

Influence of Social Media on Travel Behaviour in the Indian Scenario: An Exploratory Study

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The swift expansion of social media platforms has profoundly altered travel behaviour among Indian consumers. This exploratory study investigates the impact of social media on travel decision-making, destination selection, and comprehensive travel planning within the Indian context. As more people use the internet and smartphones, sites like Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs have become important places to get ideas and information about travel. The study utilises secondary data obtained from published research articles, industry reports, and online sources to analyse emerging trends in social media-influenced travel behaviour. The results show that social media content, like reviews from users, travel influencers, and visual storytelling, has a big impact on how tourists think and what they like.

Things like how real reviews are, recommendations from friends, advertising campaigns, and real-time updates have a big impact on travel choices. Social media also encourages people to plan trips on the spur of the moment, promotes less well-known places to visit, and makes people more aware of travel deals and experiences. But there are also worries about too much information, false information, and expectations that were too high. The study finds that social media has become a strong tool for marketing and communication that affects how people travel in India. It emphasises the necessity for tourism marketers to implement effective digital strategies and for travellers to assess online information critically. The study sheds light on changing travel trends and opens the door for more empirical research.

Keywords: travel influencers, consumer behaviour, social media marketing

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1. Introduction

Social media has become a powerful way to communicate in recent years. It has an impact on many things that consumers do, including their travel choices. The quick rise in internet access, cheap smartphones, and the popularity of sites like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and travel blogs have all changed the way people look for travel-related information. In India, where digital adoption has grown a lot, social media is very important for deciding where to go, what to do, and how to plan a trip. Travellers don't just rely on traditional sources like travel agencies or brochures. They also actively look at online content, reviews, and recommendations from friends and influencers. With the proliferation and expansion of social media and increased access to user-generated content (UGC) by tourists, the traditional sources of hotel information have been gradually substituted in the consumer's hotel decision-making process (Browning and Sparks, 2013; Fotis et al., 2012). Earlier, travellers had inadequate and limited resources to get information on travel products and services (Hu and Wei, 2013), and purchases related to boarding and lodging were made available through traditional sources, i.e. pamphlets and brochures provided by the local travel agents or through government tourism boards (Baruca and Civre, 2012). Today, social media plays a progressively significant role in planning the travel needs of tourists and as a source of information (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) including a wide range of pre and post travel-related activities such as purchase of tourism products and services, reading and submitting travel reviews, sharing and connecting with other travellers and collecting prior destination information (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). Travel blogs are found to be more reliable when travelling to an unfamiliar destination compared to advice from relatives and friends (Tan and Chen, 2012; Lee and Gretzel, 2014).

Photos, videos, and real-time updates on social media make places look good, which makes people want to go there. Travel vlogs, user-generated content, and influencer marketing are all important tools that change how people think and make them want to visit new places. Also, ratings, comments, and hashtags help travellers find out more about places to stay, get around, eat, and have fun in the area.

This digital interaction has made people more likely to travel on the spur of the moment and has made people more aware of unusual and upcoming places to visit in India. However, despite its positives, its impact also brings forth certain concerns with regard to authenticity, misleading promotional activities, and unrealistic aspirations. Too much information also creates confusion among tourists. Thus, it is vital to comprehend its role in influencing travel behaviour. This is an exploratory research with an aim to examine its impact on travel behaviour in India and highlight trends in digital-driven tourism.

2. Literature Review

Shruti Gulati and Suneel Kumar (2025), in their study, aim to explore the nexus between tourists' characteristics and the changing intensity of social media's impact on tourist decision-making among Indian tourists. A group-based comparison is done in this exploratory study; the basis of groups is the tourist's characteristics, which signifies their different types such as social media type, user type, traveller type and destination type. India, which is a huge market for tourists and social media users, is explored for this study. Shruti Gulati (2024), in her research work, aims to explore how social media affects decision-making among tourists and whether there is a potential effect of age, which is studied through generations. For this purpose, baby boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z tourists are studied, and real-time implications are offered. Shashank Kumar Dwivedi, Hitesh Tripathi, Vivek Kumar, and Subhi Vishwakarma (2023), in their study, discussed how digital media's emergence and the internet's growth have changed how people interact with one another and conduct business. As alternatives to traditional media in promoting tourism, trip planning, and decision-making, social media are now widely used for communication, sharing, and expressing personal viewpoints. Alpana Agarwal, Komal Kapoor, and Sandeep Walia (2021) studied that over the last two decades, an exponential rise has been observed in the growth of spiritual tourism where travellers are preferring and visiting places of religious inclination seeking to align their body and mind.

