

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN SHAPING TOURIST DESTINATION CHOICES IN PUNE

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ABSTRACT

Social media has entirely changed the way people discover tourist destinations. India is known for its tourist attractions as it has wide range of historical sites, rich cultural heritage and natural scenic beauty. The 'Incredible India Campaign' launched by Ministry of Tourism which has played an important role in showcasing the country's tourist destination beauty to the people globally. According to the 2024 report, World Trade Tourism Council stated that the foreign tourists have spent more for tourism in India than in 2019.

This study particularly focuses on the vibrant city of Maharashtra state, Pune. Social Media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and many more are filled with user-generated content like photos, videos, reviews, feedback and recommendations of Pune's tourism attractions and choices.

Tourists often rely on social media platforms for choosing the travel destination through reviews, feedback and recommendations available. Influencers and travel bloggers play a major role in shaping tourism content of a specific travel destination. With rise of social media platforms, it has become easy for travelers to access the wealth of information and experiences shared by others that impact travel choices.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry plays a significant role in contributing to global economic development and social connectivity. In India, to boost country's diverse tourism there are various initiatives like Incredible Indian Campaign, Heal in India, Dekho Apna Desh, Swadesh Darshan 2.0 and PRASHAD.

Pune has the best tourist attractions for both domestic and international tourism. This city offers a wide range of historical sites, temples, vibrant food culture and natural scenic beauty. Social media has become a dominant factor affecting tourist behavior and decision making in recent years. Sites such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Tripadvisor, etc enable travelers to share their experiences photographs, videos and reviews which influence the choices and perception of travelers regarding destinations. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) states that user-generated content provides reliable sources of information which are more influential than other traditional advertisements.

This paper aims to explore the role of social media in shaping tourism destination choices in Pune. It discusses the manner in which the content, influencers and online interactions affect the decision making of the travelers and offer an insight into the growing role of social media in tourism marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various research paper, articles and newspaper articles are reviewed in order to monitor the influence of social media on tourism in Pune.

Some of the literature reviews are as follows:

In research paper of Rashmi Gururaja (2015), emphasizes the major influence of social media on tourism and hospitality. Her study found that 74% of tourists post reviews after their trips, and travel and 98% trust reviews which are uploaded on platforms like TripAdvisor. Around 53% of travelers avoid booking without going through social media reviews and around 70% consider such reviews as the second most trusted source of travel information. This emphasizes the user-generated content in shaping the decision of travel destination choices.

Pooja Bhonsle and Rasika Gumaste (2019) conducted a research on adventure tourism within and around Pune City, emphasizing that social media and print media are significant promotion and distribution mediums for service providers. The study revealed that the majority of adventure tourism participants are within the age group 21 to 30 years of age, followed by 15 to 20 years of age reflecting higher youth participation in this segment.

Tanković, Bilić, and Sohor (2022), in their research paper "Social Networks Influence in Choosing a Tourist Destination", studied the influence of social networks on selection of tourism destination. The research established that indeed Facebook (97%), YouTube (76.5%) and Instagram (53.2%) were the most widely used social media sites, and these networks have significant impact on travel decision making. The quality communication and information provided on these sites was found to be strongly influenced by the travel choices.

In the research paper, "Social Media and Tourism Destinations: Trip Advisor Case Study" by J. Miguéns, R. Baggio, and C. Costa (2008), highlight the growing popularity of travel and tourism as a topic on social media sites. They observed that the conversations on trip plans, locations, hotel ratings, tourist guide and restaurant recommendations are increasing tremendously in this virtual world resulting in the creation of the term 'Travel 2.0' to define this phenomenon. Their research highlights the imperative importance of social media influencing travel-related choices and information exchange among the users.

In their paper "The Popularity of Street Food and the Role of Social Media in Promoting Street Food, with Reference to Pune City", Anuradha Karmarkar and Manas Paranjape (2020) shed light on how social media has a great influence on the choice of street food. They emphasize that a single post can lead thousand followers instantly through influencing food choices. Their survey reveals that this phenomenon has led to culinary tourism in India, which combines travel and with unique edible experiences offering tourists an authentic taste specific to each destination. This study highlights the interconnected roles of digital engagement and economic considerations in shaping street food preferences in Pune.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL & METHOD

The data collected through a well structured questionnaire designed to collect relevant and specific information from respondents. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Form developed by the researcher, using a random sampling method to ensure diversity among the participants.

The questionnaire consists of two sections:

Section I: Collected general information regarding respondents Social Demographic Characteristics.

Section II: Focused on assessing the influence of social media platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and other Travelblogs) on respondent's choice of tourist destinations in Pune.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Section I- General Information on Social Demographic Characteristics

Question 1: Age of the respondents

The survey data reveals that the majority of the respondents (43) are aged 18-25, with high youth interest. Fewer respondents fall in the 26-35 (9), 36-35 (4) and 55+ (1) group.

