

Delineating the Impact of social media Networks on Travel Decision-Making Process: An Experience of University Undergraduates

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Abstract

In Sri Lanka, the use of social media for the travel and tourism industry is in its growth stage. Businesses use social media to be discovered and become part of travelers' engagement in decision-making. This study aims at identifying the impact of social media on the travel decision-making process of travelers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 hospitality and tourism undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities using cluster and purposive sampling techniques. The collected data were then analyzed by using content analysis to achieve the objectives of the study. The findings revealed a strong effect of social media on university undergraduates' travel decision-making and their willingness to engage with social media as the mode of information source. Further, the most appropriate social media platforms to promote Sri Lankan tourism destinations were also identified through this study. It is recommended that travelers use diversified information sources active engagement, seek authenticity, and exercise caution when verifying information. Put succinctly, the support of the public and private sectors is verily needed for the stability and utilization of social media for promoting Sri Lankan tourism destinations.

Key Words: Social Media, Tourism Destination, Travel Decision, Making Process, Undergraduates

Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing industries as well as one of the largest economic sectors all around the world owning 10.4% of the world GDP (Statista, 2020). According to Industry Research website IBIS World, the tourism industry has become among the top 10 biggest industries in the world. During this decade, tourism industry plays a major role in developing and under developed countries economy including Sri Lanka. In its quest to achieve sustainable economic development, Tourism has also been identified as a focus sector by government in Sri Lanka. The nation has also selected tourism as one of the key development strategies and has made various attempts to boost the tourism sector (Gnanapala, 2017). There are lot of factors affecting for that uncertainty in tourism.

Environment, economy, historical and cultural factors, religious concerns and technology are few of among. Technology is the one of important factor effect on tourism. Information technology is the major function in technology. In the tourism, travel and hospitality sector, Information Communications Technology (ICT) plays a major role. The incorporation of ICT into the tourism industry is vital to the success of tourism companies (Bethapudi, 2013). Hence, along with the internet invention, social media marketing has become one of the critical parts in business marketing. The reason may be the associated advantages with social media marketing; easy to reach large audience, direct connection with audience, free access, easy to access, easy fragmentation, build brand, easily can evaluate performance etc.

As a component in the travel and tourism industry, travel decision making is one of the most crucial aspects. According to Senanayake et al (2019), there is a relationship between the travel decision-making process and the

functionalities of social media. It is important to study the contribution of social media in the travel decision-making process. Because consumers are engaged with social networking sites to research trips, find destinations, explore new activities, find new information, compare budget details make decisions about their travels, and share their personal experiences of a particular hotel, restaurant, or airline with the community.

Research Problem

Social media analysis also existed in the early infancy of tourism. While case studies based on qualitative discussion of the effect of social media on tourism are required, it is important to promote a detailed analysis of the effects and impact of social media on every part of the tourism industry (Zeng, 2013). Worldwide, researchers have moved into identifying the impact of social media on the tourism industry. However, as a developing country still, Sri Lanka is new to using social media effectively. There are few studies relevant to social media and its usage. Further, there have been a limited number of studies focused on the travel decision-making process of travelers which is an important concept in the tourism industry. Accordingly, the following research questions are formulated and explored in the study.

1. What is the importance of social media in the pre-trip stage, during the trip and post-trip stage?
2. What are the influential factors that make tend on social media in travelers' decision-making process?
3. What are the most effective social media platforms that can be used to promote travel destinations in Sri Lanka? (from a Travelers perspective)

Literature Review

Rise of Social Media

In recent decades, evolution of computing and networking has changed way people lives and business operation (Shaqiri, 2015). The world of business has transformed from industrial economy to knowledge economy with the invention of technological solutions and internet usage. After first super computers were created in the 1940s, the revolution was started in the last half of 20th century.

One of the serious steps in IT was the invention of internet. Initially, scientists and engineers began to develop networks between computers, and later it has led to the birth of the Internet. As a result of this, World Wide Web (WWW) was invented by Tim Berners in 1990 (Evan Andrews, 2019) with the invention of internet, the world can be seen through our fingertips. And, 90s and 2000s decades are the most critical periods in the growth of internet.

