

The tourist experience in the digital era: the case of Italian millennials

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *The digital revolution is producing several economic and societal changes. The tourism sector, which is characterized by products with high information content and intangible value, is one of the main industries involved in these changes on both the supply side and the demand side. This paper examines how digital technologies impact tourists' consumption experiences throughout the entire customer travel journey (planning, booking, experiencing, and sharing), with a special focus on millennials.*

Methodology: *On an empirical level, this research study aimed to describe the tourism-related buying and consumption behaviors of a sample of approximately 700 Italian consumers.*

Results: *The results of this empirical study highlighted that new technologies are used in all stages of the digital customer journey. Most of the respondents were experts in travel planning through digital technologies. The smartphone is mainly used by younger millennials, while the computer is mainly used by older millennials. With respect to social media, millennials prefer Instagram and Facebook for sharing content during and after trips.*

Research limitations: *This research study focused on the center of Italy, and the sample was not representative. Another limitation of this study was that the sample was made up of students, who do not have secure jobs and mainly depend on their parents' incomes.*

Practical implications: *The practical implications that emerged from this study specifically related to attracting and retaining tourists and increasing their overall customer experience.*

Originality of the paper: *This study contributes to deepen the knowledge of millennials' behaviors as tourists.*

Key words: tourism experience; digital traveler; millennials; digital tourism; tourist journey

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have introduced relevant innovations in all economic sectors, including the tourism sector, and they are radically changing the world in which we live. Gelter (2017) highlighted that the evolution of technological devices—from powerful smartphones and tablets to *smart* watches, bracelets, glasses, and lenses—has deeply changed people's lifestyles and habits. Notably, a recent study by Dorcic and colleagues

(2019) showed that smartphone use has become a daily habit, even during travel, depending on users' previous habits and the availability of Wi-Fi in tourist destinations (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2013; Mang *et al.*, 2016). Travelers are also increasingly using new technological devices that generate forms of augmented reality (AR), which adds digital elements to a live view, and virtual reality (VR), which replaces real life with virtual, alternative worlds (Beck *et al.*, 2019). These technologies can improve the overall tourist experience. Through the use of AR, for instance, content of potential interest to the digital traveler can be added and viewed using the camera on a smartphone (Scholz and Smith, 2016). Moreover, 3D printing, action cameras, and 180-degree double lens cameras have been increasingly adopted by tourists to document their travel experiences, share these experiences on their social media profiles, and obtain personalized souvenirs.

In addition to the evolution of hardware, rapid innovation is taking place in the realm of Internet-specific software. Through the use of smart agents, virtual worlds, personalized websites, and integrated games, tourists can experience VR and post comments while companies can engage in data mining and intelligent machines, which enhance their ability to provide a better tourism experience. Notably, the advent of Web 4.0 could plausibly usher in an era of greater integration between smart systems and people's everyday lives (Pencarelli, 2019). Through Web 4.0, it will be possible to guide tourists in their purchasing decisions, facilitate their movements, and make their tourism experiences more pleasant by offering flexible, targeted packages and connecting travelers with intelligent electronic agents. New technological solutions will also be available for the real-time management of consumer relationships (Parise *et al.*, 2016); such solutions include remote experts that help consumers in the pre-purchase phase and digital assistants (e.g., Siri for Apple and Google Now for Android) that provide price comparisons between similar offers.

Notwithstanding the increasing digitalization of both the tourism industry and tourist behavior, the investigation of the tourist experience in the digital era remains a current issue. Some contradictory and ambiguous situations have emerged because tourists are very inclined to share videos, images, and personal data but are also increasingly worried about the possibility of losing their right to privacy, as online information can be used for commercial purposes by actors in the business ecosystem. Moreover, this topic has received little investigation in relation to the younger segment of the tourist population, including millennials.

Recent research based on generational cohort theory has shown that individuals from different generations have different concerns, motivations, and behaviors related to the use of information technologies and social and ethical values (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Feng and Xie, 2014; Miltgen and Peyrat-Guillard, 2014; Moqbel *et al.*, 2017). Generation classification is still debated among scholars (Leask, Fyall and Barron, 2014). However, most researchers agree that the main generations are Generation Z (the iGeneration or post-millennials), millennials (Generation Y), Generation X, baby boomers, and the Silent Generation.

With regard to the years of birth constituting each generation, a number of studies (e.g., Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2013) have used the following birth dates for each cohort: Generation Y (born after 1981), Generation X (1961-1981), baby boomers (1946-1960), and the Silent Generation (1925-1945). However, there are no exact birth dates that define the millennials (Gen Y or Yers); generational time spans are not uniform and may differ across countries or even overlap due to the intensive use of the Internet (Soulez and Guillot-Soulez, 2011). Table 1 describes the demographic cohorts of Gen Y used in previous studies.

Tab. 1: Generation Y age range

Author (year)	Gen Y age range
Weiler (2005)	1980 and 1994
Meier <i>et al.</i> (2010)	1980-2000
Bolton (2013)	Born after 1981
Kattiyapornpong (2009)	1979 and 1995
Raunio (2014)	1977-2003
Saxena and Jain (2012)	1980-1995
Williams and Page (2011)	1980-2000
Cavagnaro <i>et al.</i> (2018)	1980-1994

Source: Adapted from Choudhary and Gangotia (2017).

