

**Who can change our minds?: Key factors of online travel communities'  
influence on travel intention**

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# WHO CAN CHANGE OUR MINDS?: KEY FACTORS OF ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITIES' INFLUENCE ON TRAVEL INTENTION

## ABSTRACT

User-generated reviews are becoming important sources of information on travel. In literature, the importance of user-generated content when making travel decisions was mostly focused on the message or the person conveying it. The actual platform on which the review was posted has become prominent only recently. Though much has been researched, there is still a gap in the literature on what factors of these communities contribute to higher travel intention. In this study, an extended model of Theory of planned behaviour was used to understand these factors and fill in the gap. Predictors of behaviour such as user experience of the platforms, travel involvement and eWOM scepticism as well as source credibility were chosen to best research the problem. To answer the research question, an experimental study has to be carried out. First, to test travel intention, the island Tenerife was chosen as a destination, based on Eurostat statistics. Next, a pre-test was completed to determine the message and picture of the review about Tenerife. Lastly, an experiment was carried out using travel platforms Instagram, TripAdvisor and Google Maps as independent variables. The survey was disseminated amongst major Europeans and people living in Europe. 196 responses were gathered and analyzed using SPSS. It was shown that source credibility is significantly different on each platform. It also influences travel intention, while user experience turned out to be influential of perceived credibility. Interestingly, eWOM scepticism had no mediation effect on travel intention. Lastly, travel involvement showed no moderation effect on source credibility. The findings also show the highest eWOM scepticism on Instagram and the highest credibility on Google Maps. Furthermore, though not significantly different, user experience did differ amongst platforms, emphasizing the importance of easy user experience and good design. The implications of the study contribute to professionals in tourism and marketing to plan their campaigns and prepare highly targeted promotions of the services using adequate platforms. Moreover, a discussion on the differences amongst the platforms and their benefits are also explained. These implications could be beneficial for the platforms to adapt to the public and make their content more credible.

**KEYWORDS:** *travel intention, online travel platforms, source credibility, eWOM skepticism, theory of planned behaviour*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Europeans love to travel. The number of personal trips has been consistently rising and with it, the number of sources to plan the vacations with. Since then, not only has the planning part of travelling transformed, but the acquisition and dissemination of information surrounding travelling have undergone deep changes. The way travel decisions are made has drastically changed in the last two decades, mostly due to the emergence of Web 2.0. The traditional face to face communication or word-of-mouth (WOM) has been replaced by electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM). This change influenced not only the number of information sources but also the credibility of these sources since many users can now be anonymous, while information can be misguiding or false. In my thesis, I want to explore the importance of credibility for travel intention while also researching what makes a certain source credible now that WOM has been replaced by eWOM.

Presently, eWOM has become an important and permanent part of a marketing mix in the tourism sector (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008), influencing future travellers and impacting their travel intentions. More and more travellers are making their purchases online, which are in the majority of times affected by online reviews (Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011). Tourism managers subsequently need to be aware of these procurements and tailor the reviews to their clients. This encompasses the contents of reviews as well as the environment in which they are placed. While a great deal is known about what persuades people to follow online reviews, little is known about which factors contribute to follow the reviews in specific online communities, such as travel platforms (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2011).

Casalo et al. (2011) found out that attitude is the key determinant of travel intention, with trust and perceived usefulness as important antecedents. Moreover, they tested the personal characteristics of respondents to research their influence on travel intention. Their findings were similar to Lam and Hsu (2005), who also focused on three groups of factors influencing behaviour; source of advice, nature of the advice, and personal characteristics of travellers. Both studies were complemented by Soliman's (2019) research on tourists' intentions to revisit a destination. All these and many more studies (Hsu & Huang, 2012) focus on attitudes and therefore place overall emphasis on the attempt to travel, not the actual act of travelling. In my research, I aim to achieve just that. I want to investigate the factors

contributing to the action of travel by reading reviews on online travel communities. As most of the research mentioned before consistently proves that credibility plays an important role in the process, source credibility is used as the precursor of travel intention.

Therefore, the study will investigate the factors contributing to source credibility and further travel intention. It will contemplate the factors from previous studies and expand on understanding with new, additional attributes.

RQ: Which factors of online travel communities most contribute to perceived eWOM credibility and further travel intention?

Understanding the importance of the credibility of the travel community and the characteristics that determine it can be beneficial in many areas of society. Firstly, it can help people working in the tourism industry understand what makes platforms credible and focus on improving those characteristics in their promotions. Moreover, it may advise them on which online platforms are best to endorse their services or products. Since trip planning is in 75% done on the Internet (Casalo et al., 2011), this information can be extremely helpful in reaching future travellers. Similarly, the results can help professionals in advertising and marketing. Identifying the most credible and influential platforms can help them frame the campaigns on the most adequate platforms for their target group. Lastly, it could also help online travel communities to discover what sets them apart from other communities. Since the data will compare three different online travel platforms TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps, the results can show their significant features that improve or lessen credibility.

To answer my research question, a theoretical framework that would encompass factors influencing travel intention needs to be defined. I refer to the Theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), which despite its simplicity greatly contributes to the understanding of the behaviour of individuals. Based on the framework, the independent variables are online travel platforms TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps and my dependant variables are source credibility and travel intention. Next, I need to find the factors that could be contributing to source credibility. Considering eWOM has started to influence every aspect of travel, businesses are finding ways to incorporate eWOM into their marketing strategies,

using consumer online reviews to promote their service or destination (Cheung et al., 2008). This has led to an emergence of new phenomena, known as eWOM scepticism. This factor is also included in the analysis. It is revealed as distrust in eWOM connections due to certain characteristics of the source, such as anonymity, withheld payments etc. (Zhang, Ko, & Carpenter, 2016). As suggested by Casalo, et al. (2011) I also consider travel involvement as one of the factors contributing to source credibility. For the last factor, following the recommendations by Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee (2012), I include user experience as one of the important characteristics.

To answer the research question, this thesis resorts to quantitative research using an experiment as a method. It assures that I can compare the answers for each platform and thus contrast their characteristics. By choosing an experiment as a method, I also had to conduct a pre-test that analysed the most appropriate review and the pictures to use in the final survey. The distribution of the survey took place in May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and included everyone from Europe above the age of 18. After, a presentation the results for each hypothesis and discussion of the findings can be found. At the end of the thesis, I also state the limitations and recommendations for further research.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Europe, travelling as a free-time activity has continuously grown in popularity since the Second World War (Blackall, 2019). Its consequences were apparent in advances in the air industry that consequently led to a mass transport system. Tourism soon became and was treated as an industry, giving rise to package tours in the 1950s. These not only enabled cheaper travel but also an increase in revenue for tourism services (Pearce, 1982). Following this burst, since the 1960s, tourism and travel have also gained great interest in an academic sphere, receiving more and more attention in various disciplines, especially in social sciences and psychology. Academia first struggled with the definitions of tourism and tourist, which are, especially from the research perspective, two different entities (Pearce, 1982). Though not exhaustive and in some instances too broad, the basis of the definition of a tourist remained the same since the beginning. A tourist is a "temporary visitor staying at least 24 hours in the country visited" (Pearce, 1982, p. 3), as long as the visit is motivated by either health, education, spiritual values or self-indulgence. Though it was later altered to encompass also the daily tourists, this definition will be used in the thesis.

As described, people have been tourists for several decades, and while the means of transport and the number of destinations have been changing, so have the travel decisions and planning. It has been researched that tourists account for several different information sources to determine the image of the destination. These sources can be divided into two components: the organic, including people's own experiences and non-commercial information, and induced, including mainly commercial messages. In the past, tourists have mostly relied on organic sources (family and friends), as well as some print messages such as brochures. Later, the number of sources grew with the rise of touristic TV programs and the Internet. Now, with the rise of Web 2.0, the number of information sources has not only increased, but tourists can now become information sources themselves (Sparks & Pan, 2008).

When choosing a travel destination, future tourists are thus faced with countless information sources that can alter or amplify their travel intention. These sources can also differ based on which phase of travel one decides to use them. They can be categorized into pre-purchase sources and sources at the destination (Sparks & Pan, 2008). Since I want to research travel intention in this thesis, I will only focus on pre-purchase information sources.

The decision-making process leading up to a choice of destination is complex and long-lasting. To understand the psychological and social cues surrounding the tourist's intention to travel, I will base my research on the theory of planned behaviour.

## **2.1 Theory of planned behaviour**

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is a well-known socio-psychological theory, developed by Ajzen in 1985. The theory is an extension of the theory of reasoned action that with a simple model aims to explain the informational and motivational influences on behaviour. In his model, Ajzen (1985, p. 29) clarifies that the behavioural intention "is an intention to try to perform a certain behaviour". By this, he heightens the importance of understanding that intention is an attempt to achieve certain behaviour, not an actual prediction of that behaviour being carried out. The more control someone has over their actions and factors influencing it, the higher the chance that intention will end in attempted behaviour (Ajzen, 1985).

In many studies (Hsu & Huang, 2012; Sparks & Pan, 2008; Yuzhanin and Fisher, 2016) as well as in the TPB model, the intention is often thought of as predecessor of behaviour. Several factors influence and predict behavioural intention. These factors are behavioural, normative and control beliefs (Ajzen, 1985) which further develop into three elements immediately predicting behavioural intention (as shown in Figure 2.1):

1. Attitude towards the behaviour that covers only the attitude toward the target behaviour and not the object of evaluation (Ajzen, 1985). In tourism, such attitudes could include feelings towards a travel service formed on different attributes (Hsu & Huang, 2012).
2. Subjective norms encompass tourists' perceptions of what others may think of their behaviour, especially family and friends, and the need to comply with these perceptions (Ajzen, 1985). When travelling, tourists may worry about the family's feelings towards their travel destination or the services used there (Sparks & Pan, 2008).
3. Perceived behavioural control (PBC) highlights that tourists' perception of their ability to perform a behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). Tourists often struggle with time restrictions, money problems or cultural differences when choosing a travel destination (Sparks & Pan, 2008).

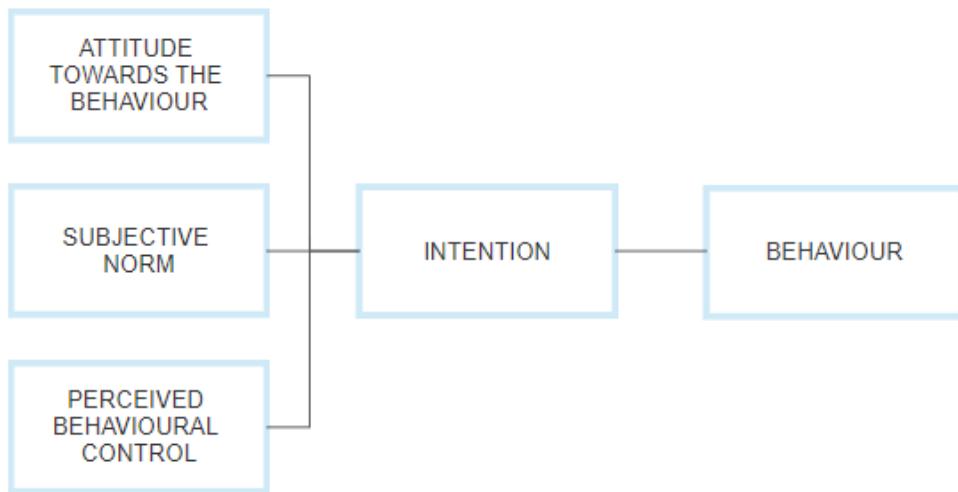


Figure 2.1: Model of a Theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985)

TPB model has been extensively used in the research of tourism and tourist behaviour. For instance, Lam and Hsu (2004) used it when predicting the influence of past behaviour on behavioural intention and the choice of travel destination. Hsu and Huang (2012) successfully extended the model focusing on marketing implications of their findings of the influence of images and positive messages on travel intention. Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016) researched the efficacy of the model for predicting travel intentions. They found out that the model is applicable when the behaviour is precisely defined and that the model is still sufficient also when adding new variables to it. This implies that using this model also requires some critical perspective during the research, but an addition of new variables or expansion of existing ones does not make the model less applicable. If anything, consideration of just one variable due to its simplicity and specificity is even encouraged by Ajzen (1985) and other authors. Finally, Sparks and Pan (2008) also confirmed the sufficiency of the model when researching the behavioural intentions of tourists.

Based on these findings, the TPB model will be used to determine travel intention in this thesis. Since Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016) state that determining the behaviour and product is crucial to conduct valuable research, I will first define the basic terms used in this thesis. The behavioural intention will be considered as travel intention, the target behaviour

will be travelling to that destination and the product will be a destination, properly determined in the pre-test. Furthermore, Ajzen (1985) argues that simplicity is the advantage of this model. That means that it is unnecessary to use multiple different variables in the same framework. Due to this, I will only focus on a factor of attitude towards the behaviour. Taking into account only one variable is reasonable from two perspectives. First, it is recommended when using the model to only focus on one variable, in my case the attitude towards the behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). It was also pointed out by the author that not all parts of the model contribute to the final intention equally or simultaneously. Researching just this variable can thus indicate whether it has a stronger impact than the others already researched. The other reason to focus on only one variable from the model is that the attitude is the only factor influenced by the information sources. When discussing subjective norms, they are mostly influenced by people who are close to us and their perceptions of our behaviour. Since travellers sharing reviews about travel destinations do not critique a person's behaviour, this factor cannot be incorporated into the analysis. Furthermore, the factor of perceived behavioural control concerns only the abilities of the traveller, over which the reviewer has no control. This variable also cannot be considered in this research.

Therefore, in my research, I will only consider the factor of attitude to answer my research question. I will do so similarly to Sparks and Pan (2008), who expended the model to incorporate the influence of information sources on travel intention. Though successful, their research only questions the sources used by outbound tourists and does not extend further than stating the most common ones and their efficacy. In my thesis, I want to expand on their extended model and research the influence of information sources, explicitly eWOM, on beliefs formed about a travel destination and these implications on a travel intention.

## 2.2 Travel intention and eWOM

Before travelling, many tourists face the uncertainty of choosing the right travel destination. Different information sources help people create images and form attitudes about the target destination. This increases their confidence in the decision before travel. Most of the time, the internal information is not enough to make decisions. Future tourists then turn to external sources which are now available either offline or online. Lately, the Internet has

become the most used external source (Lee, Law & Murphy, 2011). According to Casalo et al. (2011), more than 75% of all travels, tourists use the Internet for some part of their travel planning.

The rise of Web 2.0 not only enabled people to easily access a vast number of sources but also allowed them to become the source themselves. This rapid growth of different applications, made possible by Web 2.0, gives power to the consumers to share in two-way-communication their experiences and opinions through user-generated-content (UGC). Most of the UGC in tourism refers to online reviews describing hotels, travel destinations or travel services (Sigala, 2008). These reviews have become an indispensable source of information for tourists, most of the time altering people's behaviours before and during travelling. The change in behaviour is especially significant since tourists perceive fellow travellers as more objective, up-to-date, enjoyable and reliable than commercial messages or travel agencies (Ye et al., 2011). Consumers also perceive online reviews as more trustworthy, with most people equating them to personal recommendations (O'Reilly, MacMillan, Mumuni, & Lancendorfer, 2016). The impact of UGC on purchase behaviour has also been shown by several studies and it has been especially evident in experience goods (Ye et al., 2011). We can assume that a similar type of behaviour would be shown in travellers as well. From this, we can imply that the traditional face to face communication (WOM) has been replaced by eWOM.

eWOM is defined as “positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions over the Internet” (Moran & Muzellec, 2017, p. 150). It can appear in various places throughout the sphere of the Internet, but there are three main sources of information that are competing for attention. The first source are normal Internet users, who write user-generated content such as product reviews, the second are professional media gatekeepers, producing materials for editorial websites, and third are marketing professionals creating promotion content (Dou et al., 2012, p. 1555).

In the thesis, I will only focus on the first type of source i.e. product reviews or in tourism, travel reviews. This information is now available not only from people close to us, such as friends and family but also from people we do not know or who are not in our geographical area. Most of the online travel reviews can be found on global online travel

communities such as the ones researched in this study (TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps). These communities make information easier to find, but the abundance of the reviews makes it harder for travellers to process and judge them. This leads to “lower search costs and higher cognitive costs” (Lee et al., p. 676). The same reviews can also be perceived differently by various travellers, depending on their source of information and previous experiences (Casalo et al., 2011). Frequency and recency of prior purchases can also be key factors in predicting the future behaviour of consumers (Hsu & Huang, 2012). Since differentiating reviews in usefulness and credibility from each-other requires a lot of cognitive work from tourists’ side, they often turn to external factors of online travel communities to judge the reviews.

Casalo et. al. (2012, p. 630) define (at least) three different factors that raise the intention to follow a travel review in an online travel community:

- “1. Those related to the nature of the advice (perceived usefulness of the advice)
- 2. Those related to the source that provides the advice (trust in the online community)
- 3. Those related to the personal characteristics of the traveller that decides whether to follow the advice or not (consumer’s susceptibility to interpersonal influence).”

