sort of page and she posted questions about which rooms are best and things like that and then get replies” (Todd, FG6).

The above findings are in agreement with Chang et al. (2010) who support that cognitively oriented consumers, in their effort to avoid uncertainty, engage in post-purchase information search to confirm that they made the right purchase decision. On the contrary experientially oriented consumers engage in post-purchase information search primarily for emotion enhancement purposes.

### 9.4.6. Consumption

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, this study focuses in three holiday travel related decision making processes (DMPs): the holiday destination DMP, the accommodation DMP, and the holiday activities DMPs. The consumption stage of each of these three DMPs varies in length and in nature. For the purposes of this study, as presented in Figure 9.1, the consumption stage in the destination DMP begins when holidaymakers arrive at the destination and concludes when they depart. In the accommodation DMP, the consumption stage begins when holidaymakers check-in at their accommodation and concludes when they check-out. Similarly the consumption stage of the holiday activities DMP starts when holidaymakers start their activity and concludes when the activity ends.

Figure 9.1: Consumption stages of holiday trip related decision making processes



Source: Author

Especially for the destination DMP the consumption stage almost coincides with the during the trip stage of the holiday travel process, excluding the time of travel to and from the destination. Moreover, the consumption of destination encompasses both the stages of the consumption of the accommodation and the consumption of the holiday activities.

As it was shown in chapter 7, during the destination consumption stage, users interact with social media to perform four functions: (1) To self-express aspects of their holiday trip; (2) to search for information and evaluate alternatives for their holiday activities DMPs; (3) to keep-up with their social media contacts; and (4) to participate in social games:

First, during the consumption stage of the DMP active users employ social media to self-express aspects of their holiday trip (as also seen in section 7.3.2):

**“Did you also post some photos in Facebook?** Yes I did a lot [...]during holidays the whole time. I am Segwaying in [inaudible] beach, I am walking in [inaudible] Boulevard whatsoever [...] I normally turn my phone off. But on the last holiday I had it with me all the time, and then if there was Wi-Fi I was checking in and tag all these places to make everyone jealous [Laughter]” (Matthew, FG7).

Users self-express to share joyful holiday moments with their friends; as an invitation to their social media contacts to follow their holiday experience; as an expression of their sociability, or simply as a convenient way - when compared to other communication methods - to share photos and experiences with friends.

Second, active users, during the consumption stage also use social media to search for information and evaluate alternatives for their holiday activities DMPs (as shown in section 7.3.4):

Haley: We did look on a video at YouTube about, and what was like to walk up the top of St Peter’s Basilica, and how narrow it was and you decided that you were not going up, too narrow [talking to her husband Andy].

Alan: I saw the video and found how the situation was.

Haley: Too much of isolation.

Moderator: Did that video actually made you change your plan? Did you actually go?

Alan: I probably wouldn’t walk up there, having seen this video, and the height was up like up to the waist [Laughter] (FG6).

Such behaviour may be due to lack of adequate holiday activity planning during the pre-trip stage; a variety of unforeseen contingencies that necessitate change in plans; and / or due to a new holiday activity that has been discovered on the spot, or proposed by local sources that requires re-evaluation of the existing options.

Third, during the consumption stage of the DMP active users employ social media as communication platforms to enable them keep-up with their social media contacts (as shown in section 7.3.1):

“I used Facebook. Just for personal reasons, not really to do with the holiday, just to grace, I try not to post on Facebook much because, of my profession, I try, but once in a

while see what people do. [...] See what friends are up to, see what's currently on the world, see what people opinions are on things" (Todd, FG6).

Users are motivated by their need to remain in contact with their friends and relatives during their trip; as a social obligation towards their friends, due to a number of contingencies such as unforeseen bad weather conditions that keep users within the accommodation, or even boredom with the holiday trip may result also in keep-up behaviour.

Fourth, active users, during the consumption stage also use social media to participate in social games (as also seen in section 7.3.3)

"Mostly Facebook to check-in places and generally go to the Farm [Laughter]" (Gill, FG5)

Such behaviour is either due to addiction associated with excessive use of social games or Social Networking Sites in general (Kuss and Griffiths 2011; Rooij 2011); and/or due to the nature of the games (e.g. social polemics) that require the player's active participation at specific, frequent time intervals to the extent that they are perceived even as a form of social labour (Hjorth and Arnold 2012).

#### **9.4.7. Post Consumption Evaluation**

During the post consumption evaluation stage of the destination, the accommodation, and the holiday activities DMPs users interact with social media in order to provide outputs from their DMPs. As presented in section 8.2 such outputs are in the form of consumer reviews posted in consumer review and ratings websites, and / or in the form of comments in Internet forums. Most of this behaviour relates to the provision of accommodation reviews, rather than reviews of the holiday activities, or the destination.

This study identified a number of factors (presented in section 8.2.1) that motivate active social media users to provide accommodation and/or holiday activities reviews: (a) Users' need to reward or praise the service provider for the pleasant experience; (b) to provide justice through a review aiming to restore a wrong – to their opinion – image conveyed by existing negative reviews; (c) to assist the business of the service provider through a positive review; (d) to praise for an experience well above user's expectations; (e) as an obligation to other holidaymakers, or to the social media application, that provided the reviews which assisted them during their own decisions; and (f) in case of an experience below the users' expectations to balance an unfair exchange through a form of punishment by reporting the bad experience to the world.

## **9.5. Social media presence and impact post the completion of the decision making process**

The traditional view of the DMP (Blackwell et al. 2006) concludes with the Divestment stage. However, in the case of services (or even products with a significant service component such as a holiday trip) the stage that concludes the DMP is that of post-consumption evaluation. The development of social media not only facilitated, but also manifested self-expression during the post-consumption stage (section 8.3). Moreover, the definition of self-expression adopted by this study (as the projection of one's own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences into the world) suggests that self-expression can be independent of any expression of evaluative thoughts and feelings that can be considered as reviews, or even as evaluative comments. Therefore, by definition, post-consumption self-expression cannot be considered as an output of the post-consumption evaluation stage of the DMP, since it lacks the evaluation component that is a definitional element of post-consumption evaluation. If the above argument is valid, then post-consumption self-expression should be considered as a stage outside the DMP at least as seen via the traditional perspective of Blackwell et al (2006). In such a case, social media do have a presence post the completion of the DMP allowing active social media users to self-express but also to collaborate. More specifically:

### **9.5.1. Post Consumption Self-expression**

As presented in detail in section 8.3, active users employ social media after their trip to self-express thoughts, feelings, values and preferences into the world. Seven factors are found that seem to motivate the user to self-express during the post-trip stage: (1) The need to express the holiday story; (2) to share holiday experiences with friends; (3) to convey a message; (4) to continue the conversation that started either before, or during the trip; (5) to show off; (6) to express a positive or a negative holiday experience, or (7) simply for convenience.

### **9.5.2. Post Consumption Collaboration**

As presented in section 8.4 active social media users employ social media after the trip to communicate and share content with other members of the travel party. Users may create public or private virtual spaces, usually in Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook) within which they meet and collaborate exchanging content. Although not supported by findings, such social media usage may be driven by the need for privacy, or by the need to retain the group active despite the end of the travel experience, thus in need of a sense of belonging, or simply as a convenient and user-friendly platform for content sharing among the group members.



## **9.6. Re-approaching the stages of the decision making process**

The discussion in the above sections revealed that within the context of holiday travel and among active users, social media are present during all five stages of the Decision Making Process at least as those have been proposed by the Consumer Decision Process Model (Blackwell et al. 2006) and adopted both in generic as well as in travel related literature (Bettman 1979; Constantinides 2004; Hawkins et al. 2007; Darley et al. 2010; Dibb 2012; Kotler 2012; Jobber 2013; Penz and Hogg 2013). Even today, the five stages are still used as a framework to guide academic research (Martin and Woodside 2012; Yadav et al. 2013; Decrop and Kozak 2014; Demir et al. 2014; Law et al. 2014; Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014). However, interactions with social media were found present in stages, or states, that are not included in the CDP model such as in post-choice information search as well as in post-purchase information search. In addition, interactions with social media were found prior to the generic holiday travel decision, thus prior to the initiation of the destination, accommodation, and holiday activities DMPs, as well as post-completion of these DMPs. Such an enlarged presence of social media in relation to the stages of the DMP may provide preliminary evidence that the stages of the DMP as proposed by Blackwell et al. (2006) need to be re-approached, at least within the context of experiential products and active social media users.

## **10.Synthesis, Conclusions, and Contribution**

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### **10.1. Introduction**

In contrast to the majority of existing studies in social media related literature that employ a micro approach (as discussed in detail in section 2.6), the findings of this study (as presented in chapter 5, 6, 7, and 8) provide insights on how active users employ social media throughout the four stages of the holiday travel process: dreaming, pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip. In addition, chapter 9 focuses on use of social media throughout the stages of the Decision Making Process. This chapter, through a synthesis and critical analysis of the findings, attempts to draw the “big picture” and provide an overall view of social media use and impacts on the holiday travel process as a whole. The synthesis proposes six social media functional spaces that exist throughout the holiday travel process: Inspiration, Collaboration, Decision making, Self-expression, Communication, and Entertainment. A critical discussion of each functional space follows, examining users’ specific social media related behaviours and cognitive functions within each space. The chapter continues by presenting the social media enabled travel process model that serves as a framework to provide understanding of use and impacts of social media throughout the holiday travel process. The presence of numerous information exchange interactions, through social media, during all stages of the holiday travel process and during all stages of the decision making process provides preliminary indications that information exchange can be perceived as an enlarged consumer behaviour theoretical construct. Nine components of the construct are preliminary proposed and further discussed. The chapter concludes by presenting the contribution to knowledge made by the current study, the implications for practice, and the emerging areas for further research.

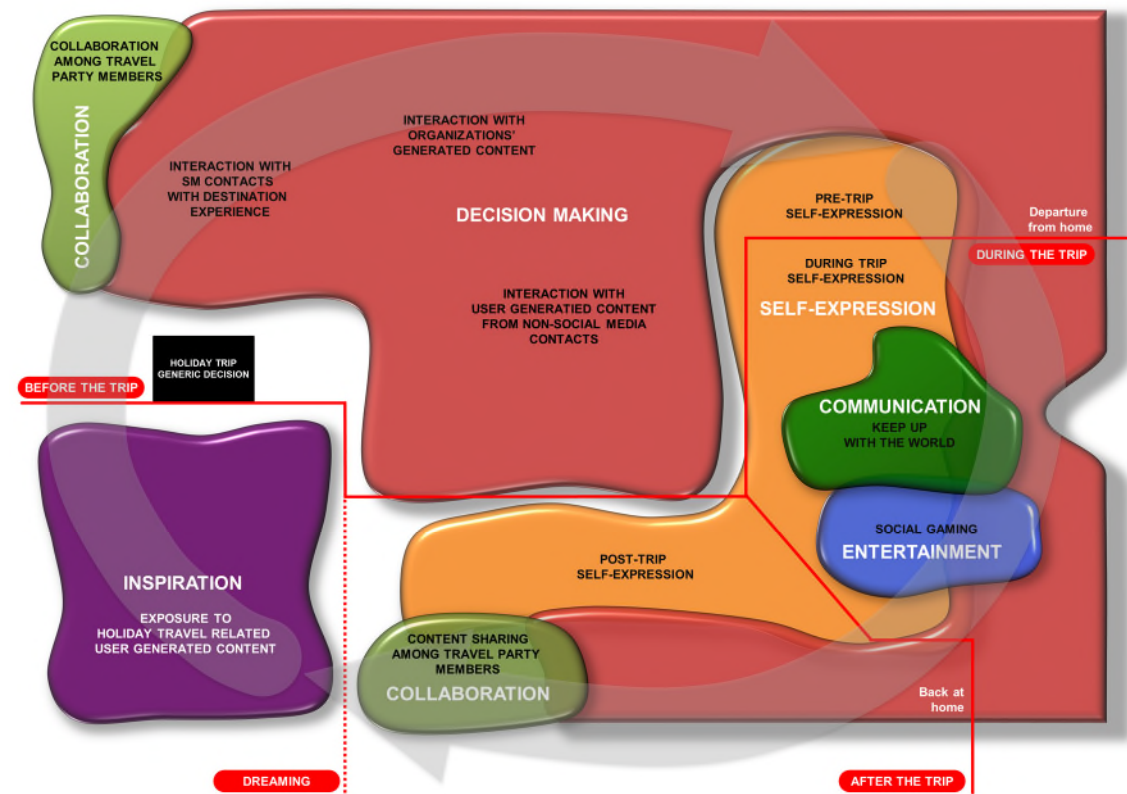
## 10.2. Functions of social media during the holiday travel process: Synthesis

The findings in chapter 5 support that during the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process, social media provide inspiration to active users (section 5.2). In chapter 6 it was shown that before the trip, active users employ social media for collaboration (section 6.2), decision making (section 6.4), and pre-consumption self-expression (section 6.3). In chapter 7, it was shown that during the trip, active users employ social media: as platforms that provide inputs to and outputs from travel related DMPs (section 7.3.4), during consumption self-expression (section 7.3.2), but also for communication (section 7.3.1), and for entertainment (section 7.3.3). Finally in chapter 8, it was shown that after the trip, active users employ social media for post-trip self-expression (section 8.3), to convey outputs from their travel related DMPs in the form of reviews and feedback (section 8.2), but also as platforms for post-trip collaboration (section 8.4).

Looking at the holiday travel process as a whole, this study concludes that active social media users employ social media to perform six major functions during their holiday travel process: (1) Inspiration; (2) Collaboration; (3) Decision making; (4) Self-expression; (5) Communication; and (6) Entertainment. As shown in Figure 10.1 these functions can be conceptually perceived as areas, or spaces, within the holiday travel process that enclose users' specific behaviours and cognitive functions, and therefore can be referred as functional spaces. Figure 10.1 also shows how the functional spaces relate to the stages of the holiday travel process spaces, that is which social media functions take place in dreaming, pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip stages (further discussed in section 10.2.1B). Below is a brief presentation of each functional space. A more detailed discussion follows in section 10.3.2, where the social media enabled travel process model is presented.

Social media are used as sources of holiday travel related stimuli that provide users with **inspiration** and ideas for future holiday trips (section 5.2). Inspiration, as a function, takes place either without intentional seeking of travel related stimuli, or as part of a hedonic ongoing search for holiday travel related information (section 5.2.2). Exposure to such stimuli (e.g. holiday photos) have the capacity to trigger a number of mental responses that may even result to the initiation of a holiday planning process, not necessarily for the same destination, or holiday activity with the one depicted in the photo (section 5.3). Inspiration is the only function, among the six stated above, that is taking place before a generic holiday trip decision has been taken, thus before the initiation of any holiday destination, accommodation, or activities DMP.

Figure 10.1: Social media functional spaces during the holiday travel process



Source: Author

Once a generic holiday decision has been taken, social media may be used as platforms for **collaboration** among members of the travel party (section 6.2). This function is primarily observed among - although not restricted to - members of a travelling party who need to overcome spatial, physical, or other constraints that reduce effectiveness of the information exchange or limit their interaction during pre-trip planning. Social media, and especially Social Networking Sites (SNS e.g. Facebook) through their direct messaging function facilitate: (a) instant communication among the members of the travel party; (b) sharing of information; and (c) group decision making during the pre-trip stage of travel process (section 6.2). In addition, after the trip the same members may use social media to share and exchange holiday trip related experiences and content (section 8.4).

Social media are also employed to facilitate holiday travel related **decision making**. Social media are used both as sources of information that provide inputs to holiday travel related decisions, mostly related to the holiday destination, the accommodation and the holiday activities (section 6.4). Moreover, social media are also used as platforms that facilitate outputs from such decisions in the form of evaluation, reviews and feedback, either during (section 7.3.4.2), but mostly after the trip (section 8.2). The term decision making is used here in

accordance with the cognitive functions included in the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006), therefore incorporating post-consumption evaluation that is taking place post-trip.

In addition, social media are used as platforms that facilitate and host holiday travel related **self-expression**. Adopting generic definitions of self-expression (Kim and Chu 2011; Kim and Sherman 2007), this study considers as self-expression the projection into the world of the user's own thoughts, feelings, values, preferences, and experiences about the holiday trip through social media. Instances of self-expression have been found pre-trip (section 6.3), during the trip (section 7.3.2), and post-trip (section 8.3).

Social media are also employed as **communication** platforms to enable active users to keep-up with their social media contacts, and the world, while they are away for their holiday trip. The use of social media to keep up with friends is among the primary functions of social media, and especially of SNS. Communication as a generic non-holiday travel related activity is present throughout the travel process. However, of interest to this study is the communication functional space that occurs during the trip as an activity that has the capacity to consume holiday travel time, and as an activity that may influence the quality of the overall holiday experience (section 7.3.1).

Finally, social media are used as **entertainment** platforms (section 7.3.3). During the holiday trip, users may engage in social gaming activities (e.g. Candy Crash, Farm Heroes and other similar games) as part of their usual social media related routine. Although this is not a quantitative study, it should be mentioned that the use of social media as entertainment platform during the holiday trip was the least popular function among all six. Use of social media for entertainment via social games is a generic, non-holiday travel related activity that is present throughout the travel process. This study includes Entertainment as a functional space that takes place during the trip, to denote its importance as a destructor or enhancer of the overall holiday experience.

### 10.2.1. Properties of social media functional spaces

The social media functional spaces share three properties that characterize their position and their shape within the holiday travel process: Fluidity, extension, and overlap. The term properties is used here as attributes, qualities, or characteristics. These properties are considered important as they illustrate that functional spaces are not static, but flexible so to adapt to the needs that each user attempts to satisfy through social media. More specifically:

### **A. Fluidity**

Throughout the findings of this study (chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8) the social media functions have been presented graphically (Figures 5.4 to 6.4, 7.2 to 7.4, 8.1 and 8.2) through irregular, fluid-like shapes, rather than through rectangular, or oval shapes that are usually employed in the majority of graphs and models in social sciences. This form of graphical representation has been chosen purposefully to illustrate fluidity as a characteristic of the functional spaces.

The concept and the term of fluidity have been borrowed from the theory of technology fluidity (Lin 2002) which supports that every communication technology has a certain fluidity that influences communication flow and communication experience. Fluidity is perceived as the degree to which a communication medium can use different modes (i.e. text, images, audio, video) to form, deliver, and receive communication through a variety of delivery systems (Lin 2008). From this perspective, social media can be considered as fluid communication technologies, due to their ability to use a variety of modes such as text, links, images, audio, video (but also likes, shares, retweets) to deliver content and messages.

However, fluidity may not only be a characteristic of a specific technology, but also a characteristic of the sets of behaviours and cognitive functions associated with the use of the specific technology or medium. As will be discussed in detail in section 10.3.2 this study groups such similar behaviours into functional spaces, which are proposed as being fluid. Fluidity illustrates the ability of social media functional spaces to change size and shape as a result of the differences among users' needs and preferences. It was not among the objectives of this study to reveal such differences. However it can be suggested that they may relate with media preferences, holiday lifestyle, personality, nature of trip, composition of travel party, the different contexts within which technology and media are used, and contingencies associated with the use of the specific technology or medium. For example user A, who plans a holiday trip in collaboration with ex-fellow students via a Facebook close group has a much larger Collaboration Space when compared to user B who used Facebook once - as an e-mail substitute - to send a holiday related message to his travel companion. It may also be the case that user A trusts her travel peers to the extent that she simply follows their travel plans with minimum level of decision making. Her contribution to the destination, or accommodation, or activities related pre-trip decisions may be limited or even not existent. In this case, user's A Decision Space will be of minimum size, or even non-existent. However, such social media behaviour may well be trip specific and not user specific. User A may plan another trip holiday trip, but this time with her boyfriend. In this trip, user A may not use social media for collaboration at all, but she may be heavily involved in trip planning. As a result in this second

trip, user's A Collaboration Space will be non-existent and her Decision Space will be significantly large.

### **B. Extension**

Extension, as a property of the functional spaces, refers to whether or not each space extends beyond the boundaries of a single stage of the holiday travel process. As it can be seen in Figure 10.1, and further discussed in section 10.3, out of the six functional spaces (Inspiration, Collaboration, Decision making, Self-Expression, Communication, Entertainment), three are located within the boundaries of a single stage of the travel process, thus not extending across multiple stages: The Inspiration Space is located exclusively within the Dreaming stage, while the Entertainment and the Communication Spaces are located only within the during the trip stage. On the contrary, the Collaboration Space extends across two stages: It is located within the pre-trip and the post-trip stages. Moreover, both the Decision and the Self-Expression spaces extend across three stages of the travel process: in the pre-trip, in the during the trip, and in the post-trip. Although further discussed in section 10.3.2.3, it should be noted that the Decision Space is used here in accordance with the cognitive functions included in the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006), therefore incorporating post-consumption evaluation taking place post-trip.

Extension as a property of social media functional spaces is the result of fluidity. Changes in size and shape of the functional spaces, therefore their fluid nature, may result due to: (a) user characteristics such as the user's social media preferences, holiday lifestyle, personality (sections 6.4.1.3 and 7.2.1); or (b) holiday trip related factors such as the size of the travel party (section 6.2); or (c) contingencies such as absence of broadband during the trip or even unexpected weather conditions (section 7.2.2). The same factors (user related, contextual / trip related, and contingencies) also influence whether or not functional spaces (except Inspiration) will be present throughout the stages of the holiday travel process.

### **C. Overlap**

In contrast to extension, which refers to whether or not each functional space extends across different stages of the holiday travel process (dreaming, pre, during and post-trip), overlap, as a property of the functional spaces, refers to whether or not spaces cover partly with each other within the same stage of the travel process. In practice, the presence of overlap between two or more, functions shows that the two, or more, functional spaces may take place simultaneously. This property illustrates the multi-functionality of social media: Active users are able to use social media for several functions within the same stage of the travel process (inspiration, pre, during, and post-trip), or even concurrently. For example, before the trip a user may go into

Facebook to exchange ideas suggestions about the trip with other members of her travel party (Collaboration). At the same time she may visits TripAdvisor and YouTube to find and evaluate information about accommodation (Decision Making) so to make suggestions to her travel party. Concurrently, she is posting in Facebook how excited she is looking forward for her summer holidays (Self-Expression). Such overlap may continue also during the trip: As soon as the user arrives at the hotel she posts a selfie at Instagram in front of the pool simply to show off (Self-expression), and she visits FarmVille to take care of her farm (Entertainment). Later in the evening she visits Facebook to catch-up with her friends back home by reading their posts in her timeline in order to “keep-up with the world” (Keep-up), but also to contact an old friend who once lived in the destination to ask for a suggestion about a local excursion suggested to her by the hotel receptionist (Decision making).

