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**USES AND GRATIFICATIONS APPROACH: IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA  
INFLUENCERS' EXPOSURE TO YOUNG ADULTS IN MALAYSIA'S TOURISM  
INDUSTRY**

**TAN MAE SAN**

A RESEARCH PROJECT  
SUBMITTED IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
BACHELOR OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION (HONS)  
FACULTY OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES  
UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

DECEMBER 2023

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Additionally, I'd like to thank all the respondents that were willing to take their time for filling up the questionnaire.

## DECLARATION

I declared that the material contained in this paper is the end results of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

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## APPROVAL FORM

This research paper attached hereto, entitled “Uses and Gratifications Approach: Importance of Social Media Influencers’ Exposure to Young Adults in Malaysia’s Tourism Industry” prepared and submitted by Tan Mae San in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Bachelor of Corporate Communication (Hons) is hereby accepted.

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Supervisor,

Ms Jullian Khor Gee Khing

Date: 03<sup>rd</sup> December 2023

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	I
DECLARATION .....	II
APPROVAL FORM .....	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	IV
ABSTRACT .....	VI
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>1.1 Social Media</b> .....	1
<i>1.1.1 Types and Functions of Social Media</i> .....	2
<i>1.1.2 Social Media in Malaysia Context</i> .....	5
<b>1.2 Social Media Influencers</b> .....	6
<i>1.2.1 Social Media Influencers in Malaysia Context</i> .....	7
<b>1.3 Tourism</b> .....	8
<b>1.4 Problem Statement</b> .....	9
<b>1.5 Significance of Study</b> .....	10
<b>1.6 Research Question</b> .....	10
<b>1.7 Research Objective</b> .....	11
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	12
<b>2.1 Background and Development of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)</b> .....	12
<b>2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in the Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and Tourism Context</b> .....	14
<b>2.3 Reviewing Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)</b> .....	16
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	17
<b>3.1 Research and Data Collection Method</b> .....	17
<b>3.2 Attributes and Advantages of Survey</b> .....	18
<b>3.3 Survey Method</b> .....	18
<b>3.4 Validity and Reliability</b> .....	19
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS .....	20
<b>4.1 Demographic</b> .....	20
<b>4.2 The Utilisation of Social Media Influencers for Travel-Related Information</b> .....	24
<b>4.3 The Utilisation of Social Media Influencers and the Uses and Gratifications Theory</b> .....	33
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	39
<b>5.1 Discussion</b> .....	39
<b>5.2 Limitations</b> .....	41

<b>5.3 Recommendations</b> .....	41
<b>5.4 Conclusion</b> .....	42
References .....	43
Appendix: Survey Questionnaire .....	52

## ABSTRACT

Tourism has always played an important role in Malaysia as it contributes a good amount to Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP). The reason Malaysia is one of the most famous tourist destinations in the world is because of its multicultural society, diverse and delicious traditional and modern cuisines, as well as tropical nature landscapes. Traditionally, the ways to promote tourism are either through word of mouth from the tourists themselves or online advertising or tour guides' recommendations. Nowadays, however, social media influencers also play a role in promoting tourism as they will visit local spots (well-known or hidden) and share their reviews with their followers. Sometimes social media influencers are paid to do so but some do it willingly without being paid. Either way, by doing so, the social influencers will be able to gain a considerable amount of followers. This is because their followers will most likely decide which local spots are worth visiting based on the social media influencers' reviews. Based on the social media influencers' reviews, local spots will either be crowded with tourists or vice versa. Even so, there are not many studies that show the impact of social media influencers promoting has on the existing consumers of the local spots. This study's objectives are to find out the existing consumers' thoughts on the local spots getting viral and the effectiveness of social media influencers promoting tourism destinations. Quantitative research will be conducted in which a questionnaire will be distributed randomly, their responses will then be collected and analysed. This study will study the effect of social media influencers promoting tourism destinations on existing consumers.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Social Media

The definition of social media has evolved over time. According to Alalawneh et al. (2022), the most recent definition of social media encompasses various innovations in information and communication technology, which have significantly revolutionized business operations and transformed them into valuable organisational resources for creating and enhancing business value. Meanwhile, in 2019, Bishop defined social media as online platforms created to foster interactions among individuals. Bayer et al. (2019) also emphasized that social media are web-based and enable asynchronous or non-live social interactions. They are interactive and primarily driven by user-generated content, placing a strong emphasis on social interaction among users. Furthermore, social media platforms allow users to broadcast interpersonal communication to large audiences, often referred to as 'masspersonal.'

Social media actually comes in a lot of forms and the most common and well-known one is social networking websites, for example, Facebook (Masciantonio et al., 2021). The first ever social networking site that fits the characteristics of social media is Bolt and Six Degrees, launched in the year of 1997 (Hines, 2022). When Bolt and Six Degrees were first introduced to the public, it was revealed that it had millions of registered users. However, that did not prevent the downfall of the site in the year 2000 due to the lack of users connecting to the internet as networks were limited. In addition, many people were unfamiliar with social network sites (Olano, 2019).

Throughout the year moving into the 21st century, countless social media platforms started to emerge one by one and even up until now, new social media platforms are being launched now and then. One of the very remarkable and popular social media platforms that was created in 2004 and is still going strong today is Facebook. The platform was founded by several

Harvard students for the sole purpose of connecting with other Harvard students. These Harvard students in question are Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollum, Chris Hughes and Dustin Moskovitz. However, it is due to the unique concept of the versatile platform which allows a wide range of users to connect and share through diverse media elements like photos, messages and text without any limitation on the users' demographics that it became a hit by the end of the year it was launched with over one million users (Tracy, 2023).

The success of Facebook is evidenced by the amount of users, this situation has prompted many creators to come up with social media platforms that either share similar or entirely different concepts from Facebook. One social media platform that shares the same concept as Facebook but has a relatively different layout and features is Twitter. Both fall under the category of traditional social networks, but the layout and features are not entirely the same. This helps users to distinguish the two social media platforms. Moreover, the varying features have users using both social media platforms for different purposes (Adames, 2022). Even so, not all social media platforms were fortunate enough to make it big much less hold up for a long time due to countless causes (Hines, 2022). However, in this era, social media platforms were built with a lot of add-on features other than the initial purpose of connecting and communicating with people to better cater to the demands of the younger generations. Not to mention, there are constant updates to ensure the social media platforms get better with every update to satisfy users' demands and to warrant users' loyalty.

### *1.1.1 Types and Functions of Social Media*

There is a multitude of social media platforms, and they can be categorized based on their functionalities. According to Aichner et al. (2021), social media platforms can be primarily divided into eight categories: social networking sites (SNS), blogs, microblogs, consumer opinion platforms, social bookmarking sites, and content-sharing platforms.

Social Networking Sites (SNS) create virtual spaces where users can create profiles and build personal or professional networks, fostering connections with others. SNSs are well-known for enabling users to connect with friends, family, and even strangers; notable examples include Facebook and Instagram (González-Nuevo et al., 2021).

Blogs, on the other hand, can be described as online personal journals, where serial entries are displayed with date and time stamps. They often feature comment sections to facilitate discussions through text, images, audio, and video. An example of a widely-used blog is Quora (Minaev, 2023).

Microblogs, while similar to blogs, differ in that they limit the word count per post, encouraging concise and to-the-point content (Nations, 2023). They are particularly suitable for sharing news and brief updates, with Twitter being a prime example.

Consumer opinion platforms are online communities where users gather to share experiences, exchange information, and pose questions on various topics. TripAdvisor is a notable example, allowing users to compare hotels and resorts worldwide based on past reviews, images, and informative forums (Hussain et al., 2019).

Social bookmarking sites enable users to tag online content and add keywords for easy organization and personal reference (Duong, 2020). Reddit stands out as one of the most recognizable social bookmarking platforms.

Content-sharing platforms encompass a wide range of media formats, including videos, presentations, documents, audio, and images. These platforms emphasize user interaction and content sharing, and they are designed not only to connect people but also to facilitate the sharing of various content types, from personal rants to valuable information.

The core function of a social media platform is to connect users (Saud et al., 2020). By connecting with others, users can reach out to family, friends, and even strangers worldwide. Platforms like Facebook, with their global user base, make it easier for people with shared interests to connect by engaging with relatable content. Users can also follow or add others to stay updated on each other's life events.

Additionally, social media platforms serve as a platform for users to share their thoughts, experiences, opinions, interests, knowledge, and information through pictures, videos, or text (Sun et al., 2019). This sharing capability leads to another crucial function: enabling interactions between users (strangers or not) (Appel et al., 2019). For instance, on Facebook, users can interact with posts by liking them, using a range of emoticons to express themselves, leaving comments, or doing both. Many platforms also offer instant communication via private messaging, allowing for non-verbal (text messages, pictures, videos) or verbal (voice and video calls) interactions.

It's worth noting that while many social media platforms share similarities, they can be differentiated based on their unique features and target audiences. For example, Facebook is known for its versatile "like" button, enabling users to express themselves comprehensively. In contrast, Twitter and Instagram offer a simpler "love" button. These visual differences aside, these features serve the same purpose: expressing support or agreement with a post.

Moreover, although some of the most popular social media platforms originated in the United States and China, (United States: Facebook, Twitter; China: TikTok, WeChat) that does not mean only the users in these particular countries can use these social media platforms (Hines, 2022). These social media platforms will inevitably be used by people all around the world as it is being launched into the market.

### *1.1.2 Social Media in Malaysia Context*

Malaysia boasts a high smartphone penetration rate and internet penetration rate, both reaching an impressive 90%, creating a fertile ground for a thriving internet economy. However, this widespread connectivity has also revealed a notable trend: a significant portion of Malaysians struggle with social media addiction. Approximately 26.8 million users dedicate a substantial two hours and forty-seven minutes daily to internet browsing, amounting to nearly 20 hours per week (Meltwater, 2023). This trend is further underscored by statistics on active social media users in Malaysia, which reveal a remarkable surge from 62% in 2016 to a substantial 91.7% in 2022, marking a notable 29.7% increase (Statista, 2023). Interestingly, this substantial growth can be attributed, at least in part, to the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It's also worth noting that a majority of social media users in Malaysia fall within the age group of 25 to 34 (Oosga, 2023).

In contrast to many countries where social media primarily serves as a form of entertainment, Malaysians exhibit distinct priorities when it comes to their online activities. A significant finding indicates that 54.6% of individuals use social media platforms primarily to maintain connections with friends and family. Entertainment closely follows at 52.7%, while the third position, with a 42.6% vote, is occupied by searching for news.