The first and third factors have been identified by several prior studies as the two most important factors for predicting purchase behaviour. But little is known about the motivations to follow the advice in various online communities. Dou et al. (2012) argue that since there is a vast number of reviews online, the original creator of the message can get lost in the crowd. This is supported also in the research of the area of health by Hu and Sundar (2010), who not only claim that the author can get lost in the crowd, but that in some cases chooses to be anonymous. Sources of advice such as a website or community can become an important factor in assessing the credibility of the message in these instances. Though some studies define source credibility as relating to the original source of the review i.e. person who wrote the review, in the “context of tourism the source credibility refers to the credibility of the website or online community in which eWOM of travel destination is disseminated” (Wang, 2014, p. 35).

### 2.3 Credibility of online travel communities

It can be assumed that in the flood of online reviews, travel communities can have an impact on the perceived credibility of the reviews and consequently on travel intentions of the receiver. These online travel communities as sources of information can be a critical variable when determining reviews' usefulness and credibility, especially when the identity of the author is anonymous or ambiguous (Dou et al., 2012). Hussain, Ahmed, Jafar, Rabnawaz and Jianzhou (2017) point out that a website's reputation can have a big influence on the credibility of information, and that their reputation is related to the perceived expertness of the website. Moreover, Casalo et al. (2011) indicate that little research has been done in the field of online travel communities and their influence on travel decisions. Authors suggest focusing only on the motivations to follow online reviews. Moreover, they also state the benefits of researching the characteristics of the reviews and platforms to understand these motivations. In their research, they also specifically focus on online travel communities as sources of online reviews but examine only trust in the community, again neglecting the factors influencing it. While Dou et al. (2012) do acknowledge the importance of the source of information in their research, they neglect the source characteristics and lack an explanation on the factors influencing source credibility. That is why in my research I want to focus on the factors influencing the credibility of online travel communities, their effect on the perception of online reviews and further communities' credibility as an influence on travel intention.

In previous research, credibility has been identified as the most important online predictor of eWOM persuasiveness (Weitzl, Wolfsteiner, Einwiller, & Wagner, 2016). Credibility "refers to the quality of the information or a source which may or may not result in trusting intentions and/or behaviours" (Weitzl, 2014, p. 115). It can be thought of as a predecessor of trust. Credibility can be divided into three perspectives: source, content, and medium credibility. In my research I will focus on source credibility, considering online travel communities as sources of online reviews. The concept of source credibility has been extensively studied as the predictor of consumer behaviour since credible sources develop stronger attitudes toward certain products and encourage purchases more than less credible sources. Source credibility is defined as "the extent to which an information source is

perceived to be believable, competent and trustworthy by information recipient" (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). In other words, source credibility affects traveller's approval of the source.

Based on this, I first need to establish if the chosen travel platforms differentiate between each other are different based on the level of credibility.

H1: The researched online travel platforms differ in their levels of credibility.

Source credibility has two dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise. These two dimensions refer to the extent people trust the source and perceive it as knowledgeable and skilled enough to share the information with other people (Dou et al., 2012). Since source credibility affects the target behaviour and thus travel intention (Weitzl et al., 2016; Shan, 2016), my next hypothesis will test the connection between both.

H2: The higher the credibility of the online travel community, the greater the travel intention.

As stated by Wang (2014), information disseminated in online travel communities regards mostly travel destinations. Since reviews can easily be adapted to best suit the business and attract more travellers, travellers have become sceptical about certain reviews posted in travel communities. Travellers thus become more suspicious about the reviews, lowering their trust in them. Since distrust can generate an overall negative attitude toward the online reviews, eWOM scepticism has to be taken into account when measuring source credibility of online travel communities. eWOM scepticism is pre-dispositional distrust in eWOM communications that has three dimensions: truthfulness, motivation and identity (Zhang et al., 2016).

When judging the credibility of online reviews, eWOM scepticism has been shown to influence consumers' intentions and behaviours. It lowers the credibility of information source due to hidden author's identity, disguised intent of the review, and overall exaggeration in messages (Zhang et al., 2016).

eWOM scepticism can thus be thought of as distrust in an online review. That is why I want to research if with higher eWOM scepticism, the travel intention will decrease.

H3: With the higher scepticism in an online travel community, the travel intention will

be lower.

As mentioned before, there are many reasons for travellers not to trust certain reviews. On Instagram, more than other chosen platforms, all these reasons can be found. The author of the message can be anonymous or have a private account, which makes it impossible to examine them before trusting the review. Further, with the rise of travel influencers and sponsorship deals, the motivations for posting a travel review might not be disclosed or even be manipulative, leading on the future travellers (Miller, 2017). Lastly, Instagram is known for its exaggeration of luxurious lives and breath-taking photos that everyone would like to be a part of. Unfortunately, destinations and attractions in real life commonly do not resemble those in the pictures, with larger crowds, corrections using Photoshop or simply altered colours. Not only pictures, but also reviews can often be misleading, speaking positively about a destination due to monetary incentives (Moran & Muzellec, 2017). Based on this I expect that Instagram will have the highest eWOM scepticism ranking.

H4: The eWOM scepticism will be the highest on Instagram.

#### **2.4 Online travel communities**

Based on the studies by Hu and Sundar (2010), and Dou et al. (2012), I would like to investigate which factors influence the intention to follow reviews in information sources, in my case, online travel communities TripAdvisor, Google Maps and Instagram. As Casalo et al. (2011) point out, reasons for following advice in a certain online travel community have been under-researched. Credibility can explain travel intention to some extent, but some authors argue that other factors could have an impact on travel intention or influence the perceived credibility of these platforms.

It was recommended by Casalo et al. (2011) to investigate the relationship between high-involved travellers in online travel communities with their travel intention. Involvement is defined as “a salient concept for understanding leisure, recreation, and tourism behaviour” (Ferns & Walls, 2012, p. 27). In tourism studies, it is mostly used to examine the involvement of tourists in general tourism activities, shopping, specific touristic activities and gambling. There are three different types of travel involvement: enduring travel involvement, situational

travel involvement, and response travel involvement. The first explains the part travel plays in peoples' everyday life. It is an ongoing process of an individual who finds pleasure in travel. The second is involvement in travel depending on a certain situation, whether it is a cheap airfare or the purpose of the trip. The last relates to the inner state of involvement based on prior involvement (Ferns & Walls, 2012). Since I want to research the overall involvement with travel and not one that is triggered by certain events or is influenced by other factors, I will only include enduring travel involvement in my analysis. Due to high involvement and consequently greater travel experiences I predict that these travellers have clearer and better-formed opinions about the travel platforms. Their travel intention will be higher with the platforms they perceive as credible since they have previous positive experiences of them as being truthful and expert. Low-involved travellers do not perceive travel as important and therefore tend not to differentiate sources based on credibility. This emanates either from lack of experience in using online travel platforms or ignorance of the validity of the information received from them.

Involvement will moderate the effect of credibility on travel intentions.

H5: High-involved travellers show higher travel intention when the online travel community is perceived as credible.

The online travel platforms I have chosen differ in various characteristics but an important one: they all depend on user-generated content to grow and inspire other people to travel. I chose these three specific platforms since they use the same form of online travel reviews. People can post picture and text to review a destination or service, while other characteristics of the review and the reviewer differ to one another. Cheung et al. (2008) point out that future travellers can also be influenced by platforms' attractiveness and likeability. Moreover, Casalo et al. (2011) suggest that perceived privacy, security and ease of use can affect peoples' perceived credibility in the community. All these factors can be summed up under what Dou et al. (2012) refer to as an interface of the intermediary, in this case, online travel communities. They also argue that the interface of the platform can influence peoples' perception of the review, the author and consequently attitude towards the destination. Therefore, I will include a short description of the interface and users'

demographic profile of each platform to better understand their differences and test these assumptions with a hypothesis.

#### *2.4.1 TripAdvisor*

The first online travel platform that I will base my research on is TripAdvisor. The world's largest travel platform was launched in 2000 when only reviews of accommodations were published. After 20 years, the platform now has more than 490 million users each month and offers more than 760 million reviews on its website. Despite its size and popularity, TripAdvisor suffered a great loss in credibility in 2019, when several investigations uncovered that more than 50% of their reviews are not genuine (Walker, 2019). Brand awareness and usage have declined, but TripAdvisor remains one of the most utilised travel platforms for travellers.

Recently, TripAdvisor has changed its user interface. Its interface is quite complicated and offers a wide variety of options to its users when writing or searching for a review. Future travellers can search for hotels, attractions, restaurants, vacation rentals, flights and more for any travel destination worldwide. Authors are visible with a name and a profile picture. Upon clicking on their profile, users can also see the number of contributions made, number of followers, date of joining the community and much more. Moreover, TripAdvisor also offers users to rate each other's reviews based on their perceived helpfulness (Shan, 2016). Travellers can thus see the number of people the review had been helpful to, number of reposts and number of saves. It is also possible to contact the author directly about their review, photo or video posted. In case the review was paid for, the review is labelled as 'sponsored'.

The exact demographics of TripAdvisor users are hard to obtain since there is no need for them to register to contribute to the community. However, there is much to discover about their preferences for using TripAdvisor. Majority of users read the reviews before booking a hotel, half of them read them before eating in a restaurant and 44% use the platform before choosing a tourist attraction (TripAdvisor, 2013). Thus, from both reputational and users' perspective, it is an interesting platform to research in my thesis.

### 2.4.2 Instagram

Instagram is a free photo and video sharing application. It was created to connect people and allow them to share their experiences with friends (<https://about.instagram.com/>). In the last few years, Instagram has transformed into a platform where users not only share the experiences but are also only 10 clicks away from purchasing a plane ticket when seeing a tourist destination (Miller, 2017). The effects of Instagram on tourism can be already seen all over the world, from increased tourism growth after collaborations with influencers, to crowds in so-called ‘Instagram spots’, popular tourist attractions shared on Instagram. Due to its predominantly picture view display, Instagram has been established as an effective marketing tool in tourism (Miller, 2017). Its high engagement, effectiveness and popularity make it an interesting online travel platform to investigate.

Instagram offers the possibility of open and private accounts. When open, everybody can access the profile, review the shared content and learn more about the person. When the profile is closed, only the name, the profile picture and followers are visible. This already creates a contradictory state for the users since they are on one hand able to discover and evaluate the reviewers, and on the other unsure of their motivations. Though reviewers are by law obliged to disclose any paid promotions, unfortunately, this is still not accomplished by the majority of profiles. The app also makes it easy to search for reviews about destinations, either by hashtag (#) or by the geolocation indicated above the post or in Instagram stories. The interface itself is simple to use, with only the possibility of scrolling up and down the content feed or watching stories. At each content posted, people can see the number of likes and comments by other users, time posted and the description of the content (the message). They can also see the person that posted it (the name and the profile picture). Since there is no review system for authors, this information is everything a future traveller can check to review the message.

Instagram has more than one billion active users. The majority are women, with almost 90% of all users originating from the outside USA. Instagram is used in 30% by people aged 18-24 years, and in 35% by people aged 25-34 years. This means that two-thirds of all users are under 35 years old. Moreover, these users visit at least one business profile

daily, with more than 70% of them using Instagram for discovering new products and learning about them (Aslam, 2020).

#### *2.4.3 Google Maps*

Lastly, I will focus on the platform Google Maps. Though it originally started as a free online map developed by Google, it has now transformed into a platform where users can also share their experiences, review destinations and add information about businesses. By developing a Local Guides gamification extension of the maps in 2016, the platform allowed users to share the world on Google Maps while also discovering new places (Kishore, 2019).

Its interface consists of an interactive map and a subheading with information about the destination. The information differs whether the user searches for a destination or a particular service. For both, they can access the reviews and photographs of local guides together with an overall score of the location. Users can see a local guide's profile picture, name and the number of reviews they have posted. Upon clicking on their profile, users can read all of the guide's reviews, shared photographs, score in the local guides and their respective level. Based on this information, travellers can evaluate the reviewers and judge their credibility. Google Maps also differs in payment options, since there are no paid reviews on them. Local guides share their information for their intrinsic motivations and do not receive any monetary rewards from anyone.

Google Maps is the most used global navigation app, with two-thirds of people with smartphones using it daily. The gamification improvement of Local Guides, a program now used by more than 120 million people, made the platform even more successful. Since Local Guides started, more than 700.000 new places have been added to the community. Google Maps built on the personal and transparent engagement of its users, which is visible also in their continued updates. People will now be able to follow certain Local Guides and will be offered recommendations based on their previous purchases (Sterling, 2019). The minimum age to become a Local Guide in Google Maps is 18 years old. Due to its transparency and possibilities for contributing to the travel community, Google Maps is an interesting platform to include.

As it is evident from the descriptions of the platforms, they differ in various visual aspects. The differences in design and user interface will be involved in people's perception of user-friendliness of each of these platforms, which can affect their perceived credibility. User experience is a combination of design of the platform, the feeling a user gets when using the platform and the usability of the platform i.e. how user-friendly a platform is (Laugwitz, Held, & Schrepp, 2008). Since different platforms offer different possibilities to review authors, share travel thoughts or rate the usefulness of the advice, I predict that the overall design of the platform and the user interface will influence traveller's perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the reviews. Thus, I want to research whether different user experience influences the perceived credibility of online travel platforms.

H6: There is a positive relationship between the user experience of a certain online travel platform and traveller's perceived credibility of that platform.

In my research, I will try to include many factors that can influence credibility. Due to a high number of these contributing factors, I have created a model to better understand the connections between them and the corresponding hypotheses testing them. This model can be seen in Figure 2.2.

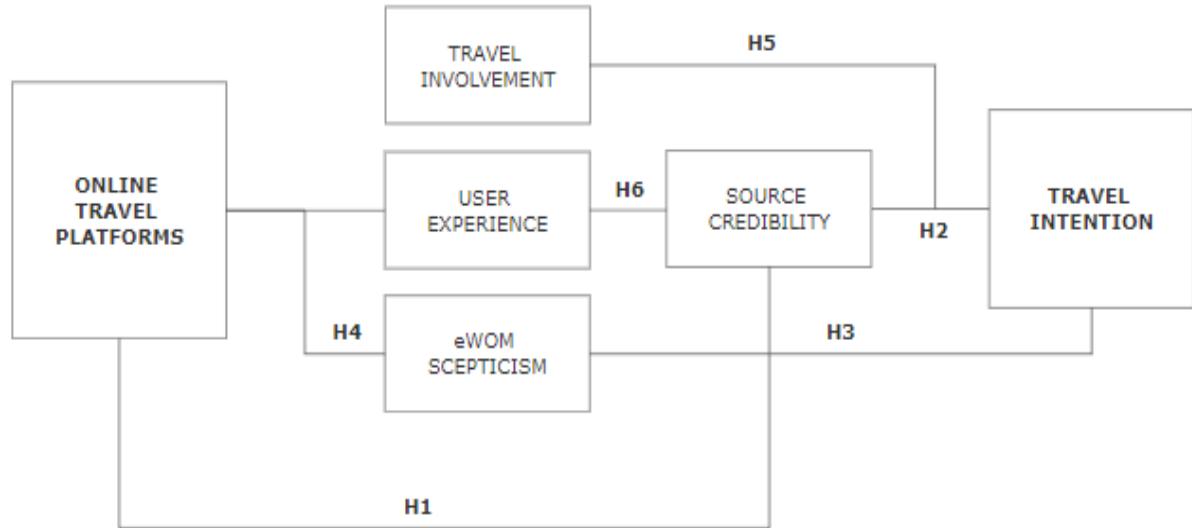


Figure 1.2: Research model

In sum, my study will use the extended TBP model to try and determine the key factors influencing source credibility and whether this perceived credibility does influence travel intention. I posed the first hypothesis to ensure that all of the online travel platforms indeed differ in levels of source credibility and can thus be used in comparison. To test the mediation effect of source credibility on travel intention, I stated the next hypothesis H2. Since eWOM scepticism is lack of trust in the source, and one of source credibility's dimensions is trustworthiness, I predict that their relationship will be inversely proportional. To test the relation, I proposed the H3. As the platforms differ in target groups, website characteristics and more, they will also have different levels of eWOM scepticism. Since Instagram is mostly used for covert promotions and users can have a hidden identity, I predicted that eWOM scepticism will be the highest on it by presenting H4. Not only platforms, but also personal characteristics of travellers can affect their attitude towards the online travel platforms. As a factor, travel involvement has not been researched yet and has been proposed by Casalo et al. (2011) to be tested. The moderation effect of travel involvement on travel intention was examined with H5. Lastly, I needed to acknowledge the differences of the platforms in design and usefulness. Since perceived ease of use and an appealing website can be considered important factors for source credibility as predicted by Casalo et al. (2011), I proposed H6. With this hypothesis I predict that better user experience will have a positive mediation effect on source credibility. By including the factors of user experience, eWOM scepticism, travel involvement and overall source credibility, the study will try and answer the research question. Moreover, it can fill a gap in literature by researching the actual sources of information, not only people's attitudes and reviews on platforms.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The overarching goal of the research is to understand which factors of online travel communities most contribute to perceived eWOM credibility and further travel intention. Since the aim to study is to determine people's attitudes and feelings about a particular communication phenomenon, a quantitative study needs to be carried out (Allen, Titsworth & Hunt, 2009). Quantitative studies allow researchers to generalize their findings to bigger populations since they are more representative and objective than qualitative studies. Since my study aims to find relationships between certain phenomena, a quantitative study is necessary. As defined by Aliaga and Gunderson (2002, p. 24), this kind of research deals with "explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods". Though attitudes and feelings about online travel platforms might not naturally appear as numerical data, by using measuring instruments such as Likert scales, these data can also be analysed with a mathematically based method. Even though the study explores the factors contributing to eWOM credibility and further travel intention, I am not interested in reasons for perceiving them as such. Since understanding why some platforms are perceived differently is not crucial to the study, a qualitative approach is not applicable. Using a quantitative approach also helps achieve neutrality of the analysis and aims at generalizability of the entire population, not only the sample (Muijs, 2004). Lastly, a quantitative approach is needed since the research tries to predict a score of one factor or travel intention from scores of other factors or variables (Muijs, 2004).

