

Digital Platforms and the Reshaping of Tourism Marketing

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Abstract

When was the last time you actually booked a trip? Most people now would admit they didn't go straight to a booking website. Instead, they found themselves scrolling through Instagram, falling down a rabbit hole of TikTok travel videos, maybe reading comments from strangers who'd been there, until suddenly they'd decided on a destination without really planning to. That's become the normal way of doing things.

This paper tries to understand why that shift happened and what it actually means for how tourism gets marketed, rather than just saying "social media is important." It looks at data showing that large numbers of travelers rely on Instagram and TikTok when deciding where to go. Some of these platforms get engagement rates that genuinely outperform traditional marketing channels, which is worth paying attention to. But the argument here isn't that every viral post leads to a booking. Instead, it examines how authentic-looking content, recommendations from people travelers trust, and strong visual storytelling work together to shape actual travel choices.

For BBA students thinking about marketing careers, this topic matters more than you might think at first. It's increasingly part of what employers expect you to understand when you start internships or job interviews in tourism, hospitality, or digital marketing. There's a tension worth noting though: the advice to "use influencers and user-generated content" sounds straightforward until you actually try to apply it well. It requires judgment about your audience, ethics in partnerships, and thinking carefully about long-term brand trust. The core argument of this paper is that professionals who learn to use social media thoughtfully, rather than just loudly, will do better work connecting travelers with experiences that matter to them.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Destination Branding, Travel Decision-Making, Content Strategy, Platform Analysis, Influencer Marketing, User-Generated Content

The way Travelers Discover Places Now.

1.1 What has Changed in Travel Planning.

Consider the way individuals used to organise trips several decades ago. You would go to a travel agent, open hardcopies of guide books, perhaps have friends make suggestions to you. Your options were limited. The data you received had been filtered by the evaluation of another individual. You had time to think about it.

Today the process has a totally different appearance, and frankly speaking, it is difficult to tell when the transition took place. You observe a picture on Instagram of the rice terraces in foggy morning. One of these videos on Tik Tok depicts the experience of walking through a neighborhood market, which is unfiltered and

somewhat hectic. One of the YouTube creators you subscribe to has been staying at a hotel and demonstrates you what the real view is through the window of the room. None of this was what you had to seek out. It just appeared. And somehow it makes you wish to have been there.

This change is important because of the magnitude of tourism as an industry. Travel and hospitality cause a great deal of money to flow. Individuals use their money on overseas travel, local holidays, hotels, restaurants, guides. All such expenditure is becoming intertwined with the functioning of the digital platforms and the things that people watch on the Internet. In India in particular where there is unbelievable variation of places to see, the transformation is rather dramatic. The backwaters in Kerala, the fort of Rajasthan, the beaches of Goa, the mountains of Kashmir. In the previous 20 years, most visitors to these destinations discovered the destinations either in a guide book or by word of mouth. Now? Instagram. TikTok. YouTube travel channels.

Why is this of any interest to you as a business major? Due to the fact that almost every ten tourism and hospitality service providers have adopted social media as an element of their marketing strategy. When you are considering the idea of getting employed in marketing, tourism, or hospitality, the way that this actually works is no longer optional. It's baseline.

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This change is a really direct one to the employment opportunities of those entering into marketing or tourism. Many of the older individuals in the tourism sector today were taught how to do marketing when there were no social sites as the primary method of destination discovery. That very furnishes an opportunity to someone like you. As long as you are knowledgeable about the basics of marketing, as well as the operation of the following platforms, you are likely to have something useful.

Tourism boards of certain regions, major hotel chains, travel booking sites they are all recruiting individuals who know how to make digital strategies work. They require employees who understand how these platforms operate, what audiences really desire, how to make material that resonates. This study will contribute to you acquiring that talent.

1.3 What This Analysis Covers

The paper attempts to provide responses to six rather simple questions, however, the answers to these questions are not as simple as you might imagine:

What's the actual impact? To what extent do these platforms actually affect every phase of how a person makes a decision to travel, starting with the initial interest to the time of posting photos of the travel?