In the current fast-paced life where stress, anxiety, insecurities and depression have become commonplace, travelling to certain places that provide a connection with the Almighty or peace to

the traveller has become very important. Jay Trivedi and Mitali Rozia (2019) highlighted that in today's digital era, social media communications have a significant impact on the consumer decision-making process. This new age phenomenon also impacts the tourism industry in India. Indian consumers (here, travellers) surf through multiple social media platforms for finding travel-related information before making a destination choice. Hence, a deeper understanding of the dimensions of social media communication and its impact on the consumer (traveller s) behaviour needs to be developed from an emerging market perspective.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows –

- To look into how social media affects the travel decisions of Indian travellers.
- To look at how social media sites affect where people choose to go and how they plan their trips.
- To find out how online reviews and ratings affect the choice of travel destinations.
- To investigate the influence of visual content (photographs and videos) on travel motivation.

4. Research Methodology

The present study is descriptive and exploratory in nature and is based on the secondary sources collected from related websites, case studies, working papers and reputable journals, etc.

5. Conceptual Framework

Before the rise of social media, India's travel industry relied on paper tickets, manual booking, and travel agents who worked in person. People learned about things through word of mouth, brochures, and TV ads. High-street agents were very important in planning trips and getting people to and from their destinations. At that time, travel agents were the main way to book, and they did it by phone and in person. It took a long time to book, and you often had to go to the office in person. Most travel tips and information were shared through word of mouth or traditional media, not digital influencers. Travelling meant using paper airline tickets, which were a big problem if they were lost and needed a lot of paperwork to get back.

Startup India says that promotion was limited to TV ads like the Incredible India campaign and in-person travel seminars. For many people, leisure travel was less common and limited to religious sites or places close to home. Without the immediate effects of social media sites like Instagram or trip planning tools, the travel industry was, in a way, less cluttered. This made the process of traveling more traditional and reliant on agents.

6. Changing Tourism Destination Choices in the Age of Social Media

Before social media, Indians mostly chose where to go on vacation based on what friends and family said, travel magazines, newspapers, and guidebooks. Movies and TV had a big impact on people's choices, and travel agents were very important for booking trips because they offered set itineraries and printed brochures. At that time, tourists relied heavily on traditional sources of information and inspiration when selecting travel destinations. Word of mouth played a crucial role, as people trusted recommendations from friends, family members, and colleagues who had previously visited a place. Travel agents and brochures were also significant, serving as the primary means of trip planning; physical travel agencies provided curated packages and printed brochures, especially for well-known destinations. In addition, print media such as travelogues, newspapers, and glossy travel magazines offered valuable insights and ideas about potential locations. Movies and television further influenced travel decisions, particularly in the Indian context, where families often preferred visiting places showcased in popular films or songs. Moreover, cultural and religious importance were key factors, with many families choosing destinations based on religious significance, historical relevance, or the popularity of traditional hill stations.

Before social media marketing, many famous Indian tourist spots thrived for decades, even centuries, thanks to word-of-mouth, their historical significance, and travel writing. The Taj Mahal in Agra, the ghats in Varanasi, the tea gardens in Darjeeling, and royal sites like Amer Fort and Hawa Mahal in Jaipur are some examples.

The Indian tourism industry has been greatly affected by the rise of social media. Over 89% of people who travel look to sites like Instagram and YouTube to research their chosen travel destination, whilst 64% of travellers base their travel choice on recommendations from family and friends. The use of social media will push a large portion of travellers (specifically youth aged 18-35) towards choosing to travel to destinations considered "Instagrammable" and therefore experiential in nature. Influencer and user-generated content are major contributors to the selection of rural and niche travel destinations. The rise of social media has significantly influenced the Indian tourism industry and transformed the way travellers select destinations. A large proportion of travellers now rely on digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube to research and explore potential travel locations, with more than 89% of tourists using these sources for inspiration and information. At the same time, traditional recommendations still hold value, as around 64% of travellers continue to consider suggestions from family and friends when making travel decisions. Social media has particularly impacted younger travellers, especially those aged between 18 and 35 years, who are increasingly drawn toward destinations that are visually appealing and Instagrammable. These travellers often seek unique and experiential trips that can be shared online. Additionally, influencer marketing and user-generated content have become powerful factors in promoting lesser-known rural and niche destinations, encouraging tourists to explore new places beyond conventional tourist spots. Several tourist destinations in India that were previously only known by locals are now becoming well-known attractions thanks to social media platforms (like Instagram) and influencer marketing. Examples of these once-hidden gems that have gained popularity as a result of their uniqueness include Varkala Beach (Kerala), Ziro Valley (Arunachal Pradesh), the Root Bridges of Meghalaya, and Dhanaulti (Uttarakhand), all of which are defined by the aesthetics of their surroundings and/or the content produced by travel influencers promoting them through these channels.