Though quantitative analysis is appropriate for this kind of study, there are some negative aspects of using such research. Firstly, the data collected is limited, with only data concerning the main variables being collected. This limits the scope of the research and does not allow for a holistic and broader understanding of the phenomena. Furthermore, with limited options, quantitative methods tend to generalize and limit human behaviour. By doing so, important additional data can be lost since people perceive their behaviour differently (Allen et al., 2009). Finally, a quantitative study can be perceived as static and closed, not allowing for the flexibility of the process (Muijs, 2004). This can again lead to loss of important data and meanings surrounding the phenomena.

Despite the disadvantages of a quantitative study, its methods and processes are the most

suitable for the intended research. Since I was testing people's attitudes on three different platforms, I need to control the conditions of the environment that respondents examined. To do so, I conducted an experimental design to purely test the variables in the study.

### **3.1 Choice of method**

As mentioned, my research is trying to fill the gap in the literature by focusing on the importance of online travel communities for travel intention. Since I want to study causation and an explanation of a certain phenomenon (Geuens & Pelsmacker, 2017), my chosen method is an online between-subjects experiment. When comparing experiments to other research methods, it is the best method to test causal relationships, because as the researcher can I define and control every aspect of the observation (Neuman, 2011). This artificial design means that the researcher can incorporate purposive variables based on the literature and study effects that would be hard to observe in a natural setting. Because the study focuses on the influence of independent variable (online travel community) on the dependent variable (travel intention), I conducted an empirically based experiment, testing the effects in a controlled environment, which can be later generalized to the real world (Neuman, 2011).

### **3.2 Sampling**

As travel and access to the internet have become more affordable, the number of travellers has risen as with it. In 2019, Eurostat found that three out of five Europeans over the age of 18 travel at least once per year. Moreover, almost 85% of all of the trips are made within Europe. In my research, I wanted to target these 3/5 of the European citizens (*Key figures on Europe*, 2020). That is, my population is made up of people living or residing in Europe, who are more than 18 years old and of any gender. Furthermore, since the survey is prepared in English, they must have a basic understanding of the language. Their religious, socio-economical and educational background is not a criterion. Though the experiment researched the credibility of travel platforms and requires prior knowledge of chosen platforms, in my population I also included people who may not use certain platforms. Since the destination researched is the island of Tenerife, as explained later, my population does not include anyone living, working or studying there at the time of the survey. For these people,

Tenerife is not a tourist destination and their answers could be misleading.

Since my population is limited to European citizens above 18 years old, my sample needs to be as representative of it as possible. In Europe in 2019, the ratio between men and women is almost the same. There is 51% of women (229 million) and 49% of men (218 million) (*Key figures on Europe*, 2020). Consequently, in my sample, I strived to keep the same ratio between respondents. To gain reliable insights, I also tried to reach as many different nationalities as possible. To draw meaningful conclusions from the study, my sample size needed to have enough power to detect effects. In my research, a size of 60 to 80 participants for each travel platform was needed for adequacy (Neuman, 2011).

### *3.2.1 Sampling method*

To gather an adequate number of respondents, convenience sampling was applied. Convenience sampling was used due to limited time and resources. It also allowed me to access the respondents with ease (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The gathering of the data was done online since the experiment was designed in Qualtrics application. The survey was in circulation from 14th of May until the 18th of May, 2020.

Firstly, I disseminated the questionnaire using an anonymous link in travel groups on Facebook. The post containing the link was posted in 50 different Facebook groups, related to either travel, travelling, exchange of travel reviews or exchange travel-related profiles on various social media platforms. Since most of these groups have strict guidelines on posting, my survey was approved to publish in only 20 groups. Some examples include Travel addiction, traveller reviews, Travel guide and Travel for free. All of these groups operate in the English language, so the understanding of the survey was not an issue. Besides the Facebook groups related to travel, I also published in three survey exchange groups, as well as three subreddit pages dedicated to filling out surveys. The survey was also posted on my own Facebook and Instagram profiles. To reach the younger population of respondents, I disseminated the survey amongst my friends, who then sent it to their friends and colleagues. When asking my friends for help, I explicitly mentioned there were not allowed to fill it out due to validity and credibility concerns. All of them obliged. Dissemination of survey amongst the younger population was especially needed considering young people are leaving

Facebook and thusly I was not able to receive their responses through Facebook groups mentioned before (Sweeney, 2018).

### *3.2.2 Random assignment*

Random assignment was used to divide the respondents into three groups, without systematically differing them based on respondents' characteristics. This unbiased method divided the sample into similar groups, such that each group was shown one of the three travel platforms. Thus the division was unaffected by respondents' interests (Neuman, 2011). This was achieved by using the function 'randomizer' in the Qualtrics programme. At the end of data collection, 55 people reviewed a review on TripAdvisor, 68 saw a review on Instagram and 63 respondents reviewed Google Maps.

To confirm the between groups similarity based on gender and age, I also conducted Chi-square tests to reassure the results. It revealed that gender is not related to platforms,  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 186, 6$ ) = 4.45,  $p = .616$ . A Chi-square test also revealed that age is not related to the travel platforms,  $\chi^2$  ( $N = 186, 72$ ) = 71.23,  $p = .503$ . None of the groups differs in characteristics of gender and age and they are thus comparable.

The survey was disseminated in the time of COVID-19 crisis, which influenced the answers of 27.3% of respondents according to their judgement. The effect of the pandemic will be discussed later in the validity section.

### *3.2.3 Description of sample*

A total of 196 responses were recorded by the end of dissemination. During data cleaning, two respondents were identified to live in Tenerife and eight respondents live outside of Europe. Due to their inadequacy, there were omitted from further analysis. In the end,  $N = 186$  responses were included in the analysis. In the sample, a percentage of females was 73.1% and of males 25.8%. 0.5% of respondents identified as other genders and 0.5% did not want to disclose the gender. All of the respondents were included in further analysis. The average age of the respondents was 28.45 ( $SD=9.81$ ), with the lowest age of 18 and the highest 64.

Since my survey was intended for people living in Europe, my respondents had different

countries of residence. In total, the respondents lived in 32 different countries. The highest percentage lived in Slovenia (24.7%) and the Netherlands (23.1%), followed by United Kingdom (8.1%), Germany (7.0%) and Italy (5.4%). The rest of the countries had less than 5.0% of the respondents. Most of the respondents obtained a Bachelor's degree (45.2%), followed by a Master's degree (31.2%) and a high school diploma (19.4%). 1.6% of respondents had a Doctoral degree, while 1.1% less than a high school diploma. 1.6% of respondents obtained other forms of education.

### **3.3 Operationalization**

In my research, the independent variables are the chosen online travel platforms: TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps. The dependant variable is travel intention. The research included three mediators (eWOM scepticism, user experience and source credibility) and one moderator (travel involvement).

#### *3.3.1 Independent variables online travel platforms*

In my experiment, independent variables were online travel platforms or communities TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps. To make them appear as realistic as possible in the survey, they were adapted to look like real posts on the respective platform (visible in Appendix B). To assure that no other characteristics besides the look of the platforms influence respondents, I used the same picture and travel review of the island of Tenerife. These two stimuli were chosen based on the pre-test, which I explain in the next section. I also changed the name of the user and its profile picture with random AI-generated photo of a woman on all three platforms. These published reviews were created using 'review' function on respective websites. For every platform, the necessary elements were changed to control the review. This way I was able to control all of the elements of the review while maintaining the authenticity and design of each platform without creating it artificially in a design program.

To manipulate the review on Instagram, I changed the location of the photo with my chosen destination, changed the name of a person visible on the bottom of the picture and blurred the profile picture of the person who liked the post. I mainly did that to prevent

followers from being identified.

The review on TripAdvisor was also manipulated to appear more helpful. Firstly, I changed the name of the location, both the beach and the island. Next, I changed the rating of the review into five stars, to appear as believable and reliable. Lastly, I changed the number of likes and saves to the same number as on the Instagram platform, to reduce the differences between communities as much as possible.

The review on Google Maps was also given five stars to reduce the difference between platforms. I changed the number of reviews the user wrote to make her more believable and authentic, as well as naming her the local guide to give her more credibility.

### *3.3.2 Dependent variable travel intention*

To measure travel intention, I used the adapted scales from a questionnaire based on the theory of planned behaviour, developed by Lam and Hsu (2006), as well as survey questions regarding following the advice from an online travel community by Casalo et al. (2011).

Lam and Hsu (2006) designed the scale to test the likelihood of choosing Hong Kong as the next travel destination. In my research, the questionnaire was adapted to fit my destination in the online review and to apply it to online travel communities. The dimensions tested in the original survey were: behavioural intention, attitude, behavioural belief, subjective norm, normative norm, perceived behavioural control, control beliefs and past behaviour, the components of TPB. Since I am only researching behavioural beliefs and thus attitude towards the destination to predict travel intention, I only included questions regarding beliefs and behavioural intention. Based on the construction of the TPB model, behavioural beliefs (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) are measured using the two components: "perceived likelihood of the outcomes of the behaviour and evaluation of those outcomes" (Lam & Hsu, 2006, p. 593). Together they consist of six items, measured on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The behavioural beliefs were adapted for the chosen destination and to the activities mentioned in the final review, chosen by a pre-test. The beliefs tested were thus: to experience warm weather, to visit water parks, to enjoy the nightlife, to go shopping, to go sightseeing and to relax on beaches. Behavioural intention (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) consisted of three items, all measured on a five-

point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Lam & Hsu, 2006). It was adapted to better fit with the research. The destination was changed in every item to fit with my online review presented, such as in an item for behavioural intention ‘intend to visit Tenerife in next 12 months’.

To explain travel intention based on information gathered in the online travel community, I also included survey questions by Casalo et al. (2011), who developed a scale especially measuring the multidimensionality of following the advice in online travel communities. In their scale, they test the following dimensions: usefulness, honesty, benevolence, competence, attitude, intention to follow the advice, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. To complement the items from Lam and Hsu’s (2006) survey, I only included the dimensions of attitude (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) and intention to follow the advice on a platform (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). The items from both dimensions were measured on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For the dimension of attitude, I included items such as ‘I think following the advice obtained in this online travel community would be good for me’, and for the dimension of intention, an item such as ‘I would feel comfortable behaving according to the advice I obtain in the online travel community’ was used.

### *3.3.3 Variable source credibility*

One of the mediators in my experiment is source credibility. There are two dimensions for measuring source credibility: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness refers to the “degree of confidence in the communicator’s intent to communicate the assertions he/she considers most valid” (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). Trustworthiness, therefore, defines the extent to which the source can be trusted or not (Ohanian, 1990). Another dimension is expertise, defined by Ohanian (1990) as “the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions” (p. 41). To evaluate the source’s expertise, it can be assessed by the aspects of knowledge, experience and skills (Dou et al., 2012). In sum, the consumer needs to assess whether the reviewer is capable of making a correct and valid review. To measure source credibility of online travel communities, I adapted the scale that measured celebrity endorsers’ perceived expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness by Ohanian

(1990). Since the Ohanian's scale was created to measure the source credibility of people, whereas my study focuses on products, the dimension of attractiveness was deducted from the scale. This does not affect the validity of the scale since Ohanian (1990) suggests using an adapted scale to predict a consumer's attitude towards a product and their intention to buy the product. In my survey, I thus only included the dimensions of expertise (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) and trustworthiness (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). The expertise was measured using five items on a five-point semantic differential scale, such as 'qualified/unqualified' and 'skilled/unskilled'. The dimension of trustworthiness was also tested using a five-point semantic differential scale of five items, including 'dependable/undependable', and 'reliable/unreliable'. To conduct my analysis, I used a combined version of the scale named source credibility (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ).

### *3.3.4 Mediating variable eWOM scepticism*

A mediator of the experiment is eWOM scepticism. It has three dimensions: the truthfulness of the message, motives of the message senders and identities of the message senders. Though the dimensions might not fit together theoretically, they are correlated with each other and have been shown to affect consumers at different levels. They were defined and tested by Zhang et al. (2016) when creating a new scale to measure scepticism towards electronic word-of-mouth. Each of the dimensions has three items. Since I do not measure eWOM scepticism towards the message, but towards the online travel platform, the items in the scale needed to be adapted accordingly. I assembled the original items from the Zhang et al. (2016) scale with their corresponding adjusted items included in my experiment. An example of the items for truthfulness (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$ ,  $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) is 'online reviews on this online travel platform are not generally truthful', for motivation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), an example is 'most online reviews on this online travel platform are intended to mislead' and an example for identity (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) is 'people writing reviews on this online travel platform are pretending they are someone else. All the items were measured using a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Zhang et al., 2016). Though I acknowledge that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for

truthfulness is low, I decided to keep it since it is also included in the original scale to measure eWOM scepticism. Since the omission of any item does not improve its reliability, I kept all of the three items tested in the survey. When testing eWOM scepticism in analysis, I used the combined scale of truthfulness, identity and motivation. Since the new scale eWOM scepticism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) was also reliable, it supported my decision to keep the truthfulness scale despite lower reliability.

### *3.3.5 Mediating variable user experience*

Being innovative and competitive in the market is no longer enough to have a successful product or service. In today's digital world, users expect that even the most complicated and complex online experiences are simple and satisfactory (Schrepp, Hinderks, & Thomaschewski, 2017). Since online travel communities are subjected to the same standards by future and regular travellers, they must also comply with the six dimensions of user experience. User experience will act as a mediator to platform credibility. The six dimensions are, based on the User Experience Questionnaire (UEQ), developed by German researchers Laugwitz et al. in 2008, the following: attractiveness, perspicuity, efficiency, dependability, stimulation and novelty. Since the original questionnaire is long and too detailed for the purposes of my research, I used its shortened version, developed by Schrepp et al. in 2017. This survey includes eight items, capturing the essence of the original questionnaire (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ). These eight items were used in my experiment to test user experience amongst travellers, such as 'obstructive/supportive' and 'clear/confusing'. Questions were presented on a five-point semantic differential scale.

### *3.3.6 Moderating variable travel involvement*

A moderator in my analysis is enduring travel involvement since it is the most permanent and travel-based construct amongst travel involvement. It is established on the "perceived relevance of travel to the individual" (Ferns & Walls, 2012, p. 28). According to the TPB, enduring travel involvement can be a predictor of a traveller's behaviour, since it helps develop and maintain attitudes towards destinations and travel. When a person is involved in travel, it has been shown to have a direct effect on travel intentions (Ferns &

Walls, 2012). Travellers who are highly involved consider travel as important, enjoyable and central to their lives. Based on TPB, they will always try to maintain their attitude in line with their behaviour (Ferns & Walls, 2012). To test travellers' involvement, I used an adapted scale by Ferns and Walls (2012), which tests people's attitudes towards pleasure travel (Cronbach  $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ). It consisted of five items measured on a five-point semantic differential scale. Such items are 'for me, travel is important/unimportant' and 'for me, travel is significant/insignificant'.

To determine the travel behaviour of the sample, I divided travel involvement variable into high- and low-involved travellers based on  $Me = 4.80$ . My sample included 47.3% low-involved travellers, where  $N = 25$  were men and  $N = 62$  were women. Of 52.7% high-involved travellers,  $N = 23$  were men and  $N = 74$  were women.

### **3.4 Research design and data collection**

#### *3.4.1 Pre-test*

In an experimental design, it is highly recommended to conduct a pre-test before data collection. For the purposes of my research, I will conduct a pre-test to better develop my stimuli. Developing a valid and reliable stimulus is at outmost importance when experimenting since it needs to be unambiguous and understandable to everyone. It must also appear realistic while being at the same time under the control of the researcher (Geuens & Pelsmacker, 2017). Due to this, I used real reviews in the pre-test, chosen by specific rules, explained in the next paragraphs. This made the online review seem competent and authentic, while at the same time controlling the desired outcome. To ascertain that the review appeared authentic in any chosen platform, I also tested the authenticity and believability of each text for every platform. Before pre-test, I had manipulated real Instagram, Google Maps and TripAdvisor reviews with the chosen texts. Every review was also accompanied by the same picture, to minimize its effect.

The outcome needed from this pre-test was to select a text of the review and an accompanying picture. Including only these two components kept the pre-test as simple as possible.

The pre-test was conducted in a respondent-driven way. Since my population consists of

anyone involved with travel over 18 years old from Europe, the pre-test was conducted on friends and colleagues. To reach a wider audience, I also distributed the pre-test amongst my parents' and grandparents' friends, encompassing an older audience. By distributing pre-test to different people outside my circle, it covered different subgroups of my population. This ensured that views of different groups are visible, and at the same time allowed for potential issues to arise (Geuens & Pelsmacker, 2017). Since the survey was disseminated mostly amongst Slovenians whose first language is not English, some of them struggled with the terminology used in the survey. Mostly they pointed out the lack of knowledge on the meaning of the word ambiguous. The questions in the pre-test with the word ambiguous could have thusly be answered incorrectly.