The evolution of social media platforms in Malaysia, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, is indeed noteworthy. Facebook, launched in 2004, initially saw slower adoption in Malaysia but gained popularity around 2006. In contrast, Instagram, introduced in 2010, initially attracted a moderate number of Malaysian users in the same year due to its unique micro-blogging concept. However, it wasn't until 2013 that its user base began to grow steadily, largely driven by the presence of lifestyle Instagrammers (Hopkins, 2019). TikTok entered the scene in 2017, starting with around 1.18 million users in 2018 and eventually growing to about 14.45 million users in 2022 (Statista, 2023). By the time TikTok launched, people were already

familiar with social media concepts, and its user-friendly interface contributed to its rapid adoption.

Owing to the substantial rates of smartphone and internet penetration in Malaysia, individuals have identified a promising opportunity, leading to the emergence of social media influencers who are experiencing a noticeable increase in popularity in the country (Lokithasan et al., 2019). To understand the occupation of a social media influencer, the next section will give an overview of the job description.

## **1.2 Social Media Influencers**

What are “social media influencers” (commonly abbreviated as SMIs)? They are individuals who establish a personal brand and exert influence over their followers. They motivate their audience to purchase products or services and actively support brands and business initiatives through their presence on social media platforms (National Geographic Society, 2021). These influencers possess the ability to impact people's behaviour via social media, and they are gaining popularity as businesses increasingly incorporate them into their marketing strategies (Google Trends, 2022).

Dedicated influencers invest substantial time in creating engaging content and interacting with their audience. Their strong influence is shaped by the products and trends within the social media landscape they inhabit. Influencers are primarily influenced by their peers and fellow social media users, rather than traditional media (Lokithasan et al., 2019).

While some may liken SMIs to celebrities, there is a distinction. Influencers not only promote their work but also consistently produce content and engage with their followers (Singh, 2023). Becoming a successful influencer requires effort and an understanding of one's target audience and preferred social media platforms (Zniva et al., 2023). Consistency in content posting is key to retaining and growing followers.

In the 21st century, being an influencer is a desirable profession, as it offers various avenues for income generation. Influencers monetize their work through sponsored posts, affiliate marketing, brand partnerships, network monetization programs, merchandising, and direct donations (Christison, 2023). As mentioned, to become a successful influencer, various skills must be acquired. Thus, making it a not hard nor easy occupation. Despite these facts, being a SMI has become a dream job for a lot of people worldwide. This particular phenomenon can be observed among Malaysian teenagers, especially Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) school-leavers (“Study shown many SPM school-leavers”, 2023).

### *1.2.1 Social Media Influencers in Malaysia Context*

According to Similarweb (2023), as of June 2023, some of the most widely used social media platforms in Malaysia include Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Interestingly, many of Malaysia's prominent SMIs are primarily active on Instagram and TikTok. Like SMIs from other countries, Malaysian SMIs tend to maintain a presence on multiple social media platforms. The concept of SMIs was relatively foreign in Malaysia until a few years ago when influencers began to emerge and their numbers steadily increased, particularly during the pandemic era. This trend is evident in findings showing that the percentage of SMIs using specific social media platforms increased by 5.63% from 2020 to 2021 (Taslaud, 2023).

There are various paths to becoming an influencer, as observed among Malaysian SMIs. One common scenario involves individuals starting as bloggers who consistently share content on social media, gradually accumulating followers as more people discover their content. Another scenario includes a transition in occupation. Many Malaysian SMIs previously worked in various occupations before transitioning into full-time influencers. For example, Alexie Sue Ann, a former radio announcer for Malaysia's English station, Hitz.fm, has now become a full-

time SMI on Instagram. Additionally, some individuals choose to pursue influencer status alongside their regular occupations (Chitra, 2022).

Regarding the rise of SMIs, Taslaud (2023) notes that the surge in SMIs has created significant opportunities for influencer marketing to become a prominent marketing channel for brands and businesses. This is due to SMIs creating product or service review videos, which they share on various social media platforms, notably Instagram and TikTok. Malaysian social media users have one of the highest social media watch times globally. This trend can be attributed to the preference among Malaysian users for consuming product or service review videos, stemming from the trust and reliance placed on SMIs, who are expected to address user concerns and enhance product knowledge. SMIs also play a pivotal role in affirming purchase decisions. Currently, there are an estimated 16,000 SMIs in Malaysia (Zairulliaty Mali, 2022). The popularity of influencer marketing in Malaysia is attributed to its ability to boost brand awareness, expand audience reach, build trust, enrich content, establish partnerships, and effectively reach target audiences. Through the utilisation of influencer marketing, SMIs also play a role in tourism (Jaya & Prianthara, 2020).

### **1.3 Tourism**

Tourism in Malaysia has always played a pivotal role, contributing significantly to Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP). The nation's status as one of the world's most renowned tourist destinations can be attributed to its multicultural society, diverse culinary offerings, both traditional and modern, and its breathtaking tropical landscapes (Musafir, n.d.). While these factors have always drawn tourists, concerted efforts have been made to enhance the tourism industry and attract more visitors.

To ensure an exceptional travel experience, tourists often seek destinations that offer accessibility, quality accommodation, and convenient transportation options. In response,



Malaysia has developed accommodations and streamlined transportation services around local attractions, making travel more convenient for visitors. Additionally, these tourist destinations have been equipped with essential amenities and facilities to enhance the overall visitor experience (Hicham Rajraji, 2022).

In the modern age, traditional methods of promoting tourism, such as word of mouth, online advertising, and tour guides' recommendations, have been complemented by social media marketing. With the widespread adoption of multiple social media platforms, social media marketing has emerged as a dominant force in tourism promotion, enabling users to explore, research, follow, and even make reservations at local attractions.

SIMs also play a significant role in promoting tourism. They often visit local spots in their own or other countries, sharing recommendations and reviews with their followers (Jaya & Priantara, 2020). Whether paid or voluntary, these SIMs have a considerable impact on tourism, as their followers rely on their authentic reviews and recommendations to choose which local spots to visit. As a result, the presence of SIMs can significantly influence tourist traffic to particular destinations. While numerous methods exist for promoting tourism, leveraging social media marketing through SIMs stands out as particularly effective, given the high level of trust placed in their reviews and endorsements by the public.

#### **1.4 Problem Statement**

In recent times, SIMs have become influential voices in recommending and reviewing local attractions and cuisines. Research indicates that modern individuals are highly influenced by SIMs when making decisions about tourist destinations, primarily due to the perceived quality and reliability of their information (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020; Pop et al., 2021; Sesar et al., 2021).

Tourism significantly contributes to a country's income, making it appear to be a mutually beneficial relationship for SMIs, users, and the country itself. However, the promotion of tourism destinations by SMIs on social media platforms has raised concerns among existing consumers. Typically, the disadvantages associated with tourism can be categorized into environmental and potentially social issues (Podhorodecka & Dudek, 2019). Yet, there remains a lack of research into the negative impacts brought upon existing consumers by SMIs.

Therefore, this study employs the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) to explore individuals' intentions in consuming information provided by SMIs, particularly in their reviews and recommendations of local attractions. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the effects of SMIs' promotion of tourism destinations on social media users. Despite the applicability of the UGT theory in understanding people's decisions regarding the use of social media platforms (Vinney, 2022), it has been underutilised in the context of tourism research.

### **1.5 Significance of Study**

This study aims to examine the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) promoting tourist destinations on social media users. Influencer marketing through social media has been recognized as an effective tool for shaping destination images and increasing revenue (Bolchinova, 2022; Faisal & Dhusia, 2022). However, limited research has explored the effects, both positive and negative, that existing consumers may experience due to SMIs promoting tourist destinations. Understanding the perspectives of existing consumers is crucial before promoting local attractions, considering potential environmental and social issues (Podhorodecka & Dudek, 2019).

### **1.6 Research Question**

- 1) How do tourists utilise SMIs to seek travel-related information?

- 2) Does utilising SMIs to seek travel-related information match the Uses and Gratifications Theory?

### **1.7 Research Objective**

- 1) To explore the motivations behind tourists' preference for SMIs over other sources of travel information.
- 2) To identify the specific gratifications derived by tourists when using SMIs for travel-related purposes.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **2.1 Background and Development of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)**

One of the earliest research endeavours in the field of communication can be traced back to the early 1940s, specifically 1942, with the work of Cantril. This research aimed to understand the gratifications that capture audiences' attention and the types of media and content that fulfil their social and psychological needs, ultimately leading to the development of a specific approach.

Simultaneously, other research in media effects explored the intentions and selection patterns of audiences concerning the new mass media. For example, in 1935, Cantril & Allport conducted a study on radio audiences; Waples et al. examined reading habits in 1940; Herzog researched quiz programs and the gratifications from radio daytime serials in both 1940 and 1944; Wolfe & Fiske investigated the factors that piqued children's interest in comics in 1949; Berelson studied the motivations behind newspaper consumption in the same year; and Lazarsfeld & Stanton delved into the reasons for selecting different media genres in three separate years, namely 1942, 1944, and 1949. Finally, Schumann & Thorson explored the intentions behind engaging with serious music in 1999. Collectively, these studies led to the discovery of a set of functions fulfilled either by specific content or the medium itself. The identified functions include challenging one's intellect against others, obtaining practical advice and information for daily life, establishing a daily routine, preparing for social mobility, and finding reassurance in the significance and worthiness of one's role (Katz et al., 1974).

However, in 1960, Klapper stated that the experimental or quasi-experimental approach was the preferred method in early effects research. This method involves manipulating communication conditions to seek general insights into effective communication or to uncover unintended message consequences. In 1994, McQuail mentioned that due to the shift toward

audience-based and social-psychological research approaches, the UGT approach evolved into a sub-tradition within media effects research.

Nonetheless, in 1974, McLeod discovered and proposed that rather than focusing on social issues, the initial use of the theory placed heavy emphasis on the human function aspect. As a result, formulating comparisons and arriving at theories through this method proved highly challenging because subjects were inquired using qualitative approaches that did not account for their social or psychological origins; additionally, the method also overlooked the interrelationships among various media functions.

Despite being a new and underdeveloped theory, in 1959, Elihu Katz was able to conclude that media no longer needed to solely rely on persuasion tactics but instead needed to actively cater to human needs. This conclusion was proven true by further studies and research conducted by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch on the theory, suggesting that the majority of audiences were not as active as expected but leaned more towards the passive side (Dhaha 2013).