Generation Y may be conventionally divided into two age groups (Barton *et al.*, 2014). The older portion of millennials faced relative prosperity in comparison to the younger portion of millennials, which was challenged by recession effects and economic turbulences (Bolton, 2013), such as the worldwide economic crisis of 2008. However, millennials are usually considered the market of the future, as they will influence the digital marketing strategies of companies in the coming years (Pencarelli *et al.*, 2018). Millennials represent 24% of the world's population. In Italy, they represent 8.03 million individuals of the total population, divided fairly evenly between males (50.5%) and females (49.5%). Furthermore, millennials have been proclaimed as the next big consumer spending group, more active travelers compared to their older counterparts, and frequent users of digital devices and social networks to acquire and share tourism information (Li *et al.*, 2013). Notably, millennials travel more frequently, explore more destinations, and spend more when they are on vacation compared to other generations. Moreover, they are constantly searching for information and new sensations (Benchendorff *et al.*, 2010; Schiopu *et al.*, 2016; Monaco, 2018).

Nevertheless, there is a shortage of knowledge regarding the behavior of millennials as tourists (Hong and Arthur, 2019; Garikapati *et al.*, 2016; Blumenberg *et al.*, 2012). In addition, studies focusing on digital technologies and the demographic characteristics and behaviors of social media users are scarce (Amaro *et al.*, 2016). Travelers exhibit different behaviors with regard to their use of social media for travel planning (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014), and every generation of tourists has a unique set of

behavioral and display demand characteristics (Salazar, 2018; Glover, 2009; Huang and Petrick, 2009). Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate how digital technologies impact tourists' consumption experiences, with a special focus on millennials, throughout the entire travel cycle (dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing, and sharing). This study also aimed to identify factors that could enhance and/or hinder the adoption of these digital technologies.

Three main research questions were used to operationalize the purpose of this study in greater detail:

RQ1: How do millennials use hardware tools in the customer travel journey?

RQ2: How do millennials use software platforms in the customer travel journey?

RQ3: How different are the subgroups of millennials (namely, older and younger Yers) in terms of the customer travel journey?

Overall, this study provided practical implications for the tourism business/industry by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between young travelers and the new digital technologies they use to search for information, to book accommodations, to aid in their travel experiences, and to return home from their trips.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 details the literature background of the present study by analyzing how digital technologies impact the traveler experience and how they can be used in the different steps of the tourism experience. Section 3 describes the methodology of the study, while Section 4 illustrates the research findings. These findings are discussed subsequently in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper by detailing the practical implications of these findings and proposing future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The impact of new technologies on the tourism experience

The digital revolution has produced several changes in the tourism industry and enhanced the development of a new tourism ecosystem (Pencarelli, 2019). This ecosystem includes all actors that are directly involved in the creation of experiential value, such as tourists, area residents, tourism service providers, transportation companies, and tourism intermediaries. Through the use of new technologies, these actors can be always connected to each other as well as with service providers (e.g., telecommunications, banks, and payment services); social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram); public institutions; support technologies for bookings (e.g., Sabre and Amadeus); tourism infrastructures (e.g., theme parks and museums); tourist information and welcome offices; and other companies belonging to different sectors (e.g., healthcare and commerce) that support travelers during their trips

(Barile *et al.*, 2017). This has led to the emergence of a new tourism global value web, as suggested by Paraskevas (2005), which explicitly incorporates fluidity and technology into a chain model “consisting of several value webs continuously inventing and offering unique value propositions and competing for greater market share (upgrading their position in the global value web)” (Paraskevas, 2005, p. 11).

The literature has clarified that customer value is created during experiential encounters (i.e., while the tourist is experiencing a tourism offer). The value that arises from a tourism experience consists of two elements: (1) the value of use, which is related to the length of the experience, and (2) the cumulative value, which is connected to the duration of the experience’s effects (Ortega and Franco, 2019). Tourism companies may create value by acting inside the customer sphere according to the customer expectations, knowledge, memory, and sense of identity (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010). Alternatively, tourism companies may co-create value by acting inside the provider sphere (the joint sphere described by Gronroos and Voima, 2013) and in appropriate experience escapes (Mossberg, 2007). In designing an experience, companies should take into account what sets of stimuli are likely to engage tourists in unique, personal, memorable, and positive experiences by considering all phases of the tourism consumption process (from the initial search for information to the purchasing decision, the booking, the experience itself, and finally, the memories).

Tourists are the main actors in the tourism performances provided by single enterprises and tourism systems; as such, tourists should be involved throughout the entire tourism consumption process, from early inspiration to post-travel activities. In a value co-creation process, the intensity of active participation and the use of technology may vary greatly (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2012, 2014). The authors found that the tourism experience begins with a low level of involvement and a low intensity of technology use. Then, it progresses to tourism experience co-creation with the company but still lacks the integration of technology. The next step is the technology tourism experience, which is characterized by a high level of technology use but remains predominantly company-centric due to the low level of consumer involvement. The final step is the fully technology-enhanced tourism experience, in which the design, delivery, and value creation of the tourism experience maximize the potential offered by both co-creation and technology (Forlani and Pencarelli, 2018).