The pre-test comprised of an introduction to the study and an explanation of what is needed from the respondents. It also included my gratitude for their participation and highlighted the importance of their answers, as well as the pre-test for my research (Geuens & Pelsmacker, 2017).

The survey was administered in the spring of 2020, between the 1st of May and the 4th of May. During the distribution, the survey was never changed.

After the dissemination, a total of 37 responses were gathered. After the data cleaning, further analysis included  $N = 37$ . Among the respondents, there were 32.4% men and 67.6% women. In the pre-test, the respondents did not state their age but their year of birth. Due to this, the variable age had to be created. I transformed the variable 'year of birth' using 'recode into different variables' so that each year corresponded with the person's age in the year 2020. The average age of the respondents was 34.01 ( $SD = 12.37$ ). The minimum age was 19 and the maximum was 70. All of the respondents received some form of higher education. 21.6% were high school graduates, 40.5% had a Bachelor's degree and 37.8% had a Master's degree.

### *3.4.2 Pre-test of potential stimuli*

Before conducting the experiment, I needed to determine the travel review that can be used to test travel intention. This review was then used in different travel communities, meaning that the online review appeared as either written on Instagram, TripAdvisor or

Google Maps. Stimulus elements were selected so the online review is compelling and understandable, while at the same time contain an unambiguous message about a popular travel destination.

As mentioned, my pre-test tested two different confounding variables: text of an online review and the picture. To achieve the desired manipulation stimulus, I tried to find and elaborate on every part of it (Geuens & Pelsmacker, 2017). My decisions and chosen stimuli elements are explained below.

Even though negative reviews are more valuable and less ambiguous (Weitzl et al., 2016), I used a predominantly positive review. Weitzl et al. (2016, p. 353) consider the higher value of negative reviews due to its predominantly less ambiguous perception amongst people since they are “more diagnostic of the character of an entity.” Since destinations with negative reviews mainly avert people from visiting it, travel intention in those cases is negative or non-existent. Positive reviews about destinations are also more common on travel platforms and promote destinations. This is also supported by Weitzl et al. (2016) who argue that only positive reviews have an effect on credibility when describing experience goods, such as travelling. Moreover, Lee et al. (2011) explain that reviews are the most effective when they appear as both positive and negative, balancing both perspectives and being seemingly unbiased. Consequently, a positive review was needed to assure that people would not be negatively influenced by it while still incorporating a negative viewpoint. It is also necessary to include both perspectives to avoid respondents’ perspective of paid or fake reviewing.

To find the right review for my pre-test, I searched for real, already shared travel reviews in online travel communities. This assured that they appear authentic and genuine. When choosing the reviews to test, I also strived to include mid-length reviews, as they show expertise, while also considering their grammatical accuracy and appropriate travel jargon (O'Reilly et al., 2016). A review abiding by these standards simulates expertise and trustworthiness, almost guaranteeing the credibility of the message.

The travel reviews tested are written about the Canary Islands, more specifically the island Tenerife. I chose this part of the world since it is the most visited region of Europe by European Union citizens. According to EUROSTAT, Spain was the most visited foreign

destination for EU citizens in 2017, receiving more than 20% of all outbound tourists in Europe (“Tourism statistics - top destinations - Statistics Explained”, 2020). Moreover, in 2017, the Canary Islands were the most visited region of Europe, hosting more than 100 million nights in tourist accommodation, with more than 90% of those tourists visiting from other EU countries (“Key figures on Europe”, 2020).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, defining the destination is also crucial when testing travel intention. Since the Canary Islands as a destination is too broad, I decided to focus on the island Tenerife, since it is the most populated and the most popular of all of the islands according to several travel pages (TUI, Lonely Planet, and TripAdvisor). Focusing on a more specific destination or attraction such as a hotel or a beach would emanate confusion or failure to recognize a destination, leading to lower credibility and further lower travel intention.

These facts are important when choosing a destination reviewed in the experiment since I wanted to guarantee travel intention among people. The more likely the destination is visited, the more feasible it is that the majority of people will also travel there since the message is only effective when it has relevance for the receiver (O'Reilly et al., 2016). Even if respondents already travelled there, March and Woodside (2005) found that behaviour is positively influenced by past behaviour. If they had pleasant experiences, that would consequently increase their travel intention. By choosing a popular tourist destination, I also assured the sufficiency of travel reviews written about it. Since I used real-life travel reviews to conduct the pre-test, this factor is extremely important.

In the pre-test, the importance of disclosing the source of online travel review will not be tested. Since reviewer profiles are the most useful and reliable sources of information on online travel platforms (Shan, 2016), this stimulus was predetermined. The author of the review was provided, appearing as a knowledgeable and trustworthy traveller. This was done to avoid the loss of credibility due to anonymity and to assure that the message is fully accepted by the respondents. When the credibility of the author is high, the message is also perceived as of higher quality and validity (Weitzl et al., 2016).

Finally, an important aspect of the online review enabled by all three online travel platforms in the picture. Based on the research by Stackla, almost two-thirds of all

participants said that they reference pictures on social review sites when researching travel destinations and 54% do that on social networks (Degruttola, 2019). Choosing the right picture is thus as important as choosing the right text of the online review. According to Stackla, 89% of respondents would post about a positive experience with a destination. Moreover, more than half of them have made plans after seeing a user-generated photo on social media platforms (Degruttola, 2019). Though Lian and Yu (2019) found that there is no significant difference between UGC and professional photo content provided by hotels or agencies, they acknowledge that people trust more the photos by other people than posted by official websites of destinations. This is especially true when they perceive the source (author) as credible. This criterion was met in my pre-test. Moreover, they identify that a positive direction of an image has a greater influence on travel intention than negative (Lian and Yu, 2019). Since my review is predominantly positive, these criteria are also met.

Lastly, it is important to consider what kind of photo of the location will be included in the final questionnaire. To test which photo would be the most appealing to future travellers, I included eight different photos in the pre-test. The pictures encompass different perspectives of the island while looking like UGC pictures. Two photos represent the nature and scenery, where one focuses on the mountains and the other on the coastal part of Tenerife. Next, four photos focus on the activities one can experience on the island. One is the city, which represents culture and architecture, one is of a group of friends in a water park, one showcases Tenerife's traditional dish and the last a building, showing the culture and architecture of the island. Lastly, respondents can choose either a picture of a beach with a family or a girl. By choosing these particular photos, I include the most famous parts of the island, the most popular activities and give travellers an opportunity of choosing a picture with or without people. The picture that the majority of respondents of the pre-test choose as the most appealing one will be added to the reviews on online travel platforms.

#### *3.4.3 Pre-test results*

Based on the aforementioned characteristics, I had to find a mostly positive, mid-length review that is unambiguous, clear and understandable to everyone. To determine this, I computed the means of each of the variables tested in the survey. The orientation of the

review was calculated on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being negative and 10 being positive. The length of the review was also measured on a 10 point scale, with 1 being too short and 10 being too long. Ambiguity, understandability and clarity of the review were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’. The means of all five variables can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Difference among six tested reviews based on several characteristics (mean)

REVIEW / respective pre-test question number	Orientation of the review	Length of the review	Ambiguity of the review	Understandability of the review	Clarity of the review
1 – Q4	6.32	4.57	2.76	3.97	3.65
2 – Q12	7.19	4.76	2.35	4.30	4.14
3 – Q16	5.78	6.22	2.97	3.51	3.30
4 – Q20	6.76	3.86	2.59	3.89	3.78
5 – Q24	7.35	4.81	2.51	3.84	3.73
6 – Q28	8.54	5.62	1.95	4.54	4.65
7 – Q32	6.54	3.14	2.73	3.97	3.68

As seen in Table 3.1, review number six was the most adequate review. It was the most positive, yet not too much. According to Weitzl et al. (2016), positive reviews can be open to multiple different interpretations and are more common than negative ones. Since the review needs to be positive as to achieve positive travel intention, it should not be overly favourable. This could make it suspicious and unethical. The length of the chosen review is close to five (mid-length) and has the lowest score of ambiguity. Furthermore, it has the highest score of understandability and clarity of the review. Based on these variables it makes it the most appropriate review to use in the final survey.

In my experiment, I used three different platforms, each with their characteristics. Since the same review will be presented on all of them, I wanted to assure that the reviews appear authentic and believable to the respondents. To research that, I prepared prototype reviews

with a random review for each platform. I tested their authenticity and believability on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘a great deal’. To understand people’s perceptions of the reviews, I first calculated the means of each variable for Instagram, Google Maps and TripAdvisor. They can be seen in Table 3.2

Table 3.2: Difference among platforms on authenticity and believability (mean)

Platform	Believable	Authentic
TripAdvisor	3.78	3.35
Instagram	3.84	3.73
Google Maps	3.92	3.84

It is evident from Table 3.2 that all of the reviews mostly appear believable and authentic on all three platforms since the means are on the positive side of the scale. To confirm the between groups similarity of means, I also conducted a repeated measures ANOVA test to reassure the results. This ANOVA test with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction determined that mean believability did not differ statistically significantly between the online travel platforms ( $F(1.59, 57.35) = 0.03, p = .660$ ). Moreover, repeated measures ANOVA with Sphericity Assumed determined that mean authenticity differed statistically between all three travel platforms ( $F(2, 72) = 3.91, p = .025$ ). This concludes that none of the platforms significantly differs from others in terms of believability, while authenticity is significantly different between them.

Lastly, I wanted to determine the picture accompanying the review. In the survey, people had to indicate which picture out of 8 appealed to them the most. The pictures can be seen in Appendix A. As it is apparent from Table 3.3,  $N=16$  chose picture 8, which is the highest number. Based on this answer, picture 8 will be used in the experiment.

Table 3.3: Picture preference of respondents in a pre-test

Picture number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of respondents	12	1	1	0	2	4	1	16

### 3.5 Validity and reliability

In my research, I aimed to predict which online travel platforms, if any, induce travel intention amongst travellers based on several characteristics of these platforms. To conduct valid research, the sample had to be representative of the population. Based on the population I determined, my sample was somewhat representative of it. Instead of including an equal ratio of men and women, only one-fourth of the respondents were male. Therefore, the results can differ from the results of the population. All of the respondents were indeed more than 18 years old and represented 32 nationalities. Since there are 44 countries in Europe, I managed to reach more than 72% of all countries. Though not all of them are presented equally, the percentage is still high enough to draw meaningful conclusions. Furthermore, all platforms except TripAdvisor had enough power to detect effects. Despite TripAdvisor not reaching the set goal, it still had enough respondents to include in the analysis.

The sample should also be generalized with caution in regards to age. Since the median age of Europeans is 43 years old (Romei, 2020) and my median was 25, there is a significant difference in the age range between both. Though the results may not be representative of the entire population of Europe, they can give insight into the behavioural intention of younger populations. The age of the sample is especially crucial to consider when attempting to discuss the results of the experiment for each platform since the younger generation tend to use different platforms than older ones.

Furthermore, for external validity, a comparison of the demographics of the platforms with the demographic profile of each platform in the survey is needed. In my sample, the age group from 18 to 34 years old comprised 41.0% of all respondents who were shown the review on Instagram. Moreover, the age group of 25 to 34 years old was represented in 34.4%. These numbers roughly coincide with the age groups on Instagram in real life. The comparison of users for the other two platforms is not possible since there is no defined demographic profile for them.

Since the sampling method was convenience sampling, results are also less generalizable from the perspective of travel involvement. As the survey was mostly disseminated in travel groups, my sample can have higher overall travel involvement than population.

The results must also be interpreted with caution since the survey was disseminated in

the time of COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly influenced the tourism industry. When asked, 27.3% of respondents admitted that their answers were affected by these circumstances. Despite their judgement, the results are still valid due to random assignment. It assured that an even number of respondents was shown each online travel platform and that their characteristics did not influence that decision. By using random assignment, it is ensured that the number of people affected by the pandemic is the same in every group. Though the travel intention in each group might, therefore, be lower due to this influence, it is equally lower across all platforms. The results are thus equally reliable and valid.

To assure people recognize the platforms on which the review was shown and respond adequately, a manipulation check of independent variable was included. At the end of the survey, the respondents were asked to identify the platform. Respondents who were shown a review on TripAdvisor correctly identified it in 92.7%. 3.6% thought the review was published on Google Maps and 1.8% thought it was published on Instagram. People who were shown the review on Instagram correctly identified it in 97.1%. The rest, 2.9% of respondents thought it was written on TripAdvisor. Lastly, 88.9% of respondents correctly identified Google Maps as their shown platform. 7.9% thought the correct platform was TripAdvisor and 3.2% that it was Instagram. Since the majority of respondents in each group correctly answered the manipulation check, the results can be used in the analysis.

The external validity of this experiment is medium since the sample can be somewhat generalized to the population as a whole, but the results may not be generalizable across different settings, making ecological validity intermediate.

To measure the main concepts, already existing and previously established scales were used for all of the variables. For a unidimensional dependant variable travel intention, two reliable scales used in two different pieces of research were used to assure valid results. Though both scales were developed recently, behavioural intention scale (Lam & Hsu, 2006) could be considered a bit outdated since only TripAdvisor existed at the time of its formulation. Despite this, the scale is not directly connected to online travel platforms, so it is valid to use it. Since both scales were used for measuring travel intention, they were both measuring the intended concept. Both scales were also determined reliable, to follow advice on a platform scale (Casalo et al., 2011) with acceptable internal consistency, and behavioural

intention scale with good internal consistency.

To measure multidimensional variable source credibility, a scale from 1990 was used (Ohanian, 1990). Since the scale was used to measure the source credibility of people, the attractiveness sub-scale was omitted, making the scale less valid. Since the scale was not meant to measure services and is somewhat outdated, it was assessed with caution during the analysis. Despite its scarcity, the scale is general and still prevailing, which is why I decided to use it in my research. Furthermore, both sub-scales and the final combined scale were determined as having good internal consistency, supporting my decision to keep it in the analysis.

The multidimensional variable eWOM scepticism was measured using a recently created and validated scale (Zhang et al., 2016). The scale had to be adapted to measure scepticism towards the platform and not the message, resulting in a less valid scale. This was also shown in the internal consistency of sub-scales, where the truthfulness had a questionable one. Since all of the levels measured with subscales are necessary for measuring eWOM scepticism and removal of one of the items did not contribute to higher reliability, I decided to keep the sub-scale in the analysis. My decision was also supported by the good internal consistency of the combined scale. Moreover, the scale did measure the intended concept and can thus be considered as valid.

To compute unidimensional travel involvement of travellers I used a scale of enduring travel involvement (Ferns & Walls, 2012) that measures feelings towards pleasure travel. In the survey, the validated version was used, making it a valid to use. The scale also proved to be reliable with excellent internal consistency.

Lastly, unidimensional variable user experience was also measured using the already existing scale (Schrepp et al., 2017). In the survey, I used already validated the shorter version of the scale without changing any of the items. The scale was thus valid and reliable, based on its internal validity which resulted to be good.

My study included numerous variables and tested the relationships between them. In some cases, a causal effect was considered when testing. Concerning online travel platforms, they were always approached as a definite cause in the experiment. Particularly, the independent variable travel platforms was a cause for travel intention, as well as different

levels of source credibility. Since there are a clear correlation and time order, causality exists (Chambliss, 2006). Furthermore, some of these variables also had other causes. For instance, source credibility also had user experience as a cause, since the look of the website can influence trustworthiness and expertise of a platform and there was a clear correlation between them.

An experiment offers great control and with it the responsibility of assuring that every variable is accounted for. In my research, confounding variables age and gender were accounted for and identified equally distributed amongst all platforms without significant influence. The dependant variable was measured with two different scales to achieve maximum validity. By distributing pre-test to people who were not allowed to fill out the survey I also assured that there was no influence of first to latter. Lastly, all of the confounding variables of online travel platforms as independent variables were accounted for and tested before the experiment by conducting a pre-test. By adhering to all these measures I ensured that the internal validity of the experiment was high.

### **3.6 Method of data analysis**

After collecting the data in Qualtrics application, I downloaded and analysed it in SPSS program. The results of the analyses are presented in the next chapter.

## **4. RESULTS**

Before conducting the analysis I needed to assure that the continuous scales used in my survey were normally distributed. To determine their normal distribution I referred to kurtosis and skewness indicators. Since normality significance tests greatly depend on sample size and visual analysis, such as histograms and Normal Q-Q plots are subjective, only these two descriptive statistics were taken into account. Almost all continuous variables are normally distributed, except for intention to follow advice on a platform. For this dependant variable, the kurtosis was above the recommended guidelines of -3 to +3. Kurtosis for this travel intention was 4.74. Though it does deviate from normality, the score is not too astray to omit from the analysis. In the analysis, I will also include results for each platform individually as well as for the model in general. By doing so, I want to get a deeper and

clearer understanding into the perception of platforms and possibly uncover factors influencing respondents' decision I had not taken into account and that could help recommendations for further research.

H1: The researched online travel platforms differ in levels of credibility.

To test H1, source credibility was measured for each platform and compared using ANOVA. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for the online travel communities TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps on their level of source credibility,  $F(2,183) = 12.25, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .12$ . Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed that Instagram is significantly less credible ( $M = 2.87, SD = 0.65$ ) than TripAdvisor ( $M = 3.27, SD = 0.51$ ),  $p = .001$ , and less credible than Google Maps ( $M = 3.34, SD = 0.57$ ),  $p < .001$ .

H1 is confirmed, since platforms do differ in levels of source credibility.

H2: The higher the credibility of the online travel community, the greater the travel intention.