However, the recent definition provided by scholars regarding the theory shows that UGT provides a theoretical structure for understanding how people actively search for and utilise different media channels to fulfil their personal needs and objectives, thus indicating that audiences are active media users (Uses and Gratifications Theory in Media Psychology? - Verywell Mind, n.d); (Calvo-Porrall & Otero-Prada, 2020).

As technology continues to advance, the Uses and Gratification theory is now applicable to both traditional media (print, television, radio) and new media (email and social media) after undergoing further developments. This expansion allows the theory to be applied to different media uses and the behavioural intentions of users (Hossain, 2019). Additionally,

Hossain et al. (2019) propose that the types of gratifications can be divided into three categories: hedonic gratification, utilitarian gratification, and social gratification.

According to the UGT, users deliberately choose media to cater to their own needs. In terms of hedonic gratification, users actively seek immediate pleasure and happiness through engaging in enjoyable experiences. The hedonic perspective suggests the aspiration to amplify pleasure and minimize discomfort in life, which is observable in the pursuit of hobbies, sensory satisfaction, and entertainment (Putri et al., 2019).

Moving on, utilitarian gratification describes the fulfilment of practical or instrumental needs through media use by individuals. These needs can include seeking information, finding solutions to problems, or accomplishing goals. Among the three gratifications mentioned, this one emphasizes how individuals utilise social media platforms for all the benefits these platforms can offer. In other words, these individuals are purposeful and strive to maximize the usefulness of social media platforms (Aydin, 2019).

Finally, social gratification refers to individuals who find satisfaction in their preferred media consumption for the purposes of social interactions and connections. This specific form of gratification is as important as the others, as it helps explain why individuals actively choose to engage with media for social purposes. Through research, it has been found that these individuals use their preferred media for identity formation and self-presentation purposes, as well as to satisfy their social needs by maintaining relationships, connecting with others, and establishing new social ties (Nuzuli, 2022).

## **2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in the Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and Tourism Context**

As time has passed, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has gained significant importance in our advanced and technology-driven era, where social media platforms have

become integral parts of daily life. This is primarily because social media platforms are renowned for providing the perceived functional and hedonic value that users seek. Moreover, these platforms possess attributes that enable individuals to use them in various contexts, including both casual and professional settings, such as in the field of tourism.

Today, the phenomenon of social media-induced tourism is far from uncommon, SMIs play a crucial role as the primary motivators behind this trend. This can be observed when SMIs purposefully share content depicting their travels, whether within their own country or abroad. Furthermore, SMIs frequently provide reviews of both well-known and hidden local spots, sharing their insights on the appeal of these destinations. These SMIs tend to attract users who share similar interests (Rizalniyani Abdul Razak & Nur Aliah Mansor, 2021). Within the framework of UGT, SMIs effectively offer the gratifications that users actively seek: an escape from their daily routines, a vicarious experience of travel, and validation for their own travel choices. In this context, users take an active role in seeking out, selecting, and ultimately consuming content from SMIs that aligns with their specific needs and desires.

In general, some of the social media platforms that SMIs use these days include Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook (Tiago et al., 2023). The reasons SMIs prefer these social media platforms are because they are among the most popular social media platforms as of 2023, targeting a wide range of users between the ages of 18 to 34 years old (Statista, 2023). Additionally, people nowadays prefer visual-based (watching) content over text-based media (reading) (Curcic, 2023), and these platforms also offer a high return on investment (ROI) for SMIs (Tiago et al., 2023). The primary purpose of social media platforms is to allow individuals to interact and connect with family, friends, and strangers. However, today's social media platforms enable individuals to seek information and search for content that interests them. By deliberately searching for content they are interested in, the social media algorithm detects and recommends SMIs that publish specific content. This shows that

individuals play an active role in media consumption because they place value on the benefits that they receive from the social media platforms, which leads to their consistent and active engagement in pursuing gratifications, such as information, entertainment, social interaction, and personal identity expression (Dolan et al., 2019).

### **2.3 Reviewing Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)**

The utilisation of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) within the travel and tourism sector has enabled the identification of four primary motivations driving tourists to use smartphones by Moon et al. (2022): social interaction, information acquisition, entertainment, and convenience. It is common for these gratifications to exhibit variations across diverse fields and contexts. Initially, an existing model and scale categorized under the framework of Uses and Gratifications motivations were employed to assess these motivations within the travel and tourism domain. However, it became evident that this model and scale were not suitable for this context, as they had primarily been tested and applied in the domain of communication and advertising. Consequently, a notable deficiency is observed in terms of reliable and valid Uses and Gratifications motivation scales tailored specifically to the travel and tourism industry.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research and Data Collection Method

The main functions of a descriptive study are to determine the characteristics of a population or a specific phenomenon and to provide researchers with a profound understanding of the research problem. Descriptive studies are widely used in research and are particularly good at addressing questions that begin with *how*, *when*, *what*, and *where* (Siedlecki, 2020). Consequently, the descriptive study was found to be a suitable research method for this research paper. Notably, the distribution of online surveys to specifically targeted respondents by the researcher matches with the descriptive research method.

Quantitative research has been used in this study to find out the importance of SMIs' exposure to young adults in Malaysia's tourism industry with the use of the Uses and Gratifications approach. This research method is known to establish the cause-and-effect relationship between two variables through several methods (mathematical, computational and statistical methods) and at the same time able to produce numerical results and hard facts (Ahmad et al., 2019). Analysing numerical data collected from a large number of respondents in particular is made easy with the use of this research method.

Among the various data-collecting methods, this study has chosen to collect data through conducting an online survey. This method requires the researcher to distribute the survey (through the Internet) to a sample of people who fit the criteria, this is to ensure the collection of respondents' varying actions, beliefs, thoughts, traits, and viewpoints as well as the way they perceived things (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). Due to the method's effectiveness in providing accurate information used in various research, it has been a widely used method to collect data.

### **3.2 Attributes and Advantages of Survey**

As mentioned previously, this study adopted the online survey method through the distribution of questionnaires to the targeted respondents (young adults in the age between 18 to 25 years old and living within Klang Valley). Among the many modern online survey tools available, Google Forms has been used. This is because it offers a wide range of question formats (text boxes, paragraph texts, multiple choices, checkboxes, scale, grid etc) and allows the personalisation of questions (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). This attribute allows the researcher to have the freedom to come up with either open or close-ended questions accordingly. Moving forward, the minimum requirement of respondents needed for the survey is 100 respondents. Getting the required amount in a short time is made easy with the use of Google Forms because it allows quick distribution of the survey through a link that can be shared on various social media platforms to get respondents. With a large number of people who use social media platforms, it is easy to get respondents within a relatively short time, thus showing that it saves time. Not to mention, no money was spent to generate and distribute the survey, so it is free of cost, hence effectively saving money. Lately, Google Forms has features that allow the researcher to keep track of the responses received as well as convert the survey results into a spreadsheet so that data can be analysed easily.

### **3.3 Survey Method**

This survey was made up of three sections, namely: Section A - demographic questions; Section B - utilising social media influencers for travel-related information and lastly, Section C - utilising social media influencers and the Uses and Gratifications theory. Section A allows the researcher to get a basic background of the respondents who took part in the survey. The targeted respondents of this study are young adults (18 to 25 years old) who live within the Klang Valley areas (Kuala Lumpur, Klang, Kajang, Subang Jaya, Petaling Jaya, Selayang,

Shah Alam, Ampang Jaya, Putrajaya, Sepang). Section B aims to find out how young adults utilise SMIs to get travel-related information by asking a series of questions revolving around SMIs, social media platforms and travel-related information. The final section, Section C focuses on how the Uses and Gratifications theory can be applied in the context of SMIs. This section observes how young adults use SMIs to achieve a purpose.

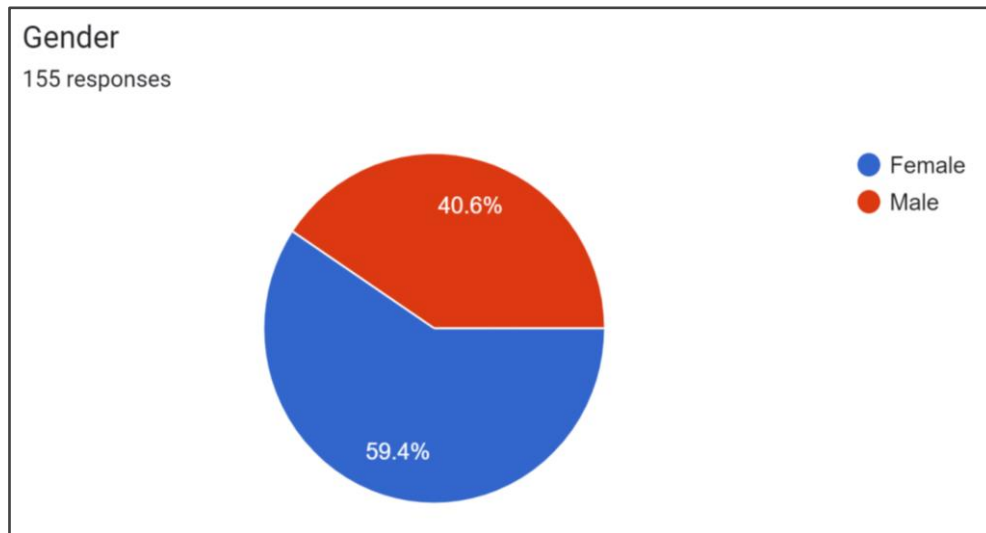
The theory applied in this study is the Uses and Gratifications theory. This theory observes the utilisation of SMIs among young adults who live within the Klang Valley areas to look for travel-related information. By doing so, the researcher gets to find out the specific needs that these young adults are seeking from the SMIs as well as the functions of these SMIs.

As this study involves humans as the subject of the research, the questionnaire was sent for an ethical clearance check. Upon receiving a pass, the survey questionnaire was distributed to a small group of respondents to act as a pilot test. To test the feasibility of methods and procedures that will be used in large-scale research, a pilot study is a must to do so (Teresi et al., 2022). The survey questionnaire was officially distributed to respondents after amendments were made to minor issues found during the pilot test stage.

