Chapter 22

Reinventing Luxury Travel Imaginaries: Early Responses of Travel Influencers to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This chapter assesses how luxury travel imaginaries were modified in the aftermath of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Drawing on long-term fieldwork among travel influencers, the chapter presents their response strategies to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on an analysis of evidence from participant observation in tourist sites, network visualisations, in-depth interviews and platform profiles, I trace the transformations luxury travel imaginaries have undergone since the beginning of 2020. Before this global crisis, travel influencers became new puissant players in the highly globalised tourism industry as they regularly received assignments from tourism boards and hotels. Although brand sponsorship was considered a substantial source of revenue for travel influencers, their collaborations in travel destinations and the monetisation of travel content on YouTube were further assets to secure a livelihood. The coronavirus outbreak, however, turned their life-worlds upside down. This ethnographic investigation identified three main responses of travel influencers to the current long-term crisis of tourism: (1) diversification of content creation and orientation towards other influencer genres, (2) support for local tourism organisations and online promotion of staycations and (3), finally, travel to tourist sites for circulating online content on safe travel standards. Digital platforms became a major arena where the future of tourism has been re-negotiated in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. The in-depth investigation suggests that travel influencers were in a position to create new powerful representations of luxury as safe travel

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since they acquired the skills to establish stable storyworlds for their travel experiences, which attracted the attention of large platform audiences.

Introduction

The Czech travel vlogger Adam strolls through a restored medieval city gate into Tallinn's Old Town. He continues walking through the pedestrian zone and soon reaches café Rukis, where Juula, the Social Media Manager of the local Tourist Information Centre, awaits him. She has arranged a meeting to discuss the creation of video content on tourist sites in the city. Adam is a successful travel influencer with high follower figures on digital platforms who has created dozens of travel vlogs providing information and practical advice on popular travel destinations. Enjoying coffee and cake in the rustic atmosphere of the café, Juula and Adam negotiate the terms of the video production. Juula suggests showcasing St. Olaf's Church, a prominent historical feature of the Old Town, in a 12-minute video. They finally agree that the vlog shall be uploaded onto the Estonian tourist board's website. Leaving the café, Adam is eager to get the creative process started and meets his cameraman Jan at a nearby luxury hotel to discuss the project. Minutes later, the two are carrying video equipment to the church and inspecting the surrounding area.

In recent years, a growing body of research has been dedicated to the rise of influencers in numerous industries around the globe. The culture of influencers was initially inspired by the notion of personal influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2009). Early studies of influencers mostly address the stardom of the highly successful subgroup. While influencer marketing has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry, the work of influencers has been widely associated with their self-branding practices and the micro-celebrity status (e.g., Khamis, Lawrence Ang, & Welling, 2016). Influencers manage to establish enduring, parasocial relationships with their followers and consequently generate sustained interest from corporations and associated brands (Yuan & Lou, 2020). The collaborations between destination marketers and travel influencers increasingly involve intermediaries that seek to formalise the agreements between both parties (Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully, 2019). As influencers strive to establish substantial followings on digital platforms, their self-presentation is enacted within the constraints of the sociotechnical systems of the Internet (Carter, 2016). The global rise of influencers, however, requires further investigation at the middle and lower levels of their socioeconomic pyramid. Although the Internet has been identified as a central driving force of tourism imaginaries (e.g., Lo & McKercher, 2016), the role of travel influencers in reinforcing such imaginaries has not been thoroughly studied in terms of transmedia storytelling. Combining a transmedia approach with perspectives from the anthropology of professionals, the present chapter describes how travel influencers responded to the predicaments of the COVID-19

crisis and reconfigured luxury travel imaginaries. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I seek to understand further the role of digital platforms in the transformations of tourism in the age of the coronavirus pandemic. Secondly, I trace disaster response strategies by drawing on three cases depicting how they adjusted their platform practices during the pandemic. In recent years, travel influencers, mainly comprising travel bloggers and travel vloggers, established themselves as puissant actors in global tourism. Based on evidence collected in the early phase of the coronavirus crisis, this transdisciplinary investigation raises a number of empirical questions: How do hobbyist creators of travel content advance to become professional travel influencers? In what ways have travel influencers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic? And, finally, how do answers to these questions provide insights into the modifications of luxury travel imaginaries since the coronavirus outbreak?