H3: With the higher scepticism in an online travel community, the travel intention will be lower

To test both hypotheses, a linear multiple regression was conducted, with the intention to follow advice on a platform as a criterion. Predictors were eWOM scepticism and source credibility. The model was found to be significant,  $F(2, 183) = 11.28, p < 0.001, R^2 = .11$ . Only source credibility was found to be a significant predictor ( $\beta = .257, p = .002$ ), while eWOM scepticism ( $\beta = -.12, p = .142$ ) was not significant for intention to follow advice on a platform.

Further, a linear multiple regression was conducted, with behavioural intention as a criterion. Predictors were eWOM scepticism and source credibility. The model was again found to be significant,  $F(2, 183) = 9.27, p < 0.001, R^2 = .09$ . Only source credibility was found to be a significant predictor ( $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ), while eWOM scepticism ( $\beta = .07, p = .410$ ) was not significant for behavioural intention.

To explain the overall mediation model I will also test the effect of eWOM scepticism on source credibility. To assess this, I will perform a simple linear regression, with source credibility as criterion and eWOM scepticism as a predictor. The model turned out to be

significant,  $F(1, 184) = 58.86, p < .001, R^2 = .24$ . eWOM scepticism was found to be significant predictor ( $\beta = -.49, p < .001$ ) for source credibility. The higher the eWOM scepticism, the lower source credibility.

Based on these findings, I accept H2 and reject H3.

H4: The eWOM scepticism will be the highest on Instagram.

The comparison of eWOM scepticism on different platforms was analysed using ANOVA. The test revealed a significant main effect of platforms on eWOM scepticism,  $F(2,183) = 19.51, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .18$ . Tukey post-hoc comparison revealed that Instagram has significantly higher eWOM scepticism ( $M = 3.23, SD = 0.66$ ) than TripAdvisor ( $M = 2.73, SD = 0.67$ ),  $p < .001$ , and Google Maps ( $M = 2.58, SD = 0.56$ ),  $p < .001$ .

H4 is confirmed since Instagram does have the highest eWOM scepticism.

H5: High-involved travellers show higher travel intention when the online travel community is perceived as credible.

To test whether travel involvement has a moderation effect on travel intention when online travel platforms are considered credible, both independent variables of source credibility and travel involvement were centralized. The new variables were then multiplied to compute a new variable ‘interaction’. Moderation was then tested using multiple regression with behavioural intention as a criterion. Predictors were centralized variable source credibility, centralized variable travel involvement and interaction. The model was found to be significant,  $F(3, 182) = 7.17, p < .001, R^2 = .11$ . Only centralized variable source credibility was found to be a significant predictor of behavioural intention ( $\beta = .26, p = .001$ ), while neither centralized variable travel involvement ( $\beta = .15, p = .082$ ) nor the interaction effect ( $\beta = .02, p = .782$ ) were found significant for behavioural intention.

To assure the analysis was correct, I performed the same test using intention to follow advice on a platform as a criterion, with the same variables for predictors. The model was found to be significant,  $F(3, 182) = 8.09, p < .001, R^2 = .12$ . Centralized variable source credibility was again found as the only significant predictor of intention to follow advice on a platform ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ), while neither centralized variable travel involvement ( $\beta = .15,$

$p = .078$ ) nor interaction ( $\beta = .01, p = .892$ ) were found significant for intention to follow advice on a platform.

Travel involvement does not moderate the effect of credibility on travel intention, thus I reject H5.

H6: There is a positive relationship between user experience of a certain online travel platform and traveller's perceived credibility of that platform.

A simple linear regression with source credibility of an online travel platform as a criterion and user experience as a predictor was conducted. The model was found to be significant,  $F(1, 184) = 38.39, p < .001, R^2 = .17$ . Better user experience does have a positive influence on the source credibility of online travel platforms ( $\beta = .41, p < .001$ ).

To test the relation between both variables for each platform separately, a simple regression was used. The test with source credibility of TripAdvisor as a criterion and user experience as a predictor was conducted. The model was found to be significant,  $F(1, 53) = 50.56, p < .001, R^2 = .49$ . Better user experience on TripAdvisor has a positive influence on the source credibility of this online travel platform ( $\beta = .70, p < .001$ ).

Simple regression with source credibility of Instagram as a criterion and user experience as a predictor was conducted. The model was found to be significant,  $F(1, 66) = 5.22, p = .026, R^2 = .07$ . Better user experience on Instagram has a positive influence on the source credibility of this online travel platform ( $\beta = .27, p = .026$ ).

Simple regression with source credibility of Google Maps as a criterion and user experience as a predictor was conducted. The model was found to be significant,  $F(1, 61) = 22.50, p < .001, R^2 = .27$ . Better user experience on Google Maps has a positive influence on the source credibility of this online travel platform ( $\beta = .52, p < .001$ ).

To research which platform has the best user experience, an ANOVA test was also conducted. It revealed a significant main effect of platforms on user experience,  $F(2, 183) = 3.12, p = .047$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Tukey post-hoc comparison revealed that no platform has significantly better user experience than others. Though the differences are not significant, the platforms do differ in the means of their evaluated user experience, as seen in table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Differences among the evaluation of the user experience of platforms (mean)

Platform	Mean
TripAdvisor	3.46
Instagram	3.68
Google Maps	3.71

H6 is confirmed, since user experience has a positive effect on source credibility on every online travel platform.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Online travel communities have, for a long time, been overlooked in the literature. Their importance has only recently started to be recognized in research and tourism industry. With the growing number of such platforms and the reviews published on them, receiving clear and authentic recommendations is more difficult than ever (Lee et al., 2011). That is why travellers have started putting more emphasis on the communities to gain reliable information, and less on the actual reviews written by other travellers (Dou et al., 2012). As has been shown by Casalo et al. (2011), trust in online travel communities does have a positive influence on travel intention. In my research I wanted to expand on these findings to understand what is it about online travel platforms that make people confide in them and convince them to travel, using the theory of planned behaviour as a framework. With my research question, I thus wanted to find certain characteristics that distinguish platforms from one another in credibility and increase travel intention. This was done using base constructs (attitude, behavioural intention, intention to follow advice on a platform, source credibility) and additional explanatory factors (eWOM scepticism, travel involvement, user experience).

Firstly, I needed to define whether the chosen platforms do differ in levels of credibility. I tested this assumption with H1, which was confirmed. Each platform had a different level of source credibility, with Instagram having significantly the lowest one. Since source credibility is greatly dependant on the reputation of the community, these results are in line with current literature and insights into platforms. Source credibility also depends on the trustworthiness and expertise of the community. Instagram as a platform is not specifically

dedicated to travel-related content as the other two communities, which can influence its perceived expertise. People posting on Instagram may not be experienced travellers and since no proof is required, might even review destinations they had never visited. This aspect also influences its trustworthiness. Moreover, trust can be lessened by firm-generated hidden or false advertising and paid promotions (Moran & Muzellec, 2017), which is prevalent on social networking sites such as Instagram.

In previous research, source credibility has been determined as an important predictor of eWOM's effectiveness. It has been confirmed that higher credibility of a product has a direct positive influence on purchase behaviour (Weitzl et al., 2016). In my experiment, this connection was tested with H2, which was also confirmed. Source credibility does have a positive influence on travel intention. Moreover, source credibility was shown as influential in both behavioural intention and intention to follow advice on a platform. This determined that not only attitude toward the target behaviour but also toward the object of evaluation is influenced by source credibility. Furthermore, the relationship also established that the behaviour was precisely defined, as suggested by the findings of Yuzhanin and Fisher (2016). When considering the effect of source credibility on travel intention for each platform, Google Maps was the only platform with no effect for both intentions. The lack of effect does not necessarily mean source credibility does not matter, but rather that regarding Google Maps, it does not make any difference on its influence.

By now it has been established that source credibility shows how much people trust certain travel communities, as one of its dimensions is trustworthiness. Therefore, if source credibility is low, distrust or eWOM scepticism could be an influencing factor. It lowers the credibility and further travel intention. Though eWOM scepticism has been identified to affect consumer's intentions, it has never been researched in terms of travel. In H3 I thus wanted to establish whether eWOM scepticism will negatively influence travel intention. The hypothesis was rejected. The factor was shown insignificant considering behavioural intention and effective when testing on the intention to follow advice on a platform. The lack of effect on target behaviour could be explained by the choice of destination and clearly defined target behaviour. Since the destination was chosen based on several factors specifically measured on the European population, it was so compelling that eWOM

scepticism could not alter their decision to travel there.

Since behavioural intention does not account for the object of evaluation, such as travel platforms (Ajzen, 1985), no eWOM scepticism of the platforms was accounted for. This relationship was explained in the associated finding on the significance of eWOM scepticism on the intention to follow advice on a platform. Here, the destination was no longer as important and higher attention was given to the origin of recommendation. The effect has extensively been researched (Zhang et al., 2016) and this finding now supports the theory in tourism as well.

From H2 and H3 we infer that source credibility and eWOM scepticism are both present on every online travel platform and that they have a contradictive effect on travel intention. This was also identified by linear regression which showed that with higher eWOM scepticism, source credibility is lower. Based on these findings, I wanted to compare levels of source credibility with levels of eWOM scepticism for each platform. Conducting the analysis on each platform confirmed this finding. Since H4 was confirmed and Instagram does have the highest eWOM scepticism, I referred back to H1 which found that Instagram also has significantly low source credibility. The low score does have its evidence in the literature and research. Since it is the only platform not specifically related to travel, it is evident that people would trust it less. Moreover, covert advertising and promotion of destinations have been greatly present on Instagram, giving its users a rationale to doubt people's motivation for posting. Furthermore though not significantly, TripAdvisor holds middle level for both variables and Google Maps appears as the most trustworthy platform with the highest source credibility and lowest eWOM scepticism based on means. eWOM scepticism, therefore, does have a mediation effect since a correlation to source credibility exists. Referring back to the results of the multiple regression, we can assume that though eWOM scepticism does not affect travel intention directly, it may do so indirectly by reducing source credibility. Since there is an inversely proportional correlation between the two variables and source credibility does have a significant effect on travel intention, the mediation effect of eWOM scepticism is present.

As has been determined by now, source credibility does undoubtedly predict travel intention. To understand the factors contributing to higher source credibility and travel

intention, I also included travel involvement in the experiment as a moderator. This factor could be considered as the attitude towards target behaviour, additional to attitude towards following the advice on platforms measured by Casalo et al.'s (2011) scale. To test whether enduring travel involvement influences travel intention and whether credible platforms as perceived by high involved travellers are more convincing, I tested H5, which was rejected. Neither travel involvement nor the interaction effect significantly affected travel intention. The only significant effect was again detected by source credibility. My sample on average included highly involved travellers, which though they perceived source credibility of each platform differently, also lacked significant eWOM scepticism towards them. The lack of moderation effect can thus have several explanations. One the one hand, the small number of low involved travellers in my sample was not strong enough to detect the credibility of the platforms differently from high involved travellers. The lack of difference in travel involvement levels is also shown in the absence of a significant effect on travel intention. On the other hand, since all three chosen platforms did appear as trustworthy, all travellers, regardless of their level of involvement, might put the same emphasis on source credibility. Source credibility consequently does not depend on travel involvement.

There are also other factors contributing to higher travel intention. Already in 2008, Cheung et al. assumed that not only the destination and review but also the platform's design and reputation can affect people's behaviour. Though determining the connection between both has been touched on in many different pieces of research, no one has directly determined the correlation. Due to this, I posed the last hypothesis H6, which was confirmed. The better user experience of an online travel platform the higher source credibility. And since it has been previously shown that higher source credibility leads to higher travel intention, it can also explain why user experience influences travel intention. This premise is also supported by comparing the levels of user experience with levels of source credibility. Though not significantly, Google Maps does have the best user experience and the highest source credibility among the platforms. User experience, therefore, is a contributing factor of source credibility and greatly influences people's perception about travel communities. Based on the previous research that argues that the platform's attractiveness and likeability pursue travellers (Cheung et al., 2008), this finding only confirms it. Since every aspect of the review

was the same across all platforms except the interface, it can be assumed that these findings hold even when excluding the influence of the confounding variables.

In conclusion, the experiment showed to be greatly contributing to not only the tourism industry and online platforms but also for marketing specialists and everyday travellers.

Firstly, for improving the quality of the online travel platforms, this research again determined that source credibility is an important predictor of travel intention. It can be achieved by regulating three factors; (1) creating the best user experience of a website, (2) lowering eWOM scepticism as much as possible, (3) targeting everyone. By achieving the first, making a review easy to find is important. Since Google Maps held insignificant first place in user experience, professionals can refer to its website for recommendations. Amongst all three platforms, it also offered the most information about the user. Second, to avoid eWOM scepticism, avert covert and fake promotions, as people can recognize and become even more sceptical towards the platform as a whole. Google Maps had the highest mean of source credibility, which could be connected to inability for anyone to pay for a review. Next, as mentioned in user experience recommendations, including as much information about users as possible also lowers scepticism towards the reviews and the platform. Lastly, since travel involvement confirmedly does not influence perceived source credibility, it is important to make the website comprehensive for everyone, no matter how much they travel. Since all (non)-travellers perceive credibility as important, assuring to offer content and understanding for all travellers is necessary. In general, the research establishes that platforms need to test and monitor their user experience to keep it at the highest level, be transparent and open about paid promotions and advertising, disclose as much information about the users as possible and provide clear content for all levels of travellers.

Next, the most important recommendation for anyone working in tourism and marketing is to include the most credible platforms in their campaigns and adapt the reviews based on target group's characteristics. Firstly, choosing the right platform that the audience perceives as the most credible one is crucial as seen in the research. Since Instagram showed the lowest source credibility, it would be beneficial to reconsider the investments made on that platform. Travel influencers and covert promotions so prominently present may have a negative outcome due to low credibility of Instagram. Preferably, professionals should invest

that money in promotions on TripAdvisor and an increase in the number of reviews on Google Maps, since both platforms were considered more credible by respondents. Furthermore, it is important to create content for all levels of travellers, since all of them value credibility equally. This finding can help professionals understand that the content should be adapted to both experienced travellers as well as beginners. Different jargon, pertinent destinations and helpful information on these platforms can attract more people. In sum, marketers and tourism professionals should adopt the use of platforms and reviews to the target audience based on the results.

Ultimately, travellers can benefit from the study to learn about the most credible platforms and characteristics that make a review authentic. Based on the results, Google Maps and TripAdvisor are the most credible platforms to receive recommendations from of the three tested. Moreover, for young travellers, Instagram has determined to be a trustworthy source as well, though it should be assessed with caution. Despite not having a direct effect on travel intention, eWOM scepticism was nevertheless proven the highest on Instagram and influential for source credibility. None of the platforms showed great distrust or scepticism towards them, confirming to be valuable and credible sources of travel information.

### **5.1 Limitations and further research**

Though the results of the study are persuasive and interesting to implement, they must be assessed with caution. During my experiment, several issues arose and had to be dealt with. Firstly, the time of dissemination of the survey coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel became impossible. Due to closed borders and travel limitations, a lot of people's perceptions about travel could have changed and influenced the answers of respondents unconsciously. Moreover, more than a quarter of respondents did recognize the effect of the pandemic on their decisions. Though these were distributed equally among platforms, the influence might have been more influential than just lower travel intention.

In conjunction with the previous limitation, the sample size reflected these conditions. Though my sample size was adequate for the power of each group, it was the minimum number of respondents required. This could be a consequence of travel-ban, and people were not eager to respond to the topic since it was taken away from them. The only people on

social media sites were younger generations with a lot of time, which is also reflected in my young sample. In the sample, sample bias was also present, since the survey was disseminated in mostly travel groups. Consequently, people's high travel involvement was to some extent a predisposition.

Another limitation that should be taken into account is the lack of literature on online travel platforms and therefore a low number of scales researching them. In the literature review previous to conducting the experiment, only one scale by Casalo et al. (2011) was identified. The rest of the scales had to be adapted to platforms, which could have influenced the results, despite showing high alpha values.

Based on these limitations and results of the analysis, I propose several recommendations for further research. Firstly, similar research should be conducted with a more generalizable sample that could confirm or reject the findings from this study. Though this research is valid and can be used as an example of perceptions of younger generations, it is necessary to replicate it to completely assure the validity of the findings. The reliability and newness of these findings could also be further assured by incorporating a control group in the experiment design. Its inclusion would determine that the results would measure the difference between platforms.

Moreover, a similar study could be replicated on a different population of a different continent or worldwide population. It would allow for a deeper understanding of each population travel behaviour and comparison of those characteristics around the world. Not only would that have practical implications in tourism and marketing, but also allowed tourist to choose the most credible online travel platforms based on the destination of their travel. Additionally, the research could also be replicated with other online platforms, such as Booking, Airbnb etc. to gain additional insights into their characteristics and credibility differences.

Lastly, to further extend on the findings, a study investigating the significance of reputation of the platforms could be beneficial. It would give insight into the importance of recognition and publicity the platforms receive and help additionally explain the results. Such a study could also focus on other factors that were not considered yet, such as level of involvement on online travel platforms i.e. travellers who write reviews vs. those who only

read them, the number of reviews considered before having an effect on travel intention and focus on particular parts of user experience that were not specifically assessed in this study.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Pre-test

Dear Madame, Dear Sir,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is a part of my Master thesis research, conducted as a part of Master in Media and creative industries at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. In my thesis, I investigate travellers' behaviour in relation to online travel platforms. In specific, I am interested whether online reviews on travel platforms TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps influence travellers' travel intention differently due to their perceived characteristics. That is why I am curious in your evaluation of 8 chosen online travel reviews from different platforms and 8 different pictures from the same destination. This will help me define the optimal and most convincing review. The survey takes around 10 to complete.

