

Travel in the Age of Social Media: From Likes to Destinations

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Abstract

This paper analyses how social media platforms have impacted the global tourism sector, transforming current traveler behavior. In analyzing how platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Youtube have impacted the selection of tourist destinations, the planning of holidays, as well as a traveler's perception of tourism, the paper will incorporate both literature and qualitative analysis of the internet phenomenon. It will discuss how traveler demand can be impacted by user-generated content and influencer marketing. The article will illustrate how the platforms allow for greater accessibility of information, access to destinations as well as offering travel ideas and inspiration, however, the platforms contribute to issues such as over-tourism, a detrimental impact on the environment and the commercialization of what once used to be authentic travel. The conclusion drawn is that even though social media is contributing to a more interconnected global community, it is fundamentally changing reasons for travel from the discovery and experience of a new culture, to more of a passive and consumption based activity of photo opportunities and social validation.

Keywords: Social media, tourism, travel behavior, digital culture, influencers, destination choice, user-generated content, Instagram tourism, online reviews.

Introduction

In the 21st century, nearly all areas of life have been impacted by technology. One of the most significant changes due to modern digital technologies has been in the sphere of travel. Among the most influential factors on travel choices are social media platforms, whose impact on tourist destination selection, trip planning and travel experience dissemination is growing exponentially. If, traditionally, people turned to travel agents, brochures or the advice of family and friends when planning travel, today's travelers use a variety of digital platforms to find travel inspiration and information.

"From likes to destinations" indicates the new paradigm of tourism demand, in which choice and decision-making, to some extent, is based on images and social popularity instead of genuine interest and significance. It is, indeed, a digital practice on platforms like Instagram and TikTok turning the journey into a 'digital performance' where the

aesthetic, visually attractive nature of places inspires tourists to choose the location in order to create content (i.e. Photos, videos) that earns engagement (likes, comments, shares).

This phenomenon poses theoretical and practical challenges. To what degree does social media influence tourism demand? Does it facilitate or degrade authentic travel experiences? What are the socio-environmental implications of this paradigm shift? These questions will be investigated in this paper through the analysis of social media in travel.

Literature review

The links between social media and tourism have been studied widely, but relatively recently. Early work by Xiang & Gretzel (2010) has highlighted the crucial role that online information sources play in the trip planning stage, arguing that the internet search engines and social media networks are primary resources used by tourists. Later studies continued and developed this area of work to focus on user-generated content, claiming that Gretzel (2018) shows that users trust recommendations from other users more than from traditional advertising sources. Images, written reviews and other forms of personal experience and feedback on the web can be considered more sincere and attainable than promotion generated by tourism marketers. Another stream of research includes influencer marketing. An influencer is regarded as someone having a strong and faithful followers base that has come to play an important role in tourism, by increasing destinations' popularity. The arguments about this trend, however, are often criticising the presentation of certain ideal realities on social media, which is what leads to unrealistic expectations among tourists. In this sense "Instagram tourism" has been widely investigated. This concept is described as tourism related to the fact that people will visit a destination simply after having seen pictures of it on Instagram. On the other hand this phenomenon has been identified as cause of over-tourism in certain regions, which leads to increased pressure on the natural resources; in many cases natural sites previously unknown become massively popular, thus over-visited by tourists after the first photograph has become viral on social media. Last stream of research deals with the psychological motivations of using social media during traveling, particularly with social gratification through likes and comments, which, besides affecting the choice of the destination, can also influence tourist's behavior, such as preferring taking photos to other activities like enjoying local culture.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to research, which is based on reviewing literature as well as analyzing observed patterns of use of social media platforms and networks. Three primary methods were implemented.

The first method was a review of literature on social media and tourism, such as academic journals and papers. Literature review helps in establishing a theoretical framework for the analysis of digital platforms and travel behavior.

Second, a content analysis was implemented through viewing and noting prevalent styles of content posted about tourism in various platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube etc. Common themes observed through such a content analysis were what types of destination are frequently shown on the platforms, the format of the content and the extent to which it is liked or commented upon by other users.

Third, common trends in tourism were also studied through publicly available information such as reports and destination statistics and visitor number data. While a primary data analysis method like interviews or surveys was not conducted as part of this research, secondary sources of information were examined at length in order to observe the general patterns in travel.

Results

Social media has become a very influential factor in present day travel behavior, and based on the results there are several key observations that can be made.

1. The importance of visuals for destination selection

One of the most defining factors when choosing a destination in the present day, is the aesthetic quality of the location. A destination that has beautiful scenery, architecture, or is “Instagrammable” will be more attractive for a tourist. This illustrates the emphasis that has now been placed on the value of aesthetics for tourism demand.

2. The impact of influencers on travel behavior

Influencers now play an important role as an intermediary between the destination and the tourist. Posts can function as unofficial advertisements, showcasing a specific destination, hotel, or experience. This will attract more tourists, and make a specific destination quickly recognizable globally, if the post is successful.

3. The reliance on UGC to build trust and credibility

Travelers are now increasingly referring to other tourists for reviews, pictures, and recommendations for new destinations. User generated content is perceived to be more authentic and thus more trustworthy, as opposed to commercial marketing for the destination. The platforms that offer UGC are numerous, but reviews on sites such as

TripAdvisor and Google reviews, as well as the pictures posted on various social media, all fall under this category.

4. Social media as a source for travel motivation

It is now common that people travel for the purpose of taking pictures and creating images, such as videos for YouTube, and sharing these on social media. A destination that can offer exciting pictures for the tourist to take and share would appeal to the growing number of content oriented travelers.

5. Negative consequences of tourism, such as over-tourism and environmental issues

Not all outcomes of social media and tourism can be considered to be positive. An increase in the number of tourists, at popular destinations can cause environmental damage, over-tourism which would then damage local environments and infrastructure. Furthermore, this can even have negative affects on the local community.

6. The problem of authenticity

Another significant problem of the effects of social media on travel, is that the experiences could lose their authenticity. If a destination or place begins to develop purely around social media expectations of what a place should offer, this can affect the authenticity of the place for the visitor, and the original character of a location may be erased by the impact of mass tourism fueled by social media.

Conclusion

This paper shows that social media has been an integral part in changing the face of modern tourism. From determining the destinations that people chose to the experiences and the perceptions of traveling.

Firstly, we are able to see many of the positive aspects of social media's impact on tourism. It has helped make information much more accessible to a larger audience, helped travelers find unique destinations to visit, and created a way for cultures worldwide to mix and match. Smaller and lesser-known travel destinations are able to benefit from exposure on social media platforms and grow from this exposure.

On the other hand, it is also clear that there is a dark side to the impact of social media on tourism. Travel based on solely visual aspects of a place and with the focus on an online perception can result in a superficial experience of the destination. Destinations may gain too much recognition from social media and then become the sites of over-tourism, contributing to environmental degradation.

To sum up, it is obvious that social media will remain an essential part of tourism for the foreseeable future. The need for more sustainable and mindful traveling, however, must be encouraged so that tourists no longer travel solely for social media content but

rather to experience destinations, interact with local communities and be aware of the impact that their visit may have. Future research should attempt to look at how digital tourism can better be aligned with sustainability and cultural integrity.

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