Committed to a mixed-method approach (e.g., Born & Haworth, 2017), I integrate ethnographic fieldwork with computational social network analysis. Between summer 2018 and spring 2020, I accompanied numerous travel influencers to their travel destinations in Southeast Asia and Europe. Throughout the investigation, but in particular during the period of lockdown, I studied travel influencers remotely (Walton, 2018). In doing so, I arranged video chats, exchanged direct messages and followed their platform profiles. From the early days of the investigation, scrolling, liking and posting on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube complemented the observational tactics in physical settings, enabling me to alternate between a physical presence in field sites and remote ethnographic research (Postill, 2017). Tourism is, by definition, rooted in mobility, and travel influencers are constantly moving targets. After meeting eight travel influencers during my initial fieldwork in Estonian tourist sites, I decided to accompany them on their travels to explore their daily routines more closely. By conducting multi-sited fieldwork, I learned about their encounters with local tourism professionals, how they produced travel content and gained insight into their skilled practices for strategically disseminating travel stories on digital platforms and websites. Participant observation was conducted in numerous tourist sites. I explored the skilled practices of several travel influencers, shadowing them to various travel destinations, including Angkor Wat, Bangkok, Berlin, Hanoi, Helsinki, Kiev, Kuala Lumpur, Riga, Singapore, Sofia, Stockholm, Tallinn, Tartu and Vilnius. This investigation mainly draws on observational data on tourist sites, 30 in-depth interviews and network visualisations. Pseudonyms are used for all individuals described in this chapter to protect their personal identities. I documented my experiences of local places and platforms through observation protocols, photographs and screen recordings. The qualitative data sets, including observation records, interview transcripts and audio-visual materials, were analysed in accordance with the principles and procedures of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

To incorporate the methods of the medium into this investigation (Born & Haworth, 2017; Rogers, 2013), the qualitative data sets were complemented by digital data sets. Considering the web as an insightful data source, I collected social network data from digital platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram. Social

network data were scraped from Instagram and retrieved from the public Twitter application programming interface and with the Excel add-in NodeXL Pro. Using the layout algorithm ForceAtlas2, the network graphs were generated in the network visualisation software Gephi (Jacomy, Venturini, Heymann, & Bastian, 2014). Based on long-term fieldwork in tourist sites and on digital platforms, I argue that travel influencers were in a position to create new powerful representations of luxury as safe travel since they acquired the skills to establish stable storyworlds for their travel experiences, which attracted the attention of large platform audiences. While the first section of this chapter describes the professionalisation of travel influencers in the past few years, the second part assesses their responses to the coronavirus pandemic restrictions. Finally, I discuss the modifications luxury travel imaginary have undergone since the beginning of the global health crisis.

The Twitter accounts VisitTallinn and VisitEstonia launched an outreach campaign on the occasion of the 2019 *Tallinn Old Town Days*. Numerous local businesses, journalists and international tourism organisations retweeted their messages. The network visualisation in Fig. 22.1 illustrates the online status of the users 'VisitEstonia', 'VisitTallinn' and the travel influencers Adam and Jan (RealHonestGuide) within this temporary network. The data set shows that a tweet sent by VisitEstonia was retweeted five times. A message by VisitTallinn was retweeted four times, and the travel influencers were mentioned in three tweets. By continuously engaging in coordinated platform practices, Estonian tourism professionals, such as Juula, raise the visibility of the travel destination Tallinn on digital platforms.
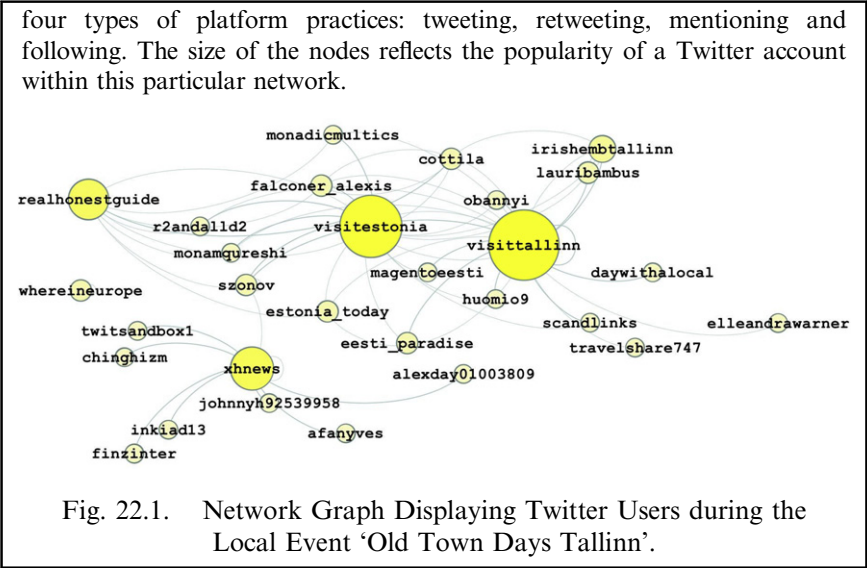
The influencer became a central actor of the social web, aiming to gather large followings and promote lifestyles, products, organisations and indeed political campaigns. Rejecting an office-based work life in the 'cubicle farm', multitudes of travel influencers work as freelancers and are 'on the road' throughout most of the year. In contrast to previous groups of nomadic travellers, such as 'drifters', 'backpackers' and 'flashpackers', travel influencers do not travel to spend money, rather to generate it. For numerous travel influencers, the most common way of earning money is through product sponsorship, whereby they become a brand ambassador. For instance, posting photographs on Instagram can be complemented by affiliate links, which redirect viewers to online shops. Given the high aesthetic quality of photographs on Instagram, travel influencers often post imagery of luxury products in exquisite locations to attract likes and comments. They can furthermore generate a substantial stream of revenue by monetising audio-visual content on YouTube. A dream common to most of the researched travel influencers is to share highly influential videos on YouTube; however, the platform sets restrictive rules on how users can monetise their uploaded content. Only registered users are eligible to apply for membership in the YouTube Partner Program, provided they have attained 1,000 subscribers and achieved 4,000 public watch hours over 12 months (YTC, 2020). Travel vloggers who meet these criteria can receive a substantial stream of revenue from their uploaded vlogs. Such revenue, however, depends on the measured popularity of their videos. The 'costs per 1,000 impressions' are calculated for each uploaded video. Members of the