Social media refers to internet-based applications with functions of sharing, relationship, group, conversation and profile (Kietzmann, Jan Hermkens, Kristopher Mccarthy, Ian P Silvestre, Bruno S, 2011). The advent of social media has revolutionized the individual's decision making and purchasing behavior. Social media become the key marketing tool for businesses to expand the market base and ease the transmission of information about product or service (Gretzel, 2009). According to research by Global Web Index, it shows Facebook as the most engaging social media platform. Nearly 60% of world population use social media which is nearly 4.80 billion people around the world. Therefore, it clearly demonstrates that social media plays a big role in current world of work and living.

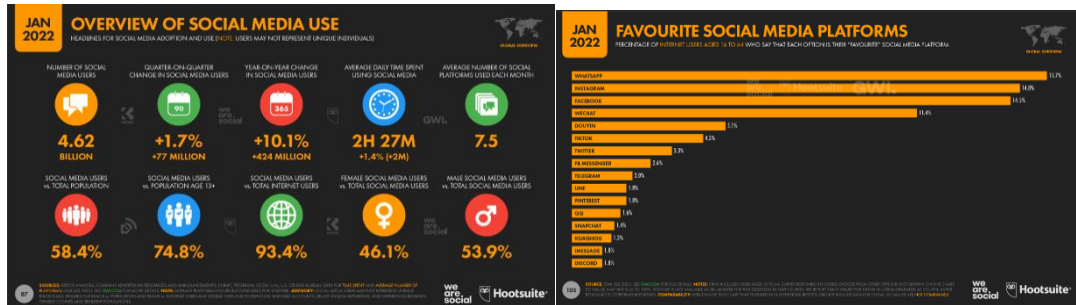


Figure 2: Social media Usage & World's Most Used Social Media Platforms

Source: Digital Global Overview Report, 2022

Social media Influence on the Revolution of the Tourism Industry

Tourism industry operations have witnessed the impact generated by social media implementation. Similarly, individuals' travel decision-making has revolutionized due to platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have transformed the way people gather information, plan, and share their travel experiences (Shyle & Hysi, 2015).

“Social networking” has a high effect on shift travel patterns and experiences, as well as promoting tourism companies/destinations and their implementation strategies and tactics” (Leung, Daniel Law, Rob van Hoof, Hubert Buhalis, Dimitrios, 2013). In terms of how travelers view and use information has enormously changed and effect on purchasing behavior of consumers and the brand image of DMC (Destination Management Companies) and tourism service providers (Narangajavana, Yeamduan Callarisa Fiol, Luis Moliner, Miguel Rodríguez-Artola, Rosa Sánchez-García, & Javier, 2017). Moreover, social media is more productive in equipping travelers with detailed knowledge about tourist destinations and alternative information through platforms like TripAdvisor, Airbnb, Booking.com,

Expedia, etc. (Gretzel, 2009). The modern way of discovering, learning, building trust, and generating knowledge about tourism suppliers and destinations is ultimately transformed by social media into cost-effective and efficient for both travelers and local suppliers (Sigala, 2012). In contrast, social networking helps to generate E- word of mouth or called E- feedback after experiencing the destination which helps potential customers to plan vacation based on reviews of previous visitors (Tafveez, 2017). However, social media & Sri Lanka tourism-related research are rarely discussed.

Social Media Influence on Travel Decision Making

Decision making process is crucial for travel industry professionals and researchers to understand and enhance the travel experience by catering to needs and preference of travelers.

According to Briandana & Dwityas, (2017) Pre-Trip Stage consists of desire or motivation to travel and gathering information and evaluation based on aspect of their travel intentions and finally make choices regarding travel plan. During Trip stage occurs while travelers are at chosen location and making decisions actions through searching information to fulfill travel desires. Post-Trip stage occurs after travelers have completed their travel experience and return to home country. This may include uploading post and posting reviews and expose memories with friend and relatives. Finally, travelers preserve future travel plans based on level of satisfactory they experienced. In all phases, social media serves the tourism industry by being the key source of generating information and currently, the travelers are part of the process by creating User Generating Content (UGC) in social media platforms in more attractive way to influence potential travelers (Narangajavana et al., 2017). Since there are few studies undertaken in Sri Lankan context with reference to social media usage and tourism, this study investigates the delineate the impact

of SM networks on the travel decision-making process in perspective of the experience of university undergraduates who belong to Generation Z.