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability**

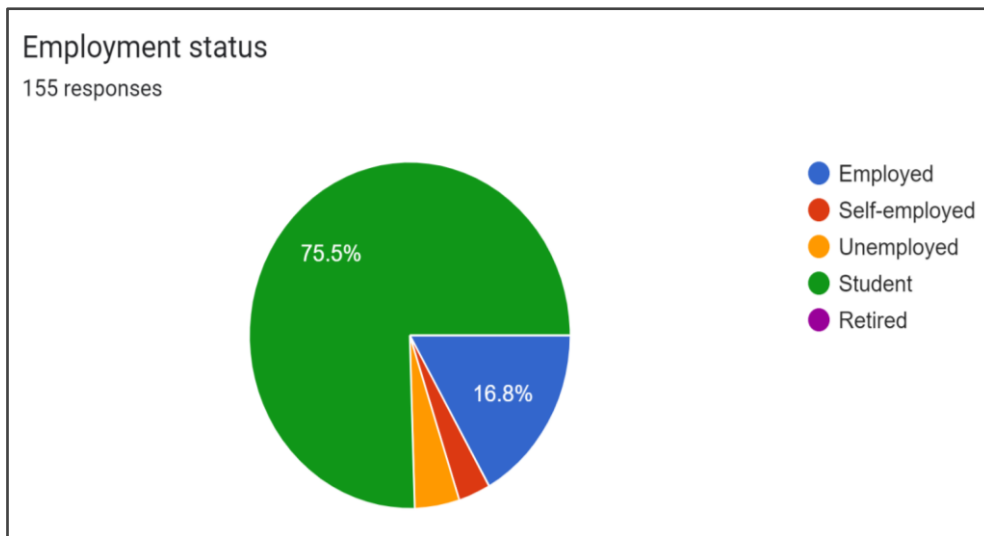
To achieve promising results in a study, it is important to guarantee the qualities of the methodology used to measure the survey, namely validity and reliability. Validity refers to the ability and accuracy of the methodology used to measure the variables. Reliability on the other hand can be understood as the stability and consistency of the results when using the same methodology under the same set of conditions (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020). Thus, to ensure the research objectives are being accomplished, validity and reliability must be practised.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

**4.1 Demographic**

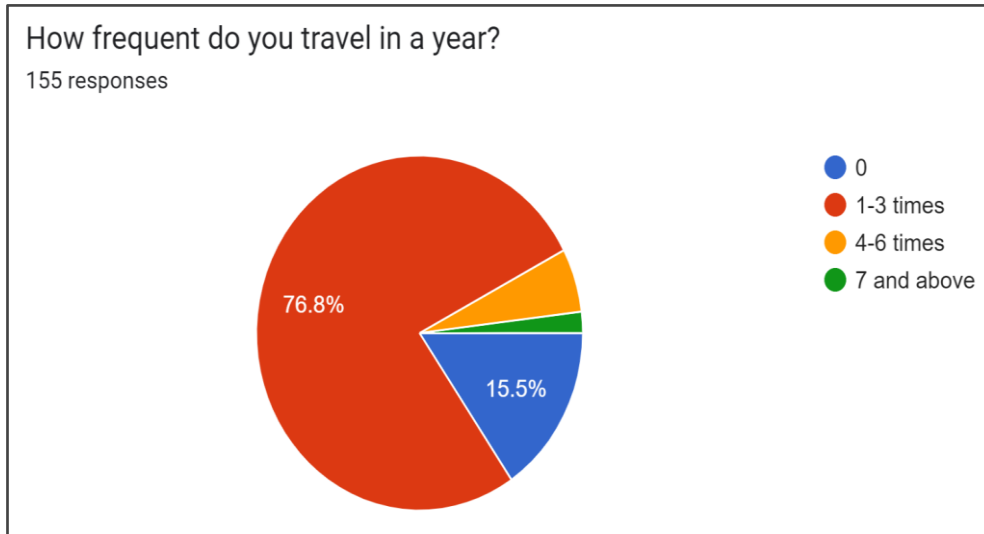
**Figure 4.1: Respondents' gender.**

Among the 155 respondents who took part in the online survey, 59.4% (92 people) of the respondents are female while the remaining 40.6% (63 people) are male respondents.



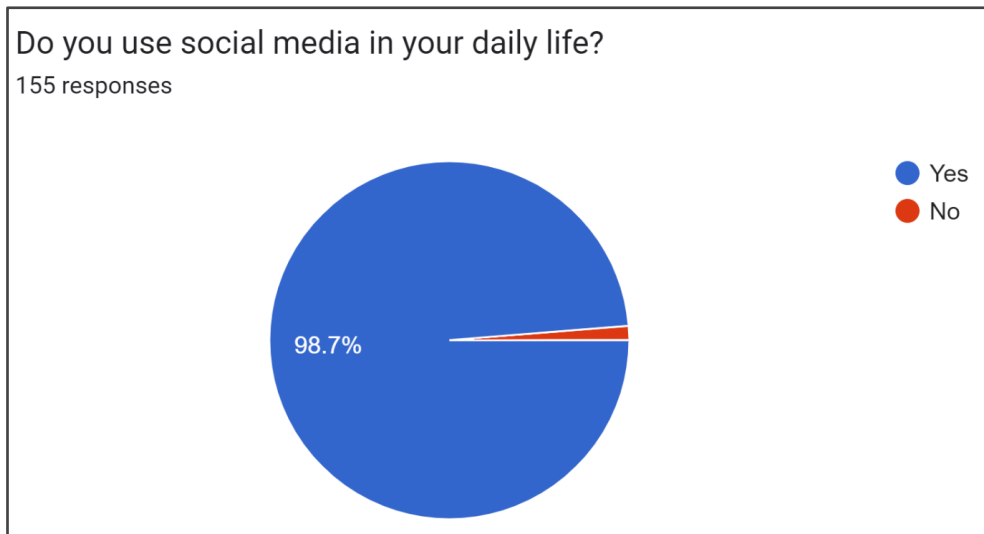
**Figure 4.2: Respondents' employment status.**

Out of the 155 respondents who took part in the online survey, it was found that the majority of the respondents were made up of students with a percentage of 75.5% (117 people). The minority of the respondents are self-employed with a percentage of 3.2% (5 people). The remaining respondents were made up of employed and unemployed people with the percentage of 16.8% (26 people) and 4.5% (7 people) respectively. It was noticed that none of the respondents were retirees.



**Figure 4.3 Respondents' frequency of travelling in a year.**

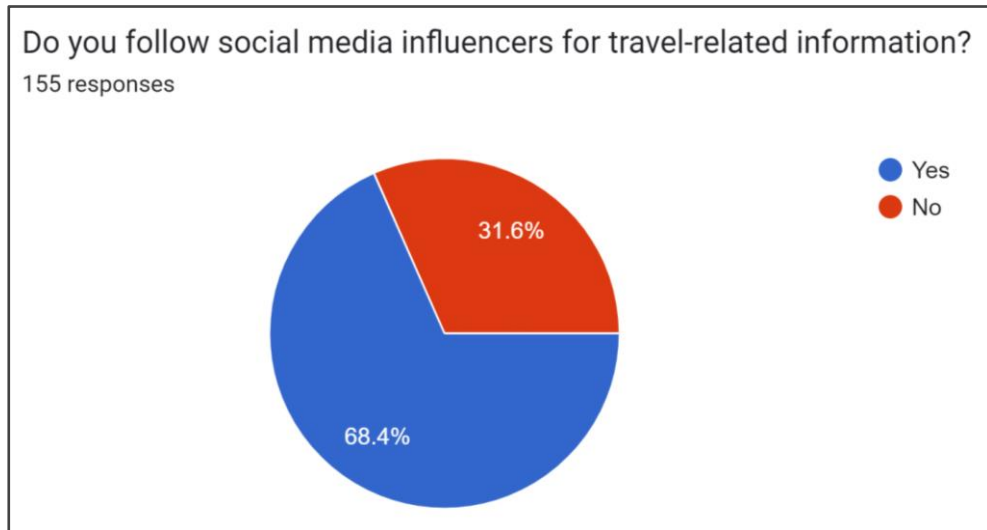
Based on the pie chart above, shows that most respondents (76.8% or 119 people) travel 1 to 3 times in a year. Only 1.9% of the respondents travel 7 times and above in a year (3 people). 15.5% of the respondents (24 people) have not been travelling in a year and 5.8% of the respondents (9 people) travel 4 to 6 times in a year.



**Figure 4.4: The use of social media in respondents' daily life.**

The pie chart above shows the majority of the respondents with a percentage of 98.7% (153 people) use social media in their daily lives while the remaining 1.3% of respondents (2 people) do not use social media in their daily lives.

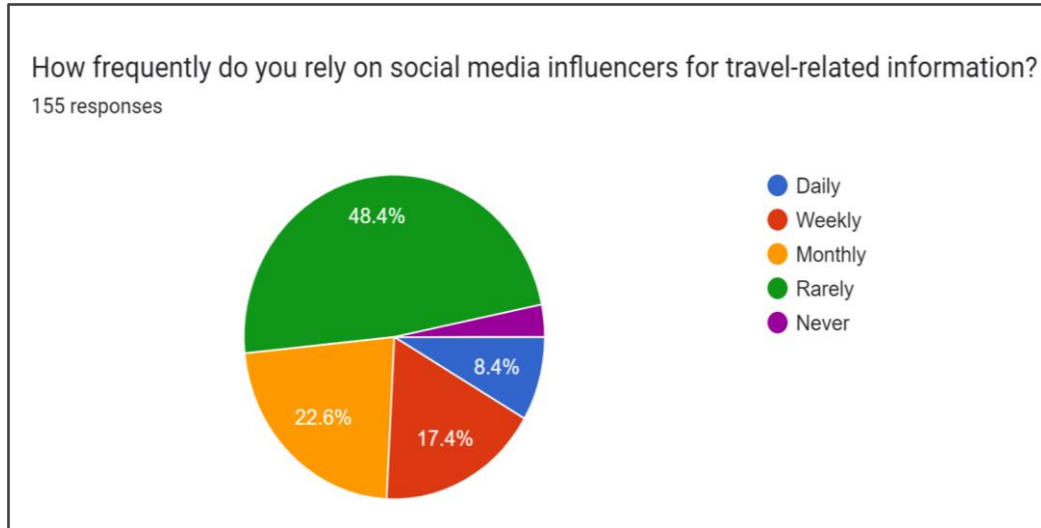
## 4.2 The Utilisation of Social Media Influencers for Travel-Related Information