Case Study 22.1: From Travel Passion to Tourism Profession

On 30 May 2019, a short video portraying the tower of Tallinn's St. Olaf's Church appeared on Twitter. The audiences watch Adam as he climbs the 258 steps to the top of the tower and revels in the magnificent view over the city on a sunny summer day. Comparing the historic church tower to a present-day skyscraper, he extols the church as a must-see tourist attraction of Tallinn. An abridged 1-minute version of the vlog was posted by Juula, who manages the official Twitter account for the travel destination Estonia. The same tweet also announces the start of *Tallinn Old Town Days*, a cultural festival showcasing dancing, theatre and musical performances. Adam retweets the message. Festivals are highly significant for the Estonian tourist board, which aspires to increase the visibility of the country's tourist places on digital platforms. Indeed, tourists around the world are increasingly inspired by travel content posted on the Internet. To contextualise the early responses of the studied travel influencers to the coronavirus pandemic, I begin by investigating their career paths and strategies for securing long-term streams of revenue. In doing so, I examine how hobbyist creators of travel content expand their skills to become professional travel influencers.

Drawing on the anthropology of professionals (Hull, 2020; Kiik, 2019; Mosse, 2011), the first case study describes the professional lives of the travel vloggers Adam and Jan. Their collaboration with the Estonian tourist board epitomises a common stream of revenue that travel influencers can generate to earn a livelihood. By attracting large numbers of followers on digital platforms, they increase their chances of being invited to travel destinations by tourist boards, tour guides or hotels. Such deals may include agreements on content sharing via digital platform handles of travel influencers in exchange for an agreed fee or free transportation and accommodation. The majority of travel influencers consider such arrangements as a part of the 'gig economy', enabling them to secure other work coinciding with their schedules and travel itineraries. Collaborations between travel influencers and tourism boards, tour guide companies or hotels can also involve the direct selling of travel content, which is used on the websites or platform profiles of tourism organisations.

By announcing the cultural festival *Tallinn Old Town Days* on Twitter, Juula sought to amplify the travel imaginaries about the travel destination Tallinn. Extensive outreach campaigns on digital platforms can make tourists aware of local events. A social network analysis of the 2019 *Tallinn Old Town Days* shows how local collaborations between destination marketers and travel influencers were enhanced on the platform Twitter. The data set for Fig. 22.1 was assembled by the search term 'Tallinn Old Town Days'. It contains 29 nodes, which represent accounts of Twitter users, and 62 edges, which refer to various platform practices. The relatively small sample size makes it possible to manually check the quality of the relevant data, which increases the reliability of the network analysis (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014). The edges relate to

four types of platform practices: tweeting, retweeting, mentioning and following. The size of the nodes reflects the popularity of a Twitter account within this particular network.

Fig. 22.1.   Network Graph Displaying Twitter Users during the Local Event 'Old Town Days Tallinn'.

YouTube Partner Program are granted access to YouTube Studio, which consists of a set of analytics tools in the backend of their user account. Another metric that travel influencers regularly monitor is the 'impressions click-through rate', indicating the percentage of impressions that are turned into views of a given video. Thumbnails and titles of YouTube videos are displayed when users search for a clip on the platform. These two features of a video can also appear in the viewer's feed or be added to a list of suggested videos. If YouTube users click on the thumbnail or title of a video clip, the influencer's popularity and revenue are increased. For example, 1,000 views of a video clip were given a specific monetary value.