Methodology

This study depends on respondent's behaviors, knowledge, and responses on social media and travel decision-making. Hence, considering the objectives of this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach. The population of this study consists of people who use at least one social media platform and the sample of this study consists of 25 undergraduates who are following hospitality and tourism degree programs in five different universities in Sri Lanka.

In this study researcher employed two sampling techniques to select the sample. In the first stage Cluster sampling technique was adopted to select 05 universities from different state and private universities that offer tourism degrees in Sri Lanka. Thereafter, the researcher chose individual respondents from the selected universities via a purposive sampling technique. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather primary data using a structured interview guideline and interviews were audio recorded after obtaining the prior approval from the respondents. Under phenomenological research design, content analysis was used to analyze data to achieve the objective of this research. Accordingly, interviews were transcribed and significant codes and categories were identified.

SN	Code	Age	Gender	Home Town	University
01	SUSL 01	25	F	Anuradhapura	Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
02	SUSL 02	24	F	Bandarawela	Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
03	SUSL 03	26	M	Gampaha	Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka

04	SUSL 04	23	M	Jaffna	Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
05	SUSL 05	24	F	Trincomalee	Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
06	CINEC 01	22	F	Mathara	CINEC Campus
07	CINEC 02	24	F	Puththalam	CINEC Campus
08	CINEC 03	25	M	Ehaliyagoda	CINEC Campus
09	CINEC 04	23	M	Gampaha	CINEC Campus
10	CINCE 05	25	M	Awissawella	CINEC Campus
11	NSBM 01	25	M	Kirindiwela	University of Plymouth
12	NSBM 02	23	M	Nuwara Eliya	University of Plymouth
13	NSBM 03	23	F	Colombo	University of Plymouth
14	NSBM 04	22	M	Chilaw	University of Plymouth
15	NSBM 06	24	F	Negambo	University of Plymouth
16	RUSL 01	25	M	Eppawala	Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
17	RUSL 02	21	M	Rathnapura	Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
18	RUSL 03	25	F	Jaffna	Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
19	RUSL 04	24	M	Trincomalee	Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
20	RUSL 05	22	F	Batticaloa	Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
21	UWU 01	23	F	Kandy	Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka
22	UWU 02	27	F	Balangoda	Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka
23	UWU 03	24	M	Piliyandala	Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka
24	UWU 04	25	M	Badulla	Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka
25	UWU 05	24	F	Kurunegala	Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Source: Survey Data, 2022

Results and Discussion

To achieve the objective one of the study, it was necessary to analyze pre, during and post stages in travel decision making separately to gain a successful outcome.

At first, in the pre-trip stage, it was identified that social media unintentionally acted as a motivational factor in travelers' mindsets. According to the respondents' experiences, this motivational factor was inclusive of social networks and media-sharing networks. Networks such as Facebook and Twitter belonged to social networks while Instagram and YouTube belonged to media sharing networks. Further, social media to be an information source was also analyzed by the responses given by the participants.

“When I plan to visit somewhere I haven’t visited yet, usually I intend to search it on social media. Most of the time I use Facebook & Instagram to gain additional information and to browse photos”.

(NSBM 02, Personal Communication, 2022)

As the most prominent method of searching for information, it was identified that respondents engage with Facebook because they believe it to be a platform that offers real-time experiences of the users with regard to their travel. Facebook pages of hospitality enterprises have created trustworthiness for the respondents in making their travel decisions as they showcase the precise details of the location on the page itself. Moreover, during this pre-trip stage, it was widely explored that social media is a capable platform for communication purposes as well. The nature of this respondent category as per Dimitriou & AbouElgheit (2019) was more likely to travel with friends or with groups. According to the collected data, 58% of respondents were in favor of traveling with friends.

“Usually I have not traveled alone. Every time I travel, I do it with my friends or family or relatives. But mostly, we go on trips by creating a WhatsApp group earlier to discuss what needs to be done on the trip, etc.”

(SUSL 02, Personal Communication, 2022)

Most commonly, it was identified that the respondents were contemplated to share photos of the destination, accommodation sector, meal plan, routes and maps, and etc via most used social media platforms like WhatsApp, Messenger, Viber, Telegram, Skype, Imo, etc.

As per the findings, it was revealed that social media played a prominent role in the decision-making process of a traveler as a motivational factor, information source and communication method. Moreover, it can also be analyzed under a broader stage of planning; processing, decision making, copying, and anticipation.