However, the digitalization of the tourism sector does not always have positive impacts on the experiences and well-being of tourists (Neuhofer, 2016). Sometimes, technology destroys value and significantly reduces people’s mental, psychological, and emotional well-being by involving them in negative experiences. The first case of customer value destruction is caused by the circulation and diffusion of data that violates people’s right to privacy. In the digital environment, trust represents a key factor in enhancing tourists’ experiences while reducing their risk perception. In this respect, Morosan and DeFranco (2016) found that app-related privacy concerns negatively influence consumers’ intentions to use hotel apps. Similarly, Wozniak *et al.* (2018) highlighted that mobile users’ information

privacy concerns negatively affect tourist behavior throughout the mobile customer journey. Other cases of value destruction in technology-driven tourism experiences relate to situations in which continuous connection to digital equipment does not allow the tourist to rest adequately and disconnect from the worries of everyday life, thus reducing the benefits of the holiday itself. A literature review by Dorcic and colleagues (2019) highlighted that using a smartphone for work purposes during a vacation is not healthy by showing that tourists' relaxing is generally reduced when they are not disconnected from their smartphones while vacationing.

Excessive digital immersion can also generate frequent interruptions on the part of business actors operating in the tourism ecosystem. These business actors are oriented to propose commercial offers or information concerning events of interest to the customer, whose profiles, habits, and preferences are made known by their digital footprints.

Moreover, technology use often fails to facilitate interactions between tourists and local communities as well as consumer-to-consumer relationships, thus reducing the overall quality of the tourist experience. An excessively technology-driven experience can even lead to dramatic tragedy, such as a road accident or even the death of a tourist taking a travel selfie. Wherever interactions between people are replaced by interactions with technology, there is a risk that social exchanges will dry up and become impoverished, leaving people imprisoned within the digital environment and thus weakening the authenticity and value of the tourism experience (Pencarelli, 2019).

In summation, prior research on the relationship between the digital revolution and the tourism experience has remained relatively inconclusive due to its contradictory findings. Therefore, this topic is still worthy of analysis, as it is relevant to the investigation of ways in which new technologies can be used in the different stages of the tourism experience to improve overall tourist satisfaction and perceived value.

2.2 How digital tourists use new technologies

The increasing adoption of new technologies has deeply changed the ways in which tourists collect information, evaluate tourism products, and purchase tourism products (Sciarelli *et al.*, 2018). Tourists-especially young tourists (Schiopu *et al.*, 2016; Femenia-Serra *et al.*, 2019)-are becoming digital travelers and avid users of social media channels such as YouTube, Snapchat, and Whisper; seek game-based entertainment; and are moving away from the traditional social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). Tourists typically have positive attitudes toward the use of mobile games to enhance their customer value and experience, especially when such applications are useful, enjoyable, and compatible with their locations (Shen *et al.*, 2020; Nunes and Mayer, 2014). Moreover, tourists are increasingly driven by curiosity and thus appreciate opportunities to gather practical information about their destinations through digital devices (Xu *et al.*, 2016).

Changes in tourist behavior related to the digitalization of the economy are evident in the phases before, during, and after a trip. The

pre-consumption phase of a trip begins with the dream. In the next steps of this phase, the tourist compares alternatives, talks to their friends and/or relatives, chooses the best options, plans the specifics of the trip in real-time contact with the service providers, books the trip, and finally, purchases the product. In this phase, digital consumers can choose from a worldwide range of destinations and accommodations; this wide range of options has made the decision-making process more challenging and complex than it was in the past (Buhalis and Law, 2008). However, digital travelers (especially millennials) are able to obtain information quickly, enabling them to narrow down and specify their expectations. Most digital travelers use search engines before choosing their destinations and modes of travel. Then, they may simply use their phones to make reservations, especially for simple tourism products that are considered financially and emotionally low-risk and thus require little forethought or organization. However, personalized advice may be needed for purchasing more complex and high-risk tourism products. Therefore, the pre-consumption phase can include consultations with a travel agent (Pencarelli, 2019).

In general, digital travelers primarily go online to search for information because most of them believe that it is where they will find the best prices (Law *et al.*, 2014). They also tend to consult online reviews and opinions posted by other users and relate with their friends on social media platforms. Travelers consider this information to be reliable and helpful for the purpose of choosing a product with a good quality-to-price ratio and avoiding making a poor decision. In fact, travel content created online is generally considered to be more credible and trustworthy than reviews from professionals or marketer information (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). In the pre-consumption phase new digital technologies also allow tourists to use smartphones, computers, special platforms, or smart lenses to sample offers in AR or VR (Beck *et al.*, 2019).

During the consumption phase, the digital traveler is constantly connected and downloading information concerning destinations, restaurants, hotels, other service providers, prices, events, local traditions, weather conditions, friends nearby, special offers, environmental emergency alerts, transportation timetables, and so on. In the present day, Internet technology is available everywhere, thus qualifying most places as *smart destinations*. This allows everyone, everywhere, to access efficient Wi-Fi networks at any time, thus allowing them to obtain data and information much faster than they can through conventional telecommunications (e.g., phone services). Travelers in the consumption phase must first search for ideas on where to go. Social media plays an important role in providing such ideas, reducing risk, and making it easier for travelers to imagine potential destinations (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Before a trip, travelers typically consume social media (i.e., read and view user-generated content) but do not actively participate by creating content.

Digital tourists use apps and other services to acquire information, photos, videos, and other content, which they may then share in their interactions with friends, relatives, and the social communities to which they belong. This activity takes place during the trip, making the tourism experience an opportunity to engage the traveler's entire social network

in his/her personal adventure in real time through comments and reactions to the narrative being shared. Since millennials are increasingly relying on other customers' recommendations and opinions (Li *et al.*, 2013), they tend to use various social media channels to share content contextually. During this phase, travelers consume social media not only to find destination-related information but also to produce comments and reviews and to share videos and photos. Social platforms are also used by tourists in emergency or crisis situations, such as when a crime has been committed, when there has been a terrorist attack, during weather-related emergencies, during political unrest, or during health outbreaks; in these situations, smartphone technology and information sharing can help tourists quickly understand and resolve problems (Law *et al.*, 2014). Tourists also use digital technology to make payments for goods and services purchased during their trips.