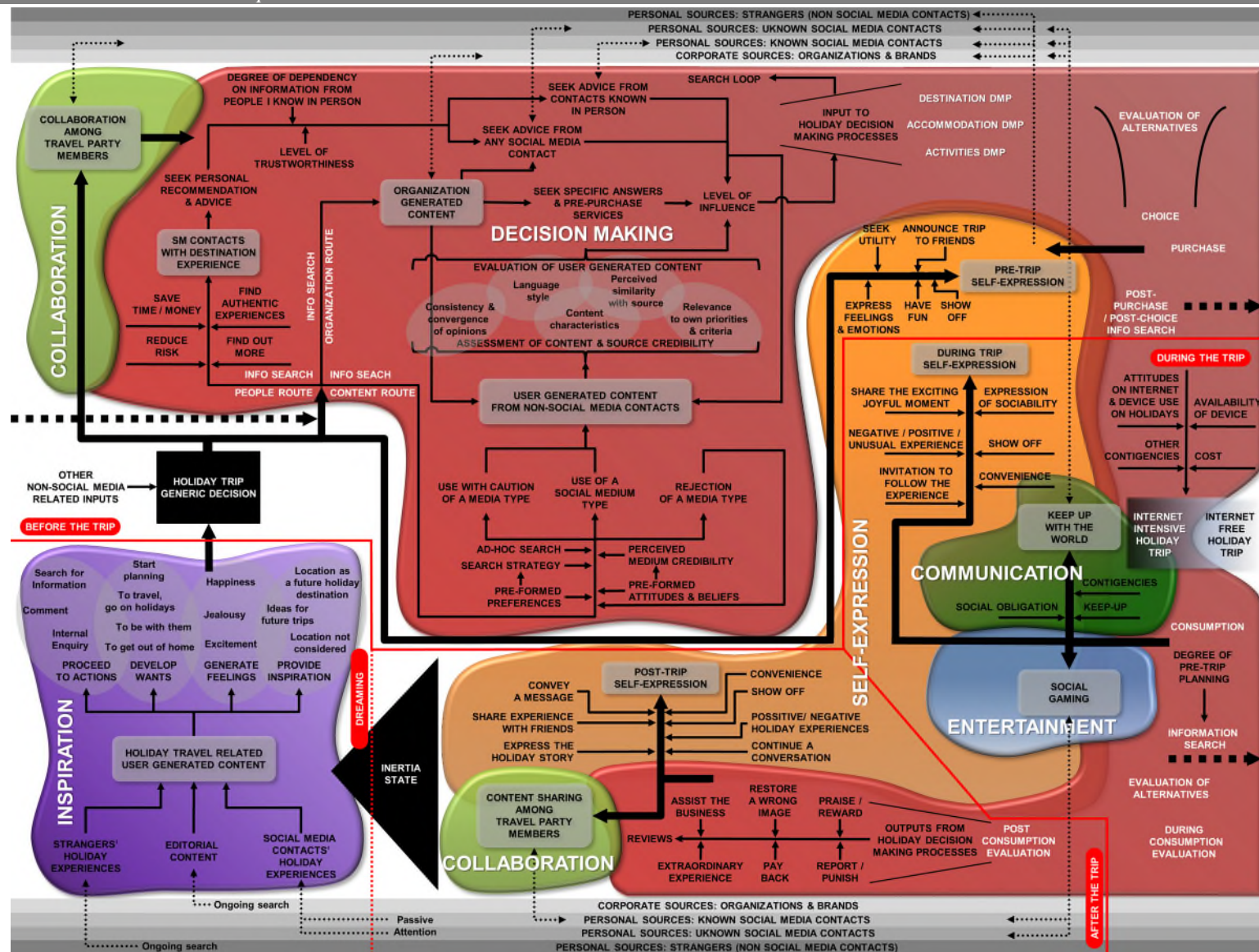
The Inspiration Space, located exclusively within the Dreaming stage, is the only one among the six functional spaces that does not overlap with any other. On the contrary, the other five spaces do overlap at least with one other functional space: Within the boundaries of the pre-trip stage, the Collaboration, the Decision making, and the Self-Expression spaces overlap, a property that illustrates the fact that the active user before the trip may use social media for all these three functions concurrently. Similarly, within the during the trip stage, the Communication, the Decision making, the Self-Expression, as well as the Entertainment spaces have the capacity to overlap: the user may concurrently use social media for decision-making, self-expression, communication, and entertainment. Finally, during the post-trip stage, the Decision making space, the Self-Expression space, as well as the Collaboration space, have the capacity to overlap.

### **10.3. The social media enabled travel process model**

Based on the findings presented in chapters 5 to 9, as well as in the synthesis presented in the above sections of this chapter, the social media enabled travel process model is proposed (Figure 10.2). The model provides a framework for understanding use and impact of social media throughout the four stages of the holiday travel process: dreaming, pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip. The model acts as a roadmap to social media multi-functional spaces by providing insights on how the spaces interrelate not only with the stages of the travel process, but also throughout the stages of the holiday travel related DMPs. The term model is used here as a graphical representation of concepts and relationships (Jaccard and Jacoby, 2010).



Figure 10.2: The social media enabled travel process model



Source: Author

### 10.3.1. Components of the model

#### A. The co-participants of the model

In section 2.3 it was shown that exchange of content is a definitional element of social media. Exchange involves at least two participants, therefore apart from the user at least one other social media user is required for the exchange to occur. Users of social media during their usual interaction with various types of social media, are exposed to, and may interact with, user-generated content created by other users (sections 5.2.1, 6.4.1.1, 6.4.1.3, and 7.3.4.1). As seen in Table 10.1, these other users, or co-participants in the exchange process, or sources of user-generated content, are of two types: personal sources and corporate sources. Personal sources can be further divided in two types depending on their relationship with the user: social media contacts, or strangers.

*Table 10.1: Types of co-participants in the social media information exchange processes*

Personal Sources		4. Corporate Sources	
People with presence in social media as individuals			
Social media contacts		3. Strangers	
People with presence in social media as individuals who already have an established connection, via at least one social medium, with the user		People with presence in social media who do not have an online, or an offline connection with the user	
1. Known Social media contacts	2. Unknown social media contacts		
People who are known in person, in the offline world to the user	People who are not known in person, in the offline world, to the user	Organizations with social media presence. People who have a social media presence on behalf of an organization and express its interests	

*Source: Author*

More specifically, social media contacts are people with presence in social media who already have an established connection, via at least one social medium, with the user. Social media contacts can be further divided into two types: Known social media contacts, that is people who are known in person, in the offline world, to the user; and Unknown social media contacts, that is people who are not known in person, in the offline world, to the user. Strangers are people with presence in social media who do not have an online, or an offline connection with the user. Corporate sources represent various organizations that have a social media presence. Within the holiday travel context, such organizations can be considered as all those that are directly or indirectly involved in the provision of holiday travel related products. Destinations, hospitality and accommodation providers, airlines, attractions, online travel agencies, but also online travel related media are only few examples of such organizations. The above four distinct types of co-participants, or sources, generate and provide content to social media that the user receives and

may interact with. Such content may be of any nature, in terms of theme, but of interest in this study is holiday travel related content.

All four types of sources, or co-participants, described above, are located in the perimeter of the model. Such placement illustrates that (a) the entire travel process is taking place within, or enclosed into, a set of interactions and exchanges of content created by the user and the co-participants; and (b) the user is in the centre of the interaction as he or she is the one initiating the interactions process.

### **B. The stages of the travel process**

All interactions between the user and the co-participants, as well as the associated exchange of holiday travel related content, take place entirely within the holiday travel process. The boundaries of each of the four stages of the travel process (dreaming, pre-trip, during trip, and post-trip) are represented in the model with red solid and dotted lines. The solid lines denote well-defined points in time, while the dotted lines denote that the boundaries between two stages cannot be explicitly defined. The user moves from the dreaming to the pre-trip stage as soon as the generic travel decision has been taken, therefore the line between the two stages is solid. The same applies for both lines that set the starting and ending boundaries of the during the trip stage. The moment that the user leaves home to start the holiday trip signifies the start of the during the trip stage, and the moment that the user returns back home from the holiday trip signifies its end. On the contrary, it is not that specific (as a point in time) the moment when the user moves from the post-trip to the dreaming stage. As a result line between these two stages is dotted.

### **C. The social media functional spaces**

The six social media functional spaces (Inspiration, Collaboration, Decision making, Self-expression, Communication, and Entertainment) are integral components of the model. They are perceived as areas within the holiday travel process that enclose users' specific behaviours and cognitive functions. They have been briefly presented earlier in this section and will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

#### **10.3.2. Description of the model**

Active users' holiday travel related interactions via social media start within the Inspiration Space which is located within the Dreaming stage of the holiday travel process. However, for the purposes of presenting a complete model, it is necessary to depict also how users move from the post-trip stage of their last holiday, to the dreaming stage of the future holiday trip. This

transition, from the holiday travel process of the last holiday trip to the holiday process of the forthcoming trip, has not been studied in this research. Moreover, this transition has not been examined in any of the travel consumer behaviour models presented in chapter 3. To cater for this need an assumption is made for this transition: When active social media users return home from their last holiday trip, and all forms of social media activity related to this trip finish (e.g. posting photos in a social networking site, review of an accommodation or an activity in a consumer review website, updating a personal blog etc.) they may (a) enter an inertia state, or (b) start already dreaming about the next holiday trip. For the purposes of this model, inertia represents a state of social media behaviour during which the user is uninterested to further generate and to further share any content related to the last holiday trip, and at the same time is uninterested to receive any social media holiday related stimuli for a future trip. As a result, the user's presence in the inertia state has four requirements:

1. The absence of any social media interaction related to the user's last holiday trip.
2. The absence of any intentional information search about a future holiday trip, as the user has not yet made a generic decision about a new trip.
3. The absence of any holiday travel related stimuli received through passive attention, and
4. The absence of any holiday travel related stimuli received through ongoing search.

The duration, or length of inertia state is not fixed. Inertia may be non-existent (in the case of users who already start dreaming about a future trip as soon as the last one ends, or even within their current trip), or ranging from few minutes to few months, depending on a number of contingencies but also depending on the user's holiday travel lifestyle, social media habits, and personality. The presence of this state has not been identified through this study. It is a hypothetical state that serves exclusively the purpose of illustrating the proposed model. More specifically, it attempts to provide a hypothetical insight on how a user moves from the post-trip state of the last holiday travel process to the dreaming stage of the forthcoming holiday travel process. The presence, or not, of the inertia state does not affect the proposed model. The user exits the inertia state and enters the Inspiration Space the moment that there is reception of a holiday travel related stimuli during his or her usual social media routine.

#### **10.3.2.1. The Inspiration Space**

Active users as part of their social media routine interact with social media by creating, exchanging, or simply by receiving content for a large variety of themes and topics. Within such a variety of content there is also holiday travel related user generated content (HTRUGC). Users

receive HTRUGC either through passive attention, or through ongoing search (section 5.2.2). More specifically:

Users are exposed to HTRUGC in various forms (e.g. images, videos, texts) generated from real-world friends who are part of user's social media contacts. Such exposure takes place through what Wilson (1997) describes as passive attention that is without any intentional seeking. For example, in the case of Facebook, holiday photos and comments posted from friends during, or after their holiday trip appear in user's newsfeed without any intentional seeking.

Alternatively, or in addition to passive attention, users may also engage in what Bettman (1979), Bloch et al. (1986) and Hwang et al. (2006) describe as an ongoing search process: Information search taking place outside a specific consumer decision making process, primarily for hedonic, recreational or other reasons. Fodness and Murray (1999, p.221) define ongoing search as "building up knowledge for unspecified future purchase decisions". Ongoing search has been neglected by research in the travel domain (Gretzel and Kang 2011). At this stage, ongoing search is independent of any specific holiday plan: it takes place prior to any generic travel related decision, and therefore outside of any travel related decision making process. Through this type of information search behaviour, active users receive HTRUGC directly from strangers, but also from corporate sources that are in most cases organizations directly or indirectly involved in the provision of holiday travel related products as discussed in section 10.3.1. In the case of strangers, users as part of their media lifestyle preferences, may be following strangers, through social media, discussing about their holiday experiences, or reading magazines (offline or online) that provide links to HTRUGC from strangers. For example, a gourmet enthusiast user while reading a food magazine finds a link to an amateur blogger (a stranger to the user) who maintains a blog about collecting mushrooms during short holiday breaks in France. The user decides to follow the blogger from which he frequently receives ideas and inspiration about gourmet oriented holiday trips. In the case of corporate sources, the content is most likely in the form of editorials or advertorials, that is written from professionals and not by actual, non-paid for that purpose, travellers. For example, a user may follow (via a Like relationship) the official Facebook page of the Greek National Tourism Organization (GNTO) simply because she likes Greece as a tourism destination, among other Mediterranean countries. As a result, the user receives travel related stimuli from a brand (in this case the GNTO) as part of an ongoing search process for travel related inspiration.

These three routes of HTRUGC reception (passive attention from social media contacts, ongoing search of editorial or other content through organizations, and ongoing search through

strangers' holiday experiences) are not mutually exclusive. It is most likely that users follow all three routes simultaneously as part of their usual social media routine.

By the moment that any given stimuli of HTRUGC gains the user's attention, he enters the **Inspiration Space (IS)** of his future holiday trip. Within this space, social media are used as platforms that provide ideas and inspiration for future holiday trips. The entrance to IS coincides with the beginning of the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process for user's next holiday trip. Exposure to HTRUGC within the IS creates four types of responses: (1) The user may proceed to actions, (2) develop wants, (3) generate feelings, and/or (4) provide inspiration for future trips. More specifically:

1. **Actions** are related to the search for information either for the specific destination depicted in the HTRUGC, or for any other destination that is associated to the type of holiday activity depicted (section 5.3.4). The search for information, at this stage, is primarily hedonic, as it is not part of any specific holiday decision making process. Further engagement with the stimuli can take any other form of action: a like, a comment as a response to the social media contact from whom the content originated, a share, a re-tweet, a pin, a favourite, depending on the type of the specific social medium through which HTRUGC is received. The action can also be exclusively internal to the user, such as an internal evaluation on whether the specific stimuli worth further consideration.
2. **Development of wants** is another form of response that may result from exposure to HTRUGC (section 5.3.1). The want may be related to the generic travel decision ("I want to go on holidays"), or the initiation of the trip planning process ("I want to start planning my holidays"). In addition, there may be wants that are not related to a holiday trip: "I want to get out of home", or to be together with the contact who submitted the stimuli are wants that are not necessarily related neither to a holiday activity, nor to the trip featured in the content.
3. Exposure to holiday travel related content may **generate feelings** to the user (section 5.3.2). Most likely these feelings relate to jealousy and excitement, both of which may be included in the set of factors that may motivate the user to proceed to the next step of the travel process.
4. Finally, stimuli resulting from exposure to holiday travel related content may be stored in memory to provide **ideas and inspiration** for the next holiday trip (section 5.3.3). The destination, or the holiday leisure activity featured in the content may become part

of the awareness or evoked sets for the next trip. However, the stimuli included in the content may not always result in a positive connotation or relationship, thus creating a “Oh... this is not for me” effect.

The above-described four types of responses are not mutually exclusive: Exposure to HTRUGC is likely to create more than one type of response (a characteristic illustrated in the model by the overlapping areas of the four types of responses). The study found (section 5.3.4) indications that certain responses trigger, or seem interrelated with other types of responses: Generation of excitement, and inspiration of the destination as a future holiday destination seem to trigger information search about the specific destination featured in the HTRUGC. However, the existence and strength of such proposed relationships should be tested through further quantitative research.

Within the Inspiration Space, and as a result of exposure to HTRUGC active social media users accumulate stimuli, information and knowledge on a variety of holiday travel components such as the destination, the accommodation, and the holiday activities or experiences. The previously discussed four types of responses, resulting from exposure to HTRUGC, together with other non-social media related inputs, do contribute so that users proceed to a holiday trip generic decision to go on a holiday trip. These other inputs are numerous and widely covered in both generic, as well as travel related, consumer behaviour models. For example, Howard and Sheth (1968) and Um and Crompton (1990) refer to significative, symbolic, and social environment inputs (sections 3.5.1.2 and b); Blackwell et al. (2006) about marketer dominated and non-marketer dominated inputs (section 3.5.1.3); Schmoll (1977) about travel stimuli (section 3.6.4.2); Goodall (1991) about environmental interactions (section 3.6.4.2), and Middleton et al. (2009) about stimuli that consist of marketing communications and other information sources (section 3.6.4.2). Once such a decision is made, users enter their pre-trip stage of the holiday travel process. From there on users may enter three functional spaces that are neither alternative nor mutually exclusive: The Collaboration Space, the Decision Space, and/or the Self-Expression Space.

#### **10.3.2.2. The Collaboration Space**

The Collaboration Space (CS) is found during two instances within the holiday travel process: First, in the pre-trip stage (section 6.2), and second in the post-trip stage (section 8.4). First, in the pre-trip stage, active social media users may enter the CS as soon as a holiday trip generic decision has been made and there is an initiation of a holiday trip related decision making process (i.e. holiday destination, accommodation, activities). Second, in the post-trip stage, users may enter the CS as soon as members of their travel party return back home. In both

instances, users enter the CS to enable them communicate and collaborate, via social media, with other members of their travel party. In the context of this study, collaboration refers to the action(s) of working with other members of the travel party to produce something (e.g. a holiday travel related decision, or an exchange of holiday travel related content). As a result the presence of a travel party is a prerequisite factor for the existence of the CS.

Within the CS during the pre-trip stage, social media are used as platforms to enable users communicate and collaborate with other members of the travel party for pre-trip planning purposes. In all instances of pre-trip collaboration encountered in this study, the user acted as a decision maker. In addition, although not supported by findings, the user may assume the role of a contributor, or even of a passive follower. These three roles are not mutually exclusive, but should be imagined as placed on a continuum. In the first case, the user is an active participant of the decision making process. The user may be assigned, formally or informally depending on the group's dynamics, a number of choices, therefore decisions, about specific parts of the trip. In the second case, the user is a contributor, therefore influencing the group's decision making efforts with own thoughts, ideas or pieces of information found. In the third case, the user is a passive follower of the decision making process and may skip, or even avoid, specific, or all of the travel related decision making processes. In the study there were instances where the user just followed others' travel plans, thus evidencing minimal or even absence of engagement with any decision making process.

Within the CS during the post-trip stage, social media are used as platforms to enable users communicate and share content with other members of their travel party. Although the study revealed only one instance of such use of social media, it should be stated that users may create public or private virtual spaces (e.g. a Facebook closed group) within which they meet and collaborate for the purpose of exchanging experiences and content. It may be speculated that post-trip use of social media for collaboration may be driven by three factors. First, by the need to retain the travel party active as a group despite the end of the travel experience, thus suggesting an effort to keep the conversation about the holiday trip active and ongoing. Second, by the need for privacy, especially when members choose a closed group, as the preferred mode of communication, thus suggesting a "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" attitude. Third, a belief or perception that social media offer a more convenient and user-friendly platform for content sharing when compared to other methods of communication.

The findings of this study also suggest that a user is more likely to enter the CS when members of the travel party are not leaving in close physical proximity with each other, thus when the members' ability to communicate in face to face mode is limited (section 6.2). It may also be suggested that even when synchronous communication is not a requirement, CS is more likely



to occur when users have a preference to social media over other communication methods such as e-mail, or even if social media are perceived as more convenient. Lastly, the size of the travel party may influence users to enter the CS (section 6.2): The need for collaboration and coordination between two friends who are planning to take a holiday trip is likely to be less evident when compared to the need of a 15 member group who are planning an adventure holiday trip in Nepal.

The presence of collaboration as a function of social media contributes in travel related consumer behaviour research by providing a preliminary insight on group decision making, and more specifically in technology enabled group decision making. As Gretzel (2011, p.763-764) supports, most travel related consumer behaviour models are developed from an “individualistic point of view”. At the same time, it has been argued that although

“there is evidence of the relevance of group decision-making in tourism, the literature fails to provide clear insights as to how joint decision-making related to tourism happens [...] It is therefore quite surprising that tourism research has not yet developed a comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics of tourism decision-making in families and other forms of groups. [...] A group level or social perspective of information search and decision-making is becoming increasingly important in light of the collective intelligence tourists can now tap into through the existence of social media” (Gretzel, 2011b, p.763-764).

Sigala (2012) made an initial attempt to study the impact of social media for collaborative decision making in the tourism domain. However, her study focused exclusively on the use of geocollaborative portals, a specific type of Web 2.0 platform defined as “geoportals exploiting the collaboration capabilities of Web 2.0 for supporting group work” (Sigala 2012, p.406). For example, Yahoo!TripPlanner, helps users create a guide for a trip, with information on hotels, attractions and maps, that can be shared among members of a travel party. However, the existence of CS, as described in this study, provides preliminary evidence that also other types of social media, such as Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook) are employed as platforms for collaborative travel related group decision making. Therefore, social media should be taken into account in relevant research as tools and platforms that are employed in technology enabled group decision making. Social media may overcome cautions about the effectiveness of traditional technological tools (e.g. email and videoconferencing) employed in group decision making as identified by earlier research on the field (Baltes et al. 2002). Moreover, the existence of CS, as described in this study, may enable researchers to enlarge their perspective of technology enabled group decision making from a pre-consumption decision making oriented process to a collaboration framework especially in the case of experiential products. It is proposed that such an enlarged framework initiates prior to the decision making process and extends to post-consumption communication and sharing of experiences.

### 10.3.2.3. The Decision Space

The Decision Space (DS) represents the functional area that enables active users to interact with social media for purposes related to their travel related decision making processes. Within the DS users employ social media to provide inputs to their decisions, as well as to provide outputs from their decision making processes in the form of reviews, evaluations and feedback. A major characteristic of the DS is that it extends beyond the pre-trip stage, being also a part of the during the trip, as well as the post-trip stages of the travel process.