Travel influencers often interconnect a variety of media channels, such as websites, video platforms and social media platforms. In the last couple of years, their forms of transmedia storytelling predominately included the photo-sharing platform Instagram and the video platform YouTube. All of the researched travel influencers pursued transmedia strategies for disseminating their travel stories. Transmedia approaches have burgeoned in the social sciences and humanities since the early 2000s. One of the first traces of transmedia storytelling can be found in a film project developed in 1999. The low-budget independent film *The Blair Witch Project* built a large fan base on the info web. Initially, transmedia storytelling referred to a then-new aesthetic that emerged in response to the convergence of media and the art of world-making (Jenkins, 2006). A fictional story might be introduced in a film, for example, and expanded through novels, comics, games, amusement parks or perhaps television series. However, each media form remains self-contained. Hence, it is not necessary to watch the movie

to enjoy the video game and vice versa. Nonetheless, all media forms provide entry points to the whole storyworld. Viewers can follow the main story across differing delivery channels. Transmedia storytelling can be seen as a socio-cultural process inherent in the dispersal of integral elements of a fictional story across multiple channels for the purpose of creating a unified entertainment experience (Jenkins, 2006). Transmedia storytelling is grounded in an overarching story-world. For example, the storyworld of the drama 24 was comprised of films, TV series, comics and novels, amongst others (Scolari, 2009). Travel influencers do not create fictional accounts but regularly emphasise the authenticity of their travel content. They create a complex yet coherent storyworld, in which audiences can engage across different platforms. The main plot line of most travel influencers is composed of a series of linear, sequential events. A storyworld can include individual personas, settings, events, subplots and background stories. Travel influencers often create narratives about travel destinations, their travels to such destinations and their encounters with other influencers.

The researched travel influencers could make a living as location independent, self-employed solo entrepreneurs by delivering attractive travel content to large audiences. This in-depth study of travel influencers revealed three main revenue sources. For many travel influencers, a substantial stream of revenue derived from collaborations with destination marketers. Other viable options were the mone-tisation of video content on YouTube and product sponsorship. Many hobbyist travel content creators primarily managed to establish themselves as travel influencers by mastering the skilled practices of creating stable online personas that come into being in transmedia storyworlds. Combining pictorial, audio-visual and textual travel content across multiple platforms, they construct coherent storyworlds mirroring their personal travel experiences. The career paths and transmedia storyworlds of travel influencers provide the socio-professional context for the dramatic transformations luxury travel imaginaries have recently undergone. In the following section, I shall describe the reactions of travel influencers to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

The Future of Luxury Travel after COVID-19

Many of the researched travel influencers had made considerable headway en route to a successful career when the outbreak of COVID-19 triggered the first lockdowns across several countries at the beginning of 2020. Attaining the figure of 10,000 followers is perceived as a crucial landmark in the process of becoming a microinfluencer. This status is widely considered the sine qua non for starting a successful career as a travel influencer. Against the background of these profes-sional career ambitions held by many travel influencers, I assess how they responded to the COVID-19 outbreak. The beginning of the coronavirus pandemic and subsequently the widespread ban on international travel forced travel influencers into a state of stasis. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak of the coronavirus a pandemic. By the end of March 2020, the majority of the world's airlines' fleets were grounded,

and cruise ships were immobilised, mostly stranded in harbours. International tourism ground to a virtual halt. Consequentially, the livelihoods of tourism professionals around the world were put at high risk. In the immediate aftermath of the last global economic crisis, which began in 2008, the number of tourists dropped by approximately 40 million worldwide (WTO, 2020). Although the severe consequences of the continuously evolving global health crisis cannot yet be fully appreciated, it is feasible that pandemic may take an even larger toll on the global tourism industry than the 2008 financial crisis. Outbreaks of infectious diseases, such as typhus, smallpox, cholera and influenza, have a long history of disrupting travel due to the risk of contagion. In the past, the ramifications of pandemics often reified the stigmatisation of marginalised social groups, othering, gendered concepts of responsibility and racism. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rhetoric for limiting the spread of the disease often entailed discriminatory classifications. Given the high level of interconnectedness in today's globalised world, a planetary health approach stabilising the balance between all living creatures is required to overcome the current global recession (e.g., McCloskey, Dar, Zumla, & Heymann, 2014).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has widely been perceived as a drastic disaster within the global tourism industry, and considerable layoffs have taken place in all major segments, including accommodation, guided touring and gastronomy. The myriad of travel influencers who were stranded in their travel destinations largely adhered to the advice of their government and returned to their country of citizenship. Between mid-March and May 2020, many of the researched travel influencers were confined to their homes, and initially, their output on digital platforms increased sharply. However, posting relatively fresh travel videos and photographs, which were produced in early 2020, was deemed inappropriate due to the rising death toll around the world. In the early weeks of the lockdown, many travel influencers had all of their 2020 trips, already planned and sponsored, cancelled. The situation of travel influencers was somehow paradoxical. On the one hand, they were grounded, and travel appeared to be impossible in the foreseeable future. However, on the other hand, the screen time of their followers on digital platforms reached an all-time high.