In the phase after the trip, called the post-consumption phase, the digital tourist finds another occasion to affirm his/her identity and give more meaning to the just-completed experience. As they did during their trip, a tourist may turn to blogs and websites to share photos and videos with their friends and with the public after their trip as well (Shao, 2009; Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Parra-López *et al.*, 2012). Once the tourist has returned to their everyday life, they can go back and relive their travel experience through a thoughtful retelling of it. Each story is built around a collage of various content elements that are personal and personalized, through which the storyteller establishes a sort of personal brand to identify themselves as an expert in the eyes of their followers. All of this takes place in a context in which personal data is transmitted and saved in a way that is not always protected or safe; this presents another managerial challenge with respect to data privacy protection and cybersecurity.

Finally, tourists' buying and consumption behaviors are changing significantly in all the aforementioned travel phases. Tourists have become extraordinary generators of content that is uploaded to the web through various social channels to be shared and commented upon by friends and followers. In this respect, tourists can be considered SoLoMO, as suggested by Ejarque (2015): Social, as they are faithful users of social media; Local, as they look for information through localized applications to enhance the destination experience; and Mobile, as they are constantly connected to mobile devices. Within this context, digital travelers play a growing role in the tourism ecosystem as both animators and co-creators of information and communication value.

3. The research method

The present study aimed to answer the research questions by means of empirical analysis. A structured questionnaire was administered online to a sample of young Italian consumers aged between 18 and 35 years old. This questionnaire was distributed via computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) over a two-month period (from September 1st to October 31st, 2018). The decision to use the web as the vehicle for dissemination of the

questionnaire was the result of a series of methodological considerations and advantages associated with the use of CAWI (Di Fraia, 2004)¹. A total of 723 young people attending Urbino University completed the questionnaire voluntarily.

According to the National Student Registry, there were 14,557 students attending Urbino University during the survey period. Brasini and colleagues' (2002) formula [1] was applied to find that the number of questionnaires that had to be administered to produce statistically significant results was 374. Therefore, our sample can be considered statistically significant, at least at the time of data collection.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 a / 2N}{4(N-1)\theta^2 + Z^2 a / 2} = \frac{1.96^2 \times 14,557}{4(14,557-1) \times 0.05^2 + 1.96^2} = 374.31 = 374 \text{ [1]}$$

where:

n = sample size

Z²a/2 = confidence level = 1.96, computed using the tables of the standard normal distribution

N = population size

θ = margin of error (set at 5%)

From a qualitative standpoint, university students were selected because they were representative of the young, well-educated portion of the Italian population. Although scholars often include individuals aged between 18 and 25 years in this group (Sari *et al.*, 2015), the average age of graduation in Italy is 26 years and a large percentage (more than 25%) of people in Italy between 30 and 34 years old are still attending university. Moreover, only approximately 50% of Italian graduates are employed within three years of graduation (Almalaurea, 2016; Eurostat, 2016)². Therefore, Italian people aged 18 to 35 years old are mainly college students, and even those who have graduated tend to be very similar to college students in terms of social status and lifestyle characteristics. Students attending Urbino University are particularly representative of Italy's young population, as more than 25% of these students traveled to attend the Urbino University over 250 km and 48.6% traveled from outside of the Marche region (ISTAT, 2016)³. Table 2 summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

¹ Compared to its advantages, the CAWI method presents some limitations, mainly related to the self-selection of respondents, which has some implications especially in terms of sample representativeness.

The data obtained, therefore, are significant but cannot be considered as representative of the entire population (Di Fraia, 2004).

² http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_and_social_conditions (accessed 15 May 2020). www.almalaurea.it/sites/almalaurea.it/files/docs/universita/profilo/Profilo2016/report_xviii_rapporto_profilolaureati-def.pdf (accessed 15 May 2020)

³ www.istat.it/it/files/2016/11/Studenti-e-bacini-universitari.pdf (accessed 15 May 2020).

*Tab. 2: Sample profile and sociodemographic characteristics of older and younger Yers**

	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
N	723 (100%)	311 (43%)	412 (57%)
Gender			
Female	76%	70%	80%
Male	24%	30%	20%
Area of residence			
North of Italy	5%	7%	5%
Center of Italy	78%	79%	77%
South of Italy	17%	14%	18%
Occupation			
Student	66%	47%	80%
Working student	34%	53%	20%
Educational level			
High school diploma	62%	32%	85%
Three-year degree	27%	44%	14%
Master's or five-year degree	11%	24%	1%

* Younger Yers include millennials born between 1995 and 2000, while older Yers include those born between 1983 and 1994 (Balton *et al.*, 2014).

Source: Authors' elaboration.

With respect to the first two stages (searching for information and booking), the respondents were asked to indicate what devices and software they used to plan and book their journeys. The questionnaire then focused on the online actions carried out by the respondents during and after travel (that is, the consumption and post-consumption stages), such as:

- The extent to which the respondents shared their travel experiences online through photos, comments, stories, videos, or ratings;
- The extent to which the respondents used digital check-in services; and
- The devices used by the respondents to share their travel experiences online.