Key Trends Before vs After Social Media in Destination Choices

Aspect	Before Social Media	After Social Media
Primary Influence	Travel Agents, Brochures, Word-of-Mouth	Instagram Reels, TikTok, Influencer Vlogs
Information Type	Curated, Formal, Static	Authentic, User-Generated Content (UGC), real-time
Decision Driver	Cost, Accessibility	Instagrammability, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)
Location Choice	Known/Popular Destinations	Hidden Gems Discovered Online / Trending Spots
Booking Behavior	Direct via Agencies / Hotels	Direct via Social Media Platforms / Third-party apps

7. Hotel Selection Behaviour in The Pre and Post Social Media Era

Before the internet and social media, most travel bookings in India were done using traditional travel booking services. Travellers used to book flights/hotels via entities such as travel agents, on the phone, and by simply walking into a hotel. The printed materials (brochures, guidebooks) available at tourist offices (government-owned) were used extensively for trip planning as were friends and/or family recommendations for travelling. Travel Agents acted as the main intermediary for travellers, helping book their hotels through the issuance of booking vouchers, providing detailed pricing/locations/facilities for hotels. On many occasions, people would contact a hotel directly via phone to establish availability and confirm a reservation. Government tourist information centre personnel would provide people with directions for finding hotels or locating hotels. Many backpackers would typically walk into hotels without a reservation, but preferred checking out the quality of the rooms before confirming. The major source of information for finding quality hotels was through guidebooks or printed travel manuals, and most reservations were made via physical mail or fax, which took large amounts of time/advance notice. The booking confirmation was recorded in a logbook, which would be kept manually, and the time it took for communication between hotels and customers was much longer than today through the use of digital technology.

Overall, all of these traditional travel booking methods majorly relied upon the professional expertise of the staff of the companies issuing these services, the legitimacy of the information provided to customers, and promotional materials, but they completely lacked in terms of first-hand users' experiences/reviews.

Studies on how social media impacts hotel selection behaviour have demonstrated that Web 2.0 platforms can be used to conduct a range of inclusive hotel searches, with TripAdvisor emerging as the dominant social media platform, followed by Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. This finding is consistent with the findings of other researchers (Ayeh et al., 2012; McCarthy et al., 2010), who have identified several different social media platforms being used for a specific purpose. This study found Instagram to be a much more popular social media choice in young people's hotel decision-making than previously anticipated, especially compared to TripAdvisor, which has historically been seen as the main travel information resource. Historically, Instagram had not been viewed as a source for travel information; however, it is beginning to gain traction as a valid source of information (Harrigan et al., 2017). Instagram also provides consumers with access to the images, videos, and links related to their future travel in a more relevant way, thus making it a much larger component of the young consumer market.

In reviewing the consumers' reviews and ratings, we found that they often mix various types of web search and social media platforms together. Although social media platforms have become established as the main source of information and data for young people, they do supplement their social media searches with local web searches to find and gain access to hotel information and make choices before booking a hotel (i.e., access to hotel information (i.e. location, price, cleanliness, etc.) and choice). In the past several years, hotel websites have been instrumental in providing valuable information that answers specific consumer inquiries through pictures, reviews, ratings, comments, and videos to assist in the decision-making process. Recent developments in social media have broadened the amount of available information with user-generated content provided in real time as users post their impressions and provide information regarding location, price,

cleanliness, and distances to attractions, all of which can be difficult to find using traditional sources of information. Through the combination of multiple information sources, consumers are able to learn from the experiences of other travellers and to compare hotels and evaluate deals based on unbiased and reliable information.

According to Baruca and Civre (2012) hotel bookings were mainly driven by physical pamphlets provided by travel agencies, but more recently, the use of both traditional Web 1.0 sources and social media has become the norm for consumers looking to book rooms. Using both sources allows consumers to validate and cross-reference information and make well-informed decisions about hotel bookings. Many times, the process is a swap of the physical site of the hotel to the social media sites of users to validate the initial impression of the hotel and find the best choice for booking the hotel. As a result, the combination of traditional and social media sources of information has increased the overall customer confidence and enhanced the overall hotel decision process.