Question 2: Name

All 57 respondents have mentioned their name.

Question 3: Gender

The majority of the respondents are female (38), followed by the males (18) and Other: 1 individual.

Question 4: Marital Status

The survey data indicates that 45 respondents are single, while 12 of them are married.

Question 5. Education Status

The survey data shows that 28 respondents are graduates while 29 of them are under graduates.

Section II- Role of social media platforms in shaping tourist destination choices in Pune

Question 6. How often do you use social media platforms?

Among 57 respondents, the majority 51 (89.5%) reported using social media daily. Only 5 (8.8%) of them use it weekly and just 1 (1.8%) report using social media rarely.

This indicates that most of the surveyed respondents have daily engagement with social media.

Question 7. Which social media platforms do you use for travel-related information?

Instagram is the most used platform, with 49 (86%) respondents depending on travel-related information. YouTube follows closely 39 (68.4%) while Pinterest 9 (15.8%) Facebook 8 (14%) and other reported were – Sanpchat 2(3.5%), Linkedin 1(1.8%), Google Search 1(1.8%), Google 1(1.8%) and Websites 1(1.8%).

Question 8. How influential are social media platforms in your decision-making process for choosing a travel destination?

Among the respondents, 14 (24.6%) found social media to be extremely influential, 28 (49.1%) found it very influential, 13 (22.8%) found it to have moderate influential and 2(3.5%) reported that social media is not at all influential.

Question 9. Have you ever visited the tourist destination in Pune based on information or recommendations from social media platforms?

45 (78.9%) respondents reported that they have visited the tourist destination in Pune based on information or recommendations from social media platforms while only 12 (21.1%) had not.

Question10. How likely are you to visit a tourist destination in Pune after seeing positive reviews or recommendations on social media platforms?

The likelihood of visiting tourist destination in Pune after seeing positive reviews or recommendations on social media platforms was examined where 26 (45.6%) respondents are likely to visit while, 25 (43.9%) are very likely to visit and 6 (10.5%) are neutral.

Question 11. Do you think social media platforms have a significance impact on promoting tourist destinations in Pune?

25 (43.9%) strongly agreed that social media platforms have a significant impact on promoting tourist destinations in Pune, while 30 (52.6%) agree and 2 (3.5%) were neutral.

Question 12. How would you rate the overall influence of social media platforms in shaping tourism destination choices?

- 26 (45.6%) respondents have rated 5
- 15 (26.3%) rated for 4
- 7(12.3%) rated for 3
- 5 (8.8%) rated for 2
- 4 (7%) rated for 1

Question 13. In your opinion, what makes social media platforms effective in influencing tourism destination choices in Pune?

The following key themes emerged from the responses:

1. Respondents note that social media is likely to provide real reviews, which are valuable for making informed decisions about travel destinations
2. Social media helps people to discover new places through photos, videos and location details. This can increase the interest in visiting Pune.
3. Respondents highlighted the importance of experiencing the tourist reviews and experiences on social media.
4. Social media influencers and bloggers play a significant role in influencing destination choices.
5. Social media platforms increase awareness about tourism places in Pune.

6. Social media provides virtual tours through photos and videos of the destination exploring before visiting.
7. Social media provides detailed information about the place that helps them to decide if the destination is worth visiting.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The study offers useful but few limitations that should be noted. Firstly, the study was based on a relative small sample size due to time and resource constraints which may not fully reflect the diversity of the tourism visiting Pune. A larger sample could offer a more accurate picture. Secondly, the research dint explore the financial aspects of tourism such as spending patterns or economic impact which are important in understanding tourist behavior more deeply. Despites these limitations, the study contributes valuable input to ongoing research and highlights opportunities for future exploration in the field of social media and tourism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The tourism departments and business should create engaging visual content like reels, travel vlogs, short videos to promote destination in Pune.
2. The user generated content should be promoted by suggesting the visitors to share photos, reviews, stories and hashtags that can work in promoting visibility and participation.
3. Collaboration of local and regional influencers should be done which can help new audiences, especially young travelers by showcasing authentic experiences.
4. Training should be provided which will help the small business, guides and food vendors learn basic social media marketing to improve their digital presence and attract more tourists.
5. The social media platform should be used more to educate tourist about cultural respect, environment sustainability and safe travel practices in Pune.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the social media platforms play a major role in influencing the tourism destination choices in Pune. As the growing popularity of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and Tripadvisor, etc. tourists of particularly young generations are majorly relying on user-generated content like reviews, feedback and influencers recommendations to plan their visit. The findings reveal that real time reviews, virtual experiences and visually engaging content helps in making travel decisions. The changing digital way of life emphasizes the need of tourism stakeholders in Pune to strategically utilize social media for enhancing visibility and promoting tourism destination for target audience.

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