To participate in this survey, you must be at least 18 years old. Your participation is completely voluntary and anonymous.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact me, Pia Erman (pia.erman95@gmail.com).

I ensure you to protect the privacy to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your answers are recorded and processed anonymously and will only be accessed by me and my mentor, and will only be used for the purposes of the thesis.

Once again, I greatly appreciate your time and participation in this survey. It will be of great help to my research.

With best regards, Pia Erman

#### About the study

What is the study about and why am I doing it? The purpose of my Master thesis is to determine whether different perceptions of online travel platforms influence travellers' travel intention after reading the travel reviews posted on them. I want to learn whether travel platforms TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps are perceived differently by travellers and if these perceptions influence people susceptibility to follow the reviews on them.

What will happen if you take part in this survey? If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to read a series of online travel reviews such as those that appear on online travel platforms and then on the direction of the message they convey (completely positive – completely negative). You will also be asked to select a favourite photo from a selection and demographic questions (age, sex, education). How long will this study take and how many people will be in the study? Participation in this study will take about 10 minutes and include about 30 participants. What data will I collect from you? As part of this study, I will collect data about how you perceive online travel reviews, resembling the ones posted on online travel platforms. I will also collect the data of your preference of the photos showed. Some demographic information (age, sex, education) will also be collected. What will happen to the information I collect about you after the study? I and the University will keep the research data for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will not be collected. All data will be secured in a password protected file. How will I compensate you for participating in the survey? For participating in this study, you will not be compensated in any way, except for the notion of helping me get my master's degree. Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Even if you decide to be a part of it now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, only the data you have already entered will be used. Contact information for me and questions about the research. If you have any questions about this research or your involvement in it, you may contact: Pia Erman, Student at Erasmus University Rotterdam Erasmus University Rotterdam

Email: [pia.erman95@gmail.com](mailto:pia.erman95@gmail.com)

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Q3 By clicking the button below, you are agreeing to be in this study. If at any time you

wish to stop participating, simply close your browser window.

I consent (1)

---

**Q4 Please read the following review carefully**

“Tenerife must be one of the most underrated and overlooked destinations in Europe. It has sea, sun, scenic grandeur and it has excellent and affordable cuisine and raunchy nightlife. The downside is that it is four and a half hours flying time away from the UK and Western European cities. Which is fine by me because I like it nice and quiet, in the day time at least.”

---

**Q5 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q6 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q7 How would you describe the length of this review?**

Too short      Just right      Too long

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Length ()



Page Break

**Q12 Please read the following review carefully**

“Tenerife’s got something for everyone, young and old. Great beaches, good restaurants, friendly people, plenty of things to do for kids, plenty of places to explore around the island, great weather but can be poor January till March but can still wear shorts on a colder night.”

**Q13 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q14 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q15 How would you describe the length of this review?**

Too short      Just right      Too long

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Length ()



Page Break

**Q16 Please read the following review carefully**

“Really great place for a great vacation. There is everything, from A to Z, many hotels, many shops and restaurants, even many Russian restaurants. The beach is also nice, unfortunately, it was in the summer when it was very cold in the water. However, this place can only be recommended. You can take the bus to other places. Sometimes there is not just a street parade but a boat parade. If you have no flip-flops for the beach, you can buy them,

there is a very large selection from cheap to expensive, from brandless to Nike and Adidas. If you like adventure there are also many beaches with big waves.”

---

**Q17 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

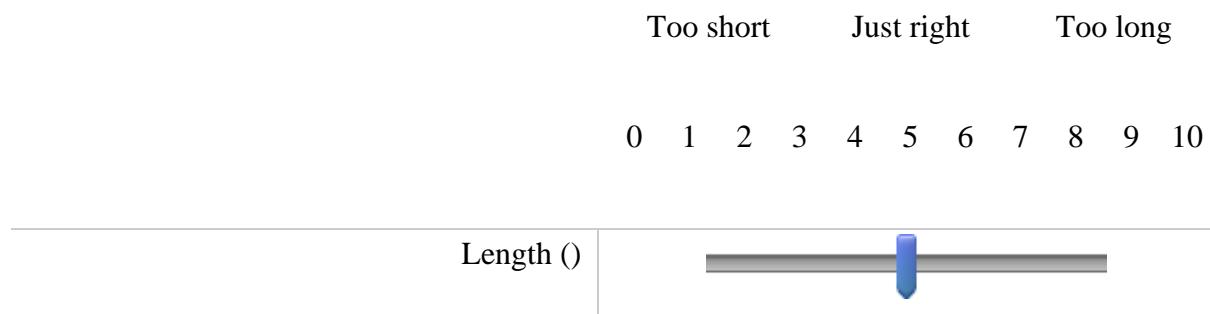
- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q18 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q19 How would you describe the length of this review?**



Page Break

**Q20 Please read the following review carefully**

“Really diverse landscapes, very nice people and a lot of variety. If you read this: take your music with you, the radio stations are terrible! Otherwise perfect for a diverse hiking holiday. By the way, the volcano is **breathtaking!** :)”

---

**Q21 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

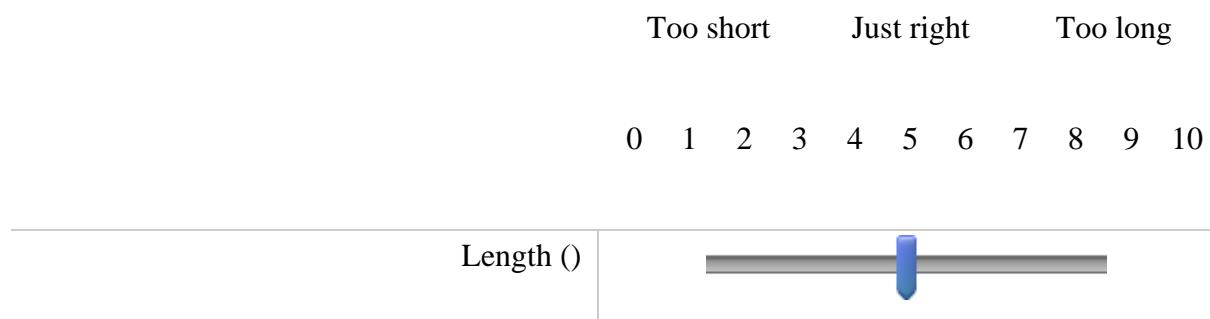
- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q22 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q23 How would you describe the length of this review?**



Page Break

**Q24 Please read the following review carefully**

“The view of a snow-capped Tiede from a black lava sun-soaked beach. A stunning opera house that seems to be held up by skyhooks. Wonderful old beautiful kept Spanish houses, villas and squares and tropical gardens. Thriving university culture and vibrant young community. An island that is more about beauty and history than getting rat arsed and

sleeping the day away..."

---

**Q25 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

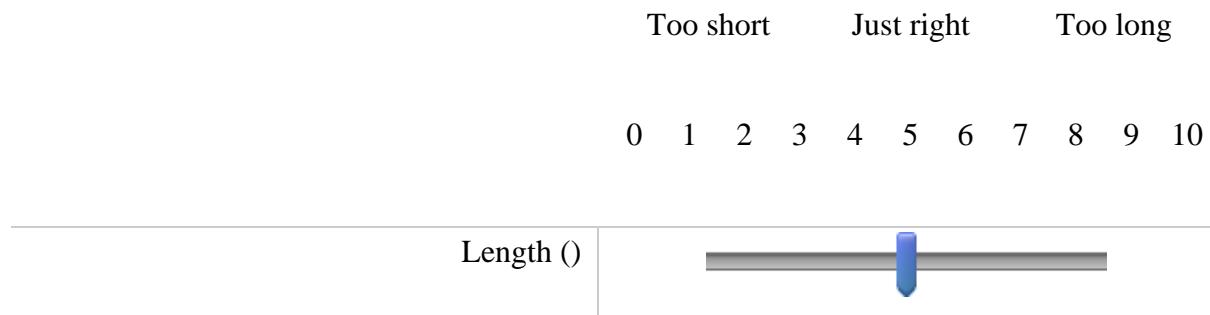
- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q26 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q27 How would you describe the length of this review?**



Page Break

**Q28 Please read the following review carefully**

“Tenerife has got so much going for it. 365 days warm weather, things to do for the young and the mature people, good beaches, great nightlife, coastal walkways great for walking and ideal for wheelchairs. If you don't want the high nightlife there are quieter areas you can go to. It has one of the best Water Parks in the world, shows you can go and watch, and public

transport is one of the best to get around on. Mount Teide is a great trip to go on. The Island is a Tax-Free Island so it's cheaper than mainland Spain."

---

**Q29 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

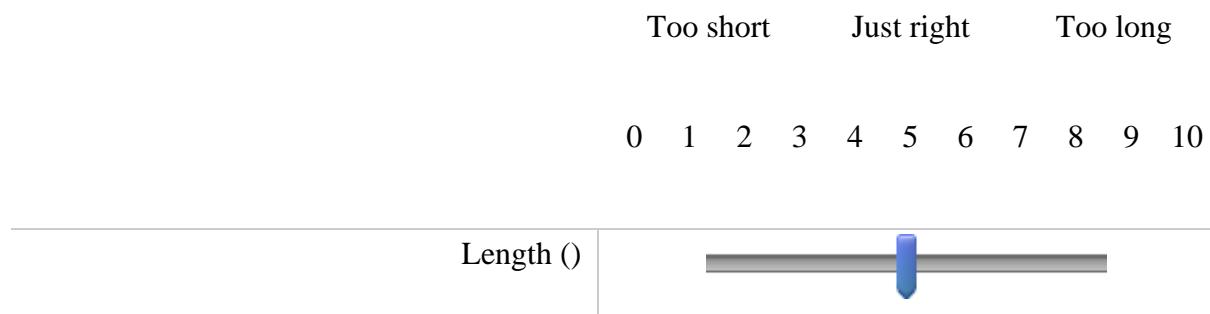
- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q30 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q31 How would you describe the length of this review?**



Page Break

---

**Q32 Please read the following review carefully**

“I must say that both my wife and I love it... We are on vacation right now and it is a beautiful island with very good beaches, some less than others of course, but all very beautiful... I will definitely return.”

---

**Q33 From negative to positive, how would you describe this review?**

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

---

**Q34 To what extent would you say that the review is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Ambiguous (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Understandable (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Clear (3)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q35 How would you describe the length of this review?**

Too short

Just right

Too long

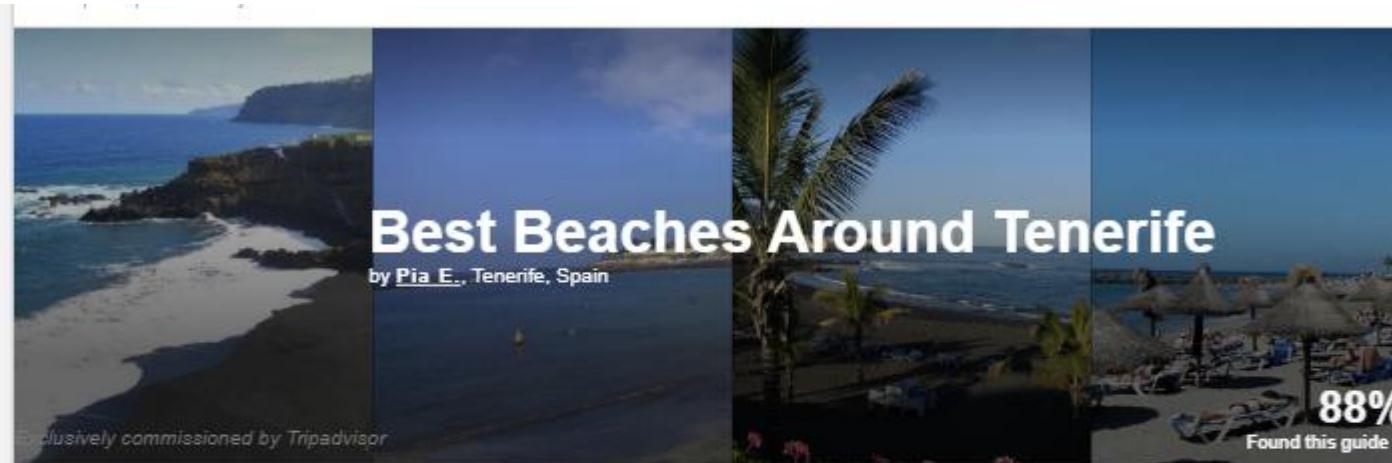
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Length ()



Page Break

Q39 Please look at the following review carefully



**Best Beaches Around Tenerife**  
by Pia E., Tenerife, Spain

Exclusively commissioned by Tripadvisor

88%  
Found this guide

Tenerife must be one of the most underrated and overlooked destinations in Europe. It has sea, sun, scenic grandeur and it has excellent and affordable cuisine and raunchy nightlife. The downside is that it is four and a half hours flying time away from the UK and Western European cities. Which is fine by me because I like it nice and quiet, in the day time at least.

Good for Nature Lover Peace and Quiet Seeker Beach Goer Thrifty Traveler Like a Local

10 Places  
6 City Tips

Q40 To what extent would you say this post is...

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Believable (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Authentic (2)	<input type="radio"/>				

**Q41 Please look at the following review carefully**

Tenerife

Island

[MORE DETAILS](#)



Pia Erman

★★★★★ a year ago

"Tenerife must be one of the most underrated and overlooked destinations in Europe. It has sea, sun, scenic grandeur and it has excellent and affordable cuisine and raunchy nightlife. The downside is that it is four and a half hours flying time away from the UK and Western European cities. Which is fine by me because I like it nice and quiet, in the day time at least."

 Like  Share

**Q42 To what extent would you say this post is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Believable (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Authentic (2)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q43 Please look at the following review carefully

 piaerman  
Tenerife

...



Heart Comment Share



 Liked by u\_k and 1143 others

piaerman Tenerife must be one of the most underrated and overlooked destinations in Europe. It has sea, sun, scenic grandeur and it has excellent and affordable cuisine and raunchy nightlife. The downside is that it is four and a half hours flying time away from the UK and Western European cities. Which is fine by me because I like it nice and quiet, in the day time at least.

**Q44 To what extent would you say this post is...**

	Not at all (1)	Very little (2)	A bit (3)	Moderately (4)	A great deal (5)
Believable (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Authentic (2)	<input type="radio"/>				

---

Page Break

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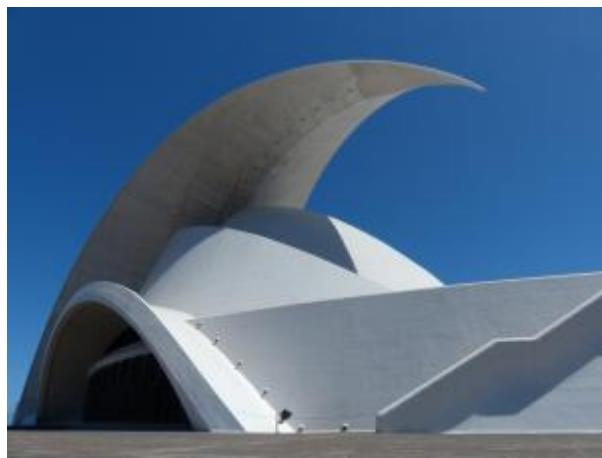
**Q45** Please observe the following photos carefully and choose ONE that is the most appealing to you 1



Q49 2



Q50 3



Q51 4



Q52 5



Q53 6



Q54 7



Q55 8



---

Q56 Which picture is the most appealing to you?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)

---

Page Break

End of Block: Introduction

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Start of Block: Block 1

---

Q61 What is your year of birth?

---

Q65 With which gender do you identify most?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)
- Rather not say (4)

---

Q63 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (2)
- Bachelor's degree (3)
- Master's degree (4)
- Doctoral degree (5)
- Other (6)

---

Q51 Do you live/study/work in Tenerife?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

---

Q50 Is there anything you would like to let me know? Is there anything weird or unusual in the survey?

---

End of Block: Block 1

---

## **Appendix B: Experiment survey**

Dear Madam, Dear Sir,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. It is a part of my Master thesis research, conducted as a part of Master in Media and Creative Industries at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. In my thesis, I investigate travellers' behaviour in relation to online travel platforms. In specific, I am interested whether online reviews on travel platforms TripAdvisor, Instagram and Google Maps influence travellers' travel intention differently due to their perceived characteristics.

To participate in this survey, you must be at least 18 years old and currently living in Europe. Your participation is completely voluntary and anonymous. There are no risks associated with participating in this survey.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact me, Pia Erman (pia.erman95@gmail.com).

I ensure you to protect the privacy to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your answers

are recorded and processed anonymously and will only be accessed by me and my mentor, and will only be used for the purposes of the thesis.

Once again, I greatly appreciate your time and participation in this survey. It will be of great help to my research.

With best regards, Pia Erman

---

Q49 By clicking the button below, you are agreeing to be in this study. If at any time you wish to stop participating, simply close your browser window.

I consent (1)

End of Block: Block 3

---

Start of Block: Tripadvisor

1 Please look and read the following review on TripAdvisor carefully. Based on this review

you will later be asked a series of questions.