**Figure 4.5: Respondents' following social media influencers for travel-related information.**

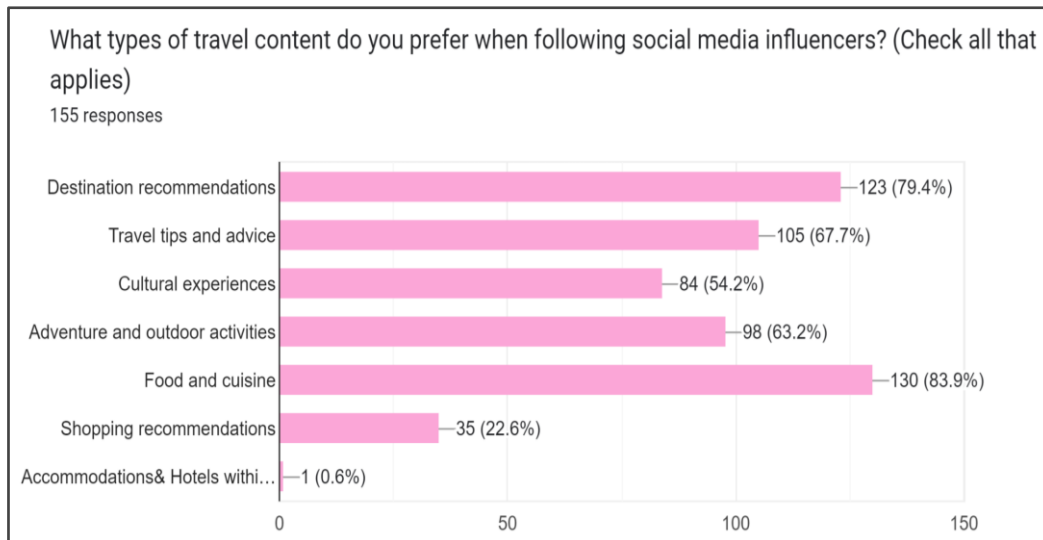
This section's purpose is to present the utilisation of social media influencers for travel-related information. Among the 155 respondents who took part in the online survey, it was noted that a majority of the respondents with a percentage of 68.4% (106 people) do follow social media influencers for travel-related information. While the remaining 31.6% of respondents (49 people) do not follow social media influencers for the purpose of travel-related information.





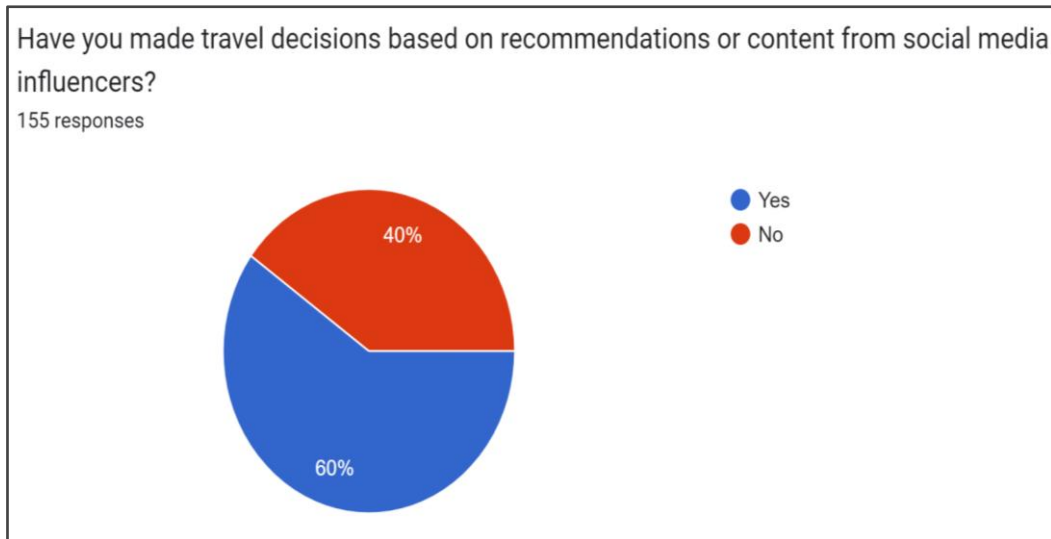
**Figure 4.6: The frequency of respondents relying on social media influencers for travel-related information.**

Figure 4.6 shows that the majority of respondents which is 48.4% of respondents (75 people) rarely rely on social media influencers for travel-related information, while the majority of respondents consisting of 3.2% of them (5 people) never rely on social media influencers for travel-related information. The remaining respondents rely monthly, weekly and daily on social media influencers for travel-related information. These respondents were made up of 22.6% of the respondents (35 people), 17.4% of the respondents (27 people) and 8.4% of the respondents (13 people) respectively.

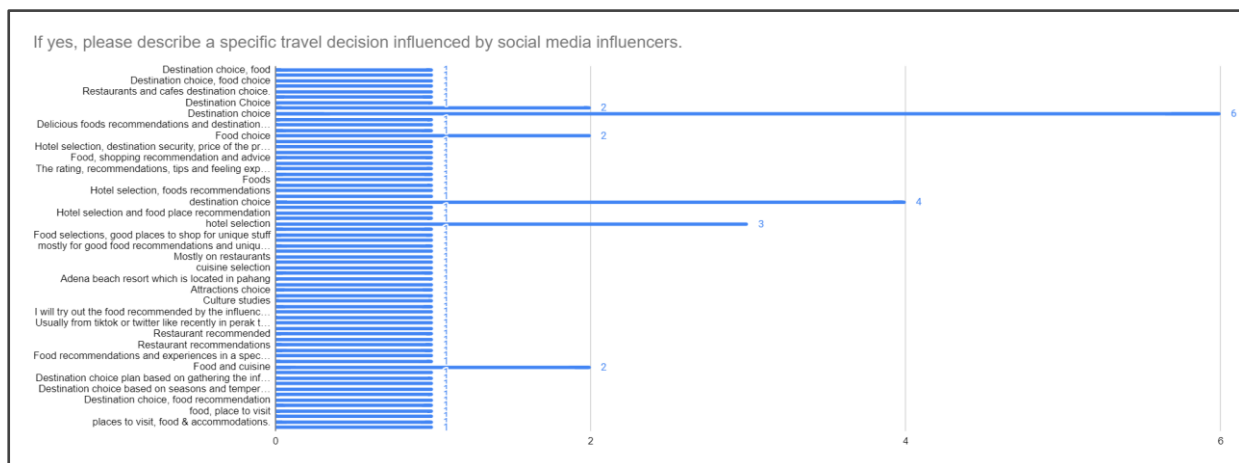


**Graph 4.1: Respondents' pick of travel content by social media influencers.**

Based on the graph above, it was shown that 83.9% of respondents (130 people) which is the majority of them have a liking for food and cuisine travel content. Meanwhile, the minority of them consisting of 0.6% of respondents (1 person) take an interest in the accommodations and hotels within the budget categories of travel content. Four types of travel content received a decent amount of interest from the respondents, namely destination recommendations (79.4% or 123 respondents), travel tips and advice (67.7% or 105 respondents), cultural experiences (54.2% or 84 respondents) as well as adventure and outdoor activities travel content (63.2% or 98 respondents). Another travel content that does not receive as much interest is the shopping recommendations travel content with a percentage of 22.6% of respondents (35 people) choosing it.



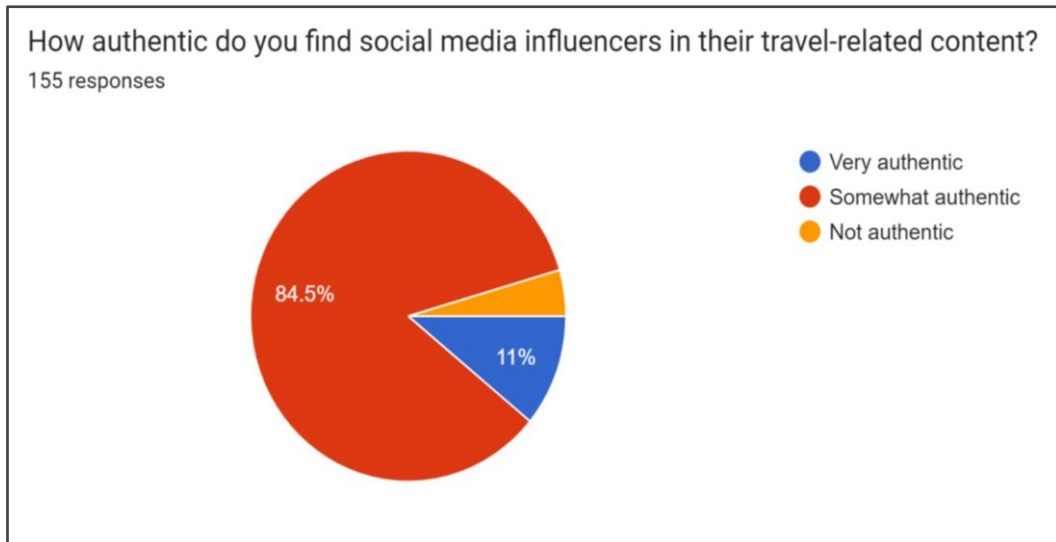
**Figure 4.7: The influence of social media influencers on respondents’ travel decisions.**



**Graph 4.2: Respondents describing a specific travel decision influenced by social media influencers.**

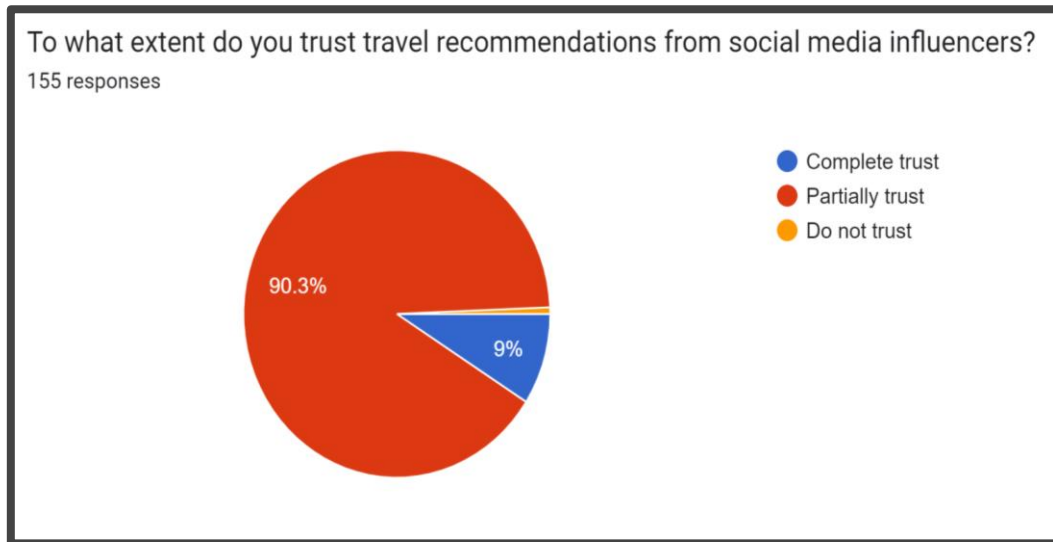
According to the pie chart above, 60% of respondents (93 people) made travel decisions based on recommendations or content from social media influencers. Meanwhile, the remaining 40% of respondents (62 people) do not make travel decisions solely on social media influencers’ recommendations or content. Among the 93 respondents who made travel decisions based on recommendations or content from social media influencers, it was observed some of the major aspects that most respondents have in common, and value are destination

choices and food choices. Meanwhile, the minor aspects that not many respondents deem important are accommodation choices and prices of products/services.