#### A. The Decision Space during the pre-trip stage

During the pre-trip stage, social media are used within the DS as sources of information that provide inputs to holiday travel decision making processes (section 6.4). At this stage, due to the composite nature of the holiday travel product, users enter at least three holiday travel related decision making processes, namely: (1) the holiday destination decision process; (2) the holiday accommodation decision process; and (3) the holiday activities decision process. Depending on the nature of the holiday trip, as well as the user's preferences, there may be numerous additional decision processes that may influence the above mentioned three, such as decisions about transportation (both to the destination but also within the destination), and decisions about the type of the holiday trip (e.g. a Tour Operator package including accommodation and flight or a custom-made holiday trip). This study acknowledges the existence of additional holiday travel related decision processes (e.g. transportation to the destination). However due to the nature of this study and its associated limitations, the proposed model limits itself to the destination, accommodation, and activities decision processes.

Within DS, during the pre-trip stage, social media enable users to follow three **information search routes**, which are neither alternative nor mutually exclusive:

1. The people route, that is to use social media in order to contact people with some kind of destination experience (section 6.4.1.1).
2. The organization route, that is to use social media to contact an organization that is somehow related to the holiday trip (section 6.4.1.2), and
3. The content route, that is to use social media to gain access to user generated content - that relates to the components of the specific holiday trip - generated from people outside the users' social media contacts (section 6.4.1.3). More specifically:

None of the travel related consumer behaviour models reviewed in chapter 3 (section 3.6.4) seem to differentiate among the above three information search routes.

Following the **people route** the user chooses to employ social media in order to contact people with some prior experience about the holiday destination under evaluation. Through this route social media are used primarily as a communication platform, offering significant advantages over traditional communications platforms such as telephone and email. This course of action is motivated primarily by four factors, or needs: To reduce the risk of a poor destination choice, to save time and money, to find authentic experiences, and to enable the user to find more information than what he can find through his own search. Through this route the user aims to gain access in personal recommendations and advices from people who either currently live, lived, or have visited the holiday destination under evaluation. Depending on (a) how much the user depends on information received from people he knows in person or not; and (b) on the level of trustworthiness, he will decide to contact and seek advice either from social media contacts he knows in person, or from any social media contact no matter if this contact is known to the user in person or not. The response that the user may receive is attached with a level of influence and becomes an input into the holiday decision-making process (section 6.4.1.1).

Following the **organization route**, users choose to employ social media in order to contact an organization that is somehow related to the holiday trip (section 6.4.1.2). Typical examples of such organizations include local tourism authorities, accommodation providers, online travel agents, airlines or other transportation providers, tour operators, or even online holiday travel related magazines. Following this route, users seek to answer specific questions, or seek information to enable them evaluate alternative options in the form of specific holiday travel products. It is speculated that the user may follow the organization route when the organization's website, or other formal corporate information source fail to deliver sufficient answers to specific questions. Users may either have already some social media connection with the specific brand (e.g. already have a Like relationship with the organization's Facebook page, or are already followers of the brand's Twitter or Pinterest pages). Alternatively, they may attempt an ad-hoc search through their preferred types of social media in order to find if the organization has a presence on the specific social medium type. The ad-hoc search may be successful or unsuccessful depending on whether the organization maintains a social media presence in the users' preferred social media platforms. Although not among the findings of this study, a number of factors, such as the plurality and quality of content, the range of services offered, and the level of customer service may determine the level of influence of the specific content found in the organization's page.

Following the **content route** users choose to employ social media in order to find user generated content from people outside their social media contacts (section 6.4.1.3). Three factors seem to influence users' choice about which social media type or application to employ:

1. **Pre-formed attitudes and beliefs** about social media types and applications. These attitudes and beliefs seem to be related with the perceived credibility of each type of medium or application, and play a role on which social medium or application will be employed in the information search process. As a result, users reject, use, or use with caution a specific social medium type or application.
2. In some cases, the existence of pre-formed attitudes and beliefs about social media types and applications, as mentioned above, may result to a **pre-formed preference** in using a specific type of social medium or application as a starting point in a user's search for holiday related information.
3. The availability of a specific **search strategy** to be followed, versus an ad-hoc selection of a medium or application at the "spur of the moment". Tourism related literature approaches the information search strategy as set of information sources, and their combinations, that the tourist employs during a specific search process (Snepenger et al. 1990; Fodness and Murray 1997; Bieger and Laesser 2004; Hyde 2007; Ho et al. 2012; Stienmetz and Fesenmaier 2014). However, this study places emphasis on the fact that the search strategy is predefined or pre-formed as a form of a search path among sources that the user usually employs in various consumer decision making processes for similar types of products. This approach seems more in agreement with the view of Aarikka-Stenroos and Makkonen (2014) who from an industrial buyer's perspective postulate that formation of an information search strategy is influenced by situational characteristics, perceptions about the credibility of the source, and the buyer's previous experience.

As a result of these three factors, users may (a) reject specific types of social media or applications; (b) use others with some caution due to pre-formed attitudes about the credibility of their content; and / or (c) use other social media types or applications without any hesitation.

By using the preferred type and application of social medium the user is exposed to information in the form of user generated content. At this stage social media users seem to proceed to information processing, and more specifically to an evaluation of the user generated content. For that purpose, active social media users have developed a number of heuristics, which are simple rules enabling users to quickly assess both content and source credibility. Heuristics enable users to quickly process and evaluate information both in terms of content credibility as well as source credibility. The result of this assessment determines the level of influence that the specific content will have as an input to the user's decision making process.

This study identified five heuristics (section 6.4.2):

1. Consistency / Convergence of opinions: consistency or convergence, either negative or positive, of opinions from different reviewers, seems to contribute to the credibility of an argument expressed in a post (section 6.4.2.1).
2. Style of language: Posts may be rejected from further consideration if they are considered as exaggerating, or enthusiastic (section 6.4.2.2).
3. Relevance to own priorities and selection criteria: In this heuristic the judgment is not whether the comment is trustworthy, but whether it is relevant with the user's selection criteria and holiday related priorities (section 6.4.2.3).
4. Perceived similarity with the author of the content: Users assess reviews by how similar they feel with the reviewer. Similarity is assessed through construction of a mental image of the reviewer based either on the content of the review, and / or with other known characteristics of the reviewer (section 6.4.2.4).
5. Specific content characteristics, such as the age (old vs. new posts) and size (short vs. lengthy posts) may be used as indicators of credibility (section 6.4.2.5).

The presence of heuristics is in agreement with the heuristic-systematic theory of information processing which suggests that consumers, as decision makers, may employ systematic processing and/or heuristic processing (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). Systematic processing requires adequate attention, and extensive engagement with the information, analysis and reasoning. Heuristic processing requires less effort since it employs simple to follow rules that use cues to activate judgement shortcuts (Sparks et al. 2013). In travel related social media research, there is no adequate emphasis on the role of heuristics (Zhang et al. 2009; Papathanassis and Knolle 2011; Sparks et al. 2013)

Independently from which of the three information search routes users followed (people, organization or content), once the result of the search becomes an input to further stages of the decision making process, users may repeat the search. This repetition resembles **search loops** during which users choose to follow either a different, or the same search route (section 6.4.3). For example, there may be instances where the user, who initially followed the people route, follows now the content route in an effort to reconfirm the advice and recommendations provided by social media contacts, so to further minimize the risk of a mistaken choice. Similarly a user who followed the content route may now follow the people route to confirm, or to fine-tune, the search findings. The presence of information search loops, during the decision making process has been mentioned in academic literature. From the perspective of information science, Spink (1997) supports that information seeking may consist of several search strategies,

each consisting of one or more cycles. Within each cycle there may be one or more feedback loops that are activated according to the user's interpretation of the search output. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2013) support that consumers participate, as active participants, in interactions that consist of multiple feedback loops. In the tourism domain, the Structuring and Processing Model (Martin and Woodside 2012) proposes that travellers break down complex holiday trip decisions into phases, or manageable modules, in the form of feedback loops.

Independently from how many times the search process takes place (single instance, or repetitive loops) social media enable the user to perform not only information search but also **evaluation of alternatives**. Although not part of the findings, it is believed that it is the very nature of Consumer Review Sites (e.g. TripAdvisor) through their elaborative, but simple to use, evaluation tools that enable an interplay between information search and evaluation of alternatives, perhaps deconstructing the classic decision making approaches that present the two as separate stages of consumer decision making process (Blackwell et al. 2006).

After a series of loops among different social media types and applications, users have adequate information to perform a **product choice**. From the time that a choice is made, a **purchase** may follow immediately, or at a later point in time. As Fesenmaier and Jeng (2000) suggest, the core decisions (e.g. destination and accommodation) are those most likely to be taken before the trip. However, it may be the case that not all of the holiday travel related choices, or purchases, will take place before the trip. Depending on the user's holiday lifestyle (ranging from a scholastic well-in-advance planner to a last minute adventurer) it may be the case that a number of choices, and purchases, are postponed to take place during the trip. Such choices may relate to secondary decisions (e.g. secondary destinations, attractions, activities), or en-route decisions such as restaurants and shopping (Fesenmaier and Jeng, 2000). The decision making process about these en-route or secondary decisions may, or not, involve social media and are further described in the next section. At this stage the user may start self-expressing via social media, a behaviour that will be further described in following sections where the Self-Expression Space is presented.

Active social media users during the pre-trip stage of the Decision Space may also start using social media for **post-choice** or **post-purchase information search**. In the travel and tourism context the term "post-purchase" frequently refers to the post-trip stage of the travel process (Moutinho 1987, Middleton and Clarke 2001, Leung et al. 2013), and it has not been studied in relation to its post-moment of purchase, but pre-trip context. Post purchase but pre-consumption information search gains continuous attention in the generic consumer behaviour literature (Chang et al. 2010, Hu et al. 2014). In the social media enabled travel process model, presented in this study, the term post-purchase information search is used with its second approach: As

information search that is taking place after the choice, or even after the actual purchase or booking has been made. Post-purchase information search can be performed either as a mental preparation for the trip, or as suggested by Chang et al. (2009) to confirm that the user made the right decision, or even purely for hedonic and emotion enhancement purposes.

## **B. The Decision Space during the trip**

When active social media users depart from home, they enter the “during the trip” stage of their travel process. During the trip, users are within the consumption stage of their destination, accommodation, and holiday activities decision making processes, thus consuming their destination, accommodation, and holiday activities experiences. Depending on the degree of pre-trip planning, a number of secondary and / or en-route decisions will take place during the trip, most likely related to attractions, activities, restaurants and shopping (Fesenmaier and Jeng, 2000). Even more, in the case of a holiday trip with multiple destinations, users may need to take accommodation, or even destination decisions during this stage (Hyde and Lawson 2003). Excluding those users who will not access the Internet during the trip (section 7.2) all others have the capacity to use social media during their holiday trip. At this stage, users may enter the Decision Space, the Self-Expression Space, the Communication Space, and / or the Entertainment Space. The last three functional spaces are presented later in this section. Within the DS, in the during the trip stage, active users employ social media as platforms that provide both inputs to holiday related decision making processes, but also outputs from these processes (section 7.3.4).

In terms of **inputs**, active users employ social media during their trip to inform decision making processes about their holiday activities (section 7.3.4.1). Social media are employed as platforms for information search, but also as platforms for evaluation of alternatives. During the trip, the information search process through social media follows the same process as with that performed before the trip. As described earlier in this section, users have at their disposal three available routes: (1) the people route; (2) the content route; and / or (3) the organization route. The people route (section 7.3.4.1.A) is most likely to be followed in case that the same route has been successful during the pre-trip information search. For example, the user may have found a person, from within his social media contacts, that provided recommendations for the particular destination. As a consequence, during the trip the user may also attempt to continue the conversation and ask for further advice. The content route (section 7.3.4.1B) follows the same process and flow with the same route described in the pre-trip stage.

This study did not encounter any instances of users following the organizations route during the trip. Although such search behaviour is evident in our social media routine, further research

with focus at this point is required to provide insights on the extent and the impact of such behaviour.

Within the DS during the trip, social media are also present during the evaluation of alternatives stage of the decision making process (section 7.3.4.1B). In this study such instances were identified within the holiday activities decision making processes. Even if there is some degree of pre-trip planning about holiday activities, instances of social media use and influence were found when:

- a. Due to time limitations and / or other constraints, active users during their trip need to reconsider their pre-trip choices and reduce the number of originally planned holiday activities. As a result, users need to make a choice on which one, or ones, they will drop from their “to do” or “to visit list”.
- b. Additional holiday activities, different from those originally planned before the trip, become available during the trip. As a result, due to the usually fixed duration of the holiday trip, users need to reconsider their original pre-trip choices taking into account the new additional activities that become apparent during the trip.

In both of the above cases, social media can be used in any step of the evaluation process in an effort to compare or “cross-check” between two, or more, alternative proposals of holiday activities in order to increase the value of the final choice. Users may turn directly to social media, searching for information as inputs for their evaluation process, while other users may turn to social media only if other information sources provide insufficient, or even conflicting results (section 7.3.4.1B).

In terms of the **outputs** from holiday activities decision making processes, active users may employ social media during their trip to provide evaluations in the form of reviews while they are within the consumption stage of their experience. This study did not reveal such instances. However, in our social media routine we do encounter instances where users do provide reviews during the consumption stage. Users may review a hotel during their stay, or even during their consumption of an activity such as during their visit to a restaurant whilst still in the venue. Further research is required to provide insights on the extent and impact of such behaviour.

As discussed in section 7.2, a prerequisite for the presence of social media during the above mentioned decision making processes is access to Internet. Four factors seem to determine if the user will have access to Internet, and therefore will have the capability to use social media during the trip: (a) Attitudes toward access to Internet, and consequently use of an Internet



enabled device (IED) during holidays; (b) the availability of an IED (c) the cost of Internet access; and (d) various other contingencies. More specifically:

- a. This study revealed that there are active social media users who do not employ social media during the trip. For these users, a planned absence of Internet access during the trip is considered as a favourable, or even as a desirable element of their holiday experience, despite the fact that they have employed social media before their trip (section 7.2.1). These non-users during holidays believe that the absence of Internet access contributes to a more relaxing holiday, and to a “break” from their normal routine of being connected. Other users express some concern, or reservation, on accessing the Internet during the holiday trip, however not to such an extent to make them abandon the idea of using IEDs. Such attitudes seems to pre-exist before the trip, and influence both the decision of whether or not an IED should be taken during the trip, but also the decision towards a planned and conscious choice to avoid Internet access. Such findings are in agreement with similar early research in the field also suggesting that intentions to use Internet during the trip are conditioned by a mix of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Kennedy-Eden et al. 2013).
- b. Ownership, or not, of an IED also plays a role on whether the user will have Internet access during the trip (section 7.2.2). However as ownership of smartphones and tablets increases (eMarketer 2014a, ComScore 2013) the role of this factor will be diminishing.
- c. The cost of Internet access also plays a role (section 7.2.2). Costs are associated with data roaming charges as well as the presence of free or paid Wi-Fi at various places at the destination especially within the accommodation. Cost of data roaming will soon become insignificant given the EU’s decision to make roaming charges equal to those of national calls as of July 2014 (European Commission 2013).
- d. Finally other contingencies, such as the presence of 3G or 4G signal, or even boredom, and weather conditions seem to influence the level of Internet access during the trip (section 7.2.2): An unexpected rainstorm during the trip may force the user to stay indoors. As a result browsing the Internet may be among the available alternative activities to cope with boredom.

All of the above four reasons, and especially the pre-existing attitude on Internet access during holidays, do not lead to a use – no use dichotomy, but to a continuum ranging between an Internet Intensive and an Internet Free holiday trip.

### **C. The Decision Space during the post-trip stage**

The moment that users return home from their holiday trip, they enter the post-trip stage of their travel process. During this stage, within the context of the DS, users employ social media as platforms to enable them to provide outputs from their holiday related decision making processes (section 8.2). Such outputs, within the DS, consist most likely of post-consumption evaluations and feedback in the form of consumer reviews, or posts in travel related Internet forums. Among the three decision making processes studied (destination, accommodation and holiday activities) most of the reviews are found to be related with accommodation, while very few with the holiday activities. For example, TripAdvisor provides a very comprehensive mechanism to enable users to provide reviews about holiday activities. On the contrary, the study did not encounter any reviews for the holiday destination as such. It seems that provision of feedback is associated mostly with specific components of the holiday experience rather than with more abstract and generic experiences such as those related to the holiday destination as a whole. It should be stated at this point that apart from social media there are also other platforms that may “compete” on where the review or feedback will be placed such as Online Travel Agencies that incorporate feedback mechanisms, or even the brands’ own websites that may incorporate a “post a review” section.

The following six factors have been identified (section 8.2.1) in motivating active social media users to provide reviews their holiday experiences:

In case of a positive experience:

1. Users may be motivated by the need to reward, or praise, the service provider for the pleasant experience.
2. Users may want to restore a wrong – to their opinion – image conveyed by existing reviews from other holidaymakers, in an effort to fix injustice.
3. The motivation may also lies on the need to provide some form of assistance to the service provider, especially when users understand that such a review may assist the service provider.
4. An experience well above users’ expectations, an extraordinary - to their eyes - experience, may motivate users to provide a review.

In the case of a negative experience:

5. Users may be motivated by their need to balance, what seems in their mind as, an unfair exchange through a form of punishment, by reporting their negative experience to the world. This may also take the form of a warning to other users so not to encounter the same negative experience.

Independently from whether the experience is positive or negative:

6. Users may feel the need to provide a review as a duty, as a way to pay back, to fulfil their obligation to other holidaymakers, or even to the specific social media application, that provided the reviews that initially assisted them during their own pre-trip planning.

Functions of social media within the Decision Making Space have been extensively studied in tourism domain (Burgess et al. 2009; Cox et al. 2009; Fotis et al. 2011; Huang et al 2010; Lo et al. 2011; Papathanassis and Knolle 2011; Para-Lopez et al 2011; Sparks and Browning 2011; Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Yoo and Gretzel 2010; Tussyadiah et al. 2011).

#### **10.3.2.4. The Self-Expression Space**

Self-Expression Space (SES) represents the functional area that enables users to employ social media as platforms for travel-related self-expression. Although different cultures (e.g. individualists vs. collectivists) differ in their views and practice of self-expression, for the purposes of this study self-expression is considered as the projection of one's own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences into the world (Kim and Chu 2011; Kim and Sherman 2007). Given the context of this study, social media enabled travel related self-expression can be considered as the projection into the world of one's own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences about the holiday trip through social media. SES is found in the pre-trip stage of the travel process, but it also extends both in the during the trip, and in the post-trip stages.

#### **A. The Self-Expression Space in the pre-trip stage**

In the SES, users employ primarily Social Networking Sites, but also other forms of social media to share with their social media contacts their thoughts, feelings, decisions, characteristics or even details of their forthcoming holiday trip. Five factors were found to motivate users to self-express in the pre-trip stage (section 6.3):

1. Their need to **express feelings and emotions** about the forthcoming trip, such as excitement and happiness, or even relief in the case that users experienced some difficulty or delay in their decisions.

2. To **seek utility** from their social media contacts: Users, although avoid to post a direct question or request to their social media contacts, they self-express aspects of their travel plans, or travel related thoughts, in anticipation of a response that will provide some form of utility, or even increase the value of the trip. The anticipated response may be in the form of a piece of advice from a contact (who either lives, or has some form of prior experience with the destination) that will increase the trip's value. The response may also be in the form of an offer, or a discount, or any other form of hospitality that will increase the economic value of the trip (e.g. a discount on accommodation, a complimentary offer of a dinner through a contact that lives in the destination).
3. The need to **show-off** is another factor that contributes to self-expression. The holiday trip represents, most of the times, a major purchase not only in terms of monetary value, but also in terms of amount of time invested in planning. The holiday trip, together with travel and mobility in general, has been perceived as a "social victory" (Krippendorff 1986, p.523) therefore users feel proud that they were able to accomplish it. They feel the need to demonstrate this achievement to their social media contacts.
4. It may also be the case that users engage in self-expression purely **for fun**, as part of their usual social media routine.
5. Lastly, users may self-express about their holiday trip so to inform their social media contacts, as an **announcement to their friends**, in a similar way that they announce pleasant moments of their life.

## B. The Self-Expression Space during the trip

Users may start self-expressing well before they arrive at the holiday destination: The study revealed self-expressive behaviour as soon as participants left home, at the airport en-route to the destination (section 7.3.2). As was the case with pre-trip self-expression, also during the trip self-expression takes place primarily through Social Networking Sites, although Location Based Social Media (LBSM) such as Foursquare are also employed. Throughout the travel process, LBSM are employed exclusively in the during the trip stage.

Six factors seem to motivate users to self-express during the trip (section 7.3.2):

1. Users employ social media as means to **express their sociability**. They want to remain, what they perceive as sociable, even during the holiday trip. For example, informing their contacts that they arrived at the destination is perceived as a social norm. It seems

that users who adopt a “my friends should know where I am” attitude in their daily routine are likely to extend the same attitude during their holiday trip.

2. Self-expression may also be the result of an intention to provide social media contacts with an open **invitation to follow the holiday experience**. Upon users’ first instances of self-expression, their social media contacts become aware of their holiday trip, they anticipate further posts from them, thus “invited” to follow their journey and participate mentally in their holiday experience.
3. Users may also be motivated for self-expression during the trip by their need to **share the joyful moment**. Sharing is a significant element of friendship, and sharing happy moments with friends has always been part of people’s sense of belonging. A holiday trip is usually a pleasant experience and as such it consists of numerous pleasant moments. Users share joyful holiday moments as they do with all other joyful moments they share in their daily routine.
4. Another driving force behind self-expression may be **convenience**. Users find it more convenient to share their news and photos through social media rather than to inform each of their friends individually either online or offline. For example by posting photos in Facebook users are assured that their pictures are available for their social media contacts to watch them on their own convenience. Users perceive this delivery method as more convenient compared to informing each individual contact separately either during, or even after the trip.
5. Users also employ social media during the trip to **show off** and make others jealous of their accomplishments. They usually post photos, and/or comments about places they have visited, or simply they perform check-ins via LBSM or SNS. While in the pre-trip stage, show off relates mostly with the whole trip, during the trip relates primarily with specific experiences and / or places visited.
6. Finally, the presence of a **positive, a negative, or an unusual experience** may drive self-expression during the trip. Feelings of excitement or disappointment about a particular component of the holiday trip may drive users to self-express. Such form of a self-expression usually takes place during the experience or shortly after, it is rather spontaneous, and less demanding – in terms of time and effort – when compared to the submission of a review in a consumer review site.