To create the questionnaire items, the authors drew from the literature on social media marketing and digital travel journeys (adapted from Monaco, 2018; Schioppa *et al.*, 2016; Amaro *et al.*, 2016; Cox *et al.*, 2009). A seven-point Likert scale was used to evaluate the items, except for the items concerning online activities during and after travel, which were measured using a three-point scale.

The data were processed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were performed to summarize the participants' responses and make inferences about the survey data. Additionally, a chi-squared test was conducted to detect statistically significant results. An independent samples t-test was performed to statistically test the equality of means and to analyze differences in behavior between the younger millennials and the older millennials.

The year of birth was taken as a discriminating factor for the development of the independent samples t-test by distinguishing between older and younger millennials (Yers). A growing number of scholars have

suggested splitting Generation Y into younger and older millennials (e.g., Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Debevec *et al.*, 2013; Garikapati *et al.*, 2016; Schewe *et al.*, 2013). Younger millennials value autonomy to control their environment and are heavy consumers of social media, as they value the personalized services and instant communication provided by social media (Youn and Kim, 2019). Compared to older millennials, younger millennials are less concerned about politics, sustainability, saving, and making mistakes in life (Debevec *et al.*, 2013; Bordonaba-Juste *et al.*, 2020). Differences and associations were considered significant at $p < 0.05$.

4. Findings

4.1 Overall profile of the respondents as tourists

When millennials decide to travel (Table 3), they reported that they prefer to organize every part of the holiday (81%), giving priority to adventure holidays. Older Yers were more likely to prefer organizing their trips on their own compared to younger Yers, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Tab. 3: Type of holiday preferred by the respondents

Which of these two sentences do you identify with?	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
When I decide to travel, I organize every part of my trip on my own; my absolute priority is adventure.	81%	83%	80%
When I decide to travel, I want an already organized program (an all-in package); my absolute priority is relaxing.	19%	17%	20%
Chi-squared test	0.863		
Df	1		
Sig.	0.353		

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The organization of travel was highly influenced by reviews from other travelers (mean = 5.07, range: 1-7). The independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the influence of online reviews between older and younger Yers. The test revealed no significant difference in the scores of the two groups ($t(721) = 0.173$, $p = 0.863$).

Google Maps appeared to be the most frequently used mobile travel app among the respondents, followed by Booking and TripAdvisor (Table 4).

The independent samples t-test showed some differences between the older Yers and the younger Yers. For one, there was a statistically significant difference in their usage of Airbnb, Trivago, Skyscanner, PiratinViaggio, GoEuro, and Momondo. Notably, Airbnb and Skyscanner were used more often by older millennials than by younger millennials, while the contrary applied to the remaining mobile apps.

Tab. 4: Mobile travel app usage

	Millennials, overall sample		Older Yers		Younger Yers		T-test		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Google Maps	5.41	1.885	5.47	1.863	5.37	1.903	.687	721	0.492
Booking	4.60	2.003	4.70	1.971	4.52	2.026	1.196	721	0.232
TripAdvisor	4.11	1.958	4.15	1.945	4.07	1.969	.554	721	0.580
Google Street View	3.72	2.304	3.80	2.281	3.66	2.321	.844	721	0.399
Airbnb	3.00	2.123	3.20	2.102	2.85	2.130	2.184	721	0.029*
Trivago	2.82	1.848	2.61	1.734	2.98	1.917	-2.700	721	0.007*
Skyscanner	2.48	2.043	2.78	2.129	2.25	1.947	3.425	721	0.001*
eDreams	2.18	1.698	2.21	1.669	2.15	1.722	.458	721	0.647
Expedia	2.01	1.551	1.91	1.391	2.09	1.660	-1.562	721	0.119
BlaBlaCar	2.01	1.569	2.06	1.571	1.97	1.569	.738	721	0.461
Piratin Viaggio	1.92	1.589	1.76	1.406	2.04	1.706	-2.368	721	0.018*
Uber	1.62	1.338	1.65	1.378	1.60	1.308	.521	721	0.602
Kayak	1.50	1.137	1.46	1.030	1.53	1.211	-.898	721	0.370
GoEuro	1.43	1.116	1.30	0.874	1.53	1.260	-2.906	721	0.004*
Momondo	1.35	0.949	1.27	0.807	1.41	1.041	-1.991	721	0.047*
Citymapper	1.33	1.051	1.32	1.060	1.33	1.045	-.037	721	0.971

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

M = mean, SD = standard deviation, t = t-value

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.2 The information search phase

With regard to the information search phase, respondents searched for information mainly through free search on the web (mean = 5.23), online booking sites (mean = 4.17), and social media (mean = 3.43; Table 5). Almost all the t-tests carried out to investigate this phase showed a statistically significant difference between the older Yers and the younger Yers, except for the t-tests concerning free search and social media usage.