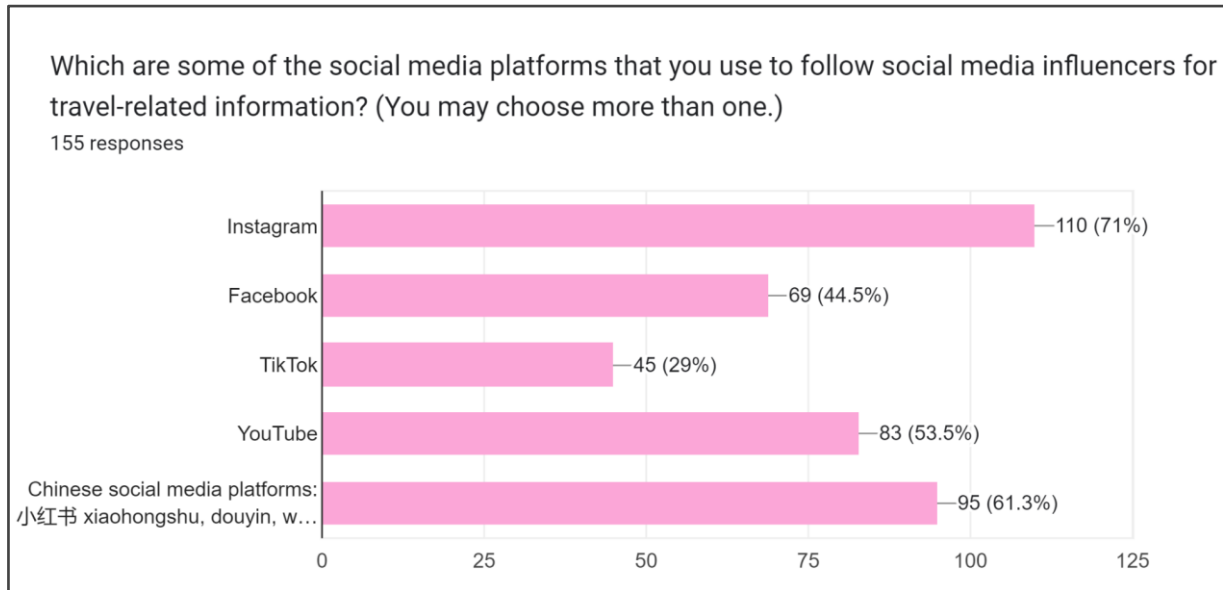
**Figure 4.8: Respondents' thoughts on the authenticity of social media influencers in their travel-related content.**

Based on Figure 4.8, it was observed that the majority of respondents which is 84.5% of them (131 people) find the social media influencers to be somewhat authentic with their travel-related content. The remaining 11% of respondents (17 people) think that the social media influencers are very authentic in their travel-related content while 4.5% of the respondents (7 people) think that the social media influencers are not authentic in their travel-related content.



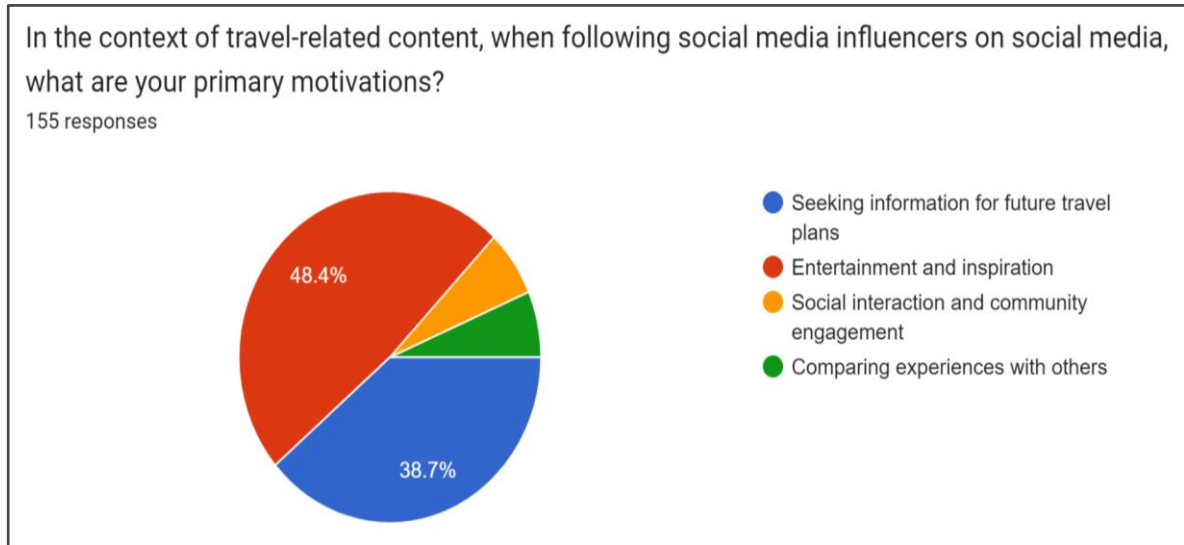
**Figure 4.9: Respondents' trust in social media influencers.**

In terms of respondents' trust in social media influencers, based on the pie chart, it was shown that 90.3% of the respondents (140 people) have partial trust in social media influencers. 9% of the respondents (14 people) have complete trust in social media influencers meanwhile the remaining 1 person (0.6 of the respondents) does not trust social media influencers at all.



**Graph 4.3: The social media platforms that respondents used to follow social media influencers for travel-related information.**

Looking at the graph above, it was seen that most of the respondents prefer Instagram and Chinese social media platforms (consisting of xiaohongshu, douyin, weibo, etc). These two platforms spot 71% and 61.3% of respondents respectively (110 and 95 people respectively). The remaining social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and TikTok are some other social media platforms that were preferred by the respondents as well. 53.5% of the respondents (83 people) follow social media influencers for travel-related information on YouTube, 44.5% of the respondents use Facebook to follow social media influencers for travel-related information, while the remaining 29% of the respondents (45 people) pick TikTok to follow social media influencers for travel-related information.

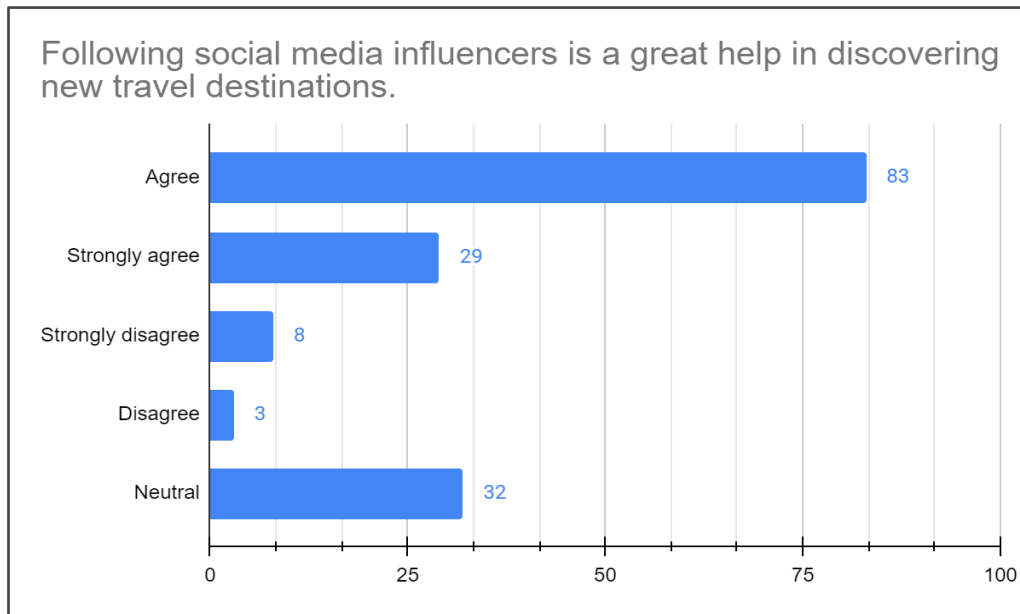


**Figure 4.10: Respondents' primary motivations for following social media influencers on social media in the context of travel-related content.**

Observing the pie chart above, the majority of respondents consisted of 48.4% of them (75 people) tend to seek entertainment and inspiration motivation when following social media influencers on social media in the context of travel-related content. Both motivations on social interaction and community engagement as well as comparing experiences with others have an equal amount of 10 respondents (6.5% of the respondents). Meanwhile, the remaining 38.7% of respondents (60 people) pick seeking information for future travel plans as their motivation to follow social media influencers on social media in the context of travel-related content.