### C. The Self-Expression Space during the post-trip stage

When users return home they may also employ social media as platforms for self-expression. Seven factors seem to motivate users to self-express during the post-trip stage (section 8.3):

1. Their need to **express the holiday story**. Users are now back home and they are able to recollect all pleasant moments from their trip, construct and express the holiday story. Travel related story telling is a usual post-trip activity in our travel culture, and photos are the prime component of story-telling activities (Gretzel et al. 2006). Stories may consist of a small number of photographs with limited or no description at all, to a large collection of photographs in an album within a Social Networking Site or a Content Community. Expression of the holiday story may not be exclusively addressed to the users' social media contacts, but also to strangers who may either follow the users, or who may find the users' story during an Internet search.
2. Post-trip self-expression may also be the result of the users' need to **share the holiday experience with friends**. Although similar to expressing the holiday story, in this case users limit sharing to their social media contacts or even to a subset of them whom they consider as friends. Sharing is a significant component of friendship, and sharing pleasant experiences with friends has always been part of people's sense of belonging. In addition, a holiday trip is a newsworthy experience, and as such it is usually considered among those stories that users share without hesitation with their friends.
3. Post-trip self-expression may also be the result of the need to **convey a message**. In this case the message is not addressed to a specific recipient of the users' contacts, and it is mostly informative in nature and relative short in terms of content. Users either directly or indirectly may inform their contacts about the end of the holiday trip, or about a specific element or component of the experience. The underlying cause can be, again in this case, the sense of belonging, or even that the users want to conform to a social group norm.
4. In other cases, post-trip self-expression may be attributed to users' need to **continue a conversation** that started either before, or during the holiday trip. Usually such behaviour is the last part of a series of self-expression statements that users initiated either before or during the trip. This sequence of posts is sometimes perceived by users as a "conversation", or as a "dialogue" with their social media contacts, although exchange of comments may not be present as is the case in a typical offline conversation. During this conversation users are not expecting an answer in a written, or in a verbal form. A series of other responses are adequate to allow users understand that their contacts have been following or even are engaged with their conversation, such as

a Like, a Share, a Re-tweet, or other forms of non-textual, or non-verbal responses. This kind of self-expression is not aimed at specific individuals among users' social media contacts but to the whole, or at least to a specific sub-group of social media contacts who share the same holiday or lifestyle interests with them.

5. The presence of a **positive, a negative, or an unusual experience** may drive self-expression during the trip. The presence of such an experience may also act as a driver for post-trip self-expression. In this case it is excitement (or disappointment) about a particular component of the holiday trip, or even a well above the expectations (or well below expectations) overall holiday experience that may drive users to self-express. Such form of self-expression seems more spontaneous and less demanding – in terms of time and effort - compared to the submission of a review in a consumer review site. However, there were no indications in the study that such form of self-expression act as a substitute for a consumer review.
6. Users' need to **show-off** to their social media contacts may also drive post-trip self-expression. As stated earlier when the need to show-off was also identified among the drivers for pre-trip self-expression, the holiday trip usually represents a major purchase. As such, users feel proud that they were able to accomplish it, therefore they feel the need to demonstrate their achievement to their social media contacts. In addition, now that the trip is over, users have stories and photos that will further strengthen the impact of their show-off oriented actions.
7. Finally, **convenience** may also drive post-trip self-expression. This study identified convenience as a driver for post-trip self-expression exclusively in relation to photo sharing. Social media provide easy to use interfaces and adequate free storage space for photos. Given that users do already have presence in social media, it seems a natural choice for them to use them as an easy solution for holiday trip photo sharing, at least for those users for whom privacy is not an issue. Users find it more convenient to upload photos in social media, primarily to Social Networking Sites, for the purpose of sharing it with friends and relatives as opposed to any other physical or online distribution method. What classifies, for the purposes of this study, such an activity as self-expression, and not simply as an act of distribution of photos, is that users when uploading their photos do not have any specific friend or relative in mind as a target recipient. Even in the case that there is one, or a small number of indented recipients, it is most likely that users will not limit the distribution to them, but will keep photos available for any of their social media contacts. It may also be the case that such a behaviour is perceived as convenience also for the users themselves: Instead of keeping

holiday photos in their own personal computer, they find it more convenient to have them stored in a Social Networking Site where they already have a presence.

#### **D. Synopsis of Self-Expression during the travel process**

Based on the findings (sections 6.3, 7.3.2, and 8.3), as well as on the discussion in the above sections (A, B, and C), the motives for self-expression throughout the holiday travel process can be further grouped into three themes: sentimental, hedonic, and functional (Table 10.2). More specifically:

**Sentimental** motives relate to the need of active social media users to share feelings, emotions, and experiences. Excitement and happiness for the forthcoming trip, or even relief that the trip details have been settled may drive users to self-expression at the pre-trip stage. During the trip, users' need to share joyful and exciting holiday moments, as they do with all other joyful moments they share in their daily social media routine, may also drive self-expression. In addition, excitement, or disappointment about a particular component of the holiday trip, or even a well above the expectations (or well below expectations) overall holiday experience may also drive users to self-expression. At the post-trip stage, users want to express the holiday story. As a result, they recollect experiences from the holiday trip, they construct the holiday story and they self-express it either as a whole or via its most important components.

**Hedonic** motives drive self-expression for users who seek fun and show-off. For a number of users the holiday trip is an accomplishment. They feel proud to achieve it, they want to make others jealous about their achievement, or even they want to show-off at any point pre-trip, during the trip, and/or post-trip. Users may also self-express for fun, as they do self-express for any other instance during their social media routine. Although in this study self-expression for fun was observed during the pre-trip stage there is no reason why it is limited only to this stage.

**Functional** motives drive self-expression when there is a utilitarian purpose. Users may seek convenience and therefore share news and photos either before or during the trip to inform contacts about their forthcoming trip, as opposed to contacting each friend or family member individually. Other users self-express to satisfy what they perceive as a social or group norm: they announce their trip to their friends, or they may simply want to convey a message about the trip since this is considered as "expected" or as a "must" by their contacts. Other users perceive their social media contacts as their co-travellers in their holiday trip. They self-express components of their holiday trip so to enable their contacts to "follow" the trip, and therefore participate mentally in the holiday experience. Users may continue self-expressing aspects of their holidays even post-trip in an effort to continue the conversation that started either before or during the trip.



Table 10.2: Motives for self-expression during the holiday travel process

Motives	Categories	Theme	Description	Dreaming	Pre-trip	During trip	Post Trip
Express feelings & emotions	Feelings & Experiences	SENTIMENTAL	Mainly excitement and happiness for the forthcoming trip.		X		
			Relief that trip details settled.				
Express a positive / negative / unusual holiday experience			Excitement (or disappointment) about a particular component of the holiday trip, or even a well above the expectations (or well below expectations) overall holiday experience			X	X
Share the joyful moment			Sharing happy, exciting holiday moments, as they do with all other joyful moments they share in their daily social media routine			X	
Express the holiday story			Recollecting experiences from the trip and constructing the story				X
Share holiday experiences with friends			Same as above but limiting the audience to social media contacts				X
Fun	Fun	HEDONIC	As part of the user’s social media routine.		X		
Show off	Show off		Holiday trip as an accomplishment: Feeling proud to achieve it, being able to do it, make others jealous		X	X	X
Seek utility	Utility	FUNCTIONAL	Seeking indirectly of opinion, advice, discount, complimentary offer		X		
Convenience (sharing the news)	Convenience		Share news and photos to inform contacts about the trip, as opposed to contacting each friend or family member individually			X	X
Announcement	Social norm		To inform contacts, as in any other “significant” moment of user’s life.		X		
Convey a message	User as social being		Mostly informative in nature, sort, and factual				X
Express sociability			Following what users’ perceive as social obligation			X	
Invitation to follow the holiday experience	Contacts as co-travellers		To enable contacts to “follow” the trip, and participate mentally in the holiday experience			X	
Continue the conversation		To enable contacts continue the conversation that started during (or before the trip)					X

Source: Author

### 10.3.2.5. The Communication Space

The Communication Space (COM) encompasses all those social media activities and related behaviours that enable users to keep in touch with their social media contacts, and with the world, during their holiday trip. Use of social media to keep up with friends is among the primary functions of social media. Keeping up with friends, as an activity, is not exclusively related with holiday travel related behaviour. It is part of active users' social media routine, and as a result it is present throughout the travel process for reasons not related to the holiday trip as such. However, of interest in this study is that the COM takes place also during the trip. The existence of COM during the trip requires users who are not negatively predisposed towards using the Internet during their holiday trip. These users feel the need to continue their social media routine even during their holiday trip, at least regarding their interaction with Social Networking Sites. Three factors drive users towards the COM (section 7.3.1). First, their need to stay in touch with friends; second, their need to fulfil social obligations; and third, a number of contingencies. More specifically:

1. Users during their holiday trip are away from home, and as a result there is a physical distance that prohibits physical face-to-face interaction with real-life friends. However, the need for communication and interaction with friends still exists. Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook and Google+) are virtual spaces where users' friends are present. Therefore such social media types are employed to enable users to **stay in touch** and to keep themselves updated with friends' news. It should be noted that such behaviour might not be limited to real-life friends only. Users, as part of their non-holiday trip related social media routine, have been conditioned to be in touch with a larger group of individuals: their social media contacts independently of the strength of the real-life relationship with them.
2. Another factor that may drive users to COM is what they perceive as fulfilment of **social obligations**. Users despite the fact that they are away, feel the need to conform to social norms in the same way that they conform while being back home. For example, visiting Facebook during the trip to send or receive birthday wishes to/from friends and relatives was among the reasons encountered during this study.
3. Finally a number of **contingencies** may drive users to COM: Indicative contingencies reported in this study were unforeseen bad weather conditions that kept the users indoors the accommodation, or even an activity or an overall holiday experience below their expectations that resulted in spontaneous boredom. To overcome boredom users seek alternative leisure activities. Given the presence of an Internet enabled device, and

broadband with acceptable cost, social media browsing becomes an easy leisure alternative.

Although not supported by findings in this study, another factor that may contribute to use of social media as platforms to keep up with the world during the trip is the presence of an addiction syndrome related to excessive usage of Social Networking Sites (Kuss and Griffiths 2011). Future research may attempt to explore, or measure, the impact of a Social Networking Sites addiction syndrome on the overall holiday experience.

Finally, two other factors seem that will contribute to a further increase in the use of social media as platforms to keep-up with the world during the holiday trip: (a) the steadily increasing ownership of Internet enabled mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets (Lipsman and Aquino 2013, eMarketer 2014a); as well (b) The planned reduction of data roaming charges in the European Union (European Commission 2013). As a result, mobile devices will significantly facilitate keep-up behaviour, offering ease of access and round the clock availability, as well as real-time and on the spot interaction, especially when compared to Internet access via laptops or publicly available personal computers.

#### **10.3.2.6. The Entertainment Space**

Active social media users enter the Entertainment Space (ES) when they employ social media as a gaming platform during the holiday trip. As was the case also with the Communication Space, active users' involvement with social games, as part of their leisure activities, can take place during any stage of the holiday travel process, and it is most likely independent from any reason related to the holiday trip. For example, during the pre-trip stage, users apart from holiday planning they also engage in numerous other online or offline leisure activities that are not related and are independent from their forthcoming trip. Social gaming can be one of those leisure activities. However, of interest to this study is users' interaction with social games during the trip due to their potential to destruct, or even enhance, the holiday experience (section 7.3.3).

The relationship between social media and gaming has been characterized as "symbiotic" (Hjorth and Arnold 2012, p.27). Time devoted to online games is part of leisure time (Martinsons 2005). Therefore it seems expected that social games hosted within Social Networking Sites (SNS) are part, or even conflate with other leisure activities during holiday travel. This may hold true especially for games that include not only social interaction, but also social polemics. These games require the player's active participation at specific, frequent time intervals, to the extent that they are perceived even as a form of social labour (Hjorth and

Arnold 2012). These characteristics may substantiate the presence of some degree of order and pressure to the player that resemble a feeling of compulsion which may be considered as incompatible with the recreational nature of holiday trips (Clawson and Knetsch 1966), and also with freedom as a definitional element of leisure (Page and Connell 2010). As popularity of SNS games moves away from youngsters, there are early signs of a growing concern for addictive behaviours associated with excessive use of both SNS games and SNS in general (Kuss and Griffiths 2011; Rooij 2011).

The current study, due to the limited number of participants who reported engagement with social games during the trip, cannot reveal neither the needs that drive such behaviour, nor its impacts. Future research on the subject may provide insights on the role of social games during the holiday trip as destructors, or even as enhancers of the holiday experience. Moreover, social games can also be studied as elements of an anti-social behaviour that negatively affects the relationship between the user and the other members of the travel party.

### **10.3.3. An attempt to compare the proposed with existing models**

This section attempts to make more justice to the social media enabled travel process model by discussing potential contribution to knowledge in light of the deficiencies of the current consumer behaviour models.

#### ***10.3.3.1. Approaching the proposed model as a consumer behaviour model***

In an effort to approach the social media enabled travel process model as a consumer behaviour comprehensive model and examine its contribution to knowledge in light of the deficiencies of the current models, three initial observations need to be made.

First, the proposed social media enabled travel process model can be considered as a consumer behaviour model. In section 3.4, consumer behaviour has been defined as the physical and mental activities that individuals undertake either as part of processes or as independent acts when they dream, search, evaluate, obtain, consume, goods, services, ideas and experiences within physical or virtual environments. In section 10.3.2 it was extensively presented how the proposed model encapsulates a number of social media related physical and mental activities that individuals undertake when they dream, search, evaluate, obtain and consume holiday travel related products. Moreover, the proposed model seems to be in accordance with the characteristics of consumer behaviour models as those have been discussed in section 3.5. For example the proposed model presents a framework that agrees with Bowen and Clarke's (2009, p.58) description of a model: It encapsulates "different elements of behaviour, showing

relationships that exist, normally in some sort of chronological order from the start to the finish of the behavioural process” which in the specific context relates to the holiday travel process. At the same time the model involves concepts and relationships between concepts, as per the description of Jaccard and Jacoby (2010), and as an “overall framework of looking at reality” (Silverman 2006, p.13).

Second, the proposed social media enabled travel process model although it can be characterized as comprehensive (or multi-variable or grand) it is not generic. The Nicosia model (1966), the Howard and Sheth model (1968), and the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006) are usually among those that have been characterized as comprehensive, or multi-variable, or grand models. Comprehensive or multi-variable, as opposed to specific models, are those that incorporate a large number of variables, thus attempting to explain a variety of behaviours although in a less detailed nature when compared to specific models that depict a very specific aspect of behaviour such as repetitive purchasing or innovative behaviour (Chisnall 1995, Loudon and Della-Bitta 1993). Moreover, grand models attempt to cover each stage of consumer behaviour (Bowen and Clarke 2009). However, the proposed model cannot be compared and contrasted with the above-mentioned models due to the fact that it not generic. More specifically, the Nicosia (1966), the Howard and Sheth (1968), and the Consumer Decision Process (Blackwell et al. 2006) models attempt to depict generic consumer behaviour processes, thus applying to a wide range of - if not all - products. On the contrary the proposed social media enabled travel process model is not generic: It attempts to depict holiday travel related consumer behaviour activities and processes.

Third, the proposed social media enabled travel process model focuses exclusively on one type of inputs or stimuli: social media. On the contrary, grand models such as Howard and Sheth (1968), and the Consumer Decision Process (Blackwell et al. 2006) do not restrict inputs or stimuli to specific types. For example, the Howard and Sheth model (1968), as discussed in section 3.5.1.2, includes significative, symbolic, and social environment inputs. Moreover, it identifies a number of exogenous variables (i.e. importance of purchase, personality variables, social class, culture, organization, time pressure, and financial status) that act as influences from the external environment. Similarly, the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006), as discussed in section 3.5.1.3, refers to marketer and non-marketer dominated stimuli, and also identifies environmental influences and individual differences as two sets of variables that influence the decision process.

Based on the above three initial observations, it can be supported that the proposed social media enabled travel process model, although a consumer behaviour comprehensive model, cannot be directly compared to generic comprehensive models, such as the Howard and Sheth model

(1968) and the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006), and as a result, it cannot contribute in overcoming specific deficiencies of these models.

However, the proposed model contributes in enlarging our view about consumer behaviour and how it is depicted through comprehensive models in the following three ways:

First, the social media enabled travel process model proposes that decision making, as a process, is not taking place in a vacuum. Contemporary comprehensive models of consumer behaviour have been criticized for placing emphasis on the decision making process, and in particular on the mental activities that occur before, during, and after the purchase (Loudon and Della-Bitta 1993). As a result, they evidence a “buyer” rather than a “consumer” focus (Firat 1985). In contrast to such emphasis and focus, the proposed model places the decision making function alongside a number of other functions that take place concurrently with decision making. Within the context of holiday travel, the proposed model identified collaboration, self-expression, communication, and entertainment as additional functional spaces that take place concurrently with decision-making during the whole consumption process. Such a holistic perspective to consumer behaviour not only overcomes the “buyer” focus identified by Firat (1985) as a limitation of contemporary comprehensive models of consumer behaviour, but also provides research stimuli for scholars to assess potential inter-relationships among the functional spaces that may exist due to the presence of fluidity, overlap, and extension as properties of the functional spaces (section 10.2.1).

Second, due to their emphasis on the decision making process as explained above, contemporary consumer behaviour models examine behaviour processes commencing from the stage of need recognition. For example, as shown in section 3.5.1.3, the Consumer Decision Process model (Blackwell et al. 2006) postulates that in an extended problem solving behaviour the process is activated when environmental influences, individual differences and information stored in memory contribute to make a consumer aware of a discrepancy between his/her actual and ideal state, thus when a consumer recognizes a need. On the contrary, the social media enabled process model proposes that prior to need recognition there is the functional space of Inspiration (as discussed in section 10.3.2.1). During Inspiration consumers receive stimuli through passive attention and/or ongoing search before need recognition, thus outside of a specific decision making process. The proposed model suggests that such stimuli provide ideas and inspiration for future purchases once a need will be recognized. The inclusion of the Inspiration Space in comprehensive consumer behaviour models may enable us to enlarge our views on the decision making process by exploring and examining processes prior to the need recognition stage as well as their impacts in need recognition, on information search, as well as on self-expression.

Third, the social media enabled travel process model proposes fluidity as a property of the social media functional spaces, that can also be perceived as a characteristic that overcomes the rigidity of comprehensive consumer behaviour models. One of the criticisms of comprehensive consumer behaviour models is that they do not allow enough flexibility to cater for highly adaptive decision making, a limitation usually associated with the rigid nature of the models and presented as a dimension of rationality (Erasmus 2001). Fluidity (discussed in section 10.2.1.A) as a characteristic of the functional spaces that exist alongside decision making, illustrates their ability to change size and shape as a result of the differences among consumers' needs and preferences when using specific technologies or media as part of their consumer behaviour.

#### **10.3.3.2. Approaching the proposed model as a tourism consumer behaviour model**

In an effort to approach the social media enabled travel process model as a tourism consumer behaviour model and examine its contribution to knowledge in light of the deficiencies of the current models, two initial observations need to be made.

First, the social media enabled travel process model can be characterized as a tourism consumer behaviour model as it attempts to describe - among other functions - the purchase and consumption process of tourism products (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). As such, the proposed model can be further characterized as a general conceptualization that attempts to provide a comprehensive view of the whole holiday travel related decision-making (Decrop 2006). Further on, the proposed model can be characterized as a tourism related cognitive model of consumer behaviour as it places emphasis on the mental processes involved in decision making (Decrop 2006), and more precisely as a process model that attempts to investigate how decisions are made in relation to underlying cognitive processes (Svenson 1979 cited Decrop 2006).

Second, as discussed in the previous section, the social media enabled travel process model focuses exclusively on one type of inputs or stimuli: social media. As a result of this focus, the proposed model cannot be directly compared with general-purpose cognitive tourism process models such as the Travel Decision Process model (Schmoll 1977), the Travel Decision Making Process model (Mathieson and Wall 2006), the Vacation Sequence model (van Raaij and Franken 1984), and the Vacation Tourist Behaviour model (Moutinho 1987).

However, the social media enabled travel process model contributes in enlarging our view about tourism consumer behaviour models in the following three ways:

First, the social media enabled travel process model proposes that travel related decision making, as a process, is not taking place in a vacuum. The criticism made by Loudon and Della-Bitta (1993) and Firat (1985) that generic comprehensive consumer behaviour models place emphasis on the decision-making process, thus resulting in the impression that decision-making takes place in a vacuum, applies also to the tourism consumer behaviour models discussed in Chapter 3. This emphasis is also evidenced by the fact that in the tourism literature the terms “consumer behaviour models” and “decision making models” are being used interchangeably as discussed in section 3.6.1. The social media enabled travel process model overcomes such a deficiency by proposing that within information technology intensive environments, within which active social media users operate, holiday travel related decision-making is not taking place in a vacuum, but it occurs concurrently with five other functional spaces (namely: inspiration, collaboration, self-expression, communication, and entertainment) that take place concurrently during the whole holiday travel process.

Second, fluidity as a property of the functional spaces addresses the limitation proposed by Hudson (2000) that tourism consumer behaviour models are stereotypical. Hudson stressed that tourism consumer behaviour models view potential tourists as homogeneous whereas in reality the decision making process may vary significantly among consumers. In the proposed model, fluidity (discussed in section 10.2.1.A) has been proposed as a property of the six functional spaces existing within the holiday travel process. Fluidity enables functional spaces to change size and shape as a result of the differences among consumers’ needs and preferences when using specific technologies or media as part of their travel related behaviour. As explained in section 10.2.1.A, the decision making space, similar to the other five functional spaces, does not have a rigid structure, therefore does not have a constant size or volume. In practice this means that the proposed model caters both for those potential tourists who are heavily involved in trip planning therefore having a significant contribution to a travel party’s decision making process, but also for those potential tourists whose their contribution to holiday travel related decisions is limited or even non-existing. As a result the fluidity of functional spaces overcomes the deficiency of existing tourism related models being stereotypical.