What platforms are really important? All of them are discussed by Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, YouTube, TripAdvisor people, but are they really the same? Which ones are the motivators of genuine involvement?

What is the reason peer recommendations are effective? Why would it make you believe a fellow traveler or someone who follows the content you read than an official advertisement?

What is actually wrong with this system? It's not all positive. What are the actual challenges that individuals and organizations face? Algorithms change. Fake reviews exist. It is a time and money-consuming process.

What are you really going to do about it? What strategies do you find reasonable under real budgets and real time constraints? (Working in tourism).

What is the marketing theory that explains the happenings? What about what we know about marketing as presented in the textbooks and how it applies to the issues of social media and travel decisions?

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What is the marketing theory that explains the happenings? What about what we know about marketing as presented in the textbooks and how it applies to the issues of social media and travel decisions?ng, User-Generated Content.] Shifted Over Time

2.1 The various periods of the usage of these platforms.

How social media has been used by organizations with regard to tourism did not remain the same. It has developed fairly well in separate stages.

Prior to 2020: Mostly, companies broadcast announcements. A hotel would advertise that it had some special promotion. Their major attractions would be highlighted by a tourism board. One could or could not see it. Not much back-and-forth. It was traditional advertising that had occurred online.

The period between 2020 and 2022: all changed when no one started going anywhere. Places to visit could not fill hotels or receive tourists and they created. They began providing online tours. They had stories by their staff. They wrote about the sustainable tourism and what makes their place special other than the attractions. People confined at home were hungry of that content. They began fantasizing about traveling. It occurred via screens through some sort of emotional attachment to locations that they could not visit in the real world.

At present: The platform has already integrated into the entire travel process. Instagram is no longer a site that people use to conduct research. They plan itineraries there. Local recommendations are made to them in the comment sections. They visit a location virtually and then they make their decision to visit. To a person who is on a trip, he or she finds it almost instinctive to publish content at the time of the trip. The platform ceased to be a discovery tool, but it became an element of the experience.

2.2 The Real Implication of these Platforms on what people choose.

To see why platforms are so important, it is good to follow through what actually transpires in the head of people when they are deciding to travel.

The time it becomes interesting.

Someone is just scrolling. They are not thinking about travelling. And then they find something that catches their eye, perhaps it is a field of agriculture, with morning sunlight striking it at the right angle, or a detail in an ancient temple, or something about the method of some street vendor, hands in a repetitive dance. The image or video has a message of the aesthetic or the emotional. Other people who have made comments

under the post say the same. This person saves it. Creates a mental note. No traveling plans yet, but it is registered.

This is what conventional advertising could hardly achieve. It is possible to give inspiration to individuals who were not actively seeking it, with the help of platforms. The algorithm functions in the background. And studies indicate that a relatively large proportion of the travelers cite social networks in particular as the things that got them interested in the first place.

In fact investigating and collecting data.

When a person is motivated, he or she becomes a researcher. They will go searching Instagram hashtags and check tens of photos belonging to various users visiting the same location. They check reviews and rating on websites that are made to be reviewed. They will also view travel videos of 15, 20 minutes long to get the real feeling about what a place is like. They can become members of the Facebook groups where individuals talking about travels are quite frank about what is good and what is bad.

The most important benefit of social platforms in this stage is associated with what is credible. Its official site on a hotel is going to focus on its most positive features. Comfort. Luxury. Great views. When one uploads his/her own photo, however, you know what the sunlight really does in the room at various times of the day. The way the food will appear when it is on a plate. Did they feel that the price was worth it. The raw view of that has a heavier weight than refined marketing. The majority of travelers do use social networks particularly when they are in decision on whether to book somewhere.