 **Jenny\_K** •••  
wrote a review Mar 2020  
📍 Shefford, United Kingdom  
148 contributions • 68 helpful votes



●●●●●

**Lovely sandy beach with panoramic vistas**

Tenerife has got so much going for it. 365 days warm weather, things to do for the young and the mature people, good beaches, great nightlife, coastal walkways great for walking and ideal for wheelchairs. If you don't want the high nightlife there are quieter areas you can go to. It has one of the best Water Parks in the world, shows you can go and watch, and public transport is one of the best to get around on. Mount Teide is a great trip to go on. The Island is a Tax-Free Island so it's cheaper than mainland Spain.

[Read less ▲](#)

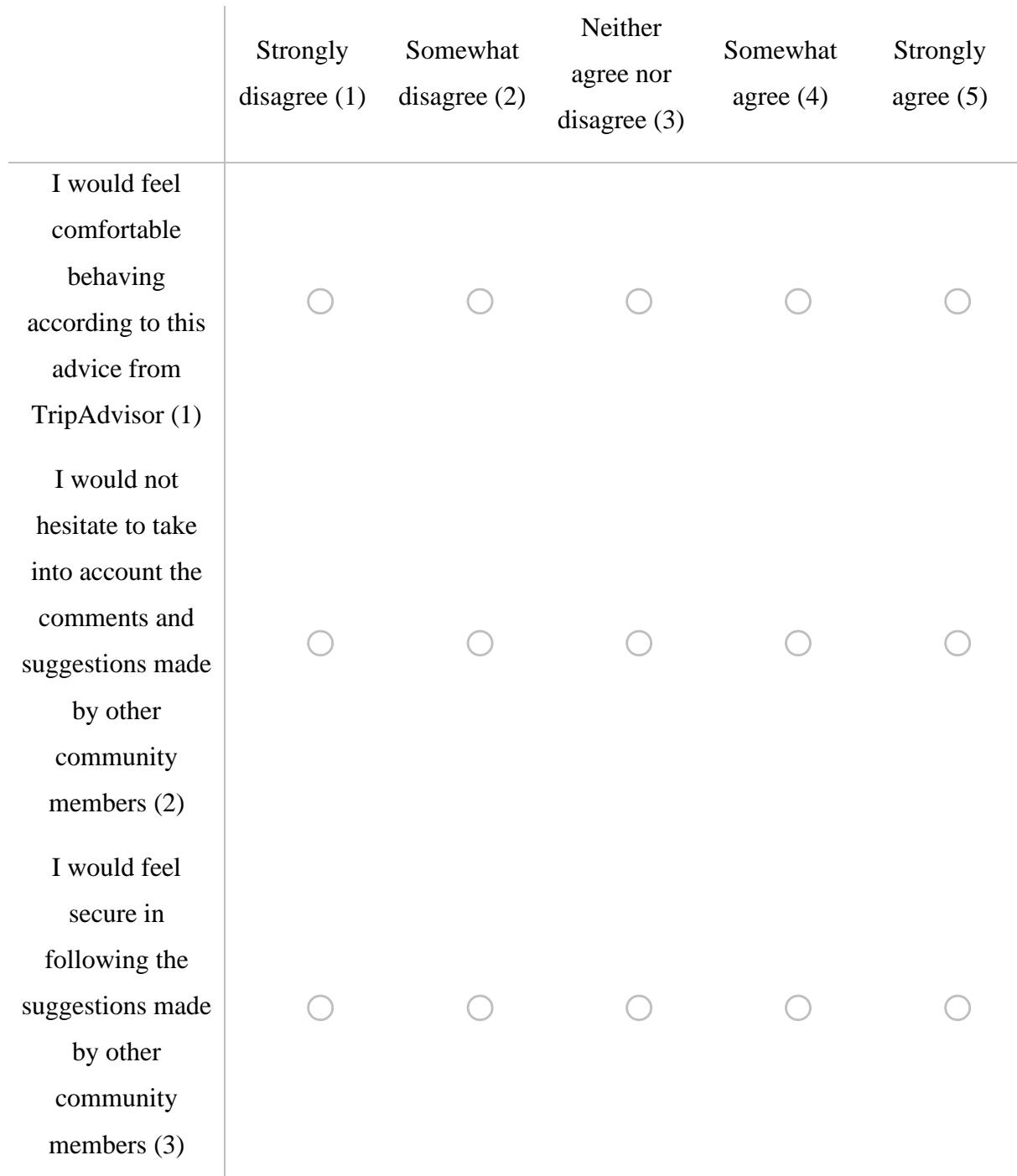
**Date of experience:** March 2020

**Trip type:** Traveled as a couple

*This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.*

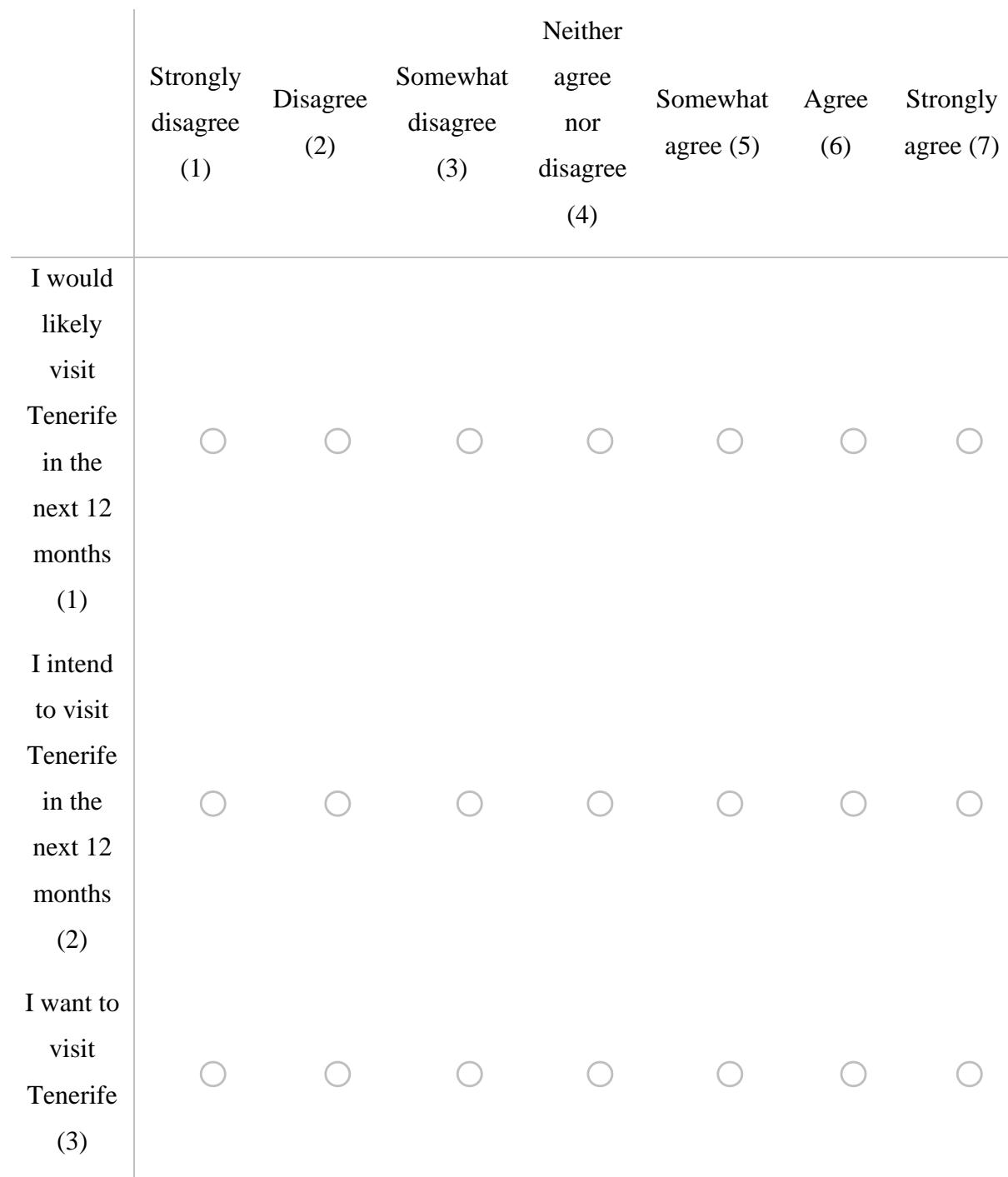
 **Helpful** 

2 Based on the review, please express your agreement with the following statements



I would rely on  
the  
recommendations  
made by other  
community  
members (4)

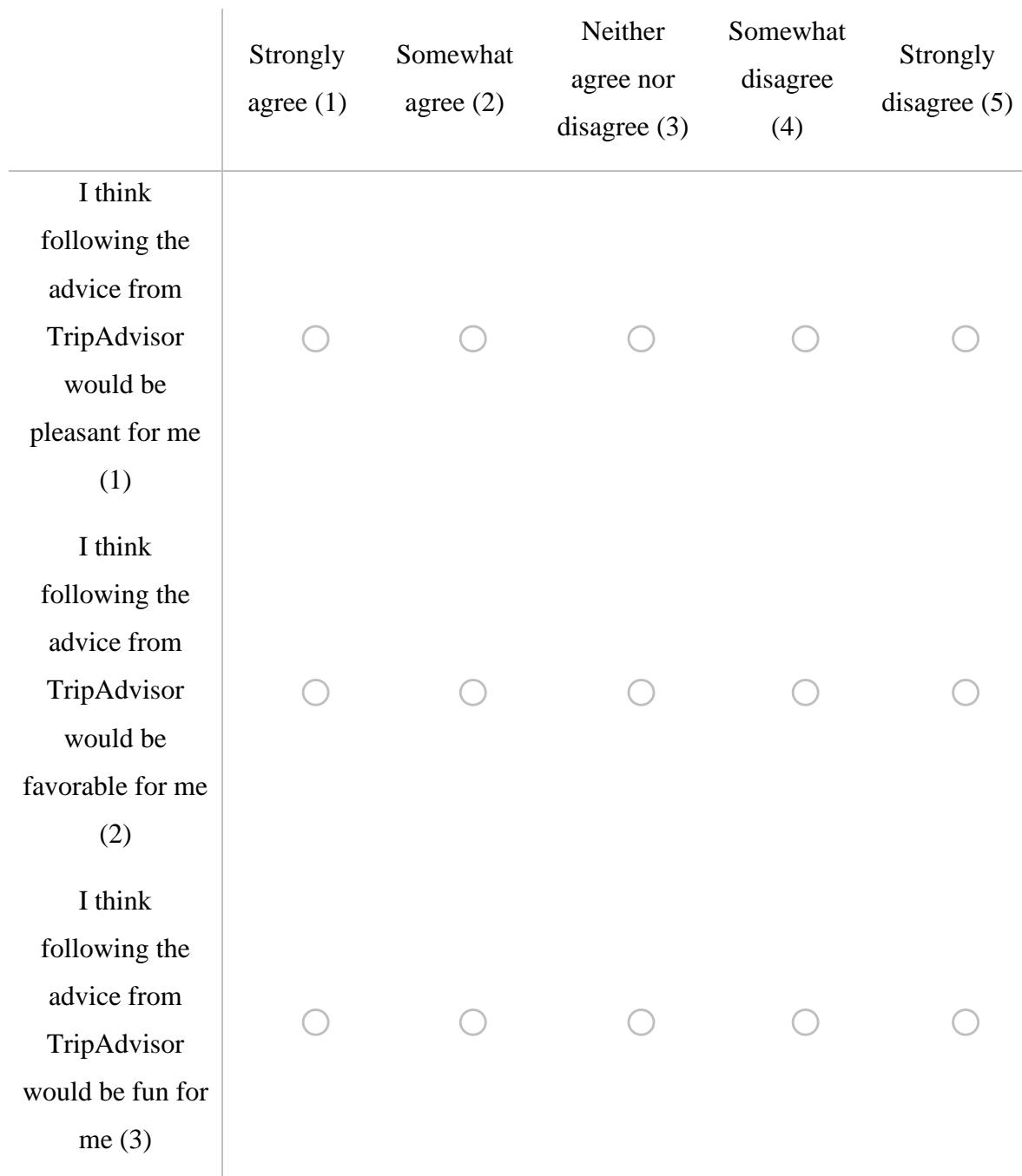
3 Based on the review, please express how strongly you agree with the following statements



4 After reading the review, I want to travel to Tenerife to...

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
experience warm weather (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
visit water parks (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
enjoy night life (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
do shopping (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
go sightseeing (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
relax on beaches (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5 After reading the review, please express your agreement with the following statements



I think following the advice from TripAdvisor would be enjoyable for me (4)	<input type="radio"/>				
I have a positive opinion about the advice from TripAdvisor (5)	<input type="radio"/>				

Page Break

#### 6 I consider TripAdvisor

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Undependable	<input type="radio"/>	Dependable				
Dishonest	<input type="radio"/>	Honest				
Unreliable	<input type="radio"/>	Reliable				
Insincere	<input type="radio"/>	Sincere				
Untrustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	Trustworthy				

7 I believe that people reviewing on TripAdvisor are

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Not expert	<input type="radio"/>	Expert				
Inexperienced	<input type="radio"/>	Experienced				
Unknowledgeable	<input type="radio"/>	Knowledgeable				
Unqualified	<input type="radio"/>	Qualified				
Unskilled	<input type="radio"/>	Skilled				

Page Break

---

8 Please indicate to what degree do you agree with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We can hardly depend on getting the truth from TripAdvisor (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online reviews on TripAdvisor are not generally truthful (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In general, online reviews don't reflect the true picture of a subject (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TripAdvisor cares more about getting you to buy things (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TripAdvisor intends to mislead (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People writing online reviews on TripAdvisor are always up to something (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

TripAdvisor  
includes online  
reviews from people  
who are not  
necessarily the real  
customers (7)



People writing  
online reviews on  
TripAdvisor are  
pretending they are  
someone else (8)



On TripAdvisor,  
different reviews are  
often posted by the  
same person under  
different names (9)



---

Page Break

---

9 How you would describe TripAdvisor website?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Obstructive	<input type="radio"/>	Supportive				
Complicated	<input type="radio"/>	Easy				
Inefficient	<input type="radio"/>	Efficient				
Confusing	<input type="radio"/>	Clear				
Boring	<input type="radio"/>	Exciting				
Not interesting	<input type="radio"/>	Interesting				
Conventional	<input type="radio"/>	Inventive				
Usual	<input type="radio"/>	Leading edge				

10 For me, travel (is)

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Unimportant	<input type="radio"/>	Important				
Of no concern	<input type="radio"/>	Of great concern				
Insignificant	<input type="radio"/>	Significant				
Means nothing	<input type="radio"/>	Means a lot				
Does not matter	<input type="radio"/>	Matters a lot				

Page Break

11 With which gender do you identify most?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)
- Rather not say (4)

12 What is your age?

▼ 18 (1) ... 102 (85)

13 Where do you currently live?

▼ Albania (1) ... Other (49)

14 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (2)
- Bachelor's degree (3)
- Master's degree (4)
- Doctoral degree (5)
- Other (6)

15 Do you live/study/work in Tenerife?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

---

Q51 On which online platform was the shown review written?

- TripAdvisor (1)
- Instagram (2)
- Google Maps (3)

End of Block: Tripadvisor

---

Start of Block: Instagram

Q61 Please look and read the following review on Instagram carefully. Based on this review

you will later be asked a series of questions.



Jenny\_K  
Tenerife, Spain

...