Third, in contrast to the existing tourism consumer behaviour models (as discussed in 3.6.4.2), the social media enabled travel process model covers all four stages of the holiday travel process: dreaming, pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip. For example, the model of tourist buying decision (Wahab et al. 1976), the travel decision process model (Schmoll 1977), and the stimulus-response model of buyer behaviour (Middleton et al. 2009) terminate with the decision outcome, thus they cover largely the pre-trip stage of the travel process, without differentiating between pre-trip and during the trip decisions, neglecting both the post-trip and the dreaming



stages. Similarly, the travel decision-making process model (Mathieson and Wall 2006) although it makes a reference to the travel experience and the post-trip evaluation, it neither differentiates between pre-trip and during the trip decisions, nor it covers the dreaming stage of the travel process. At the same time, it does not clearly differentiate between the pre-trip, the during the trip, and the post-trip stages. The vacation sequence model (van Raaij and Franken 1984) makes a reference to the vacation activities, therefore it covers the during the trip stage. However, when it refers to satisfaction and complaints as a stage of the vacation sequence, it does not make clear if this stage takes place during or post-trip, or during both stages. In the case of the vacation tourist behaviour model (Moutinho 1987), the during the trip stage is not adequately represented: The model moves from purchase to post-purchase information / evaluation, however in the case of tourism products the purchase does not necessarily implies consumption. Finally, the holiday decision process model (Goodall 1991) makes a reference to the holiday experience. However, Goodall (1991) locates the holiday experience variable (Figure 3.13) within the information gathering stage enabling the holidaymaker to reinforce his/her perceptions and adjust accordingly the holiday preferences and goals for the next trip. Goodall (1991) does not make any reference to the post-trip stage or to the dreaming stage of the holiday travel process. In contrast to the above, the social media enabled travel process model covers all four stages of the travel process (dreaming, pre-trip, during and post-trip) with specific references in all six functional spaces, thus attempting to provide a more holistic approach to the holiday travel process. Such a holistic perspective has a number of implications for practice that are relevant to destination, accommodation, and leisure marketers which are presented in section 10.7.

#### **10.4. Social media and the consumer decision making process**

As presented in chapter 9, focus groups revealed that active users interact with social media not only throughout all stages of their destination, accommodation, and holiday activities DMPs (section 9.4), but also prior to the initiation of the DMPs (section 9.3), and post the completion of the DMPs (section 9.5). More specifically:

It was found (sections 5.2, 5.3, and 9.3) that active social media users do have holiday travel related interactions with social media prior to any generic holiday travel decision, therefore prior to the initiation of any holiday travel related DMP. Among other impacts, the stimuli from these interactions provide active social media users with inspiration about future holiday trips. In addition to inspiration, these interactions with social media may also develop holiday travel related wants. Given that a want is seen as a “particular form of consumption chosen to satisfy a need” (Solomon 2013, p.613), it can be argued that need recognition is demonstrated by the

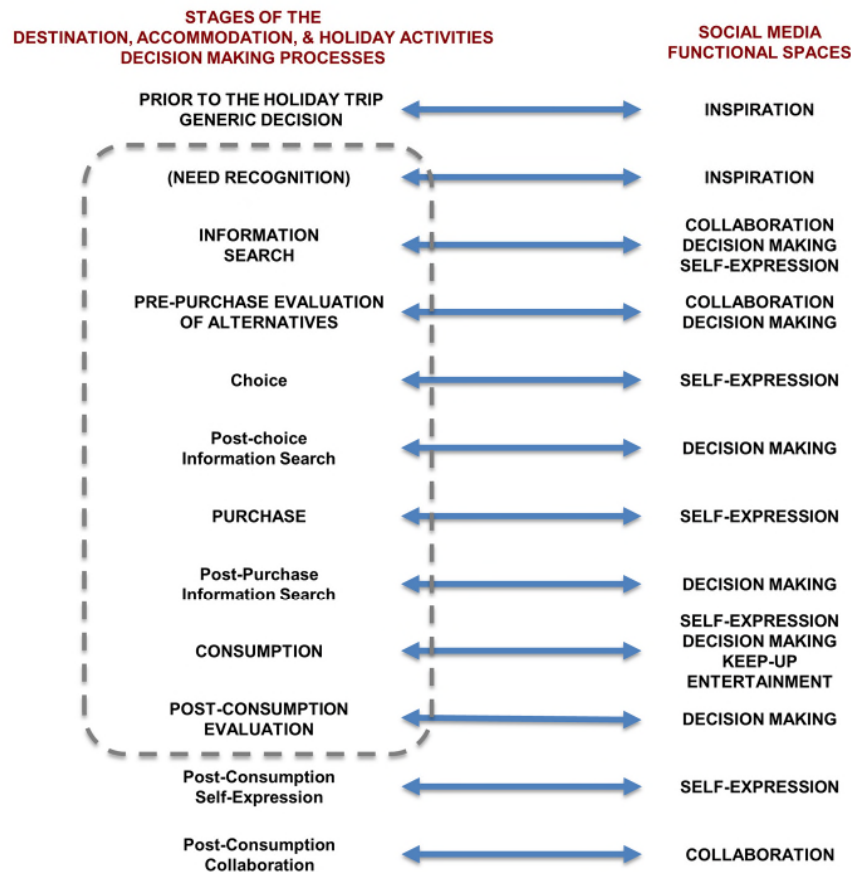
expression of a want. As suggested in section 9.4.1, holiday travel holiday travel related stimuli, received through interaction with social media, do contribute among other factors, to the need recognition for (a) the generic holiday travel decision; (b) the holiday destination DMP; and/or (c) the holiday activities DMPs. Apart from the need recognition stage, interaction with social media have also been found during each of the remaining stages of the holiday travel related DMPs:

1. The information search stage (section 9.4.2) where active users employ social media: (a) as information sources to provide inputs to their holiday related DMPs (sections 6.4 and 7.3.4); (b) as collaboration platforms among members of the travel party (section 6.2); and (c) as platforms for travel related self-expression (section 6.3).
2. The pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives stage (section 9.4.3) where active users employ social media: (a) in their effort to correctly rank alternatives (destinations, accommodations, holiday activities) found during the information search process (sections 6.4 and 7.3.4); (b) as collaboration platforms among members of the travel party (section 6.2).
3. The choice and purchase stages (section 9.4.4) where active users employ social media as platforms for holiday travel related self-expression (section 6.3).
4. The post-choice and post-purchase information search stages (section 9.4.5) where active users employ social media as information sources to provide a mental preparation for the trip, to confirm that the user made the right decision, or even purely for hedonic and emotion enhancement purposes
5. The consumption stage (section 9.4.6) where active users employ social media: (a) as platforms for communication (section 7.3.1); (b) as platforms for travel related self-expression (section 7.3.2); (c) as platforms for entertainment (section 7.3.3); (d) as platforms providing inputs to holiday activities DMPs (section 7.3.4.1); and (e) as platforms providing outputs from accommodation DMPs (section 7.3.4.2).
6. The post-consumption evaluation stage (section 9.4.7), where active users employ social media for post consumption evaluation (sections 7.3.4.2 and 8.2).
7. Post the completion of the holiday travel related DMPs active users employ social media for post consumption self-expression (sections 8.3 and 9.5.1) and post consumption collaboration (sections 8.4 and 9.5.2).

Based on the above, it is concluded that holiday travel related interactions with social media take place during all stages of the DMPs as well as pre and post the DMPs. Figure 10.3. portrays this finding showing that holiday travel related interactions with social media take place not

only during all stages of the holiday related DMPs (depicted in the figure as the area within the dotted lines), but also prior to the holiday trip generic decision, thus before the initiation of a DMP, and also post the completion of the DMP.

Figure 10.3: Interactions with social media pre, during, and post the decision making process



Source: Author

#### 10.4.1. Remarks on social media use during the consumer decision making process

##### A. Self-expression and the consumption stage of the accommodation DMP

The study did not encounter any instances of self-expression during the accommodation consumption. However, the author, as an active social media user, has witnessed such instances during his own interaction with social media, primarily in the form of hotel check-ins and photos that his contacts have posted in social networking sites from within hotels during their holiday trips. Moreover, the Facebook pages of various hotels do contain adequate examples of posts, made by their guests during their stay. A possible reason to explain the absence in this study of any instances of self-expression during the accommodation consumption may be that

this specific social media behaviour is very low in popularity among users, and therefore difficult to be detected through a small sample qualitative design such as the one employed in this study. A large-scale quantitative survey may provide a more accurate picture in terms of the popularity of such behaviour.

## **B. Information search and evaluation of alternatives during the consumption stage of the destination DMP**

Active social media users during the consumption stage of the destination DMP may employ social media to search for information and evaluate alternatives about their holiday activities (section 7.3.4.1). Holidaymakers who are already at the destination may engage in such activity primarily for three factors:

1. Lack of adequate holiday activity planning during the pre-trip stage. This includes also a number of en-route decisions (e.g. lunch or dinner outside the accommodation, evening entertainment, etc.) that for many users are not that important so to be taken prior to the trip.
2. A variety of unforeseen contingencies that necessitate change in plans. For example, bad weather conditions may force holidaymakers to replace a pre-planned outdoor holiday activity (e.g. a visit to an outdoor sight) with an indoor activity (e.g. a visit to a museum). In such a case there is a need for a new information search and a new evaluation of alternatives.
3. A new holiday activity that has been discovered on the spot, or proposed by local source resulting in a need for re-evaluation of the existing options. In such a case, due to the limited duration of the holiday trip and the time available it is very likely that a new evaluation of alternatives is required so that to compare the new proposed activity with already pre-scheduled activities.

In all of the above three scenarios the user may employ social media to perform information search, and evaluation of alternatives. As presented in section 7.3.4 and further discussed in section 10.3.2.3B, active social media users have at their disposal the same three, as in the pre-trip stage, information search routes: people, organizations, and content. However, it should be noted that the study did not encounter any interaction with organizations for information search purposes within the holiday activities DMP during the trip. A possible explanation may be that users, being under time pressure for a decision, follow search routes that have increased likelihood of success. For example, the study provided preliminary indications that during the trip, the people route is followed only if an available person with destination experience has been identified and already contacted in the pre-trip stage. The user seems not willing to invest

in time attempting to find a contact with destination experience unless this search has been successfully performed in the pre-trip stage. In contrast, it may be argued that the organization's route requires more time since the user not only needs to be aware of the specific organization / brand name, but also needs to search whether the organization has a social media presence. Another possible reason to explain the absence in this study of any instances of holiday activity information search through the organization route may be that such social media behaviour is very low in popularity among users, and therefore difficult to be detected through a small sample qualitative design as the one employed in this study. A large scale quantitative survey may provide a better picture in terms of the popularity of such behaviour.

### **C. Post consumption evaluation of the destination DMP**

This study did not encounter any instances of outputs – in the form of reviews and comments – from the holiday destination DMP. This absence may be attributed to the very low popularity of such social media behaviour. Therefore, it is difficult to be detected through a small sample qualitative design as the one employed in this study. Apart from this hypothetical cause, there are a number of additional potential reasons that may be related to the low popularity of destination reviews:

1. As stated in section 10.3.2.3C, the abstract nature of the destination experience - as a composite product - when compared to the accommodation and the holiday activity experience;
2. The fact that accommodation experience is more human centric than the destination experience, in the sense that there are human service providers that are directly or indirectly rewarded, or punished, through an accommodation review, as opposed to a review of a destination where interaction with a specific service provider is less likely; and
3. The absence of popular consumer review sites that place emphasis on the destination rather than the accommodation: TripAdvisor and HolidayCheck, the two most popular consumer review websites place almost exclusive emphasis in accommodation reviews but not in destination reviews.

### **D. Post-consumption self-expression and post-consumption evaluation**

As presented in detail in Chapter 8, and discussed in section 10.3.2.4C, active social media users employ social media after the trip to self-express thoughts, feelings, values and preferences into the world. Seven factors are found that seem to motivate the user to self-express during the post-trip stage: (1) The need to express the holiday story; (2) to share holiday

experiences with friends; (3) to convey a message; (4) to continue the conversation that started either before, or during the trip; (5) to show off; (6) to express a positive or a negative holiday experience, or (7) simply for convenience. Given the above seven drivers of post-consumption self-expression, but also given the nature of content, the indented recipient, and the social media platform employed, four major differences can be identified between post-consumption self-expression and post-consumption evaluation:

1. Post-consumption evaluation is more likely to be service provider specific, while post-consumption self-expression is more abstract relating to feelings, messages, and conversations.
2. As per the content, while reviews have a significant evaluative component, this is not the case for post-consumption self-expression. The latter usually lacks any form of evaluation of the experience: The user is not posting a review about the holiday experience, but simply shares feelings, thoughts and values through textual posts, images, videos.
3. In the case of post-consumption self-expression the indented recipient of the message, or the indented partner for interaction, is usually among the social media contacts of the user performs self-expression. Users seek a Like, a share, a comment, or even just the belief that their thoughts will be read from their social media contacts. On the contrary, the indented recipient of the post-consumption evaluation is usually unknown to the user. It is the world, the general public, the “whom it may concerns” visitor of the consumer review and rating website where the review is posted.
4. Post-consumption evaluation is almost exclusively performed in consumer review and ratings websites like TripAdvisor, HolidayCheck, or to a much lesser extent at Internet forums where the user contributes to a forum thread. On the contrary post-consumption self-expression is most likely to take place in Social Networking Sites but also in personal blogs.

#### **10.4.2. On linearity and rigidity of the decision making process**

Despite the sequential appearance of the DMP stages in Figure 10.3, this study does not consider the consumer as a rational decision maker, an assumption considered as a classic limitation of the comprehensive consumer behaviour models (section 3.5.2). More specifically, the absence of boxes and arrows in the presentation of the DMP stages in Figure 10.3, but also in the social media enabled travel process model (Figure 10.2), is deliberate so to show that this

study does not adopt two of the three dimensions of consumer's rationality as per Erasmus et al. (2001): linearity and rigid model structure.

In terms of linearity, the absence of boxes enclosing the DMP stages, as well as the absence of connecting arrows among them, reflects that this study does not assume the DMP stages as a linear sequence of activities that consumers pass through when making a decision. Although this is not a study focusing exclusively on consumer decision making, findings are in agreement with Erasmus et al. (2001): Active social media users, as any other consumer, may devote little time in a specific DMP stage, or even not engage at all in a particular stage of the process. Findings of this study are also in agreement with Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) who suggest that purchases may occur without a decision process but as a result of a number of factors including group conformity.

In terms of the rigid structure of the models, as a dimension of rationality that does not allow enough flexibility to cater for functional and highly adaptive decision making (Erasmus et al. 2001), this study proposes fluidity as a characteristic of the functional social media spaces as presented in detail in section 10.2.1: Fluidity illustrates the ability of social media functional spaces to change size and shape, therefore their fluid nature, and thus absence of rigidity. Moreover, the study came across the use of heuristics as part of holiday related decision making (section 10.3.2.3), which are considered by Mishra and Olshavsky (2005) as indicators of the absence of rationality. In addition, this study does not endorse Erasmus et al. (2001) third dimension of consumer's rationality: The lack of consumers' capacity to correctly rank alternatives. Critics of consumer behaviour comprehensive models suggest that consumers cannot be rational in their decisions due to their lack of capacity to correctly rank alternatives resulting from limited knowledge and skills, as well as limited access to information (Erasmus et al. 2001, Schiffman and Kanuk 2000). It was shown in section 2.5.5 that Consumer review websites offer an impressive range of features that enable consumers to perform elaborate ranking tasks through user-friendly interfaces. As a result, the findings of this study do not support rationality in the decision making process. This study supports that social media further enhance Mishra and Olshavsky's (2005, p.368) "consumer-computer system" which was seen as "an alliance between man and machine in which the two interact to make decisions" that can "relax" a number of constraints imposed by rationality.

## **10.5. Proposing information exchange as a consumer behaviour theoretical construct**

This study found (section 10.2) that active users interact with social media throughout all four stages of the holiday travel process (dreaming, pre, during and post travel), performing six functions: inspiration, collaboration, decision making, self-expression, communication, and entertainment. These functions have been conceptually proposed as functional spaces that enclose users' social media related behaviours and cognitive functions. Moreover, in presenting the social media enabled travel process model (section 10.3), it was shown that within each, but also across all, functional spaces, there are numerous and extensive interactions via social media that consist of exchanges of user generated content, taking place among social media users, as well as between users and organizations.

Based on the above discussions, and synthesizing the findings presented in chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, this study supports that social media enable active users to have a dual role: operating both as recipients, seekers, but also as providers of information throughout all stages of the holiday travel process. Table 10.3 provides a summary of this dual role. Based on this dual role, this study supports that users' interactions with other users and organizations via social media are acts of provision and reception of information. These acts of provision and reception of information clearly resemble a series of information exchange processes. The term information exchange is used here as per the Denis (1996, p.436) definition of information exchange: "either giving or receiving information".

In addition, in sections 9.5 and 10.4, it was shown that active users employ social media to provide and receive information throughout all stages of their holiday travel related DMPs. As a result, information exchange occurs not only throughout all stages of the holiday travel process, but also throughout all stages of the holiday travel related DMPs. Therefore, information exchange runs concurrently, and in coexistence with consumers' holiday travel related DMPs. Given that interactions with social media also occur prior to the initiation, and also post-completion of the DMPs, it is supported that information exchange occurs not only throughout the stages of the DMPs, but it also extends prior to the initiation, and also post the completion of the DMPs.

Information exchange has been viewed as the key difference between individual and group decision making, being a key element of group decision making (Denis 1996). As a result,



Table 10.3: Roles of consumers and social media functional spaces during the travel process

	INSPIRATION	COLLABORATION	DECISION MAKING	COMMUNICATION	ENTERTAINMENT
<b>CONSUMERS AS RECIPIENTS OF INFORMATION</b>	Passive, or on-going recipients of product related stimuli during the dreaming stage, from other consumers who are self-expressing, or from organizations and brands that discuss, consult, or promote their products	Active recipients of ideas, suggestions, comments, thoughts, decisions from other members of the travel party during the pre-trip stage	Active seekers of information from people, organizations, and social media platforms during information search, evaluation of alternatives, post choice / post-purchase information search during the pre-trip and/or the during the trip stage	Active seekers of information from social media contacts in order to keep in touch with friends and the world during the trip	Active or system-mediated seekers of social game related information during the trip
	SELF-EXPRESSION	COLLABORATION	DECISION MAKING	COMMUNICATION	ENTERTAINMENT
<b>CONSUMERS AS PROVIDERS OF INFORMATION</b>	Providers of information during the pre, during, and post-trip stages in the form of self-expression statements that provide product related stimuli to other consumers	Providers of ideas, suggestions, comments, thoughts, decisions to other members of the travel party during the pre-trip stage	Providers of information in the form of post-consumption evaluations	Providers of information to social media contacts in order to keep in touch with friends and the world during the trip	Active or system-mediated providers of social game related information during the trip

Source: Author

information exchange has been mostly studied within the context of group decision making (Dennis 1996, Lightle et al. 2009, Peñarroja et al. 2013, Silver 2014).

The above discussion, together with the findings of this study, enables us to enlarge our view of information exchange in two aspects:

1. Information exchange can be seen not only as a process of giving and receiving information (Denis, 1996), but also as a continuous space of information exchanges. This space starts prior to the initiation of the DMP, runs concurrently throughout all of its stages, and extends after its completion, thus enclosing several instances of provision and reception of information
2. Information exchange can be seen not only as a key element of group decision making, but also as a significant element of individual decision making, enabling consumers to interact, via social media, with others and with organizations.

This study proposes that such a perspective enables us to approach information exchange as a consumer behaviour theoretical construct. Jaccard and Jacoby (2010, p.13) define constructs as “high order concepts” since they refer to “instances that are constructed from concepts at lower level of abstraction”. The term theoretical construct is used here as a non-directly observable structure that assists in organizing perceptions and knowledge, consisting of observable components or parts that can be submitted to measurement, enabling anticipation of events and prediction of outcomes in specific contexts (Rosenberg 1974; Kuhlthau 1988; DePoy and Gitlin 2011).

Moreover, the term theoretical construct is also used here as:

“the conceptual underpinnings that influence key research and practices in the field [...] concepts from which researchers build theories, develop models, evaluate results, and measure impacts” (Jansen and Rieh 2010, p.1519).

The importance of theoretical constructs in theory development has been clearly articulated by George and Jones (2000, p.657-658):

“At the core of all theory and theory building is the process of creating and defining theoretical constructs and specifying the relationships between them to develop propositions that predict and explain the nature and behaviour of an observed phenomenon. Based on this theoretical work, constructs can then be operationalized as variables and the process of empirical verification of the utility of the theory in explaining the phenomenon in question can be undertaken (Bacharach, 1989; Dubin, 1976, 1978; Kaplan, 1964). Obviously, therefore, the predictive ability and descriptive power of any theory depends crucially in both the conceptualization of the constructs and of the causal relationships between them”..

By proposing and describing information exchange as a theoretical consumer behaviour construct, this study attempts to set the foundations for a more holistic view on the use, role and impact of social media on consumer behaviour. A view that includes exchanges occurring: (a) pre, during, and post consumption; (b) during each of the stages of the consumer decision making process (DMP), but also prior, and post the DMP; and (c) within the six social media functional spaces: Inspiration, collaboration, decision making, self-expression, entertainment and communication.

The above view on information exchange is independent of how we perceive, and depict, the decision making process, that is whether we consider it as linear, sequential, as a Venn diagram, spiral, or circular. Such a position is considered outside of the scope of this study. What is proposed by this study is that information exchange, as a consumer behaviour construct, runs alongside the decision making process and throughout its stages no matter how the decision making process is perceived in relation to the sequence of its stages.

The following section attempts to identify, define and describe the components of information exchange within such a holistic framework. Defining, describing and identifying the components of information exchange will assist researchers to develop and test propositions, as well as causal relationships that will further improve our understanding of social media enabled consumer behaviour phenomena.

### **10.5.1. Components of the information exchange construct**

Based on the results discussed in sections 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4 it is proposed that information exchange, as a theoretical construct within the context of consumer behaviour of active social media users, consists of nine components:

1. Information acquisition through passive attention
2. Ongoing search for product related information
3. Information exchanges for collaboration
4. Information search and information retrieval prior to purchase
5. Post-choice information search, and/or post-purchase information search
6. Non-product related information exchanges during consumption
7. Provision of post-consumption evaluations
8. Product related self-expression
9. Post-consumption collaboration

All of the above components have been discussed in detail in previous sections (10.2, 10.3, and 10.4). However, the following paragraphs provide: (a) a synopsis within the framework of generic consumer behaviour, thus outside the context of holiday travel; (b) a number of points that require further clarification:

**Information acquisition through passive attention** takes place prior to the need recognition stage, thus prior to the initiation of the DMP. The term passive attention is used here in accordance with Wilson's (1997, p.562) definition: "information acquisition without intentional seeking". Consumers prior to need recognition, therefore prior to the initiation of any DMP, receive product related stimuli from other users or organizations, primarily through social networking sites, as part of their usual social media routine. These stimuli provide inspiration for future purchases, and may impact the consumers' awareness, consideration, evoked, inert and inept sets. Apart from inspiration such stimuli may develop wants, generate feelings, or make the consumer proceed to actions such as to perform active search for information which however takes place prior to the recognition of a specific purchase problem, thus outside the DMP.