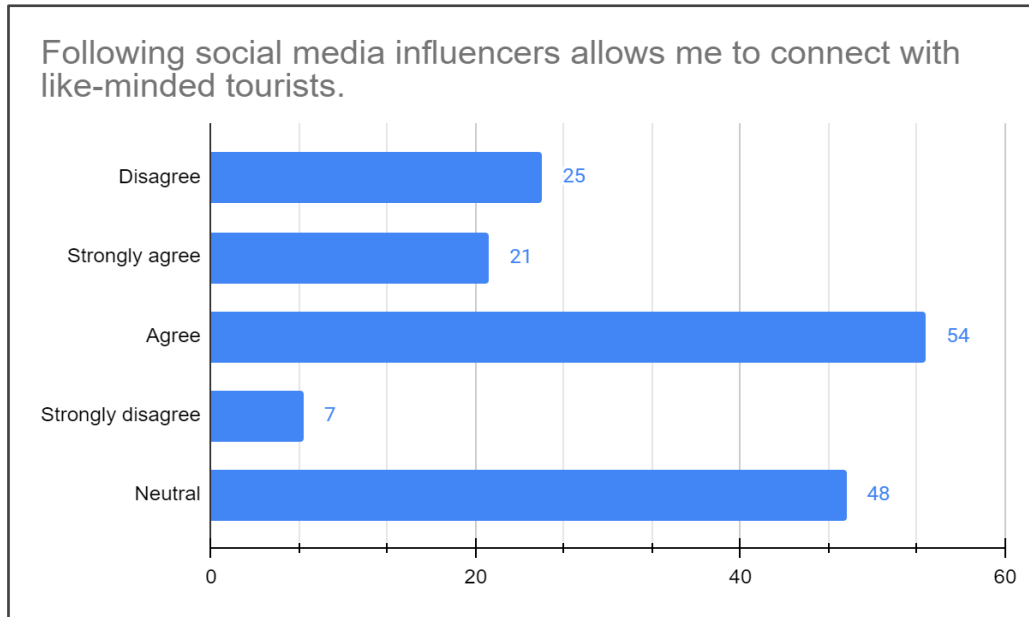


### 4.3 The Utilisation of Social Media Influencers and the Uses and Gratifications Theory



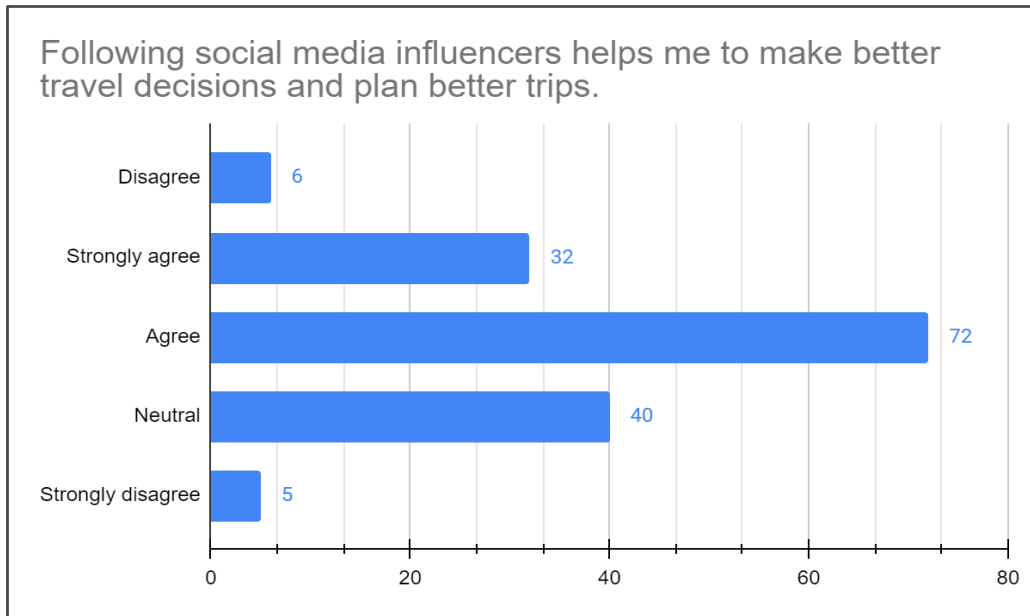
**Graph 4.4: Respondents' thoughts on "following social media influencers is a great help in discovering new travel destinations."**

This section will display the results on the utilisation of social media influencers and the Uses and Gratifications theory. The first statement as shown in the graph above: Following social media influencers is a great help in discovering new travel destinations. Among the 155 respondents, the majority of them consisted of 83 respondents who agreed with the statement with a minority of 3 respondents who disagreed with this statement. The respondents' reactions vary as 32 respondents choose to take a neutral stand on the statement, while 29 respondents strongly agree with the statement and finally, 8 respondents strongly disagree with the statement.



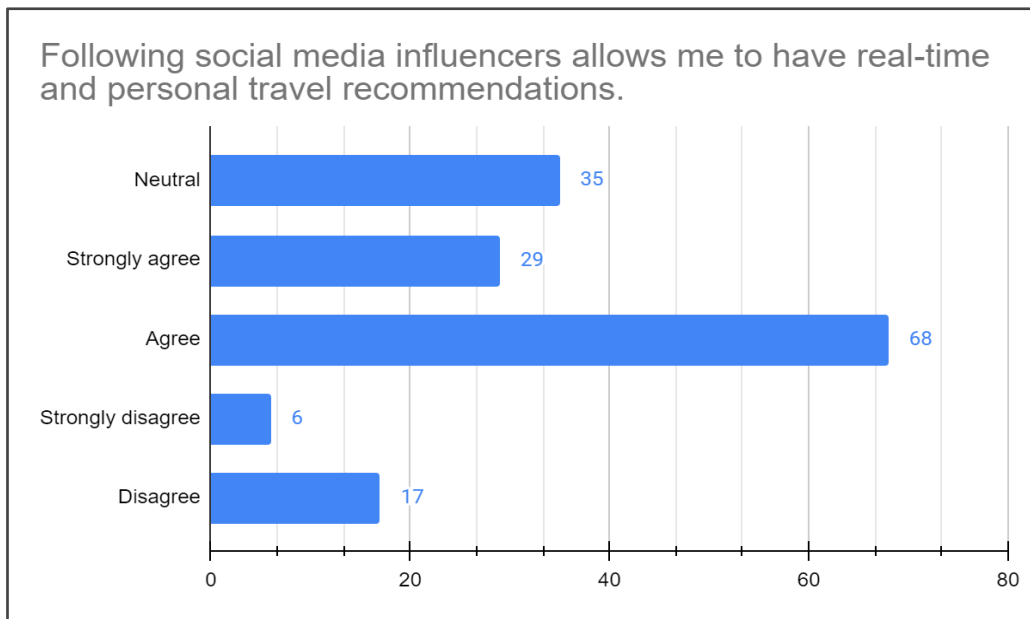
**Graph 4.5: Respondents' thoughts on "following social media influencers allows me to connect with like-minded tourists."**

Looking at the graph above, the second statement is: "Following social media influencers allows me to connect with like-minded tourists." Most respondents made up of 54 people agree with the statement while 7 respondents were found to strongly disagree with the statement. A total of 48 respondents chose to take a neutral stance. However, 25 respondents disagree with the statement and 21 respondents strongly agree with the statement.



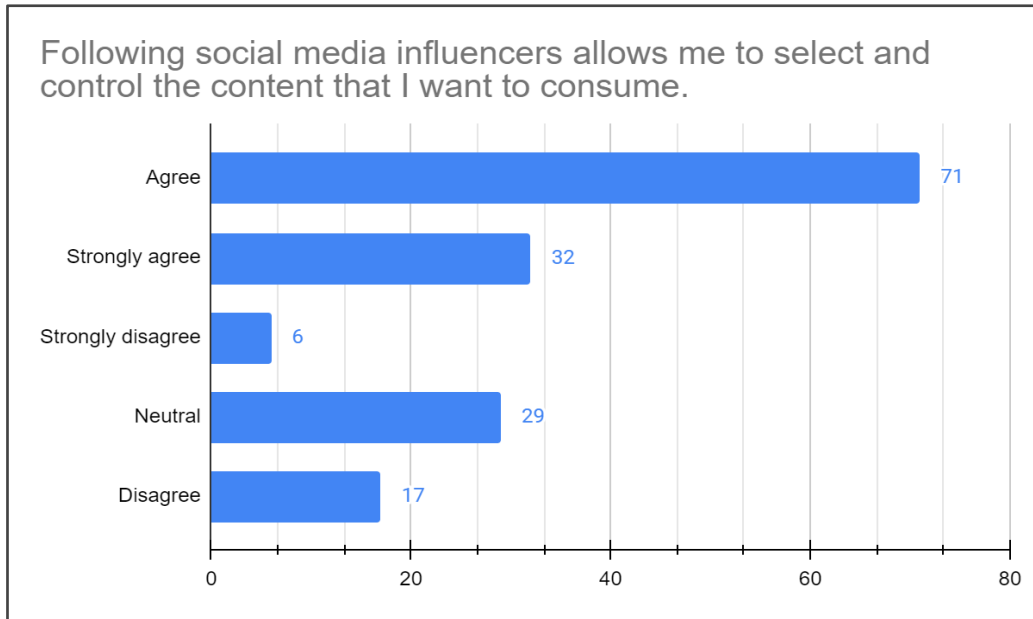
**Graph 4.6: Respondents' thoughts on "following social media influencers helps me to make better travel decisions and plan better trips."**

Moving on to the third statement: Following social media influencers helps me to make better travel decisions and plan better trips. 72 respondents which is the majority of them agree with the statement. In contrast, the minority of them consisted of 5 respondents who strongly disagreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 6 respondents were found to disagree with the statement; 32 respondents strongly agreed with the statement; 40 respondents stayed neutral regarding the statement.