The experience of a pandemic varies considerably from person to person. While for many there is no immediate threat to their own lives, anxieties and worries about their professional prospects may begin to reach into the present. Future and present form a continuum, which makes it necessary to study them in concert (Bryant & Knight, 2019). The ways possible futures are imagined may affect the present and vice versa. People regularly imagine how life will look like on the other side when the pandemic has come to an end. Building on a philosophical tradition tracing back to antiquity, the study of orientations can illuminate the digital cultures of travel influencers who have to cope with increased uncertainty about their future career plans. The six major orientations towards the future include anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope and destiny, representing different ways in which the future may affect our present (Bryant & Knight, 2019). Public debates about the current global health crisis have been dominated by future orientations. By sharing stories about the

consequences of COVID-19 on tourism on digital platforms, travel influencers already inhabited the future of their lives. In the rapidly shifting world of contemporary tourism, one of their central aspirations has been to promote good standards for safe travel. A plethora of travel influencers claimed that they would be among the first to consistently travel during the coronavirus pandemic. In recent blog posts and vlogs, they sought to instil the feeling of safety in their audiences. For example, a few of the researched influencers travelled by plane during the course of the pandemic and posted photographs that promoted air travel as a safe mode of transport.

Between April and May 2020, I conducted a series of in-depth online interviews with travel influencers. While most interlocutors initially focussed on their adjusted platform practices, the future of their careers emerged as a second central theme. After the initial shock, the vast majority of the research participants reported on an abundantly positive effect of the lockdown measures. With their readers and viewers forced to stay at home, their numbers of likes, subscriptions and comments skyrocketed on various platforms. All travel influencers were delighted while checking the analytics of the web traffic they could attract. Despite the joys of sharing travel throwback content, it soon became clear that the world was plunging into a deep recession that only a few living people had experienced. Building on their following and online status on digital platforms, various travel influencers shifted gear and engaged with new business partners. The turmoil following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic ironically encapsulated the dependency of travel influencers on platform metrics. Having lost their bread and butter topic, some travel influencers partnered up with online mental health advisers, food companies or fashion brands. A further subgroup produced new podcast series or switched to other digital platforms, such as TikTok and Twitch. While sponsored posts represented about 35% of the influencer posts in mid-February 2020, sponsored content dropped to about 4% of their overall posts in mid-April 2020 (Whateley, 2020). The initial response of travel influencers was mainly a diversification of their content creation on two different levels. Some rapidly adjusted their influencer genre, while others wandered to different platforms.

In the Irish tourism scene, Twitter has become one of the most popular platforms for sharing information on tourist sites and events in recent years. When the Irish government began to officially endorse local tourism in June 2020, many tourism organisations took the opportunity to announce tourist attractions and promote nature tourism. Such efforts were widely considered to be a way of increasing visitor numbers to tourist sites while maintaining high safety standards. The network graph displays how communities were connected within the hashtag public. In addition to tourists, various professional groups, including photographers, travel bloggers, journalists and tourism organisations, sought to shape the communication within the hashtag public. For instance, the account of TV weather presenter Barra Best can be interpreted as a hub in this particular network. This account could mediate between various subnetworks and gain the attention of various professional groups.

Case Study 22.2: Stasis and Staycation

In June 2020, the lockdown measures were steadily eased in some parts of the world, and many of the researched travel influencers could leave their homes for outdoor activities other than buying groceries. The second case study about the South Korean travel influencer Jang-mi illustrates how perceptions of luxury travel were transformed during the pandemic. Longing for new travel experiences and fresh travel content, many travel influencers decided to travel locally. Hiking and camping were increasingly considered safe and suitable alternatives to the more glamorous world of hotels, cruises and shopping malls. Imaginings of luxury began to slowly change. Experiences of rural areas and nature enjoyed unprecedented popularity, promising to sharply limit the contact with other tourists. Safe travel that minimised the risks of catching and spreading the coronavirus became a highly valued service. In early July, Jang-mi wrote a blog entry covering a camping trip during the night of summer solstice at Vartry Reservoir, Ireland. This piece introduced a new subplot to her storyworld. At that time, she had been stranded in Ireland for several months. Hiking off the beaten track was the only possible way of satisfying her need to travel. Unexpectedly, camping became a tangible form of luxury, which attracted great attention on digital platforms. While camping and hiking were traditionally perceived as low-cost activities, the meaning attached to these travel practices suddenly changed. Given the dangers and difficulties of reaching remote tourist sites, the calmness attached to hiking and camping paradoxically rendered them luxury experiences in such turbulent times. Jang-mi expressed the unprecedented immobility as 'staying put and camping locally'. She further explained that she enjoyed the wildlife more consciously and used the stasis to re-explore some of her cultural traditions, such as Korean food and medicine. Indeed, governments and tourist organisations encouraged people to opt for 'staycations' rather than travelling abroad for a holiday during 2020. In June and July, Jang-mi slowed down her platform practices. Only occasionally would she post photographs of red deer or greenfinches on Instagram and Twitter, adding the newly popular hashtag staycation. The performance of extravaganza on digital platforms was, step by step, replaced by stoic moments of mindfulness.