Tab. 5: Information search phase

	Millennials, overall sample		Older Yers		Younger Yers		T-test		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Free search on the web	5.23	1.781	5.32	1.777	5.17	1.783	1.068	721	0.286
Online booking platforms (e.g., Booking and Expedia)	4.17	1.95	3.94	1.953	4.34	1.931	-2.745	721	0.006*
Social media	3.43	1.908	3.41	1.896	3.46	1.918	-0.357	721	0.721
TV (e.g., movies and documentaries)	3.12	1.858	3.3	1.91	2.98	1.809	2.23	721	0.026*
Magazines/books (e.g., travel guides)	3.08	1.893	3.25	1.976	2.95	1.82	2.069	721	0.039*
Travel blogs	2.91	1.905	3.08	1.885	2.78	1.911	2.128	721	0.034*
Tour operator websites	2.35	1.703	2.12	1.569	2.53	1.779	-3.239	721	0.001*
Travel agencies	1.72	1.265	1.6	1.173	1.81	1.325	-2.213	721	0.027*

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

M = mean, SD = standard deviation, t = t-value

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The millennials mainly used smartphones and computers for research and for making reservations (Table 6). The younger Yers used smartphones more frequently than the rest of the sample, confirming the mobile-oriented attitude of this group. However, a chi-squared test of independence showed no statistically significant difference between the older and younger Yers in terms of their preferred devices for research.

Tab. 6: Devices used by millennials in the information search phase

Type of device	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
Smartphone	51%	46%	54%
Computer	46%	51%	42%
Tablet	3%	2%	3%
Do not carry out this activity online	1%	1%	1%
Chi-squared test	6.872		
Df	3		
Sig.	0.076		

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.3 The booking phase

With regard to the booking stage (Table 7), 55% of the respondents used websites and aggregator platforms to book their travel, together with the websites of the airline companies or structures in which they would stay (37%). The chi-squared test showed no statistically significant difference in preferred booking channels between the older Yers and the younger Yers.

Tab. 7: Booking channels used by millennials

Booking channel	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
Online booking platforms (e.g., Booking and Expedia)	55%	55%	56%
Website of the airline and/or structure in which they would stay	37%	40%	34%
Travel agency (physical location)	7%	5%	8%
Website of a specific tour operator (e.g., Alpitour or Eden Viaggi)	1%	1%	2%
Chi-squared test	6.877		
Df	3		
Sig.	0.076		

Source: Authors' elaboration.

For making reservations (Table 8), the computer was the preferred device of most of the sample. A chi-squared test of independence showed that there was a significant difference in the preferred devices for making reservations between the two groups (Sig. = 0.038). In particular, the younger Yers used computers less frequently than the older Yers, even for those younger Yers who did not book their travel online.

Tab. 8: Devices used by millennials for booking

Type of device	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
Computer	80%	82%	78%
Smartphone	14%	14%	14%
Do not carry out this activity online	4%	1%	5%
Tablet	3%	3%	3%
Chi-squared test	8.444		
Df	3		
Sig.	0.038*		

* The chi-squared test is significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.4 The consumption phase

During travel, the millennials preferred to share content mainly on Instagram and on Facebook (Table 9). An independent samples t-test showed a difference between the two defined groups of millennials in terms of their preference to share content on Instagram versus Facebook. Content was shared on Instagram more frequently by the younger millennials, while content was shared on Facebook more frequently by the older Yers.

Tab. 9: Online activity during travel

	Millennials, overall sample		Older Yers		Younger Yers		T-test		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Sharing content on Facebook	1.93	0.7	2.06	0.669	1.82	0.706	4.74	721	0.000*
Sharing content on Instagram	2.36	0.785	2.21	0.821	2.48	0.736	-4.616	721	0.000*
Sharing content on other social platforms	1.21	0.486	1.21	0.498	1.21	0.477	-0.014	721	0.989
Localizing oneself on Facebook	1.57	0.715	1.62	0.708	1.53	0.719	1.614	721	0.107

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

M = mean, SD = standard deviation, t = t-value

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The millennials mainly used smartphones to share content during travel (89%), although 9% of the sample did not share anything on the web (Table 10). The younger Yers tended to use smartphones more frequently than the older Yers. Moreover, the older Yers did not share their travel more frequently than the younger Yers. However, a chi-squared test of independence showed no statistically significant difference between these groups in terms of the devices they used to share content during travel.

Tab. 10: Devices used by millennials to share content during travel

Device	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
Smartphone	89%	86%	91%
Do not share anything online during travel	9%	11%	7%
Computer	2%	3%	2%
Tablet	0%	0%	0%
Chi-squared test	4.933		
Df	3		
Sig.	0.177		

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Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.5 The post-consumption phase

After travel, the millennials preferred to share content summarizing their journeys mainly on their Instagram profiles (mean = 1.84) and their Facebook profiles (mean = 1.50). They also preferred to share reviews on TripAdvisor (mean = 1.58) and similar platforms (Table 11). An independent samples t-test showed statistically significant differences between the two groups of millennials in terms of their preference to share reviews on TripAdvisor, share reviews on hotel Facebook pages, or share content summarizing their journeys on Instagram. Notably, the first two activities were practiced more frequently by the older Yers, while the younger millennials preferred to share content summarizing their journeys on their Instagram profiles.

Tab. 11: Online activities carried out after travel

	Millennials, overall sample		Older Yers		Younger Yers		T-test		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Sharing reviews on TripAdvisor	1.58	0.676	1.66	0.68	1.51	0.667	2.924	721	0.004*
Sharing reviews on the Facebook pages of hotels, tour operators, or travel agencies	1.25	0.5	1.32	0.551	1.2	0.45	3.345	721	0.001*
Sharing reviews on the Instagram pages of hotels, tour operators, or travel agencies	1.23	0.508	1.22	0.499	1.23	0.515	-0.313	721	0.755
Sharing content summarizing the journey on one's own Facebook profile	1.5	0.677	1.55	0.703	1.47	0.655	1.572	721	0.117
Sharing content summarizing the journey on one's own Instagram profile	1.84	0.825	1.66	0.783	1.97	0.831	-5.172	721	0.000*

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.
M = mean, SD = standard deviation, t = t-value

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The device most frequently used by the millennials to share content after travel was the smartphone (Table 12). A chi-squared test showed that the younger millennials used smartphones significantly more frequently than the older millennials (Sig. = 0.036).