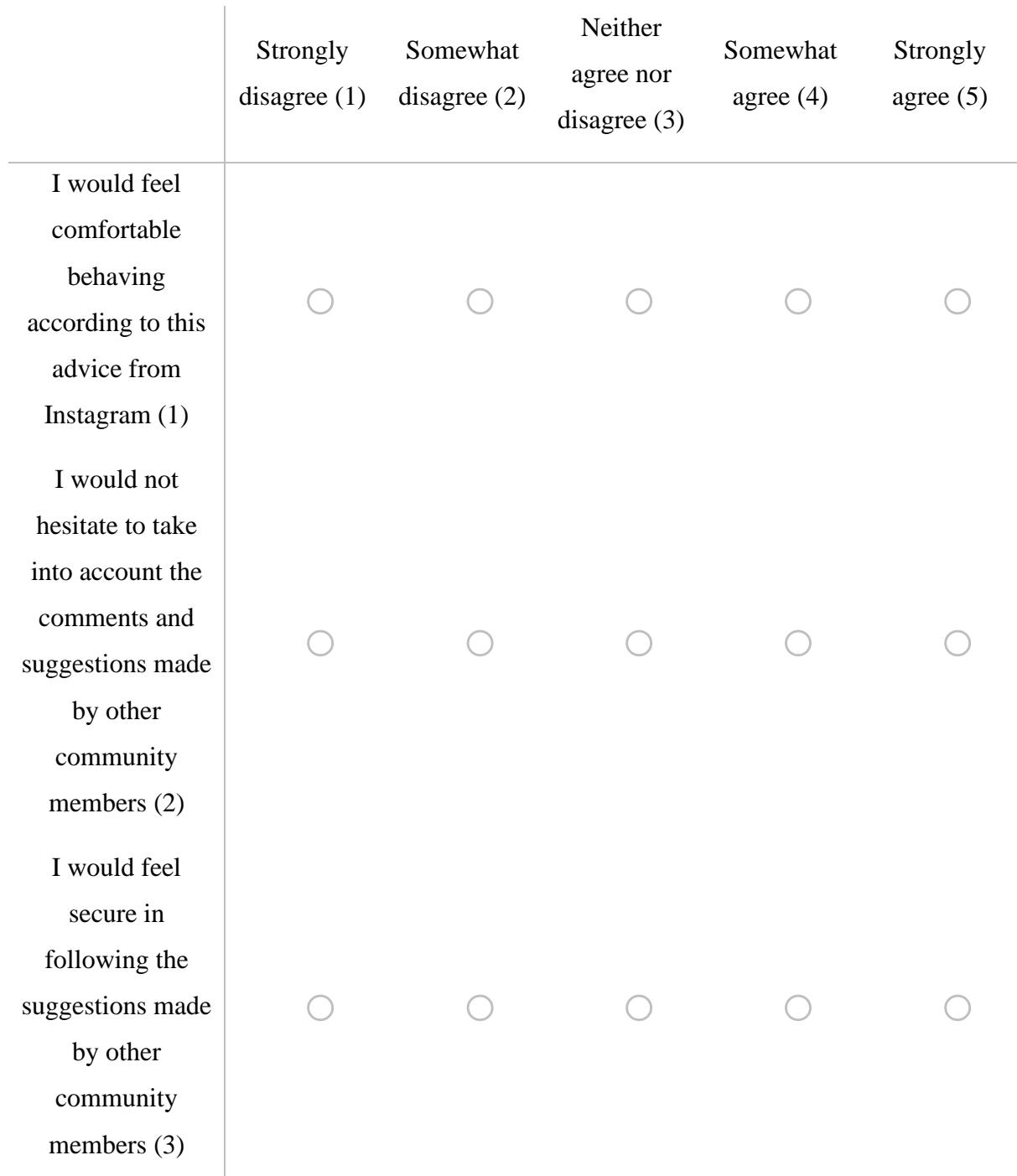


Liked by jessicakey and 121 others

piaerman

Tenerife has got so much going for it. 365 days warm weather, things to do for the young and the mature people, good beaches, great nightlife, coastal walkways great for walking and ideal for wheelchairs. If you don't want the high nightlife there are quieter areas you can go to. It has one of the best Water Parks in the world, shows you can go and watch, and public transport is one of the best to get around on. Mount Teide is a great trip to go on. The Island is a Tax-Free Island so it's cheaper than mainland Spain.

Q62 Based on the review, please express your agreement with the following statements

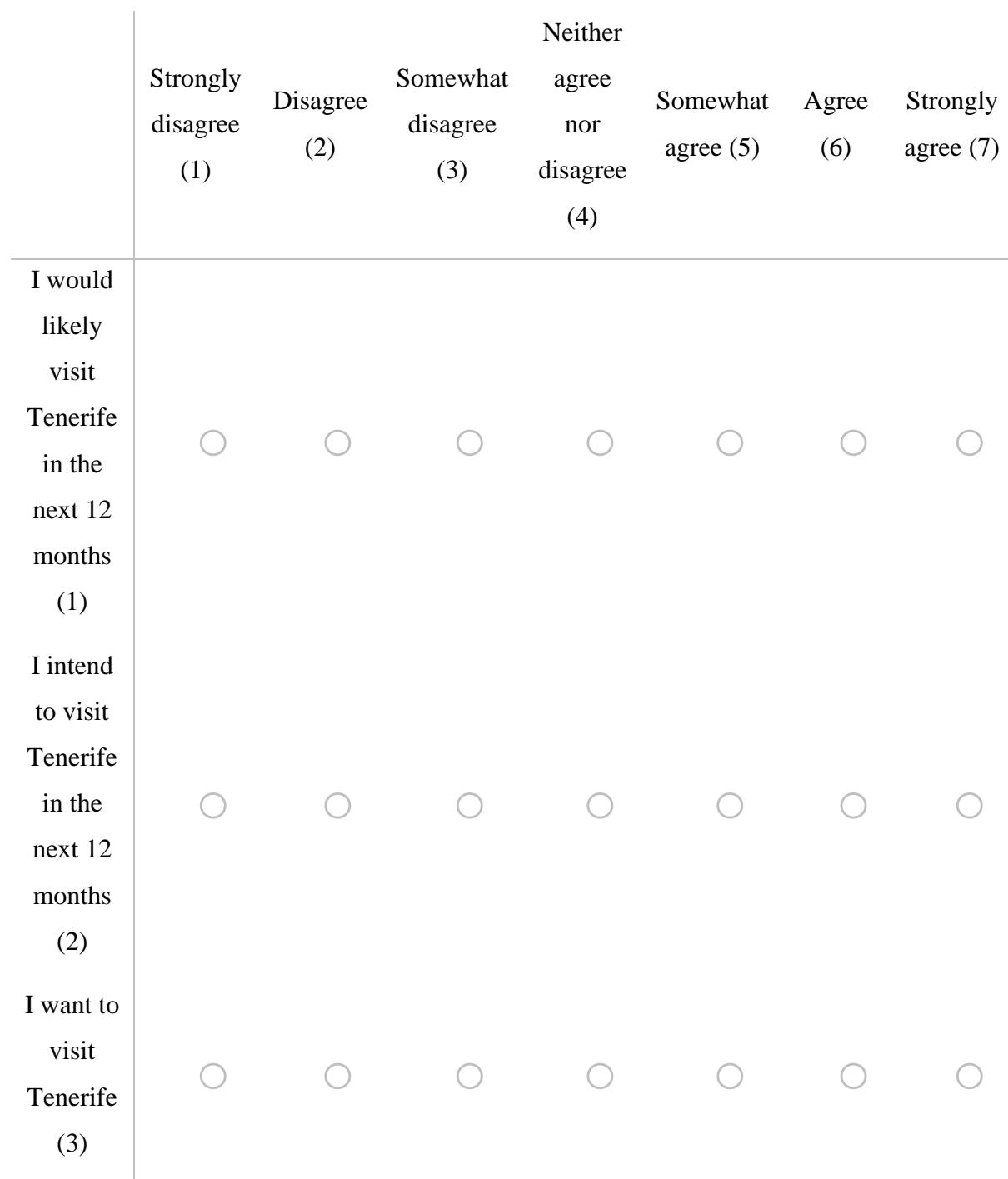


I would rely on  
the  
recommendations  
made by other  
community  
members (4)

Q63 Based on the review, please express how strongly you agree with the following

statements



Q64 After reading the review, I want to travel to Tenerife to...

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
experience warm weather (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
visit water parks (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
enjoy night life (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
do shopping (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
go sightseeing (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
relax on beaches (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q65 After reading the review, please express your agreement with the following statements

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
I think following the advice from Instagram would be pleasant for me (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think following the advice from Instagram would be favourable for me (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think following the advice from Instagram would be fun for me (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think following the advice from Instagram would be enjoyable for me (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a positive opinion about the advice from Instagram (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

-----  
Page Break -----

Q66 I consider Instagram

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Undependable	<input type="radio"/>	Dependable				
Dishonest	<input type="radio"/>	Honest				
Unreliable	<input type="radio"/>	Reliable				
Insincere	<input type="radio"/>	Sincere				
Untrustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	Trustworthy				

Q67 I believe that people reviewing on Instagram are

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Not expert	<input type="radio"/>	Expert				
Inexperienced	<input type="radio"/>	Experienced				
Unknowledgeable	<input type="radio"/>	Knowledgeable				
Unqualified	<input type="radio"/>	Qualified				
Unskilled	<input type="radio"/>	Skilled				

-----  
Page Break -----

Q68 Please indicate to what degree do you agree with the following statements

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We can hardly depend on getting the truth from Instagram (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online reviews on Instagram are not generally truthful (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In general, online reviews don't reflect the true picture of a subject (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Instagram cares more about getting you to buy things (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Instagram intends to mislead (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People writing online reviews on Instagram are always up to something (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Instagram includes online reviews from people who are not necessarily the real customers (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

People writing online reviews on Instagram are pretending they are someone else (8)



On Instagram, different reviews are often posted by the same person under different names (9)



Page Break

---

Q69 How you would describe Instagram website?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Obstructive	<input type="radio"/>	Supportive				
Complicated	<input type="radio"/>	Easy				
Inefficient	<input type="radio"/>	Efficient				
Confusing	<input type="radio"/>	Clear				
Boring	<input type="radio"/>	Exciting				
Not interesting	<input type="radio"/>	Interesting				
Conventional	<input type="radio"/>	Inventive				
Usual	<input type="radio"/>	Leading edge				

Q70 For me, travel (is)

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Unimportant	<input type="radio"/>	Important				
Of no concern	<input type="radio"/>	Of great concern				
Insignificant	<input type="radio"/>	Significant				
Means nothing	<input type="radio"/>	Means a lot				
Does not matter	<input type="radio"/>	Matters a lot				

---

Page Break

---

Q71 With which gender do you identify most?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)
- Rather not say (4)

Q72 What is your age?

▼ 18 (1) ... 102 (85)

Q73 Where do you currently live?

▼ Albania (1) ... Other (49)

Q74 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (2)
- Bachelor's degree (3)
- Master's degree (4)
- Doctoral degree (5)
- Other (6)

Q75 Do you live/study/work in Tenerife?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q53 On which online platform was the shown review written?

- TripAdvisor (1)
- Instagram (2)
- Google Maps (3)

End of Block: Instagram

---

Start of Block: Google maps

Q46 Please look and read the following review on Google Maps carefully. Based on this

review you will later be asked a series of questions.



Jenny\_K

Local guide · 148 reviews

...

★★★★★ 2 months ago

Tenerife has got so much going for it. 365 days warm weather, things to do for the young and the mature people, good beaches, great nightlife, coastal walkways great for walking and ideal for wheelchairs. If you don't want the high nightlife there are quieter areas you can go to. It has one of the best Water Parks in the world, shows you can go and watch, and public transport is one of the best to get around on. Mount Teide is a great trip to go on. The Island is a Tax-Free Island so it's cheaper than mainland Spain.



Like

Share

Q47 Based on the review, please express your agreement with the following statements

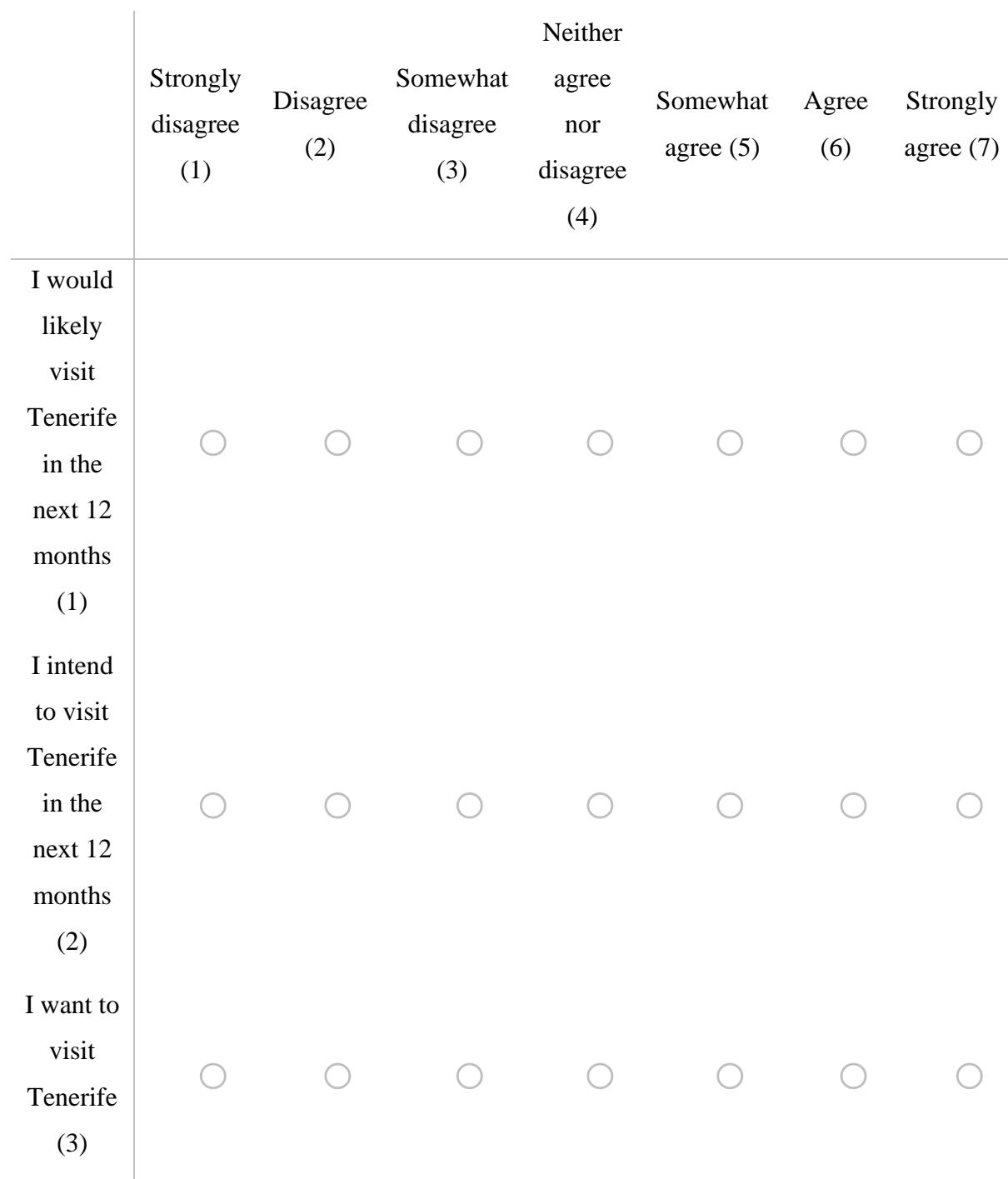
	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I would feel comfortable behaving according to this advice from Google Maps (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would not hesitate to take into account the comments and suggestions made by other community members (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would feel secure in following the suggestions made by other community members (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I would rely on  
the  
recommendations  
made by other  
community  
members (4)

Q48 Based on the review, please express how strongly you agree with the following

statements



Q49 After reading the review, I want to travel to Tenerife to...

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
experience warm weather (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
visit water parks (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
enjoy night life (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
do shopping (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
go sightseeing (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
relax on beaches (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q50 After reading the review, please express your agreement with the following statements

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
I think following the advice from Google Maps would be pleasant for me (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think following the advice from Google Maps would be favourable for me (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think following the advice from Google Maps would be fun for me (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think following the advice from Google Maps would be enjoyable for me (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I have a positive  
opinion about the  
advice from  
Google Maps (5)

---

Page Break

---

Q51 I consider Google maps

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Undependable	<input type="radio"/>	Dependable				
Dishonest	<input type="radio"/>	Honest				
Unreliable	<input type="radio"/>	Reliable				
Insincere	<input type="radio"/>	Sincere				
Untrustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	Trustworthy				

Q52 I believe that people reviewing on Google maps are

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Not expert	<input type="radio"/>	Expert				
Inexperienced	<input type="radio"/>	Experienced				
Unknowledgeable	<input type="radio"/>	Knowledgeable				
Unqualified	<input type="radio"/>	Qualified				
Unskilled	<input type="radio"/>	Skilled				

---

Page Break

---

Q53 Please indicate to what degree do you agree with the following statements

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
We can hardly depend on getting the truth from Google maps (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online reviews on Google maps are not generally truthful (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In general, online reviews don't reflect the true picture of a subject (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Google maps cares more about getting you to buy things (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Google maps intends to mislead (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People writing online reviews on Google maps are always up to something (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Google maps includes online reviews from people who are not necessarily the real customers (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

People writing online reviews on Google maps are pretending they are someone else (8)



On Google maps, different reviews are often posted by the same person under different names (9)



---

Page Break

---

Q54 How you would describe Google maps website?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Obstructive	<input type="radio"/>	Supportive				
Complicated	<input type="radio"/>	Easy				
Inefficient	<input type="radio"/>	Efficient				
Confusing	<input type="radio"/>	Clear				
Boring	<input type="radio"/>	Exciting				
Not interesting	<input type="radio"/>	Interesting				
Conventional	<input type="radio"/>	Inventive				
Usual	<input type="radio"/>	Leading edge				

Q55 For me, travel (is)

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	
Unimportant	<input type="radio"/>	Important				
Of no concern	<input type="radio"/>	Of great concern				
Insignificant	<input type="radio"/>	Significant				
Means nothing	<input type="radio"/>	Means a lot				
Does not matter	<input type="radio"/>	Matters a lot				

---

Page Break

---

Q56 With which gender do you identify most?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (3)
- Rather not say (4)

---

Q57 What is your age?

▼ 18 (1) ... 102 (85)

Q58 Where do you currently live?

▼ Albania (1) ... Other (49)

Q59 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree (1)
- High school graduate (2)
- Bachelor's degree (3)
- Master's degree (4)
- Doctoral degree (5)
- Other (6)

Q60 Do you live/study/work in Tenerife?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

---

Q54 On which online platform was the shown review written?

- TripAdvisor (1)
- Instagram (2)
- Google Maps (3)

End of Block: Google maps

---

Start of Block: Block 4

Q48 Do you believe that circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 affected your answers in this survey?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

---

Q50 Do you have any comments regarding the survey?

---

End of Block: Block 4

---