8. Influence of Social Media on Identification of Exotic Dishes of Different Travel Destinations

In pre-social media India, the main ways for tourists to learn about food were from guidebooks, other travellers, and personal experiences. Tourists would typically use busy street vendors, local markets, and small restaurants for healthy and low-cost food. Travellers would pick up well-known snacks (e.g., roasted channa/boiled eggs/pakorras), by observing how busy the stall was (to judge freshness and safety). Travellers would also purchase their meals during train trips from pantry cars and from vendors at the station, sampling local foods such as litti chokha/biryani/samosas/chai. For longer journeys, many people travelled with their own homemade food items (e.g., khakhra/pickles/murukku/laddoos), which were easy to transport and would last longer than prepared foods. Most travellers would prefer to eat at local family restaurants or roadside dhabas over modern cafes. All of the above food options were driven by hunger, curiosity, cost, and cultural experience of the area, rather than presentation. In summary, the emphasis on food while travelling was on taste, convenience of transport, and understanding of cultural experiences,

resulting in simple, practical, and strong ties to local cultures.

Through visual experience, social media is changing the way we make choices about where to eat on vacation. The power of social media is transforming how travellers choose their dining options, relying more on captivating visual imagery than on traditional advertising. More than half of travellers are utilising Instagram and TikTok to determine where to dine out based on pictures/videos of menu items and the atmosphere of the restaurant. These photographs create the expectation of what it is supposed to look like, which creates motivation for travellers to visit those places. Social proof from food bloggers and influencers increases trustworthiness in eating different types of food or trying new cuisines. Electronic word-of-mouth (peer reviews and user-generated content) also significantly influences the decision of where to go and eat, while being an essential factor in decision-making. As well, viral trends generate interest in local "must-eat" foods and unique dining experiences, encouraging tourists to try those things.

Promoting visually appealing, "Instagrammable" dishes and popular restaurants over hidden local gems can often keep tourists from having authentic and exotic dining experiences. The focus on how things look makes travellers choose meals that look good in photos over traditional or less visually appealing foods. Content driven by influencers makes people think and act the same way, which makes popular places too crowded and limits the variety of foods people can try. Tourists may also be misled about the quality and authenticity of curated and edited images. Trends also tend to take over local traditions, which makes visitors choose more modern or westernised options. Relying on sponsored "food influencers" makes things even more confusing, which hurts local food culture and makes people less interested in real regional cuisine.

9. Travel Convenience Before and After Social Media

Before social media, people in India who wanted to travel relied on travel agents, printed brochures, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Planning a trip took longer because there wasn't as much information available, and it was harder to get to.

People who were going on vacation looked up places to go in brochures or asked friends and family. They booked flights, trains, and hotels by going to travel agents or calling them. There weren't many real-time updates on weather, reviews, or travel conditions. There weren't many options for places to stay, and most people didn't know about budget stays, boutique hotels, or homestays. When people relied too much on agents, they often had less freedom and higher costs. With the rise of social media, travellers could quickly read reviews, see pictures, and talk to people directly, which made planning easier, more personal, and more efficient.

Social media marketing has changed Indian tourism by moving travel planning from traditional agencies to digital platforms, making it much easier. Travellers can now get instant information, real-time reviews, and personalised suggestions, which makes it easier to make choices. More than 89% of travellers use social media to look up attractions and places to stay. Instagram and YouTube are examples of platforms that show real-time visuals that make things less uncertain. Content made by users builds more trust and openness than traditional advertising. You can also talk directly to hotels and tour operators on social media to make quick reservations and get personalised help. Also, integrating with navigation tools helps travellers plan their trips more quickly and easily by helping them find transportation, manage logistics, and find their destinations.

10. Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are as follows:

1. The study focuses on the Indian scenario, which may not be representative of other countries or cultures. Future research could explore the influence of social media on travel behaviour in other contexts.
2. The analysis is based on secondary data, and as an exploratory study, the research provides insights into the impact of social media on travel behaviour, but it does not establish causal relationships or provide conclusive evidence.

11. Conclusion

Social media has become a powerful tool for tourism marketing and communication in India, shaping travel trends and behaviours.

To leverage this tourism marketers should develop effective digital strategies while travellers should critically evaluate online information some potential strategies for marketers include, collaborating with influencers to showcase authentic experiences utilizing user-generated content for destination promotion and also providing real-time updates on travel deals and experiences for travellers, it's essential to verify information through multiple sources look beyond curated content plan ahead to avoid FOMO (Fear of missing out) driven decisions the study provides valuable insights into evolving travel trends, highlighting the need for further empirical research on social media's impact on Indian tourism.

Tourism boards can leverage social media analytics to identify trends and preferences, and travel companies should focus on creating engaging, shareable content. Travellers can use social media to connect with local communities and enhance their experience. Overall, social media's influence on Indian travel behaviour is likely to grow, presenting opportunities for tourism growth and innovation.

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