Similarly, **ongoing search for product related information**, takes place prior to the need recognition stage, thus prior to the initiation of the DMP. The term ongoing search is used here in agreement with the Bloch et al. (1986, p.120) definition:

"search activities that are independent of specific purchase needs or decisions [...not occurring] to solve a recognized and immediate purchase problem [...but occurring] on a relatively regular basis [...either to] acquire a bank of product information potentially useful in the future [...or for] pleasure or recreation".

As was the case with product related stimuli resulting from information acquisition through passive attention, information resulting from ongoing search provides inspiration for future purchases and may impact on consumers' awareness, consideration, evoked, inert, and inept sets. Moreover, apart from inspiration such stimuli may develop wants, generate feelings, or make the consumer proceed to actions such as active search for information. Generic consumer behaviour literature suggests that among the determinants of ongoing search is an enduring involvement, reflecting a continuous interest, or even an enthusiasm, with the product rather than a temporary interest that results from a purchase requirement (Bloch and Richins 1983).

**Information exchanges for collaboration purposes** is a component that is evident within the context of group decision making processes. In holiday travel, or in other contexts that involve group decision making about experiential products, consumers employ social media to facilitate group decision making processes. Consumers take advantage of the capabilities of social media platforms, over other synchronous or asynchronous communication modes, that enable them to

exchange ideas, suggestions, comments, thoughts, and decisions among the group members during the pre-purchase stages of the DMP.

**Information search and information retrieval prior to purchase** is related to the active search for product related information, and the extraction of information from social media platforms. The term active is proposed here to denote that the consumer “actively seeks out information” to overcome a specific purchase problem (Wilson 1999, p.562). To perform information search through social media consumers have at their disposal three routes (discussed in section 10.3.2.3A) that are neither alternative nor mutually exclusive: The people route, the organization route, and the content route. The difference between information search and information retrieval is borrowed from Information Science. Although both terms focus on how people interact with information that is located in computer systems (e.g. social media platforms), within the context of Information Science, search refers to “specific behaviours of people engaged in locating information”, and retrieval refers to the “extraction of information from a content collection” (Jansen and Rieh 2010, p.1517). Looking at such a difference within the context of social media it may be said that a direct visit to TripAdvisor in search for reviews about a specific hotel should be viewed as information retrieval since the visit is to a specific content collection (e.g. TripAdvisor) that is already known to the user. On the contrary, performing a search via a search engine using the phrase “Hotel X reviews” should be viewed as information searching since the emphasis is not only on locating the relevant information but also on locating the content collection that will contain the information (e.g. TripAdvisor, an Internet forum, or a personal travel blog).

**Post-choice information search, and / or post-purchase information search**, takes place prior to consumption and refers to active information search about a product for which a choice has already been made, or has already been purchased. A title, a keyword, and an abstract search for the terms “post-purchase search” and “post-purchase information search” on four bibliographic databases (Blackwell Online, Elsevier Science Direct, Sage Online, Scopus, and SpringerLink) covering the last 12 years identified only one work (Dutta and Biswas 2005) with either of the terms in the title, and less than 30 articles containing the term in the abstract. Most of the work in post-purchase information search is found within the domain of retailing research focusing primarily on price matching or low price guarantees. Although this type of information search through social media did not yet achieved the attention of scholars, during the last years it gains increasing attention in the generic consumer behaviour and information search literature (Chang et al. 2010, Hu et al. 2014). Social media seem to facilitate post-choice and post-purchase information search: For some consumers this type of search seems to be driven by their need to confirm the choice, to get assured that their decision was right, as also supported

by Chang et al. (2010) in the case of cognitive oriented consumers. This study proposes that in the case of experiential products (e.g. holiday travel) consumers seem to employ social media for search as a form of mental preparation for the forthcoming unknown experience, as a mean to reduce anxiety, while others to feel nice by reading positive feedback provided by others who previously consumed the same experience.

During the consumption stage, apart from product specific information exchanges, active users interact through social media with user generated content, and with other users, as part of their usual social media routine. Of interest during the consumption stage are also the **non-product related information exchanges**. These interactions are of interest since they consume time and effort from the consumption experience itself. This study proposes that non-product related information exchanges occurring during the consumption stage have the potential to influence (positively or negatively) the consumption experience. This study identified two types of interactions that can be considered as components of non-product related information exchanges: Keep-up with social media contacts and with the world in general, as well as interactions for entertainment purposes. Interactions for communication and keep-up purposes seem to be driven (section 10.3.2.5) by users' need to stay in touch with friends and the world in general; their need to fulfil social obligations towards social media contacts; a number of contingencies from the external environment; or simply due to an addiction syndrome related to excessive usage of Social Networking Sites (Kuss and Griffiths 2011). In the case of interactions for entertainment purposes (section 10.3.2.6) users employ social media as social gaming platforms. Interactions with social games are seen as information exchanges due to the social nature of the games: Users exchange game related information with other players, or simply interact with their social media contacts to demonstrate game related achievements or even to invite others into the game. A number of social games, especially those that involve social polemics require the user's / player's active participation at specific, frequent time intervals, to the extent that they are perceived even as a form of social labour (Hjorth and Arnold 2012). As a result, users may feel some degree of order and pressure resembling a feeling of compulsion that is incompatible with the recreational nature of experiential products and with freedom as a definitional element of leisure (Page and Connell 2010). Interactions for keep-up, or entertainment purposes may decrease spontaneous boredom during the consumption experience, or they may be an attempt to enhance an experience that is considered as below the consumer's expectations.

**Provision of post-consumption evaluations** as part of the information exchange construct refers to those interactions, through social media, that involve provision of reviews and feedback as evaluative output from DMPs. Although this component of the information

exchange construct has been extensively covered by scholars, this study identified six factors that seem to motivate active social media users to review the product experience through social media: (a) The need to reward or praise the service provider for the pleasant experience; (b) as an attempt to restore a “wrong” (to the users’ opinion) image conveyed by existing reviews; (c) the need to provide some form of business assistance to the service provider; (d) an experience well above the users’ expectations; (e) as an obligation to other holidaymakers, or to the social media application, that provided the reviews that assisted users during their own pre-purchase planning; and (f) in case of an experience below the users’ expectations to balance an unfair exchange through a form of punishment by reporting the bad experience to the world.

**Provision of product related self-expression** refers to all those information exchange instances where users project into the world their own thoughts, feelings, values and preferences about the product experience through social media. Provision of product related self-expression is considered as a component of the information exchange construct since the content of the self-expression has the potential to influence product related attitudes, choices, and behaviours of its recipients, who may be found at different stages of their own DMPs, or even at their inspiration stage. Provision of product related self-expression may take place pre, during and/or post-consumption (section 10.3.2.4). A number of factors seem to motivate active social media users to self-express. Although they were presented in detail in section 10.3.2.4 they are also briefly stated here to provide a complete view of product related self-expression as a component of the information exchange construct. In the pre-consumption stage, users self-express driven by their need to express feelings and emotions about the forthcoming experience; in anticipation of some form of utility to increase the value of the experience; to show-off; as an announcement to their friends; or simply for fun. During consumption of the experience, active users self-express as an invitation to their social media contacts to virtually follow their experience; to share the joyful moment; driven by their need to remain sociable even during the experience; or simply because sharing content through social media is more convenient compared to other modes of communication. During post-consumption, active users self-express as a form of story-telling, to share part of the experience with their friends; to convey a message; to continue a conversation that might have started pre, or during consumption; to show-off; to convey a positive or a negative aspect of the experience; or simply because sharing content through social media is perceived as more convenient compared to other modes of communication.

**Post-consumption collaboration** refers to information exchanges through social media for the purpose of communication and sharing of thoughts and content with other users who were also present during the consumption of the experience. Therefore, post consumption collaboration is a component that requires joined or group consumption. The term joint, or group consumption

is used here to denote the existence of a group of active social media users who consumed the experience together. A typical example of a joined consumption is a group of friends who travelled together in a holiday trip. They jointly consumed the destination experience, the accommodation experience in the case that they all stayed in the same hotel, and the holiday activity experience in the case that they all engaged in the same activity. It may be the case that the same group also engaged in information exchanges for collaboration during pre-consumption (as discussed earlier), however this is not a prerequisite condition for post-consumption collaboration to occur. During post-consumption collaboration users may create social media based public or private virtual spaces (e.g. a Facebook closed group, a public or a private blog, a page in Flickr, or in YouTube) within which they meet and collaborate for the purpose of exchanging thoughts and visual content. It is speculated that post-consumption collaboration may be driven by the need for privacy, or by the need to retain the group active and alive after the end of the experience, thus expressing of a sense of belonging, or simply as a convenient and user friendly platform for communication and sharing of content among the group members.

## **10.6. Contribution to knowledge**

This study contributes to knowledge in consumer decision making theory, in the theory of technology fluidity, as well as in social media related research in the context of holiday travel. More specifically:

### **10.6.1. In consumer decision making theory**

#### **A. Information exchange as a consumer behaviour construct**

This study proposes information exchange as a consumer behaviour theoretical construct (section 10.5). So far, information exchange, defined as the process of giving and receiving information (Dennis 1996), has been mostly viewed within the context of group decision making (Dennis 1996; Lightle et al. 2009; Peñarroja et al. 2013; Silver 2014). However, social media enable individual active users to operate both as recipients, seekers, but also as providers of information throughout all stages of their DMP. This dual role resembles a series of information exchange processes taking place throughout all stages of an individual's (and not group's) DMP. In the case of experiential products, such as holiday travel, information exchange runs not only concurrently, and in coexistence with a consumer's DMPs, but it also extends prior to the initiation, and also post the completion of the DMPs.



By proposing and describing information exchange as a theoretical consumer behaviour construct, this study attempts to set the foundations for a more holistic view on the role and impact of social media on consumer behaviour incorporating interactions with other users and organizations taking place: (a) pre, during, and post consumption; (b) pre, during each of the stages, but also post the DMP; and (c) within the six social media functional spaces identified in this study. Such view is in contradiction to both generic consumer behaviour models (discussed in section 3.5) and travel related consumer behaviour models (discussed in section 3.6) where interactions with others and with information are depicted primarily during the information search stage of the DMP.

## **B. Group level and social decision making**

Gretzel (2011, p.763-764) supports that most travel related consumer behaviour models are developed from an “individualistic point of view”. Moreover, she argues that although

“there is evidence of the relevance of group decision-making in tourism, the literature fails to provide clear insights as to how joint decision-making related to tourism happens [...] It is therefore quite surprising that tourism research has not yet developed a comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics of tourism decision-making in families and other forms of groups. [...] A group level or social perspective of information search and decision-making is becoming increasingly important in light of the collective intelligence tourists can now tap into through the existence of social media” (Gretzel, 2011, p.763-764).

The identification of collaboration as a social media functional space contributes in travel related consumer behaviour research by providing preliminary insights on group level decision making, and more specifically in technology enabled group decision making. So far the study of technology enabled decision making in tourism has been approached through specific applications such as geocollaborative portals (Sigala 2012). The existence of the Collaboration Space (CS), as described in this study (section 10.3.2.2), provides preliminary evidence that also other types of social media, such as Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook) are employed as platforms for collaborative travel related group decision making. Social media may overcome cautions about the effectiveness of traditional technological tools (e.g. email and videoconferencing) employed in group decision making as identified by earlier research on the field (Baltes et al. 2002).

Moreover, the existence of CS, as described in this study, may enable researchers to enlarge their perspective of technology enabled group decision making. So far collaboration has been approached as a pre-consumption activity within a decision making process. This study contributes to this research area by proposing that in the case of experiential products

collaboration can be approached as an enlarged framework that initiates prior to the decision making process and extends to post-consumption communication and sharing of experiences.

Finally, Gretzel (2011) stresses the significance of the social perspective of information search primarily due to the collective intelligence available to holidaymakers through social media. However, this study showed (chapter 9 and section 10.4) that active social media users interact with other users via social media throughout all stages of the DMP, as well as pre and post the DMP. Therefore, emphasis of the social perspective needs be placed not only in the information search stage, as supported by Gretzel (2011), but throughout all stages of the DMP. Although this study is qualitative, and therefore it cannot make any suggestions on the extent and intensity of these interactions, it provides evidences (chapter 9, section 10.4 and Figure 10.3) of the existence of different types of interactions apart from those related to decision making. Namely, the interactions apart from decision making are also related to inspiration, collaboration, self-expression, entertainment, and communication that have been proposed as functional spaces. In addition, taking into account the duality of consumers' role who act both as recipients and providers of information (Table 10.3) within each of these functional spaces, there are preliminary indications that among active social media users, product related decisions are co-shaped: Other social media users, as well as brands, co-shape consumers' decisions through a continuous flow of interactions, in the form of information exchanges that take place throughout the consumer decision making process.

### **10.6.2. In the theory of technology fluidity**

This study enlarges the concept of fluidity, as used in the theory of technology fluidity (Lin 2002). Lin (2002) supports that every communication technology has a certain fluidity that influences the communication flow and the communication experience. Fluidity is perceived as the degree to which a communication medium can use different modes (i.e. text, images, audio, video) to form, deliver and receive communication through a variety of delivery systems (Lin 2008). Therefore, social media, as per Lin's (2008) perspective, can be considered as fluid communication technologies, due to their ability to use a variety of modes such as text, links, images, audio, video (but also likes, shares, retweets) to deliver content and messages.

This study proposes an enlargement in the theory of technology fluidity by suggesting that emphasis needs to be given not only to the technology, but also to the user. Fluidity, from being a characteristic of a specific technology (as per Lin's perspective), is now proposed as a characteristic of the sets of behaviours and cognitive functions associated with the use of the specific technology or medium. This study groups such similar behaviours into functional

spaces (section 10.3.2), which are proposed as being fluid. Fluidity illustrates the ability of social media functional spaces to change size and shape as a result of the differences among users' media preferences, holiday lifestyle, personality, nature of trip, composition of travel party, the different contexts within which technology and media are used, and contingencies associated with the use of the specific technology or medium.

### **10.6.3. In social media related research in the context of holiday travel**

The literature review did not reveal any attempt to study use and impact of social media throughout all four stages of the holiday travel process: dreaming, pre, during, and post trip. The findings of this study make the following four contributions:

#### **A. Identification and description of travel related social media functional spaces**

This study contributes in holiday travel related social media research by identifying six major functions of social media during active users' holiday travel process (section 10.2): (1) Inspiration; (2) Collaboration; (3) Decision making; (4) Self-expression; (5) Communication; and (6) Entertainment. These functions are proposed as spaces, within the holiday travel process, that enclose active users' specific behaviours and cognitive functions. The social media functional spaces share three properties that characterize their position and their shape within the holiday travel process: Fluidity, extension, and overlap. The six functional spaces provide a conceptual framework on the overall usage of social media in each of the stages of the travel process, as well as in each of the stages of the decision making process so that to enable researchers focus at micro level.

#### **B. Proposing the social media enabled travel process model**

This study contributes in holiday travel related social media research by proposing the social media enabled travel process model (section 10.3). The model provides a framework for understanding use and impact of social media throughout the four stages of the holiday travel process: dreaming, pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip. The model acts as a roadmap into social media multi-functional spaces by providing insights: (a) on a number of cognitive functions that have been identified within each functional space; and (b) on the interrelationship between the functional spaces and the stages of the travel process, but also with the stages of the holiday travel related DMPs.

### **C. Information search routes**

This study provides preliminary insights on the existence of the three information search routes (sections 6.4.1, 7.3.4.1, 10.3.2.3A and 10.3.2.3B) that active social media users employ to seek inputs to their information search and pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives stages of their decision making processes, both pre-trip and during the trip: the people route, the content route, and the organizations route. Search routes are neither alternative nor mutually exclusive, therefore they may be used in combination in the form of sequential or concurrent search loops. Current travel related social media research does not differentiate among these three routes. Most scholars seem to be heavily oriented towards the content route, while the people route seems almost neglected from scholars' interest.

### **D. Information acquisition through passive attention**

The impacts of exposure to user generated content through passive attention within the context of a holiday travel related decision making process have not been adequately studied. A title, a keyword, and an abstract search for the terms "passive attention" on four bibliographic databases (Blackwell Online, Elsevier Science Direct, Sage Online, Scopus, and SpringerLink) did not result in any publication within the context of decision making and social media. This study contributes to research in this field by identifying four types of responses (section 5.3) that are triggered by exposure to information from social media through passive attention: (1) development of wants; (2) generation of feelings (3) inspiration; and (4) actions.

## **10.7. Implications for practice**

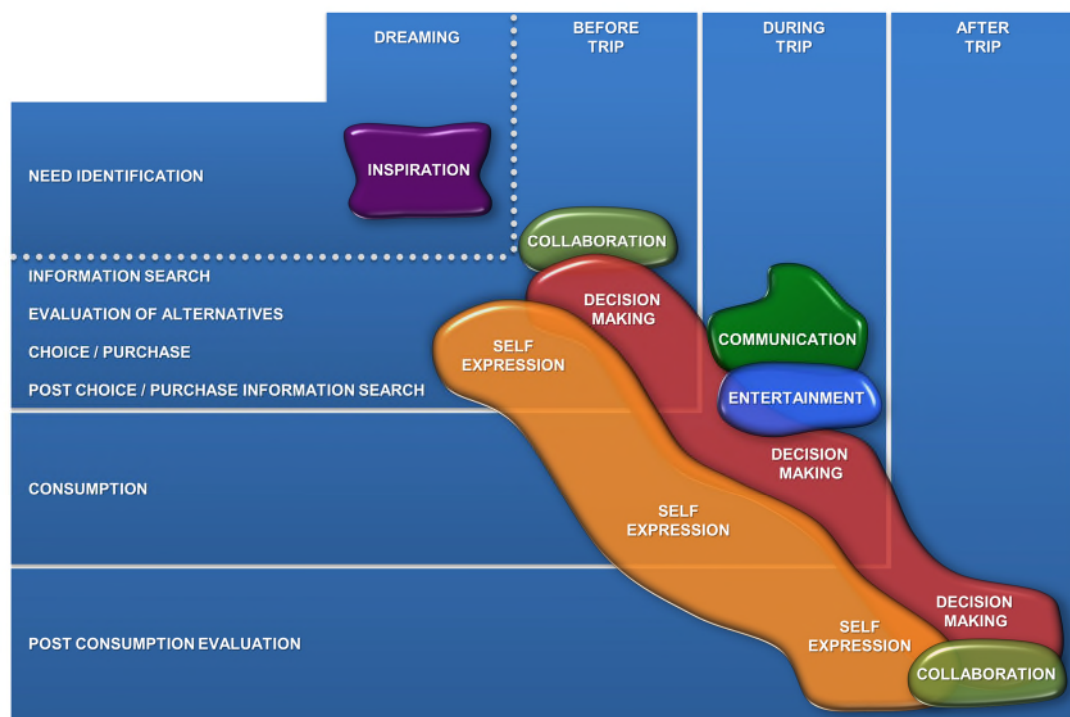
Based on the findings, this section identifies a number of implications, which are relevant to marketers of destinations, accommodations and leisure activities (thereafter referred as marketers).

Marketers seek insights and understanding of consumers' behaviour in order to formulate effective and efficient marketing strategies and actions. The findings of this study suggest that:

1. Active users interact with, and via social media throughout all four stages of the holiday travel process.
2. Interactions with and via social media take place throughout all stages of holiday travel related DMPs, but also before their initiation and post their completion.
3. Throughout the holiday travel process there are six functional spaces that incorporate social media related cognitive and behavioural functions.

This study suggests that holiday travel related marketing strategies and actions, that employ social media, need to be: (a) stage of travel process specific; (b) stage of DMP specific; and (c) functional space specific. Figure 10.4 presents a framework, in the form of a matrix, to assist marketers in developing marketing strategies, campaigns, and actions that satisfy the above three suggestions. The figure shows, in a simplified form, the social media functions through which users interact with social media for any given stage of the travel process and for any given stage of the DMP.

Figure 10.4: Framework for developing holiday travel related social media strategies



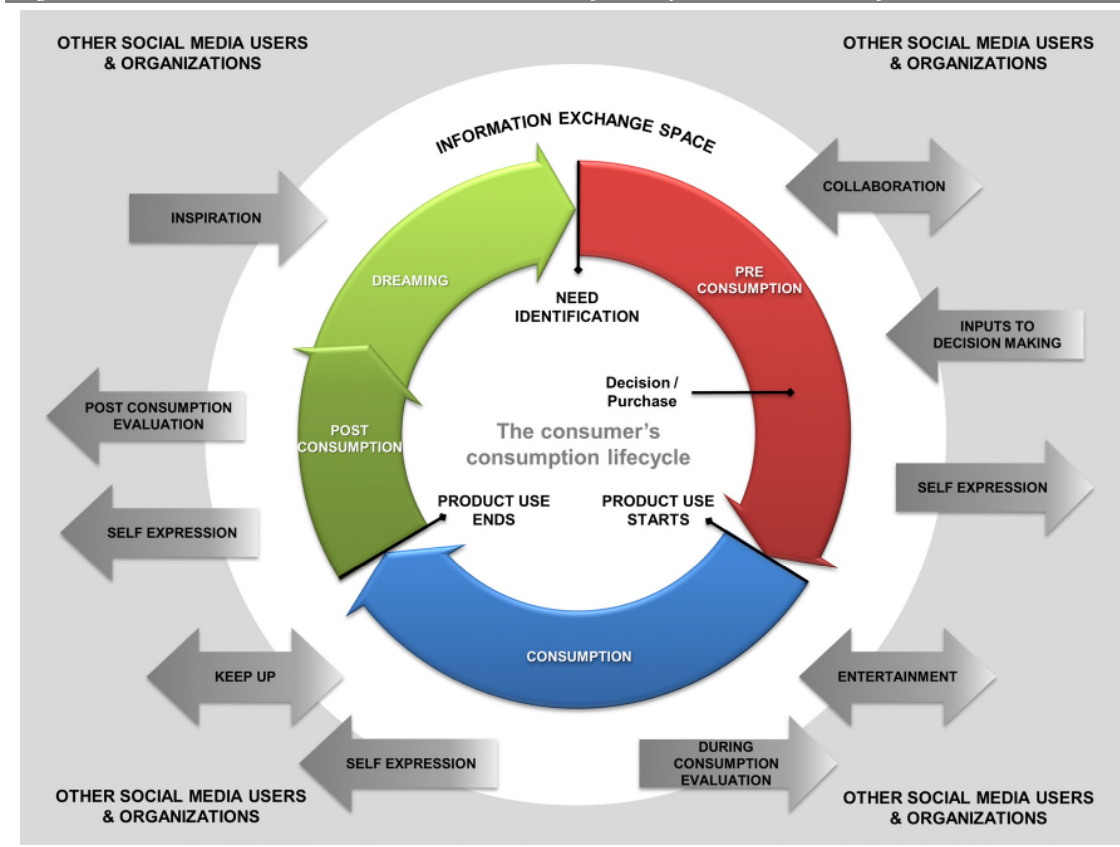
Source: Author

These interactions, given that they involve cognitive functions, may be perceived as a mental journey taking place within the consumer mind. Based on Werthner and Klein's (1999) tourist life cycle, and the discussion on the holiday travel process (section 3.7) this journey resembles a 360° degree process. However, to acknowledge the presence of holiday travel related interactions with social media prior to the generic holiday travel decision, the proposed journey starts with the dreaming stage and not with the pre-trip stage as suggested by Werthner and Klein's (1999). The pre-trip stage commences with the generic holiday travel decision, concludes at the end of the post-trip stage, but restarts with the dreaming stage of the next holiday trip. It is evident that the duration of this journey within the consumer's mind is much larger when compared to the duration of the actual holiday trip journey. It is a journey through

the functional spaces identified in this study, a journey through inspiration, collaboration, decision making, self-expression, communication, and entertainment. Such an enlarged, or holistic perception of the consumer journey is in contrast with the perception of some of the leading industry practitioners who lack consensus on which are the stages that are included in the consumer journey. A number of practitioners postulate the online consumer journey as a process that ends with the product decision, or the purchase (Court et al. 2009; Edelman 2010). Within the tourism and travel domain Google (2010) proposed a five-stage consumer journey that involves 5 steps including experience and sharing. However, in a later report, booking is seen as the last among the “stages of travel” (Google 2014, p.25). Microsoft’s approach (2011) terminates the consumer journey with the consumption stage, while Accenture (2014) proposes two stages after the purchase, namely loyalty and advocacy.