The hashtag staycation became a trending topic on Twitter in many countries between June and August 2020. For this hashtag public, a data set was assembled by the query '#staycation'. All data were collected on 8 August 2020. Based on the rules for the public Twitter API, data from the previous seven days were included in the data set, which is comprised of 14,585 nodes and 21,331 edges. The graph below (Fig. 22.2) shows the giant component of the directed network. The edges of the graph represent various platform practices, including tweeting, retweeting and mentioning. The breadth of the edges indicates the frequency of platform practices between two nodes, while the direction of platform practices between nodes is symbolised by curved edges. The size of the nodes reflects the number of all platform practices for a Twitter account. Accordingly, the large nodes stand for the most influential accounts within this hashtag public.
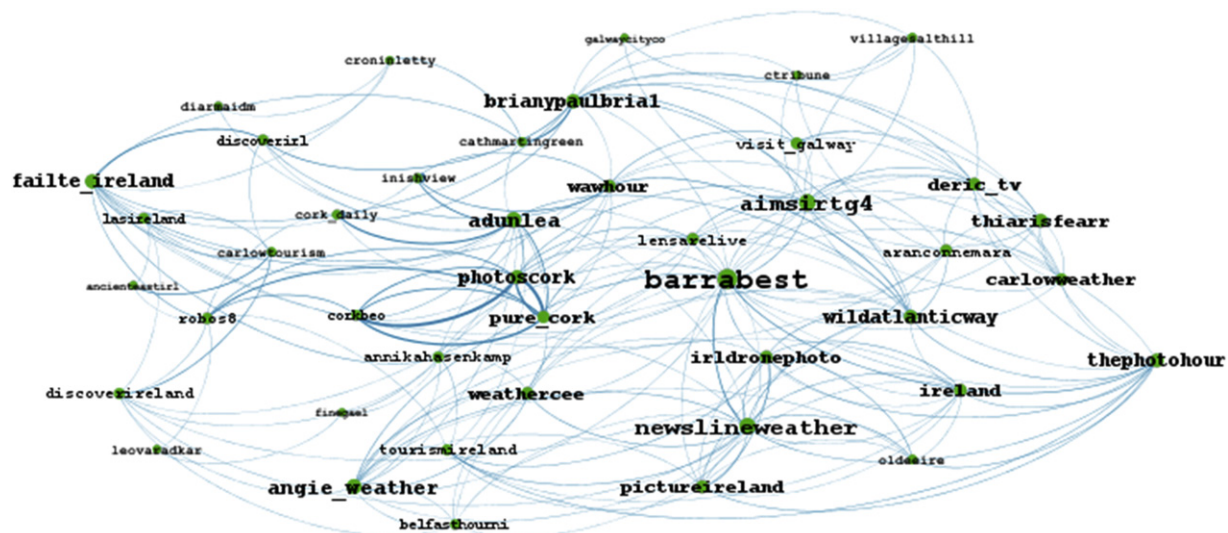
Fig. 22.2.   Connected Communities within the Hashtag Public Staycation on Twitter.

Based on evidence from the platform profiles and in-depth interviews with travel influencers, I primarily identified three types of response to the coronavirus pandemic. Firstly, travel influencers sought to maintain their status by diversifying their content creation. Secondly, another response strategy involved embracing local tourism to deliver travel stories about luxurious staycations and nature tourism to platform audiences. Finally, many travel influencers aspired to promote practices of safe travel. Many of the researched travel influencers voiced hope that they could play a crucial role in rebuilding the travel industry while acting as role models for hygiene standards and social distancing rules. Tourism boards, governments and hotel chains showed sustained interest in partnering with travel influencers and envisioned them as new ambassadors of safe travel. Such ambitions gave rise to the creation of new luxury tourism imaginaries, which is assessed in greater detail in the next section.