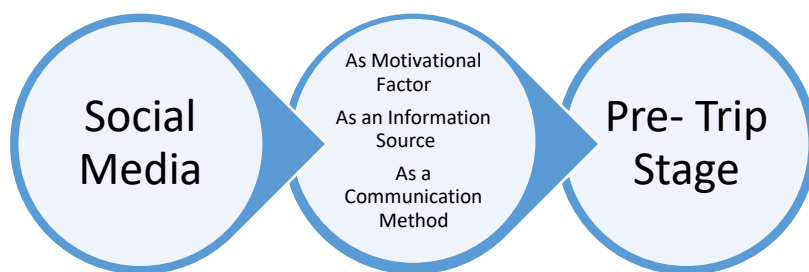


Figure 2: Importance of social media in Pre-Trip Stage

Source: Survey Data, 2023

Next, during the trip stage, most of the respondents mentioned that the use of social media was for the internet facility where they sought internet facilities to communicate the locations or destinations with their friends or family. It

was true that even in the pre-trip stage the respondents used social media for communication. But, during the trip stage the use of social media for communication was more likely to keep in touch with the family or friends to avoid getting lost and acknowledging the travel destinations.

During the analyzing of data, it was precise that the respondents used WhatsApp mostly, which was known to be the commonly used media platform to get connected with loved ones (Patmanthara & Febiharsa, 2019). Moreover, they tend to share their travel stories mostly in WhatsApp and Instagram to make their closest circle aware of their travel status.

“I usually share my experiences, by making reels, sharing stories, and making collages and uploading them to WhatsApp and Instagram”.

(CINEC 03, Personal Communication, 2022)

Addition to that, respondents intended to engage in unplanned trips during their journey which they believed it as a source of discovering hidden destinations. Further, the major decisions like accommodation decisions, meal decisions, and the destination decision were taken during the trip stage.

In a nutshell, the importance of social media during the trip can be categorized as Connectivity, Navigation, Short-Term Decision-Making, and On-Site Transactions.

And finally, referring to the last phase of the travel which was the post-trip stage can be simply defined as the stage that heading back home and reflecting on the vacation. It was explored that everyone had a habit of uploading at least one capture from the travel on social media.

“I do upload photos and stories in Facebook and Instagram just like others after a trip. It looks like a diary so that I can see them in the future as a collection of my memories”.

(SUSL 03, Personal Communication, 2022)

It was precise in data that the behavior of the respondents in the virtual environment was based saving the memories of the trip and influencing on other individuals' travel intentions.

“Normally after the trip I share the photos with each other and upload them in my personal accounts. Sometimes it has helped people who are willing to go on my visited destinations to gather information in the comments section and inbox”.

(NSBM 01, Personal Communication, 2022)

It also appeared from respondents that they were performing evaluation after every trip. Some were doing content writing, video creation, reels, etc. The respondents who engaged with content creation in social media after the trip were identified as the ones who were enthusiastic with their travel. Further to that, social media was further used for the purpose of Sharing Documentation, External Memory, Re-experiencing, Reconstruction, and Attachment by the respondents in post trip stage.

As per the study of Matikiti-Manyever and Kruger (2019), social media sites and trip planning could be impacted from information search through social media which was continuingly play a key role in decision making. The literature review showed that the information search stage (pre-trip stage) and experience sharing stage (after trip stage) were the most pre-dominant stages in which travelers use social media platforms. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram were the most used platforms by the travelers during trip planning and Instagram was emerging out of them (Matikiti-Manyever and Kruger, 2019). However, these three stages of travel decision making process were interviewed and analyzed separately in this study by the researcher to gain a successful outcome.

Findings of the second objective of the study which was to explore the influential factors that make tend on social media in travelers' decision-making process was analyzed under three categories which were benefits, uniqueness and, negative and positive factors of social media.

According to the figure 03 it showcased Facebook as the most popular social media platform that was utilized by the respondents in their decision making. Findings of Mariani, Styven, and Julian (2019) too proved it in their study the popularity of Facebook among travelers.