Figure 10.5 presents the social media enabled consumer journey, which proposes an enlarged or a holistic 360° framework, when compared to the existing industry approaches, incorporating all types of interactions with social media taking place within the information exchange space.

Figure 10.5: The social media enabled consumer journey: A 360° holistic framework



Source: Author

This study proposes that social media are the tools and platforms that enable marketers to accompany and interact with consumers throughout all phases of this enlarged journey. Marketers not only need to follow passively the consumer. Marketers need to assure that they provide the social media platforms and content to enable a continuous and systematic interaction with the consumer, and as a result actively accompany consumers throughout this enlarged journey by listening, responding, discussing, building trust, consulting, and ultimately selling.

The following discussion provides indicative components of engagement and content actions as part of social media strategies that result from the findings of this study:

Destination marketers when planning social media campaigns aiming at users in their dreaming stage need to focus equally to the destination as well as to the holiday activities available at the destination. At this stage, social media content needs to be designed in a way so that to make users proceed to actions such as perform an information search for the destination, generate positive feelings, and provide inspiration for a future trip, thus placing the destination in the users' consideration set. Accommodation marketers aiming at users in their dreaming stage need to promote the destination or the activities rather than the accommodation itself.

Marketers need to assure that their organizations' websites are collaboration friendly. Websites need to incorporate tools that enable travel party members to save and share itineraries, information about attractions, maps, or other useful information.

In addition, understanding that users, as part of their decision making process, have available three paths for their information search provides guidelines for specific actions. For example, tourism marketers need to take advantage of tools such as Facebook's Open Graph API to enable users easily find which of their social media contacts Like or have been to a specific destination, accommodation establishment, or holiday leisure venue. As a result, consumers will then be able to contact them directly for personal opinion and recommendations following the people route of the information search.

Moreover, marketers need also to encourage users' pre-trip self-expression. Towards this end, markers need to take into account that users can be motivated by their need to express feelings and emotions about a choice or purchase, to show-off, to have fun, to announce the trip to their friends or even to seek utility. Self-expression from users found in their pre-trip stage is likely to be received through passive attention from users' social media contacts who at that time are found in the dreaming stage of their own holiday travel process. Given exposure to such user

generated content, users' social media contacts are likely to proceed to actions, develop wants, generate feelings, and /or be inspired about the destination or the leisure activity.

Destinations need to develop strategies to encourage users to self-express during their trip primarily through photos uploads in social networking sites. Users' social media contacts who will receive such stimuli through passive attention are likely to search for information for the specific destination and position it in their holiday consideration set as a destination for a future trip. Moreover, these users may become contacts with destination experience for other users who will follow the people route in their information search. Similarly, visual stimuli that act as reminders, gamification techniques (e.g. points, badges), or even rewards in terms of complimentary products or special offers, may act as motivators for users to self-express in the form of check-in at destination venues. Self-expression from users found in their during the trip stage is likely to be received through passive attention from users' social media contacts who at that time are found in the dreaming stage of their own holiday travel process. These users' social media contacts are likely to proceed to actions, develop wants, generate feelings, and /or be inspired about the destination or the leisure activity.

Use of social media for communication and entertainment provides the opportunity for attraction and leisure activities marketers to use social media as advertising vehicles (via pay per click campaigns) aiming at users who are already at the destination. Finally, social media travel related applications may incorporate tools for post-trip collaboration that will enable users to share material and information within closed private groups.

## **10.8. Emerging areas for future research**

Based on the findings, this section identifies a number of areas that could be further studied in future research.

### **10.8.1. Passive reception of information during the dreaming stage**

Prior to the generic holiday trip decision, active social media users are exposed, through passive reception (section 5.2.2) to holiday travel related user generated content (HTRUGC). This study identified (section 5.3) four types of responses as a result of such exposure: (1) development of wants; (2) generation of feelings; (3) inspiration; and (4) actions. Future research in this area can:

- a) Measure the impact of each of these four responses in the holiday trip generic decision;



- b) Explore further, and measure the impact of such HTRUGC on active users' holiday destination and holiday leisure activities awareness, consideration, evoked, inert and inept sets; and
- c) Measure the impact of each of these four responses in the holiday destination and holiday leisure activities choices.
- d) Examine the existence of a causal relationship between emotional engagement resulting from exposure to social media contacts' holiday related photos and pre-generic decision information search.

Moreover, this study found (section 5.3.4) preliminary indications that certain types of responses (1 to 4 above) that evidence emotional engagement may trigger, or seem interrelated with other types of responses. For example, there are preliminary indications that exposure to holiday destination specific UGC that results in feelings of excitement and inspiration seem to trigger information search about the specific destination featured in the UGC. The existence of such causal relationships needs to be further explored through more focused qualitative research. Further on, the strength of such relationships needs to be measured through quantitative research.

### **10.8.2. Information search routes**

When active social media users perform information search through social media they follow three search routes: The people route (sections 6.4.1.1 and 7.3.4.1A), the organization route (section 6.4.1.2), and the content route (sections 6.4.1.3 and 7.3.4.1B). All three routes were followed for information search in the pre-trip stage (10.3.2.3A). However, in the during the trip stage, this study encountered the people and the content route, but not the organization route (10.3.2.3B). The small sample size of this qualitative study was not sufficient to reveal adequate employment of the organization route. A more focused qualitative study is needed to further inform the characteristics of this route. A further quantitative study may seem necessary to substantiate the existence and the relative volume for each of the above three routes both in the pre-trip stage but also during the trip.

Moreover, research emphasis needs to be placed on the search strategies identified in the content route. This study provides only preliminary evidences of the existence of such strategies. Further research is required to explore and describe the main strategies in detail and provide a typology of search strategies.

Finally, future research is required to provide further insights into the interrelationship of these three routes, the criteria of choice among the three, the relative importance of each route, as well as the effectiveness of each route.

### **10.8.3. Post-choice and/or post-purchase information search**

This study suggests that active social media users during their pre-trip stage employ social media for post-choice and/or post-purchase information search (sections 9.4.5 and 10.3.2.3). Post purchase but pre-consumption information search gains continuous attention in the generic consumer behaviour literature (Chang et al. 2010; Hu et al. 2014). On the contrary, in the travel and tourism domain, this type of information search did not receive, so far, adequate attention. Further qualitative research on this area is needed to increase our understanding especially in the area of the motivations behind this type of search. Further on, quantitative research may provide evidence of the impact of this type of search on the level of satisfaction from the holiday experience.

### **10.8.4. Pre and post-trip collaboration**

Collaboration through social media among members of the holiday travel party has been identified both before the trip (section 6.2) and after the trip (section 8.4). This study suggests that social media should be taken into account in relevant research as tools and platforms that are employed in technology enabled group decision making. The existence of the Collaboration Space, as described in this study (section 10.3.2.2), may enable researchers to enlarge our perspective of technology enabled group decision making from a pre-consumption decision making oriented process to a collaboration framework especially in the case of experiential products. Future qualitative research may provide further insights and increase our understanding on social media enabled collaboration in the context of holiday travel products. Moreover, further research may assess use and effectiveness of social networking sites as pre-trip, or pre-consumption (in the case of other experiential products) collaboration tools, especially when compared with other communication platforms employed for collaboration.

### **10.8.5. Social media as destructors or enhancers of the holiday experience**

Few active users were found to employ social media as a gaming platform during the trip (sections 7.3.3 and 10.3.2.6). Further qualitative research may provide insights on the role of social games during the holiday trip as destructors, or even as enhancers of the holiday

experience. Moreover, social games can also be studied as elements of travel related anti-social behaviour that negatively impacts the relationship between the users and the other members of the travel party.

Active users also employ social media during the trip to enable them communicate with their social media contacts, and with the world (section 7.3.1 and 10.3.2.5). Future research may provide insights on during the trip use of social media for communication as destructors, or enhancers of the holiday experience. Within the same vein, future research may attempt to explore, or measure, the impact of a Social Networking Sites addiction syndrome on the overall holiday experience.

#### **10.8.6. Information exchange as a theoretical construct**

This study proposes information exchange as a consumer behaviour theoretical construct (section 10.5) running concurrently and in co-existence with active social media users' holiday travel related DMPs, but also extending prior to the initiation and post the completion of these DMPs. Further quantitative research is required to validate the existence of this theoretical construct.

Moreover, this study proposes that information exchange consists of nine components (section 10.5.1). Further research is required to further enhance our understanding of these components, but also validate impact and magnitude of each of these components not only on product choice, but also on post-consumption behaviours.

Finally, further research is required to assess whether this theoretical construct exists in experiential product related consumer behaviour, thus outside the context of holiday travel related consumer behaviour.

#### **10.8.7. The social media functional spaces**

This study identified six social media functional spaces, namely inspiration, collaboration, decision making, self-expression, communication, and entertainment (sections 10.2 and 10.3.2.1 to 10.3.2.6). Further quantitative research is required to validate the existence of each of the above functional spaces, as well as their three properties: fluidity, overlap and extension (section 10.2.1). Moreover, it is suggested that future research may assess whether these functional spaces exist outside the context of holiday travel related use of social media, thus within the wider context of experiential products.

#### **10.8.8. The inertia state**

Although not resulting from the findings, this study employed the inertia state as a hypothetical behavioural state (section 10.3.2) for the purpose of illustrating the social media enabled travel process model. Inertia may be present between the post-trip and the dreaming stages of the holiday travel process. More specifically, when all forms of social media activity about the previous holiday trip finish, active users may enter a state during which they are uninterested to generate and share any content for the previous holiday trip, and at the same time also uninterested to receive any social media holiday related stimuli for a future trip. Users exit the inertia state and enter the Inspiration Space the moment that there is reception of a holiday travel related stimuli during users' usual social media routine. The presence, or not, of the inertia state does not affect the proposed social media enabled travel process model. However, for the purposes of improving the model, it is suggested that future qualitative research needs to uncover the existence or not of the inertia state and its characteristics.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: List of social media types distributed to focus group participants**

#### **Types of web applications that are generally considered as social media:**

- 1. Social networking sites** (such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, LinkedIn, Xing, academia.edu, Wayn, or similar other).
- 2. Blogs** (personal websites sometimes in the form of online diaries where users share own thoughts, experiences, photos and other information)
- 3. Microblogging applications** (such as Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk, Tumblr, or similar other).
- 4. Wikis** (such as Wikipedia, Wikitravel, or similar other).
- 5. Content community websites** (These are websites where users can post their own photos or their own videos such as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Picasa, Panoramio, or similar other).
- 6. Consumer review & rating websites** (such as TripAdvisor, Holidaycheck, Revoo, Yelp, Epinions, or similar other)
- 7. Internet forums**
- 8. Location based applications** (that people sometimes use through their mobile phones such as Foursquare, Gowalla, Facebook places or similar other)

## Appendix 2: Focus group questioning route

1. **Welcome / Offer coffee, tea, juices**
2. **Explain information sheet / Give consent forms / Make name cards / Start voice recording**
3. OPENING: Please tell us your name and what are you doing for a living..
4. INTRO: We are here to discuss about holiday trips. Please think back the last time you were on a holiday trip. Tell us where you went and how many nights did you spend there.
5. At various points during our conversation I will give you five pieces of papers, each containing an uncompleted sentence. I would like you to complete each sentence in writing. We will then go round the table and discuss what you wrote. Here are the first two GIVE SENTENCE COMPLETION #1 and #2. Let them write down, then discuss answers and collect papers. ASK WHY'S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.
6. In relation to that trip you just mentioned, think back before any of your decisions, when you just had the idea of going on holidays. How did you start planning that trip in terms collecting for information? WATCH OUT IF ANY SOCIAL MEDIA ARE MENTIONED (UNAIDED MENTION). ASK WHY'S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.
  - a. Did you use the Internet at all for any reason related with planning and preparing your holiday trip? How? WATCH OUT IF ANY SOCIAL MEDIA ARE MENTIONED (UNAIDED MENTION). ASK WHY'S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.
7. I will give you a list of what some experts consider as types of social media websites. I would like you to read the list and then tick those types that you have visited at least once. Feel free to ask me if you need any clarification, or if you are not sure. Let's go round the table so that everyone tells us the ones you ticked. DISTRIBUTE SHEET WITH TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA – ASK THEM WHICH THEY ARE USING OR HAVE USED AT LEAST ONCE.
8. It's time for two more uncompleted sentences. To those of you that are using or have used Facebook or any other similar social networking site I will give the third sentence to complete. GIVE SENTENCE COMPLETION #3. Also I will give to all of you the fourth sentence to complete. GIVE SENTENCE COMPLETION #4. ASK WHY'S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.
9. KEY: While you were still planning your holidays, before your departure, did you visit any social media of these types for any reason related to your trip? If yes, please share

with us what you did during your visits in these websites. IF “NO” PROBE FOR REASON: What made you not to? IF “YES” PROBE FOR “HOW” PROBE: Did you seek any advice for the trip. From whom? How did you contact him/her? ASK WHY’S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.

10. Here is the last sentence for you to complete. GIVE SENTENCE COMPLETION #5. ASK WHY’S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.
11. KEY: During your holidays, did you visit any of those types of social media for any reason? If yes, tell us what you did during these visits. ASK WHY’S ON SOCIAL MEDIA MENTIONS.
  - i. IF “NO” PROBE FOR THE REASON: What made you not to? Probe: Did you have access to Internet during holidays? Was Wi-Fi free / on charge?
12. KEY: When you returned back from your holiday trip, did you visit any social media of these types for any reason related to your trip? If yes, tell us what you did during your visits in these websites.
13. KEY ENDING: Overall, do you consider that social media helped you at all in planning your holidays, both before and during? Let’s discuss in what ways if any. DID THEY INFLUENCE THEM?
14. What are social media for you? In relation to your trip? HOW DO THEY CONSTRUCT SM IN THEIR TRIP CONTEXT?
15. FINAL: Is there anything else that you would like to add to our discussion? Have we missed anything?
16. **Give money envelopes / Form to sign / ask for age – age bracket**

### Appendix 3: Profiles of focus groups participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Profession	Type of SM used*	FG / Date
Delma	F	23	German	MSc Student	1,2,X,4,5,6,X,X	FG1 06.06.11
Karla	F	24	German	MSc Student	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,X	
Veronika	F	24	Greek	MSc Student	1,2,3,4,5,6,X,X	
Christine	F	30	English	MSc Student	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,X	
Chen	M	25	Chinese	MSc Student	1,2,3,X,5,6,X,X	
Ludwiga	F	23	German	MSc Student	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,X	FG2 08.06.11
Kostas	M	24	Greek	MSc Student	1,2,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Anastasiya	F	23	Russian	MSc Student	1,X,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Masha	F	23	Kazakhstani	MSc Student	1,2,X,4,5,6,7,8	
Alina	F	28	Kazakhstani	MSc Student	1,X,X,4,5,X,7,8	
Fion	F	24	Taiwanese	MSc Student	1,2,3,4,5,X,7,X	
Cindy	F	23	Taiwanese	MSc Student	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	
Fei-Fei	F	24	Macanese	MSc Student	1,X,3,X,X,X,X,8	
Ning	F	24	Chinese	MSc Student	1,2,3,X,5,6,7,8	
Chrystalla	F	30	Greek Cypriot	Civil Engineer	X,X,X,4,5,6,X,X	FG3 17.06.11
Ino	F	32	Greek Cypriot	Music Teacher	1,X,3,4,5,6,X,X	
Kostas	M	31	Greek Cypriot	Dietician	1,X,X,4,5,6,X,X	
Aristotele	M	28	Greek Cypriot	Archaeologist	1,2,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Eleftheria	F	32	Greek Cypriot	Musician	1,X,X,4,5,6,X,X	
Harmonia	F	30	Greek Cypriot	High school teacher	1,X,X,4,5,6,X,X	
Manolis	M	29	Greek Cypriot	Oceanologist	1,2,X,X,5,X,X,X	FG4 04.10.11
Jacques	M	27	French	Payroll & Accounts	1,X,3,4,5,6,X,X	
Madeline	M	41	English	HR Executive	1,X,X,X,5,6,X,X	
Dionisios	M	42	Greek	Businessman	1,X,X,X,5,X,X,8	
Paul	F	29	English	IT Specialist	1,2,X,4,5,6,X,X	
Emily	F	60	English	Office Manager	1,X,X,X,5,X,X,X	
Kelly	F	39	English	NHS Admin	1,2,X,X,5,6,X,X	FG5 10.10.11
Scott	M	28	English	Software Developer	1,2,X,X,5,X,X,X	
Agnes	F	34	English	Sales / Admin	1,2,3,X,5,6,7,8	
Nadimah	F	34	Libyan	PR Consultant	1,2,3,X,5,6,X,8	
Adam	M	39	English	Floor Specialist	1,X,X,X,5,6,X,X	
Gill	F	40	English	Local Government	1,X,3,X,5,6,7,8	
Todd	M	35	English	School Teacher	1,X,X,X,5,6,X,8	FG6 09.10.12
Roy	M	40	English	Inspector	1,X,X,4,X,6,7,X	
Rosemary	F	46	English	School Administration	1,X,X,4,X,6,X,X	
Norman	M	41	English	School Teacher	1,X,X,4,5,X,X,X	
Victoria	F	28	English	Uni. Administration	1,2,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Haley	F	36	English	Marketing Executive	1,2,3,4,5,6,X,8	
Alan	M	36	English	Assistant Manager	1,X,X,4,5,6,X,8	
Carol	F	39	English	Secretary	1,X,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Dean	M	31	English	Uni. Administration	1,X,X,4,X,6,7,8	

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Profession	Type of SM used*	FG / Date
Addie	F	31	English	Uni. Administration	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,X	
Sidney	F	45	English	Uni. Administration	1,X,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Sean	M	33	English	Hospitality Manager	1,X,X,X,5,6,X,X	
Matthew	M	37	English	Office Manager	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	
Theo	M	51	English	N/A	1,X,X,X,X,6,X,X	FG7
Barry	M	43	English	School teacher	1,X,X,X,X,X,7,X	10.10.12
Lindsey	F	30	English	Office Assistant	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	
Jonathan	M	32	English	Manufacturing	1,2,X,4,5,6,7,X	
Abbott	M	47	English	Project Manager	X,2,X,4,5,6,X,X	
Seth	M	33	English	School Administration	1,2,3,X,5,6,7,8	

(\*)Key: 1: Social networking sites; 2: Blogs; 3: Microblogging applications; 4: Wikis; 5: Content community websites; 6: Consumer review & rating websites; 7: Internet forums; 8: Location based applications

## Appendix 4: Focus group information sheet



### Focus Group Information Sheet

Project title: Holiday decision making and the Internet

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking time out of your precious holidays to consider participation.*

#### 1. What is the purpose of this study?

This project is part of the PhD study of the researcher (Mr John Fotis) who is currently a PhD Researcher and part-time lecturer in the School of Tourism at Bournemouth University, UK. The study aims to explore what is the impact, if any, of Internet on how people plan and make decisions about their holiday trips.

#### 2. Why have I been invited to participate?

You are being invited to take part in a focus group discussion because you accepted the invitation by the Bournemouth University's Marketing Research Group.

#### 3. Are there any requirements I need to fulfil to enable me participate?

To be eligible to participate in the focus group discussion you need to fulfil only two requirements:

1. To have taken at least one holiday trip during the last 12 months. A holiday trip is defined as travelling to, and staying in, a place, or places, outside the place where you conduct your regular life routines (living and/or working) for at least one night and not more than one consecutive year, for leisure or recreational purposes
2. To have a profile in at least two types of social media websites and visit them at least every other day. Please see page 3 of this document for examples of social media types.

#### 4. What is the focus group about?

The focus group will be a discussion between the project's researcher, and a group of a maximum 8 - 10 individuals. Participants will discuss how they decide about their holidays and the role of the Internet in those decisions. There will be no pressure to talk about anything you prefer to keep private, and all members of the focus groups will be asked to keep things discussed confidential to the group. Although the questions are not designed to touch upon any sensitive areas or issues, in case that you may not wish to answer or participate in the conversation you will feel free to refuse to answer. For the purposes of transcription, the focus group discussion will be voice recorded, however, as also explained later in this document, participants' names and identity will be kept confidential, as there is no need to reveal your real name during the discussion. Please read paragraph 5 of this document for more details about anonymity and confidentiality. The discussion will last between one hour and one hour and a half.