Imagining Safe Zones

A major anthropological approach to tourism revolves around the imaginaries that tourism service providers and tourists co-construct (e.g., Dixit, 2020; Gravari-Barbas & Graburn, 2012; Gravari-Barbas & Nelson, 2016; Mostafa-nezhad & Norum, 2019; Sundbo & Dixit, 2020). The term tourism imaginary refers to a socially transmitted representational assemblage which is used as a meaning-making and world-shaping device and interacts with personal imaginings (e.g., Salazar & Graburn, 2014). Luxury travel imaginaries are a specific segment of the manifold, overlapping tourism imaginaries that circulate around the world through travel magazines, TV shows, newspaper articles, blog posts and digital platforms. Drawing on a travel story about the reopening of tourist sites in the United Arab Emirates, I assess the transformations of luxury travel imaginaries since the coronavirus outbreak. The study of tourism imaginaries reveals worldviews, discourses, stereotypes and fantasies. Tourism imaginaries can also take on the form of socio-cultural frameworks for encounters with others. The main components of such representational assemblages include the imaginings and expectations of individual travellers, globally disseminated images of local places, the collective identity of the visited communities and, finally, the beliefs that travellers develop about locals, and vice versa (Leite, 2014). The Lacanian theory of registers, which is based on a fundamental distinction between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, is an underlying basis of the overwhelming majority of empirical studies about tourism imaginaries. This conceptual triad provides insight into the formation of the sense of self, otherness and the world (e.g., Lacan, 1936). Based on the ability of humans to think about themselves as objects, socio-cultural identities are formed through a twofold process of externalisation and internalisation. The proliferation of digital platforms in everyday life has altered the formation of socio-cultural identities. Through the sharing of blogs, photographs and vlogs, travel influencers perform self-presentations. Digital platforms provide a secure backstage area for disseminating travel stories (Lo & McKercher, 2016). Luxury travel imaginaries are a collection of images

and representations, which travellers mainly create for digital platforms. Due to the genre-specific claim of authenticity, travel vloggers and bloggers primarily generate storyworlds that centre around their own experiences and selves.

The story of luxury travel imaginaries prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus could not be told without acknowledging the veritable explosion of travel photographs on Instagram. Celebrated by some and despised by others, Instagram users uploaded vast collections of high-quality photographs portraying top-notch tourist attractions. This platform serves as a circulation engine and provides a crucial infrastructure of movement for luxury travel imaginaries. Digital platforms accelerate the dislocation of images from travel destinations. Travel influencers often depict themselves while indulging in luxury goods in extraordinary settings. In the last five years or so, Instagram has become a tool for both promoting luxury travel and circulating stereotypes about travel destinations. By posting photographs or short videos on Instagram, travel influencers reshape luxury travel imaginaries. Their enduring platform practices reconfigure the relations between the different components of such representational assemblages, including photo and video cameras, tourist attractions, travel magazines, restaurants, tourists, tour guides and TV shows. Luxury travel imaginaries traditionally oscillated between indulgence in exquisite food and mesmerising places offering outstanding views. Luxury items in extravagant settings became a powerful genre on Instagram. In recent years, the visual culture of Instagram amplified luxury travel imaginaries. High-quality photographs displayed travel influencers in exclusive hotels or on cruise ships, enjoying high-end cuisine and views over epic landscapes. Images of extravagant travel influencers circulated via millions of devices, attracting millions of comments and likes. Textual narratives, photographs and videos mostly represented tourist places. Such imaginaries of places also play a crucial role in the current transformation of luxury travel.

Sometime between March and May 2020, the Instagram posts portraying influencers with bottles of champagne lounging beside hotel pools or on rooftop terraces began to fade away. However, the platform practices of travel influencers did not decrease. They directed their attention towards new forms of luxury emerging during the pandemic. In doing so, they transformed visual representations of luxury travel and, ultimately, the meaning of luxury. Depictions of extravaganza on digital platforms began to slowly be replaced by images of safe travel. The COVID-19 crisis of tourism, which may have just begun, provides crucial insights into the adjusted self-presentations of travel influencers and the newly emerging representations of luxury travel. Reaching out to their numerous contacts in the travel industry, many travel influencers engaged in online discussion sessions staged on Instagram and other platforms. Such sessions were dedicated to reflections on how trust in the safety of travelling could be rebuilt. In June 2020, many travel influencers publicised blog posts that reviewed hotels and holiday homes in terms of safety standards. They knew that the stakes were high and feared losing their online status, for which they had worked hard over the previous years. Hotels and destination marketers quickly began to collaborate with travel influencers to promote their safety standards. Stories about touch-free