Tab. 12: Devices used by millennials to share content after travel

Device	Millennials, overall sample	Older Yers	Younger Yers
Smartphone	70%	67%	72%
Computer	15%	20%	12%
Do not share anything on the web after travel	13%	12%	14%
Tablet	2%	2%	1%
Chi-squared test	8.547		
Df	3		
Sig.	0.036*		

* The chi-squared test is significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

5. Discussion

The present study highlighted several interesting issues regarding the impact of the digital revolution on young tourists' behavior in their digital travel journeys. Law *et al.* (2018) stated that digital technologies influence travel patterns and tourist behavior before, during, and after trips by providing convenient, instant access to information, social connections, support, and an interactive sharing platform. Our empirical research supported this proposition, highlighting the relevance of online reviews and electronic word-of-mouth in the organizational process of travel (Gabbianelli and Pencarelli, 2019) and thus confirming that most young people are considerably influenced by reviews and prefer to book accommodations and organize trips after consulting the opinions of other travelers.

In the first two stages of the digital travel journey (before the trip), millennials tend to use the web and online booking platforms to search for information and book their travel accommodations. In both of these phases, younger millennials appear to contact travel agencies more frequently than older millennials. The methods and tools used by tourists to acquire information have changed impressively over time, and the major decisions and evaluations of tourists appear to be most heavily influenced by word-of-mouth and clicks within social networks, which serve as expressions of the tourist experience (Coshall, 2009). Overall, millennials tend to use computers to find information and book travel accommodations, and younger Yers tend to use PCs more frequently and use smartphones less frequently compared to older Yers.

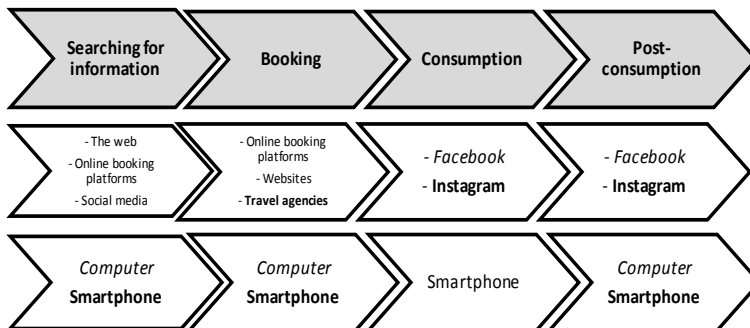
During their trips (i.e., in the consumption phase), millennials tend to share content such as photos, videos, and stories on their social networks. In particular, younger millennials prefer to share this content on Instagram, while older Millennials prefer to share this content on Facebook. Nearly all the respondents used smartphones to share content during their trips.

After their trips (i.e., in the post-consumption phase), millennials prefer to share content that summarizes their travel experiences on their social networks. As in the consumption phase, older Yers are more active

on Facebook while younger Yers prefer to use and share content on their Instagram profiles in the post-consumption phase. Although millennials consider it very important to consult online reviews in the decision-making process, young travelers do not seem to be extremely active in giving their opinions or sharing reviews on the social media pages of hotels, travel agencies, or tour operators. Rather, they prefer to share reviews on online booking platforms, such as TripAdvisor and Booking. This behavior is consistent with the findings of previous research highlighting the fear of losing one's right to privacy when sharing information online (Morosan and DeFranco, 2016). Finally, younger millennials used smartphones more frequently to share content after their trips, while older millennials used PCs more frequently for this purpose.

In summation, the present study showed that digital technologies impact all stages of the travel journey, even though younger travelers appear to be trying to connect more closely with travel agencies. With respect to device use, the survey confirmed that the younger travelers were smartphone natives, while the older Yers tended to use computers in certain stages of the customer journey. The predominance of smartphone use over computer use observed among the younger participants was in line with the unstoppable development/evolution of the mobile world that has been witnessed by several works of research (Wang *et al.*, 2012; Wang and Xiang, 2012). Fig. 1 summarizes the software and hardware tools used by the millennials during their digital travel journeys.

Fig. 1: Mapping the millennial traveler's digital journey



* Italics indicate older Yers, bold indicates younger Yers, and the remaining text describes the common aspects of the two groups.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

6. Conclusions and implications

Young tourists generate advances in technology by encouraging innovation through their consumer preferences and habits. These habits include making online reservations, interacting with travelers through social networks, and using mobile devices and applications to plan and conduct travel. This paper provides an overview of the major studies related

to the impact of new technologies on the tourist experience. Furthermore, this paper also shows how millennials use digital technologies in their travel journeys. The main purpose of the present study was to gain a better understanding of how millennials use hardware and software tools in their travel and whether millennials of different ages behave differently.

This paper contributes to the current literature on the relationship between the digital revolution and the tourist experience by providing evidence concerning the use of modern devices and software platforms by tourists to assist them in all stages of the customer journey. Millennials largely use computers to search for information on the web and book their travel accommodations, but they mainly use smartphones to share their travel experiences during and after travel (RQ1). Millennials find information by making free searches on the web. In addition, millennials use online booking platforms both to search for information and as their primary channels for booking. Young consumers tend to share their travel experiences on social networks, particularly Instagram and Facebook (RQ2).