#### 5. Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign the attached consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you decide not to take part, you don't have to give a reason.

#### 6. Will what I say in this focus group be kept confidential?

Yes, every effort is made so that all discussions are strictly confidential and anonymous. Although the focus group will be voice-recorded and transcribed, to ensure accurate reporting of the information that you provide and as evidence that the focus groups actually took place, there is no means that your identity will be revealed in the audio file. This is because during the voice-recorded

Page 1

conversation apart from your first name (real or fake) no other personal information or data will be revealed so to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Even in the case that another participant refers to you by your real first name, the transcribers are instructed to erase this phrase. Moreover, transcribers have already signed a confidentiality form stating that they will not discuss any item on the audio file with anyone other than the researcher. After the end of the voice-recorded session you will be asked in private whether you would like to reveal your nationality and age as the study may attempt to examine if people from different nations and of different age have different views about social media. The digital audio files will be stored in password-protected folders on a University computer. As per Bournemouth University Research Ethics Code of Practice (section 21.6) audio files will be kept for 5 years and destroyed after that time.

**7. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

Findings of this research will be used by the researcher in his PhD thesis. It may also be the case that the findings of this research will be published in the form of articles in academic journals, and / or presented in research, or business presentations. Short quotes from your answers, or quotes from the focus group discussion among the participants may be included in the above mentioned reports or presentations, however none of the participants will be identified with his or her actual name or surname, since the quotes will be anonymous.

**8. Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research is being carried out by Mr John Fotis who is currently a PhD Researcher and part-time lecturer in the School of Tourism at Bournemouth University, UK. Mr Fotis is on a full PhD scholarship offered by Bournemouth University to conduct this research.

**9. Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has been reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the School of Tourism, Bournemouth University Research and therefore complies to its standards, as well as by the researcher's supervisors Professor Dimitrios Buhalis, Professor Alan Fyall, and Dr Miguel Moital.

**10. Whom can I contact for further information?**

If you would like more information about this research please contact the researcher Mr John Fotis either by e-mail at [jfotis@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:jfotis@bournemouth.ac.uk), or through the hotel executive who invited you to the discussion, or at the address given at the end of this document. Alternatively you may contact the researcher's supervisor Professor Dimitrios Buhalis at [dbuhalis@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:dbuhalis@bournemouth.ac.uk). In case you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, please feel free to contact the School of Tourism Research Ethics Representative Mr Sean Beer at [sbeer@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:sbeer@bournemouth.ac.uk) or by phone at +44 1202 965109.

**11. How can I take part in the focus group?**

Simply confirm your participation with the member of the BU Marketing Research Group staff who invited you to participate. There is no need to bring with you neither this document, nor the consent form. Both will be provided to you in hard copy upon your arrival.

**12. Will I get any form of compensation for my participation?**

At the end of the discussion each participant will get £20 to cover both for his/her time and travel expenses to and from the university. There is no provision for any other form of payment. Each participant will sign a form as a proof of receipt.

**Date: 9 October 2012**

John Fotis  
D236c Dorset House  
School of Tourism, Bournemouth University  
Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset BH12 5BB  
United Kingdom


Page 2

**Types of web applications that are generally considered as social media:**

1. **Social networking sites** (such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, LinkedIn, Xing, academia.edu, Wayn, or similar other).
2. **Blogs** (personal websites sometimes in the form of online diaries where users share own thoughts, experiences, photos and other information)
3. **Microblogging applications** (such as Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk, Tumblr, or similar other).
4. **Wikis** (such as Wikipedia, Wikitravel, or similar other).
5. **Content community websites** (These are websites where users can post their own photos or their own videos such as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Picasa, Panoramio, or similar other).
6. **Consumer review & rating websites** (such as TripAdvisor, Holidaycheck, Revoo, Yelp, epinions, or similar other)
7. **Internet forums**
8. **Location based applications** (that people sometimes use through their mobile phones such as Foursquare, Gowalla, Facebook places or similar other)

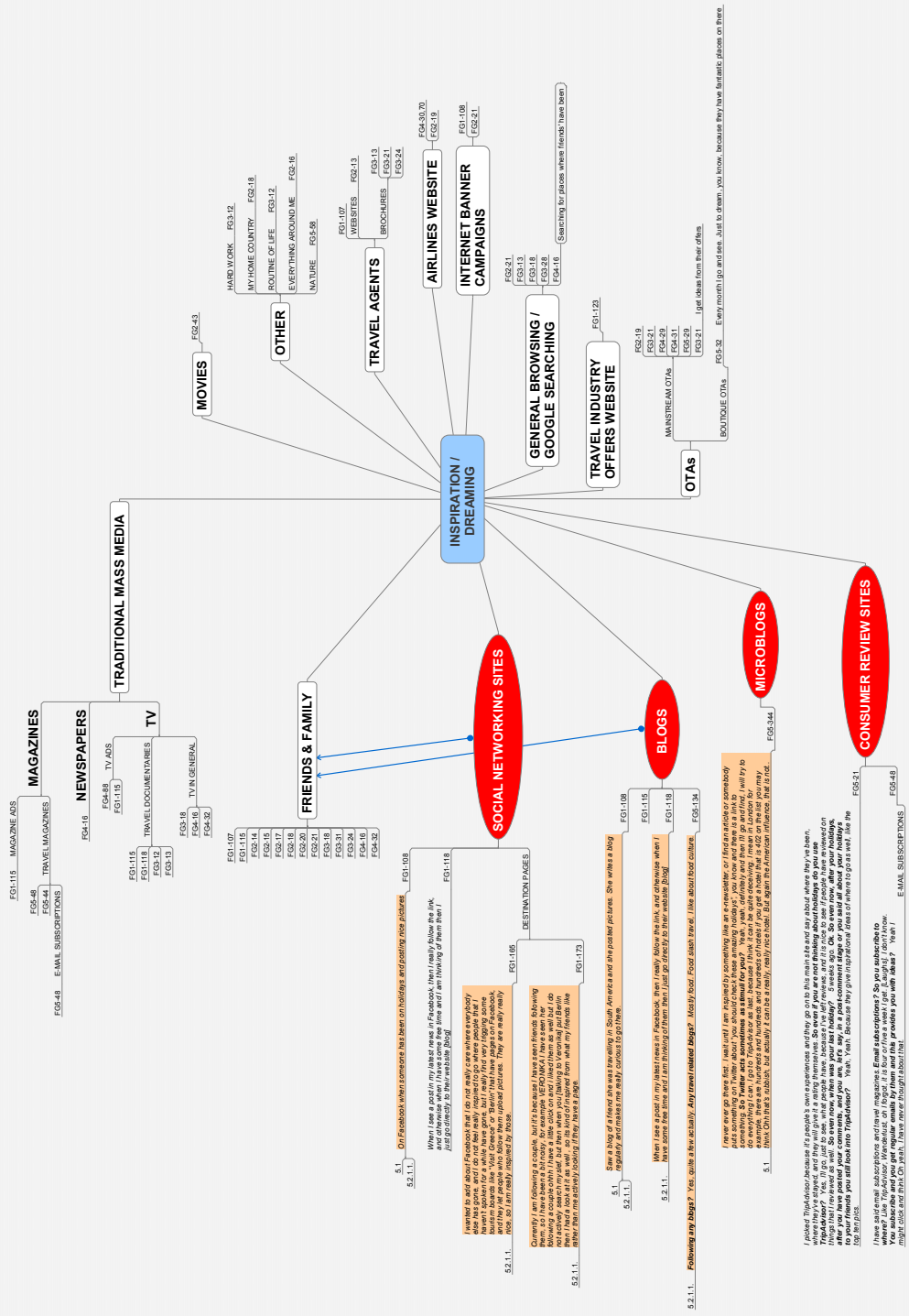


## Appendix 5: Focus group consent form

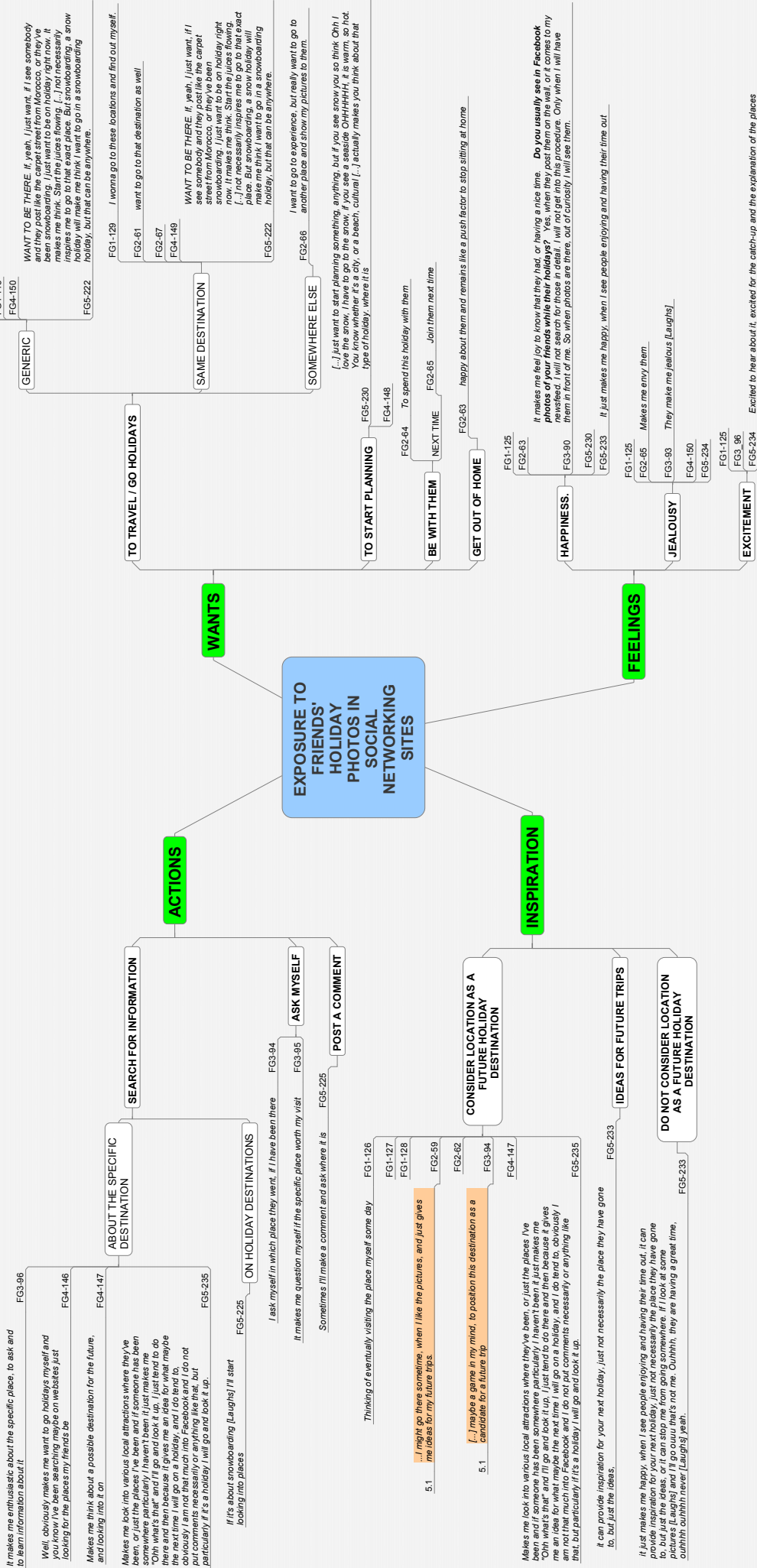
	<h3>Focus Group Consent Form</h3> <p>Project title: Holiday decision making and the Internet</p>	
<p>John Fotis, PhD Researcher, PT Lecturer School of Tourism, Bournemouth University jfotis@bournemouth.ac.uk</p>		
	Please tick the box	
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask any questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I agree to the focus group being audio recorded	<input type="checkbox"/>	
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in academic publications	<input type="checkbox"/>	
_____ Name of Participant	_____ Date	_____ Signature
_____ Name of Researcher	_____ Date	_____ Signature
<p><small>FG Project Information Sheet and Consent Form – BU10_2012.docx</small></p>		
<p>Page 4</p>		

## **Appendix 6: Mind maps**

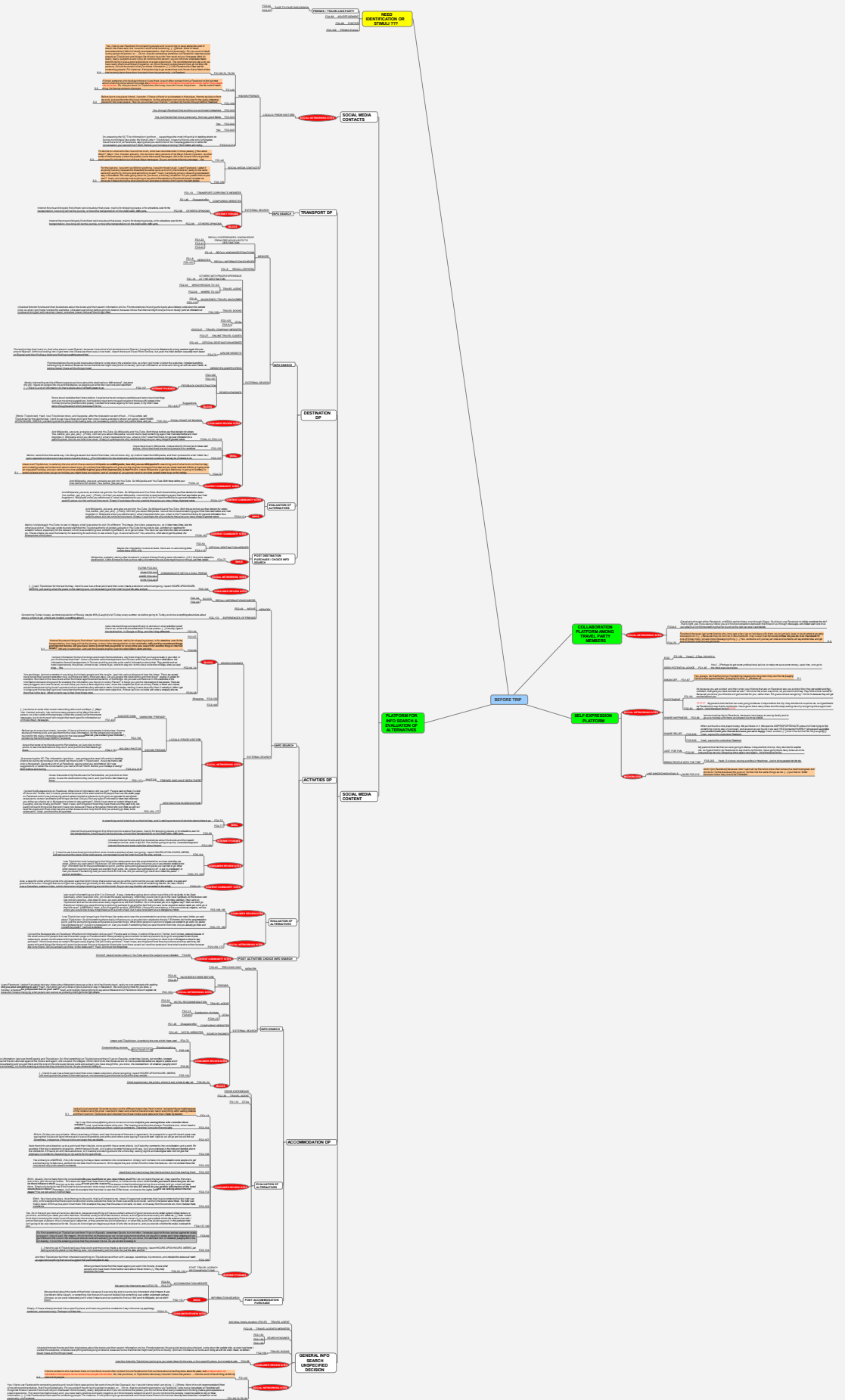
Even when I am not thinking of holidays ... provide(s) me with the best ideas and inspiration about my future holidays

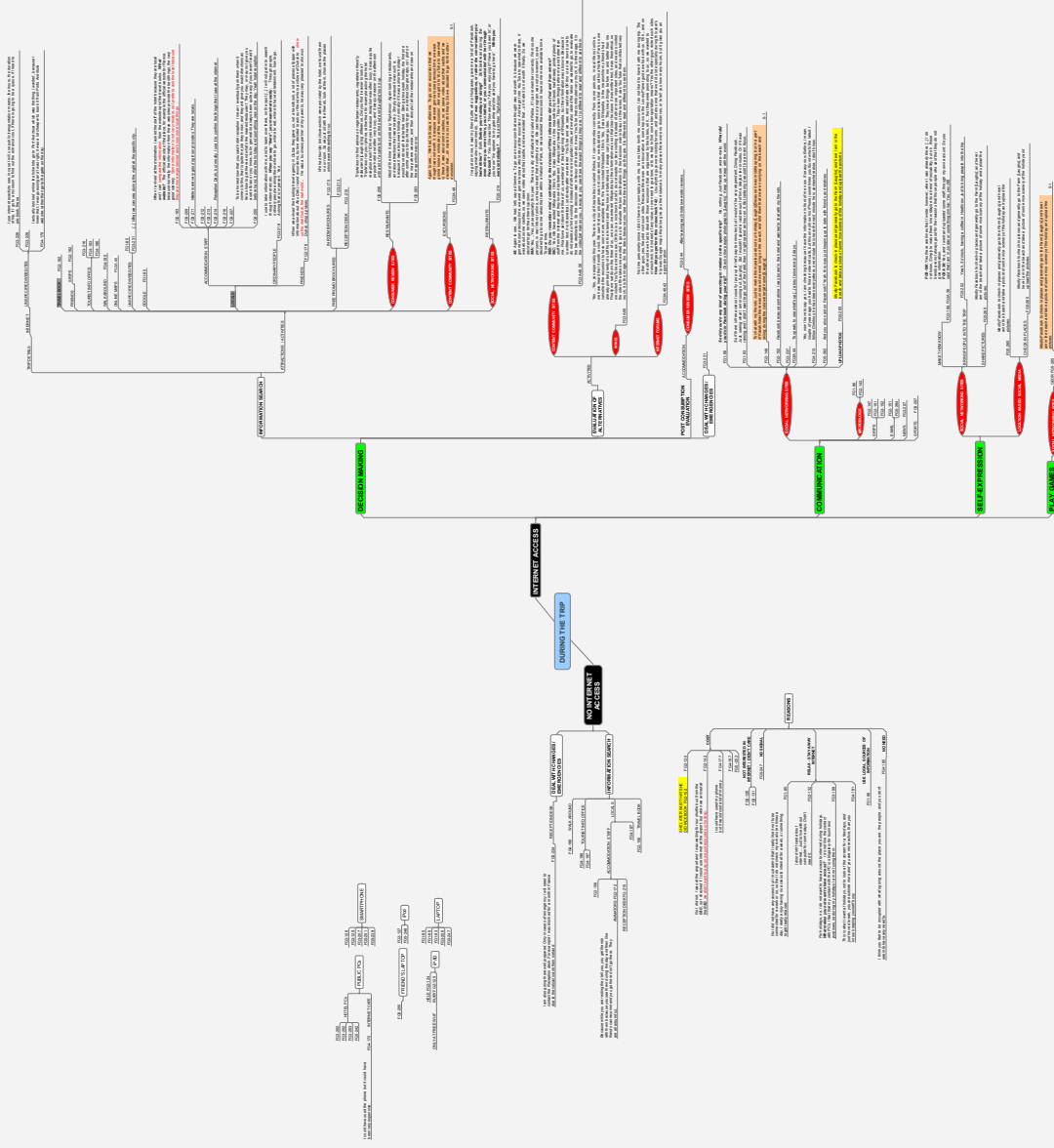


When I am in Facebook, or any other similar website, looking at nice photos that my friends took during their holidays makes me.....



## Before the trip











## Appendix 7: List of published material

### Refereed Journal Articles:

Fotis, J., Buhalis, D. and Rossides, N. (2011). Social media impact on holiday travel planning: The case of the Russian and the FSU markets. *International Journal of Online Marketing*, 1(4), 1-19.

### Refereed Conference Proceedings:

Fotis, J., Buhalis, D. and Rossides, N. (2012). Social Media Use and Impact during the Holiday Travel Planning Process. In: Fuchs, M., Ricci, F. and Cantoni, L., (Eds). *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2012*. Vienna, Austria: Springer, pp. 13-24.

Fotis, J., Rossides, N. and Buhalis, D. (2010). Social Media Impact on Leisure Travel: The Case of the Russian Market and the Challenges for the Cyprus Tourism Industry. In: Vrontis, D., Weber, Y., Kaufmann, R. and Tarba, S., (Eds). *3rd Annual EuroMed Conference of the EuroMed Academy of Business: Business Developments Across Countries And Cultures*. EuroMed Press, pp. 1365-1367.

### Book Chapters:

Fotis, J., Buhalis, D. and Rossides, N. (2013). Social media impact on holiday travel planning: The case of the Russian and the FSU markets. In H. El-Gohary (Ed.), *Transdisciplinary Marketing Concepts and Emergent Methods for Virtual Environments*, pp. 230-249. Hershey, PA: Business Science Reference.

### Research Presentations:

Fotis, J., Buhalis, D. and Rossides, N. (2012). Social Media Use and Impact during the Holiday Travel Planning Process. ENTER 2012. 19<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Information Technology and Travel & Tourism, Helsingborg, January 24-27.

Fotis, J. (2011). Social media: Are there adequate evidences to substantiate a redefinition of comprehensive consumer behaviour models? Focus on Leisure Tourism Products. ENTER PhD Workshop, 18<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Information Technology and Travel & Tourism, Innsbruck, Austria, January 26-28. Awarded: Best Proposal for the ENTER 2011 PhD Workshop, 3rd Place.

Fotis, J. (2010). The Impact of Social Media on Consumer Behaviour: Focus on Leisure Tourism Services. ENTER PhD Workshop, 17<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Information Technology and Travel & Tourism, Lugano, Switzerland, February 10-12.

Fotis, J., Buhalis, D., and Rossides, N. (2010). Social media impact on leisure travel: The case of the Russian market and the challenges for the Cyprus Tourism Industry. 3rd Annual EuroMed conference of the Euromed Academy of Business: Business Developments Across Countries And Cultures, Nicosia, Cyprus, November 4-5