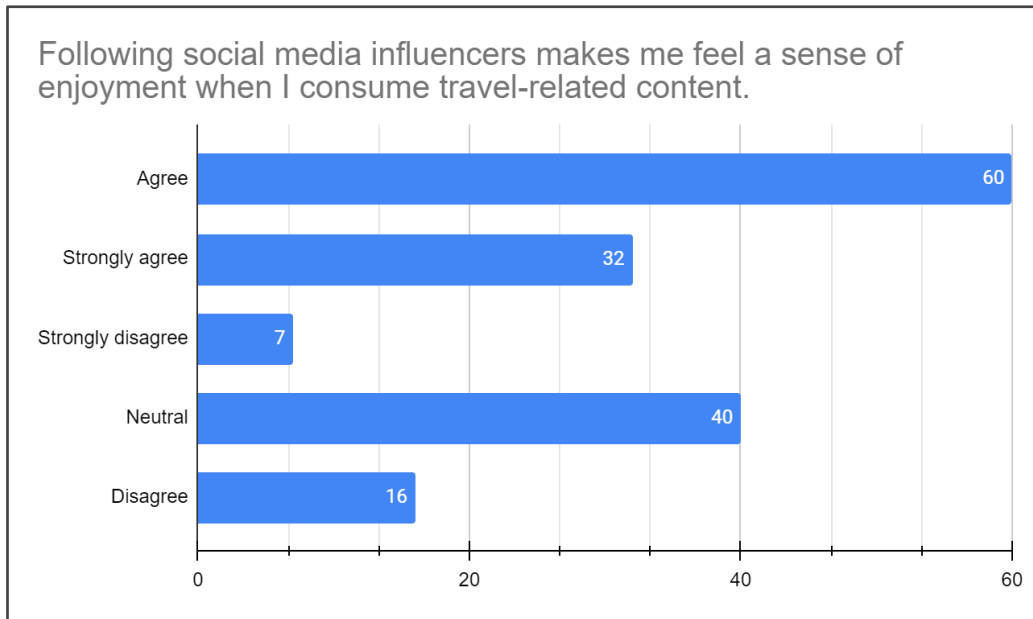
**Graph 4.7: Respondents' thoughts on "following social media influencers allows me to have real-time and personal travel recommendations."**

Based on graph 4.7, the fourth statement is: Following social media influencers allows me to have real-time and personal travel recommendations. Regarding this statement, the majority of the respondents recorded 68 people agreeing with the statement while the minority of the respondents recorded 6 people that strongly disagreed with the statement. In the graph, it was observed that 35 respondents took a neutral stance on the statement; 29 of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement; and 17 respondents were found to disagree with the statement.



**Graph 4.8: Respondents' thoughts on "following social media influencers allows me to select and control the content that I want to consume."**

The above graph shows the fifth statement: Following social media influencers allows me to select and control the content that I want to consume. Based on this statement, it was observed that the majority of respondents consisted of 71 people who agreed with the statement while the minority of respondents consisted of 6 people who strongly disagreed with the statement. Other than that, 32 respondents strongly agreed with the statement; 29 respondents remained neutral with the statement; and 17 respondents disagreed with the statement.



**Graph 4.9: Respondents' thoughts on "following social media influencers makes me feel a sense of enjoyment when I consume travel-related content."**

Graph 4.9 concludes the last statement: Following social media influencers makes me feel a sense of enjoyment when I consume travel-related content. To this statement, it shows that 60 respondents agreed with the statement, making them the majority of respondents. 7 respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, making them the minority of respondents. At the same time, 32 respondents strongly agreed with the statement; 40 of the respondents held a neutral stance with the statement; and 16 of the respondents disagreed with the statement.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion

In this technology-filled modern world, there are countless social media platforms with diverse functions that cater to different people. These social media platforms have become an essential and inseparable part of everyone's daily lives. This study has two research questions. The first research question seeks to find out how tourists utilise SMIs to seek travel-related questions. In order to do that, Google Forms (online survey) were created and distributed to people living within Klang Valley. Data were collected from 155 respondents. Results show that 98.7% of respondents which is also equivalent to 153 respondents are social media users. Among these 153 respondents, it was revealed that 106 respondents follow SMIs for travel-related information. This indicates that most young adults rely on SMIs when it comes to seeking travel-related information. Furthermore, results also show that the content they prioritise when following SMIs are (from most to least): food and cuisine, destination recommendations, travel tips and advice, adventure and outdoor activities, cultural experiences shopping recommendations as well as accommodations and hotels within the budget. This concludes that SMIs play an important role in attracting tourists, given that SMIs publish content that is in line with the tourists' preferences (Liu et al., 2020). The results also reveal that despite the existence of many other platforms, SMIs successfully become an alternative that tourists look for as they are able to provide a specific motivation: information seeking (Dolan et al., 2019). Which also falls under the category of utilitarian gratification. Other than that, the results also suggest that most young adults like to use Instagram. The reason young adults are more attracted to this particular social media platform is because of its heavily visual-based content (Curcic, 2023).

The second research question of this study seeks to find out does utilising SMIs to seek travel-related information matches the Uses and Gratifications theory. In the online survey, this specific section contains six questions that were based on the perspective of the three types of gratifications, namely: hedonic gratification, utilitarian gratification and social gratification. The questions will be grouped into each respective gratifications.

- Hedonic gratification
  - Question 6: Following social media influencers makes me feel a sense of enjoyment when I consume travel-related content.
- Utilitarian gratification
  - Question 1: Following social media influencers is a great help in discovering new travel destinations.
  - Question 3: Following social media influencers helps me to make better travel decisions and plan better trips.
  - Question 4: Following social media influencers allows me to have real-time and personal travel recommendations.
  - Question 5: Following social media influencers allows me to select and control the content that I want to consume.
- Social gratification
  - Question 2: Following social media influencers allows me to connect with like-minded tourists.

Based on these questions, results unveiled that a majority of respondents agree with all of these statements. This shows that all three of the gratifications: hedonic gratification, utilitarian gratification and social gratification are acquired through the utilisation of SMIs for travel-related purposes as most respondents have partial trust towards the SMIs' recommendations. Additionally, most respondents also find the SMIs' travel-related content to



be somewhat authentic. These show that the respondents trust and find the SMIs' content authentic to a certain extent. Trust and content authenticity play a part in the gratification factors in the context of SMIs and tourism (Tariyal et al., 2022).

In short, SMIs are a great help in the tourism industry. The act of targeting young adults' motivation for travel information makes SMIs an easy and great option compared to other alternatives as social media platforms have been an inseparable part of everyone's day-to-day lives. Not to mention, these days social media platforms are easily accessible around the world. SMIs gain followers while these young adults will be able to do a lot of things with the information consumed through the SMIs. Moving forward, among the three gratifications listed, it is confirmed that not everyone will experience the same gratification just because they perform or are involved in the same thing, it depends entirely on the purposes of the young adults performing one action(s).

## **5.2 Limitations**

There are several limitations identified throughout this research. For starters, the young adults in this research are between the age of 18 to 25 years old. However, it was found that the age range to define young adults is not unified across the country as there are a number of official websites that have different views regarding this matter. As a result, this will affect the accuracy of the data collected. Adding on, the 155 respondents are based on young adults living within the Klang Valley area. This shows that the sample size is not only small but the study area is small too as it only covers a small section of Malaysia. Thus affecting the accuracy of the data as well.

## **5.3 Recommendations**

Based on the limitations mentioned, recommendations will be provided accordingly. Firstly, the age range to define young adults should be standardised to prevent confusion.

Secondly, it is advised to increase the sample size in terms of the number of respondents and possibly the study area by focusing on a state rather than an urban conglomeration such as Klang Valley. These recommendations can be of help in ensuring the accuracy of the data.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

To sum up, this study on the importance of SMIs' exposure to young adults in Malaysia's tourism industry in the context of the Uses and Gratifications approach is able to provide more insights and identify the motivations behind tourists' preference for SMIs over other sources of travel information and the specific gratifications derived by tourists when using SMIs for travel-related purposes. The implementation of the Uses and Gratifications theory in this study is able to prove that young adults choose SMIs among plenty of other available options because of the motivations they have. This is especially true because the Uses and Gratifications theory states that people are active users as they actively search for and utilise different media channels to fulfil their personal needs and objectives. Also, it is because social media platforms are a permanent part of everyone's daily lives so naturally, SMIs will be an option. Moreover, most young adults are shown to have achieved all the gratifications available when they use SMIs for travel-related purposes. This is especially supported and shown in the research data. Young adults seek happiness through engaging in enjoyable experiences in which they have fun following SMIs, they also follow SMIs to seek related information, and they are able to connect with others as well through following SMIs.

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## Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

Section 1 of 4

## A Study of the Uses and Gratifications Approach: Importance of Social Media Influencers' Exposure to Young Adults in Malaysia's Tourism Industry

Greetings, I am Tan Mae San, currently a final year Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) student majoring in Bachelor of Corporate Communication (Honours). This survey is conducted as a study using the Uses and Gratifications Approach to assess the importance of social media influencers' exposure to young adults in Malaysia's tourism industry.

The research will ensure that the information and responses collected will be kept private and confidential.

Again, thank you for your participation in this survey.

Section A Demographic questions

Description (optional)

**Gender \***

Female

Male

**Employment status \***

Employed

Self-employed

Unemployed

Student

Retired

How frequent do you travel in a year? \*

- 0
- 1-3 times
- 4-6 times
- 7 and above

Do you use social media in your daily life? \*

- Yes
- No

Section 3 of 4

Section B Utilising Social Media Influencers for Travel-Related Information



Description (optional)

Do you follow social media influencers for travel-related information? \*

- Yes
- No

How frequently do you rely on social media influencers for travel-related information? \*

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Rarely
- Never

What types of travel content do you prefer when following social media influencers? (Check all \* that applies)

- Destination recommendations
- Travel tips and advice
- Cultural experiences
- Adventure and outdoor activities
- Food and cuisine
- Shopping recommendations
- Other...

Have you made travel decisions based on recommendations or content from social media influencers? \*

- Yes
- No

If yes, please describe a specific travel decision influenced by social media influencers. (e.g., destination choice, hotel selection).

Long answer text

How authentic do you find social media influencers in their travel-related content? \*

- Very authentic
- Somewhat authentic
- Not authentic

To what extent do you trust travel recommendations from social media influencers? \*

- Complete trust
- Partially trust
- Do not trust

Which are some of the social media platforms that you use to follow social media influencers \*  
for travel-related information? (You may choose more than one.)

- Instagram
- Facebook
- TikTok
- YouTube
- Chinese social media platforms: 小红书 xiaohongshu, douyin, weibo...
- Other...

In the context of travel-related content, when following social media influencers on social \*  
media, what are your primary motivations?

- Seeking information for future travel plans
- Entertainment and inspiration
- Social interaction and community engagement
- Comparing experiences with others
- Other...

### Section C Utilising Social Media Influencers and the Uses and Gratifications Theory

Choose the respective boxes to indicate how much you agree with the following \*  
statements.

(Scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Following social media influencers is a great help in discovering new travel destinations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Following social media influencers allows me to connect with like-minded tourists.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Following social media influencers helps me to make better travel decisions and plan better trips.

Following social media influencers allows me to have real-time and personal travel recommendations.

Following social media influencers allows me to select and control the content that I want to consume.

Following social media influencers makes me feel a sense of enjoyment when I consume travel-related content.