Narrowing down choices

Once one has narrowed down to a limited number of choices, he/she is seeking confirmation. They would like to know the opinions of several individuals. A review by an influencer that a content creator that they follow has been to, or a review posted by someone that the person knows, is more credible than a review left by a stranger. This is what is referred to as social proof. About 50 percent of individuals report to believe suggestions made by content creators, particularly young people. However, there is one specific detail that is worth considering: the number of followers does not always mean that a creator is more effective, in case there are 50,000 followers, and 50,000 of them are interested in the specifics that the creator is currently engaged in. A micro-influencer that focuses on sustainable travel is likely to make more bookings to an eco-lodge than a person with massive general audience.

Actually booking it

Reservations have frequently begun on the site. One can just click a link on someone on Instagram bio and land on a booking page. The hotel can be contacted by talking to the hotel via the app. There are destinations where you can make payments on the site. The hassle has reduced significantly to searching the internet, locating a site, visiting their contact page, and moving to a reservation site.

After the trip

Majority of people shoot pictures during travelling. Post them. Share them. This causes continuous free advertising. A person who had a positive experience has ultimately turned into a marketing agent of that destination to his/her network of interested people (because these are the people who follow them).

2.3 It Is Not the Case that All Platforms Work.

Different platforms are used in different purposes. It would not be fair to imagine they are the same.

Instagram is mainly visual. Individuals are exposed to destination images, hotel designs, food appearance. It works well in making people desire to go somewhere. Attracts youth mostly, between 18 and 40 years.

TikTok prefers the short videos, the ones that are slightly uncouth. It is, in fact, that lack of polish that makes it believable. Travel posts on TikTok receive greater likes than you might guess. Primarily younger users but spreading among the ages.

Facebook is not always very active on individual posts, but it allows reaching particular demographics with a significant degree of precision. And the discussion groups about it can also be useful in case travelers want to receive honest feedback.

YouTube is used to tell longer stories. Influencers create an environment where they produce 15-20 minutes of content on destinations. Such format constructs actual knowledge. Works across all ages.

When they seek organized information and grouped ratings, they visit the review sites such as TripAdvisor. Not social per se, but belonging to the research ecosystem.

Pinterest acts as a planning software. Individuals save pictures of destinations, hotels, plans. Biases against individuals who consider themselves as female.

One fact that is worth mentioning: the engagement rates of TikTok actually exceed the majority of industry standards. Something important is what this implies. It is the unpolished and short format that is more effective than the highly produced content. The sincerity and conciseness have a greater role than the costly production.

2.4 The reason why User-Generated Content and Influencer Recommendations are effective.

Happy individuals shape up themselves.

People who travel post their own photos and stories, so there is inherent credibility in their work. It does not have any financial incentive to post (which would happen even in case they were paid, but the relationship still seems personal). A viewer of that material will consider it to be the viewpoint of an individual who is similar to them, rather than a business attempting to sell them something. That distinction matters.

It is economically interesting to the tourism organizations. Having the travelers write about their experience and repost it is significantly cheaper than buying a professional photographer and production company. And engagement is higher. The campaign that includes the post by travelers actually works better compared to campaigns, which contain professional content.

Consider it in a practical way: rather than paying a person to take professional shots of a region, a tourism board can organize a hashtag campaign where people would share their own photos and then the tourism board may edit and reshare the most beautiful ones. Lower cost. Higher engagement. Comes out as sincerely targeted to real travelers.

When influencers give a recommendation.

Influencer marketing is achieved by creating trust over a period of time. When you constantly consume the content created by a person, you start to get an understanding of his or her taste, his / her attitude to traveling, and what he or she appreciates. Their recommendation of a destination has some weight. Partly due to the fact that the relationship is personal, although it is a publicity. Approximately 50 percent of the respondents indicate that they have faith in such recommendations.

But there's nuance. The number of followers does not say a lot. An artist of 50,000 followers who specifically targets sustainable tourism is likely to make more real bookings to an eco-lodge than an artist of 2 million followers but a general following. The correspondence of the creator and the audience is more important than the size in its raw form.

Looking at the Numbers

3.1 How Much Money is Being Spent

The volume of money that is being used in the digital marketing of travel speaks volumes. Travel marketing budgets increased annually. The amount of money that was spent on digital allocation by tourism companies continued to rise. They would not continue doing it were it not to be effective.