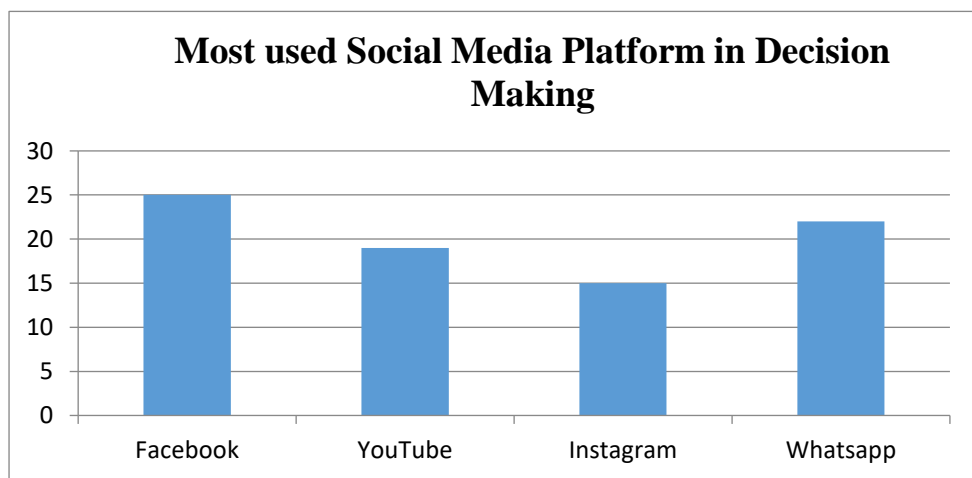


Figure 3: Social media Usage of Respondents in Decision Making

Source: Survey Data, 2023

Moreover, in 2018 the Pew Research Center survey of nearly 750 15- to 19-year-olds found that 45% are engaging online almost constantly and 97% of the sample uses a social media platform, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram in their daily chores. Leading the fact, the study too provided some influential factors caused within the respondents to explore the benefits of

social media which made them tend to use social media for their travel decision making. Those benefits were explored under three sub categories which were ease of connectivity, building relationships and self-learning. Under ease of connectivity, it was identified that respondents tend to build trust on social media accessibility to information when they were far away from their home environment. In deciding a novel destination to visit, they tend to accept the results given by social media users at that very moment just because of ease of connectivity.

“As an Information source I usually use Facebook out of other social media platforms as it is readily accessible to gain information from relevant Facebook pages though I don’t know the crowd personally”.

(SUSL 03, Personal Communication, 2022)

Moreover, it was explored that building relationships in social media led to share the exact experience of a location or an activity with all pros and cons. Similarly, by gaining information from social media, it also played the role of a relationship builder among people with simple set of ideas and thoughts. Social media could be a platform beyond connectivity which vividly allowed respondents to seek for the people with same mindset which deliberately let them to gain accurate destination decisions in making memories (Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019). As per the findings of the study, it also revealed that nowadays people take the risk of getting connected to strangers yet social media was believed to be a platform that allowed the respondents to spot the ideal set of people when making their travel decisions.

Technology, education, literature, art, and tourism can now be explored within fingertips with a smart phone in one’s hand. Majority of respondents confirmed that the knowledge gained for several years through social media

by themselves activated a strong desire to choose social media for their decision making. As per the findings, it was clear cut that social media has a tendency for people to rely on information after a browse by their own rather than depending on phone calls and reviews in websites. As stated by (Huang, Hong and Burtch (2017), use of social media allows a user to find information readily as each platform states argumentative results shared by other users. Diversified experiences and thoughts shared by rest of the social media users allowed the respondents to make decisions through gather variety of ideas. Therefore, explicitly this study's findings too revealed the tendency of the respondents to make their own decisions through self-learning which has led them to intentionally engage with social media in gaining information.

Moreover, the uniqueness of social media was analyzed by three sub categories; audience level, direction connection and variety of platforms. The findings of the study stated that to learn different cultures and religions social media played a main role. Even though the travelling couldn't be performed, the respondents stated that the experience could be gained virtually. Referring to the direct connection, it was explored that the use of comment sections, inboxes of vloggers and reviews on pages allowed the respondents to build a discussion with social media users in each platform to make their travel decision. This characteristic of social media has influenced travellers in making decisions prior to the visit (Tham, Mair, and Croy, 2020). Proving the fact, this study revealed that the respondents also engaged in those sections of social media to enhance their engagement in gaining an accurate detail about a destination or an activity. Further to that, through variety of platforms, it showcased the purpose of the respondents in travelling to a destination could be varied.