Case Study 22.3: Broadcasting Safe Travel

The third case study illuminates the modifications that luxury travel imaginaries underwent in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. In mid-July 2020, the Palestinian-Israeli travel couple Omar and Amira travelled to Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The travel restrictions had only been lifted a few days earlier, but in a short video shared on Instagram, they walked their viewers through the different stages of their journey. Throughout the video, they emphasised the different measures that were in place to make the trip as safe as possible. They began by inspecting the conditions of air traffic. Only 80% of the seats were occupied by passengers, allowing for social distancing during the flight. The cabin crew wore personal protective equipment, while all passengers were obliged to use the supplied face coverings and gloves. Upon arrival, the travel couple took a free COVID-19 test. As their test results were negative, they could enter the hotel. The choice of their leisure activities also took social distancing rules into account as they mainly engaged in kayaking and cycling. In the final sequence of the video, Omar praised Dubai for welcoming tourists back and expressed his appreciation of the safety measures that were in place. The travel destination Dubai established safe touristic zones, in which intensive testing and strict social distancing rules significantly limited the spread of the coronavirus. The safe zone was widely portrayed as an idyllic micro-paradise for luxury experiences. Omar's and Amira's video amplified the newly emerging imaginary of the safe place, where holiday makers can escape their day-to-day troubles. The safe travel place has become a new embodiment of luxury. The video about the safe zone epitomises a new trend among travel influencers. Safety narratives are increasingly shaping representations of luxury travel and personal imaginings of luxury among platform users. A few days after the video was published on Instagram, Omar and Amira wrote a blog post. This piece contained background stories about their trip and served as a further entry point to their storyworld.

Imaginaries of extravagant indulgence in exquisite places have slowly been replaced by the imaginary of the safe place. Extravagant consumption of luxury goods was substituted by a desire for safety. A myriad of travel influencers underlined the safety of their first pandemic trips in their online travel stories. Safe zones can, however, become porous. Many newly established travel bubbles could not fully repel the coronavirus. For instance, the crews and passengers of a number of cruise ships fell victim to virus outbreaks after the industry had restarted their touristic journeys in June 2020. An analysis of the researched travel influencers indicates a change from imaginings of extravagant lifestyles to imaginings of safety. Luxury travel imaginaries have shifted from an orientation towards the performative consumption of luxury goods to an orientation towards infrastructures of travel safety. Accordingly, the self-presentations of travel influencers increasingly involved stories about safe travel places. They prioritised the circulation of information on safety rules and healthy travel routines, hoping to maintain their online status and their identities as influencers.

check-ins, regular temperature checks, social distancing signs, low-contact breakfast deliveries and sealed hotel room doors mushroomed on the Internet.

Conclusion

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, travel influencers established themselves as new players in the global tourism industry. Although brand sponsorship has predominantly been considered the most substantial source of revenue for travel influencers, this in-depth investigation revealed alternative ways of securing a livelihood, including collaborations with local tourism professionals in travel destinations and the monetisation of travel content on YouTube. The researched travel influencers mainly responded in three ways to the current, long-term crisis in tourism. Firstly, one subgroup shifted their priorities as influencers and diversified their content creation. Secondly, others embraced local tourism and promoted staycations on digital platforms. Finally, numerous travel influencers envisioned themselves as ambassadors of safe travel. The recent platform practices of travel influencers have reshaped luxury travel imaginaries. The digital performance of extravaganza was widely replaced by images of safe zones. Over the last five years, the platform Instagram has enjoyed growing popularity within the global tourism industry, providing a new infrastructure for telling visual travel stories. The various components of luxury travel imaginaries have been reshuffled. Travel magazines, tour guides and travel TV series have increasingly been integrated into a new media ecology of global tourism, and the power relations between traditional and digital media have been reversed. The pandemic seems to rather accelerate than mitigate this process. Digital platforms became a major arena where the future of tourism has been re-negotiated in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. Based on an ethnographic investigation into travel influencers in the era of the global pandemic, I argue that travel influencers were in a position to create new powerful representations of luxury as safe travel since they acquired the skills to establish stable storyworlds for their travel experiences, which attracted the attention of large platform audiences.

The culture of influencers involves both gendered practices and gender stereotypes. Gender perspectives can shed further light on how gender is performed among travel influencers, unveiling gendered access to professional networks as well as empowerment and constraints of remote labour. Furthermore, tourism research faces new methodological challenges. While tourism is, in general, at risk of dwindling for a long time, the deteriorating effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on research practices complicate in-depth investigations into tourist sites. Given the present uncertainty for travel-related research, tourism scholars are likely to continuously integrate digital methods and remote co-presence into their research agendas. Tourism practitioners should align their managerial strategies with the ongoing platformization trend, of which the rise of travel influencers is but one example. The ethnographic investigation into responses to the coronavirus disaster points towards a further major change, of course. Concerns of travel safety for both transportation and accommodation will not disappear in the foreseeable future,

and tourism practitioners shall establish appropriate guidelines for safe travel that can protect the public health in tourist places as well as local business interests. The coronavirus pandemic has already transformed work life, travel and digital cultures in unprecedented ways. An assessment of the early responses of travel influencers and other tourism professionals to the pandemic indicates a great versatility in the travel industry and an even greater demand for sustainable leisure travel. While the COVID-19 crisis is undoubtedly the greatest challenge tourist organisations have faced in decades, the hope of contributing to the re-birth of a world where sustainable tourism can flourish again has not been extinguished.

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