3.2 The Behavior of Travelers in the Real World.

The statistics provide a more accurate idea of what is going on:

Big majorities of the travelers visit social networks during their destination research prior to booking. Social media has become a part of the marketing strategy of almost all tourism companies. Over a quarter of travelers post actively during the course of traveling. About 50-60% of individuals believe the recommendations created by the content creators, but it depends on the age.

None of this should surprise one when you consider the same. But the specificity matters. It is not that the social media is popular. That is, it is that certain behaviors can be measured and repeatable.

3.3 The Performance of Differing Platforms.

The rates of engagement vary on the platforms, and it is important. Tik Tok is always above the traditional standards. That appears to be motivated by the format and the anticipation of authenticity. You do not see as polished content, and people interact with it more.

Hardcore Issues That Are Not Talked About.

There are also negative aspects of tourism depending on social sites. There are some real challenges that complicate matters.

Bad reviews spread fast

A dissatisfied client leaves a review of his or her experience. It gets shared. Other people see it. It is able to ruin a business within a short time. Organizations are forced to either react to it, turn their heads or attempt to correct the root cause. The way you manage it determines the opinion that people have of you.

It takes a lot of work

There is no passive use of these platforms. A person must make some content, reply to some comments, address some discussions, check analytics. Businesses with two or three people have a hard time. The algorithm is being forgotten. You must have committed individuals or you are behind.

The game is under the control of platforms.

The algorithms which determine what to be included in feeds are dynamic. Organizations that invest in organic reach may find it plummeting at a huge rate. You rely on regulations that you cannot regulate and foresee.

People are skeptical now

Fake reviews exist. People pay for testimonials. AI generates content. The question that is posed more and more often by travelers is Is this real? Was he/she even enamored with this or was he/she bribed? Such cynicism, however, is understandable but it complicates actual marketing.

Too much noise

The number of travel posts posted up every day is in the millions. Notice is achieved either through exceptional content, working with influencers, paid placement, or by chance. It is fundamentally impossible to have consistent visibility without investing seriously.

The Practical Effect of What Works.

Choose your platforms that suit your destination.

Focus, rather than being everywhere. Instagram is more effective with visual destinations. Viral, short-length content performs well on Tik Tok. Guides in long form belong to YouTube. Facebook is the place where local discussion occurs. Pinterest is used by planning oriented viewers. Find the platform that you are trying to do.

5.2 Authenticity beats polish

Professional photography is alright, but it is not as engaging compared to content made by travelers. Authentic individuals desire to watch what an object resembles like, rather than what it could potentially appear like. It should invest strategically in encouraging the travelers to post their experiences and organizing that content rather than spending a lot on production.

5.3 Partnerships between influencers must be sensible.

Cooperation with creators with enormous following may not be as effective as cooperation with smaller creators whose viewers are interested in what you are selling. A person who has 50,000 followers who care about eco-tourism is likely to create more significant outcomes than a person, who has 2 million random followers.

5.4 Actually engage with people

Quit television and begin to talk. Respond to comments. Participate in discussions. Share what travelers post. Create space for community. That creates loyalty better than pushing contents at people.

The Implication of This in the Future.

The social platforms have actually transformed the way individuals explore and experience travelling. That's not going to reverse. The possibilities this presents are actual to marketing experts who are aware of the essence of tourism and the actual operation of these platforms. The data confirms the fact that authenticity and peer recommendations make people more persuaded than institutional messages. This is what most organizations are appreciating.

Students going into the field of tourism or marketing this knowledge will help you have the upper hand. The individuals who will operate tourism organizations in the next years will be the ones who learn how to thoughtfully utilize these platforms, create real communities of travellers and ensure that organizational messaging is in tune with what people are now expecting. This study gives a little background towards the acquisition of that expertise. It is not only important to know the tactics, but rather to know how and why people react to things and not to others.

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