“When I search for user experiences in Instragram sometimes I don’t get the real experience I wish to gain. But, Youtube vlogs are my favorite where I gain the real time information of a location I wish to go”.

(RUSL 03, Personal Communication, 2022)

Likewise, it can be stated that each and every platform operates in a different manner which would influence the user differently. A growing use of social media was seen growing during the analysis of data of the study. The findings revealed both positive and negative facts which directly influenced the respondents’ travel decision making.

“Sometimes the location’s beauty in social media is exaggerated”.

(NSBM 02, Personal Communication, 2022)

Respondents’ experiences disclosed that the nature of the destination is over rated in social media. Sometimes, the real time experiences of travelers were not shared as it was, according to the respondents.

“But I choose travel vlogs of travel with wife and solo traveler all the time because they give real time experience”.

(NSBM 02, Personal Communication, 2022)

As per the respondent, it was clear thought there are negative impacts of social media, the usage of social media in travel decisions were always admired. At last, according to the findings of the study, it can be stated that the user content of social media positively influenced the respondents to use social media platforms for their travel decisions though the negative impacts exist. It turned out that, negative impacts of social media were not much cared or taken into account by the travelers when making the decision as vlogs and blogs in

Facebook and YouTube influenced respondents to make the move in decision making.

Despite the unique characteristics of social media, the respondents clearly mentioned only three main points which cannot be taken or presented in traditional media. Thus, those characteristics mentioned can be illustrated as follows that tend them their use of social media in their travel decisions.

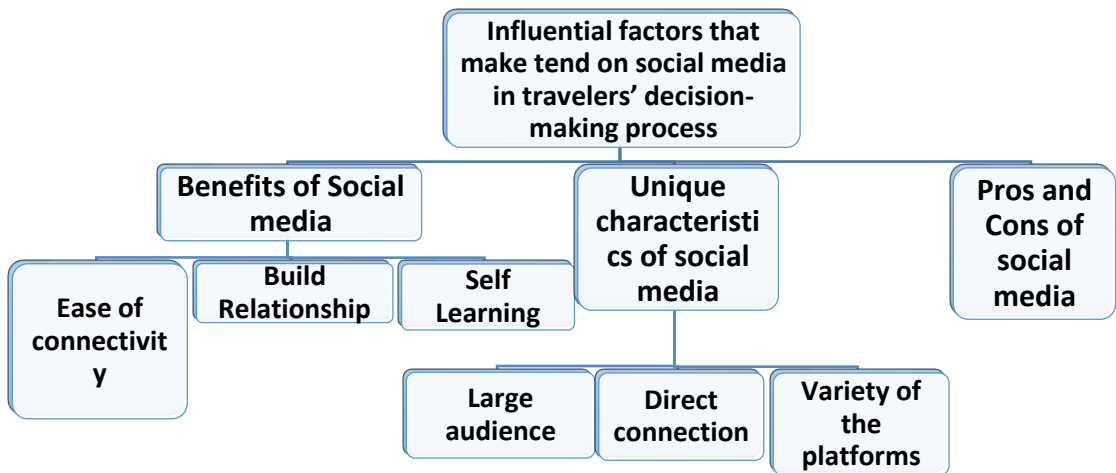


Figure 4: Influential factors of social media that tend travelers for their travel decisions

Source: Survey Data, 2023

It was significant the attentiveness of the respondents of the study in promoting travel destinations they visited for awareness purposes of other existing travelers in social media to gather information. Hence, objective three of the study which was to identify the most effective social media platform

which can be used to promote travel destinations in Sri Lanka from tourist perspective revealed the following results.