Moreover, this study revealed some age-related differences among millennials (RQ3). Before their trips, younger Yers tend to try to gain closer contact with travel agencies. During and after their trips, younger millennials prefer to share their travel experiences on Instagram while older millennials tend to share these experiences on Facebook. With regard to device use after travel, younger Yers are smartphone natives whereas older Yers tend to use computers.

On the demand side of tourism, the advent of new technologies has radically modified the behaviors of digital travelers; this is especially true for young tourists, who are especially inclined to take an active part in the value creation process. Millennials, particularly the younger portion of the generation, grew up with smartphones in their hands and benefited from innovative applications that make life seem easier. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, this paper confirms prior claims that the use of digital technology aids in all phases of the customer journey and enriches the behavioral framework of millennials. This paper also highlights several important differences between the younger and older portions of the millennial generation.

Furthermore, the findings of this article have several managerial implications that could be particularly useful for hospitality managers. First, the present study provided evidence that new technologies are used during all stages of the travel planning process, albeit to different extents and for different purposes. As mentioned previously, young people exhibit a strong tendency to use online search engines. Therefore, it would be relevant for hospitality managers to focus on the search engine optimization (SEO) of their websites in order to become more visible. Moreover, young tourists tend to inform themselves about travel accommodations through social media platforms, and online review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor) have a strong impact on their decision-making. Therefore, hoteliers and social media managers should monitor positive and negative comments closely and deal with them promptly. By analyzing comments in online communities, hotels and other travel-related companies can better understand what

their guests like and dislike about them and their competitors (Dellarocas, 2003). As a consequence, tourism-related businesses must be visible on search engines and spotlighted on social media channels in order to grow their online reputations.

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Appropriate communication activity management is needed by the accommodation industry, by intermediaries (e.g., travel agents and tour operators), and by all the economic and institutional operators of the tourism value ecosystem (e.g., transport companies, cultural institutions, spas, event organizers, and tourist destinations) to fit customized content to the motivations of specific tourists (Rita *et al.*, 2018). Given that tourists interact through a high number of touch points (e.g., review sites, social media, real-time messaging apps, and online travel agencies), it is critical for hoteliers to be reactive on all channels 24/7. A good customer relationship management (CRM) system can be used to process data from all sources and present a clear, readable recap of each customer's needs, tastes, and shopping habits. Furthermore, the use of data management and CRM systems to produce quality service and personalization can serve as a driver of customer loyalty.

The increasing use of technological devices by tourists has implications not only at an operational level but also from a strategic standpoint. As suggested by Salazar (2018), effective segmentation must be taken into account, as tourists' values may differ. Therefore, a special focus was given to millennials in this paper. Our findings revealed that members of this generation prefer to proactively plan and execute their travel by deciding upon their own itineraries. Thus, it is likely that this generation tends to be creative. Tourism companies should understand the unique interests, personalities, and lifestyles of tourists to tailor unique personal experiences to their customers. Tourist proactivity could also lead to the development of new motivations to travel, aimed at exploring different lifestyles, new experiences, and new places. As noted by Ketter (2020), digital tourists prefer to travel "off the beaten track", typically preferring places that are less popular and more "authentic." Therefore, new destinations that are capable of providing genuine experiences should be promoted through the web. Finally, the web may shift millennials' attentions toward peer-to-peer accommodation instead of traditional hotels. Therefore, the tourism industry should consider new offerings, such as posh hostels or new hotel sub-brands, specifically aimed at the millennial market.

Although these implications did not emerge clearly from the results of the present study, they should be considered by companies in light of previous research demonstrating a recognized need to develop digital marketing processes through innovations in the informational, strategic, and operational components of marketing practices (Kannan and Li, 2017). All of these practices can be realized by skilled hoteliers and tourism managers. Digital transformation is a challenge involving not only new digital technologies but also people, who are its main drivers (Giannini, 2019). In addition, a firm's ability to manage such change instead of being disrupted by it will depend on how the firm uses products, services, and data to influence (or even change) its own and other players' positions in the tourism ecosystem (Paiola, 2017).

Millennials are relevant not only due to their present impact on tourism but also as the tourists of the future (Richards and Wilson, 2004). The tourism sector must take this generational change into account to design future-proof products and services. Like the young tourist of today, the middle-aged tourist of the 2030s and 2040s will have completely different needs, wants, and travel behaviors from those of the contemporary middle-aged tourist (Cavagnaro *et al.*, 2018).

The present study had some limitations, including the origin of the respondents and the localization of the university, which focused mainly on the center of Italy. Despite the importance of this university and the enrolled students' representativeness of the country, wider samples could be beneficial for future investigations. Future studies should use larger sample sizes and increased sample variety, perhaps by involving different universities. In addition, the CAWI method presented some limitations mainly related to the self-selection of respondents, which has some implications for sample representativeness (Di Fraia, 2004). To increase the generalization of the present findings, these results should be tested further in more representative sample settings. Another limitation of this study was the fact that the sample was made up of students, who do not often have secure jobs and mainly depend on their parents' incomes. Non-student millennials could display different behaviors in the digital tourist journey. Future research could also investigate millennials' motivation to travel, their preferred payment methods in the travel customer journey, and their travel decision-making style. Furthermore, future research may compare the tourism consumption habits of other generations.

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