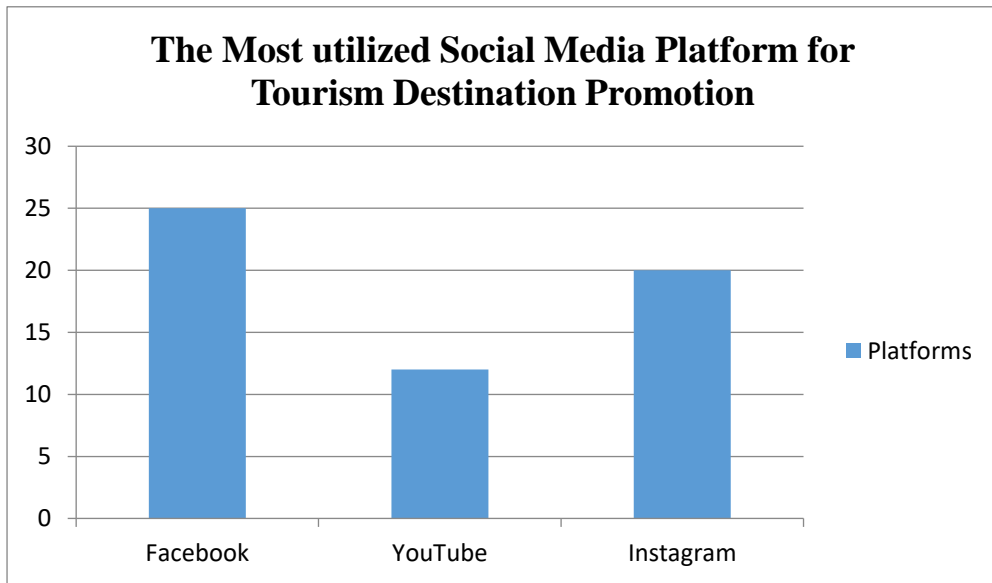


Figure 3: Top three platforms used for destination promotion

Source: Survey Data, 2023

Facebook was explored to be the most popular type of social media platform the respondents tend to use in promoting Sri Lankan destinations for user visibility. Further, the respondents asserted these three platforms to be the big three in social media when it comes for the tourism industry. A study, “Tourism destination marketing using Facebook as a promotional tool” conducted by Shahnoor Rahaman stated, “Among the varied social media platforms, Facebook deserves a special mention with regard to promotion of a tourism destination. Facebook offers travel brands the ability to identify prospective travellers, communicate directly with users, engage with advocates and create branded experiences through advertisements and custom-developed Facebook applications” (Rahman & College, 2017). Proving the

fact, the study's findings too showcased the tendency of the respondents to engage with Facebook specifically to gain information as well to promote novel destinations for other travelers for awareness alongside with increased visibility.

As per the findings of the study, the content of social media delivered the importance under three main stages of travel decision making process and the factors why people tend to use social media in their travel decisions. Succinctly, it can be concluded social media as the most effective source utilized by Sri Lankan young travelers for destination promotion.

Conclusions & Recommendations

In today's digital age, the influence of social media transcends boundaries and impacts various industries across the globe. It has become an integral part of marketing and communication strategies for industries as diverse as automotive, politics, entertainment, tourism, and hospitality. One sector that has felt the profound impact of social media is the travel and tourism industry. The travel decision-making process is a pivotal aspect of this industry, as it determines where people choose to visit and how they plan their trips. This study sought to delve into the effects of social media on this decision-making process.

The research uncovered three distinct stages of the travel decision-making process: the pre-trip stage, during the trip, and the post-trip stage. Each of these stages was significantly influenced by social media, and several factors emerged as influential in guiding individuals to use social media for their travel decisions. The three primary categories of factors are benefits, unique characteristics, and the pros and cons of social media. The benefits of social media were highlighted by respondents, who stressed the ease of accessibility

to travel-related information through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Travelers appreciated the flexibility and real-time updates that social media provided, allowing them to make well-informed decisions.

For both travelers and the travel industry, there are several recommendations to maximize the benefits of social media. Travelers should diversify their sources, actively engage with others, prioritize authenticity, and exercise caution when verifying information. The travel industry, in turn, should diversify platforms, invest in visual storytelling, leverage user-generated content, embrace interactivity, make data-driven decisions, and collaborate with influencers. By understanding the influential factors and adopting these recommendations, both travelers and the travel industry can make more informed choices and effectively promote destinations,

Generally, social media plays an indispensable role in influencing travel decisions. It serves as a dynamic platform for information sharing, inspiration, and peer recommendations. Travelers and the travel industry, by understanding these influential factors and selecting the right social media channels and strategies, can make more informed choices and effectively promote destinations. The impact of social media on the travel industry will continue to evolve, making it imperative for all stakeholders to adapt and harness its potential for mutual benefit.

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