

Examining the Uses of Social Media for Cultural Tourism by Desi North East Indians

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Abstract:

Tourism is a uniquely valuable industry as it brings the market to the region, rather than requiring the region to reach outward to the market. Many nations as islands and remote hills thrive purely on tourism revenue. It used to be a trillion-dollar industry prior to the catastrophic pandemic.

Ritchie and Zins (1978) defined cultural tourism as one of the key elements that attract tourists to a particular destination that include traditions, culinary, dress and costumes, handicrafts, leisure activities and such others. Some other elements that they identified are the educational system and religion other than the history of the area, language and art and architecture.

This paper is a study about the penetration of the tourism market through the power of social media from the north east region of India. Gone are those days when money was pumped into expensive advertisement. Social media empowers all equally at the same time even in the covid climate. It distributes power to anyone who has something interesting and unique to offer in the world of instant pleasure. To reap the full benefits of social media different online platforms as Facebook, Instagram, travel blogs, lifestyle sites will be analysed. It will be a study to analyse what do the other communities look forward while travelling to the north east part of India and how the local indigenous community are promoting their USP on the online platform. It intends to take a closer look in the cost effective ways various social media platforms are cruising its way inside the online platform targeting both its national and international customers.

Social networking is an important component of this paper. There are many online groups dedicated to the North East community on digital space. It will further delve into the world of SME of tourism sector who promote their B&B, travel and tour packages, festivals, exotic locations, safe hikes, food trips, unique experience on social media platforms. It will be an examination as how pandemic forced traditional travel related business owners to a digital shift in the state of total lockdown. As things are slowly progressing towards normalcy is digital marketing of tourism a temporary phase or a permanent shift on the online world will be assessed?

As social media technology gains widespread acceptance, an increasing number of organizations are realigning their strategy to take advantage of the benefits available from the use of social networking (Durkin et al., 2013). This paper will assess if Durkin's argument is valid in the north east territory of India and how social media adoption by both consumers and business owners from the travel industry generating revenue. Cultural tourism is an enterprise that can contribute to the local economy of the indigenous belt and their day to day wellbeing especially to the rural villages where the customs and traditions are most vibrant and very unique.

Key words: Social media, Tribe, Travel, North-East, Cultural Tourism, Pandemic, Indigenous.

Introduction:

Discover, Learn, Enjoy, See, Experience, Explore – Words which comes to our mind very often when we think of travel and aptly so because that's what we do when we travel to a new destination. Gaining a new perspective, having an opposite view point, experiencing a totally new way of cooking, learning a few words of a new language, using a new way of greeting someone, getting surprised by a particular kind of behaviour etc.: These are some very common statements we get from a person who has just returned from a trip to a new place. New Place here denotes a destination which is different from one's home location and different not only geographically but also in the way people ACT/REACT/CONNECT with one another. We are speaking of a new culture with altogether different history to it. Under cultural tourism comes the fields of history and culture and are the most sought after resources to attract tourists. (Timothy, 2011). Be it researchers or practitioners: Both argue that to capture the attention and interest of a broad public, marketers must link cultural attractions to an engaging narrative, while using mediums as social media to deliver their online content and engage in interactions (Egberts & Bosma, 2014).

Social Media – Lesser you say is more: It has the now become the inherent power which can make or break any business including Tourism. No surprise that all and one is trying to scope out a piece of the magic bullet through various promotion in varied social media platforms. Nonetheless, as prevalent everywhere, though there are numerous social media platforms, it will be impossible to take into perspective of all of these numerous platforms. Hence for the purpose of this paper we will focus on few of the topmost popular sites that include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube. These sites are also one's put to test most often and frequently by destination marketing organization including National Tourism Boards: Firstly, to post information on attractions and events while at the same inviting followers to share their personal and travel experiences and opinions through images, videos or text. What exactly do these Marketing Organizations gain by doing these? A loyal interactive user base who have the probability and possibility of converting into a tourist to the locations promoted by these companies.

The mention of the must-visit places in India will be incomplete without the mention of the exhilarating and enigmatic 8 states of the North-East of India. Originally called the Seven Sisters comprising of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura- it was joined by Sikkim: till than a small Himalayan monarchy in 1975. Each state with its unique cultural orientation as well as history: for the traveller to the North East region is a hard to find, rare and exquisite repository of rare experiences, next-to- nowhere-else kind of cultural diversity, rare gastronomic journeys, jaw-dropping climatic diversities all of which in one way or the other influences the diverse cultural bonanza: Something to be experienced or else you will regret. So near yet so far: Its fascinating as well as shocking that even many Indians outside of the North-East region barely knows or appreciates what they are missing.

From history to bio-diversity to fauna which is one-of-its-kind to extreme climatic condition such as the highest rainfall, to the longest river etc.: all adorn the necklace of beauty that the North-East region is proud and boastful of. And promotion of these through social media is and will be a game-changer to bring the north- east of India as a distinct, unique and integral part of the World Tourism Map.

Nations having an Exclusive Tourism Portfolio

Inspite of being a trillion-dollar industry, the tourism sector has a subordinate position in some nations

and therefore, it is placed along with other government entities with a shared portfolio in a Ministry. It can be found in Ministry of Economy, Development, and Tourism of Chile, Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Turkey, and in the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture in the Maldives (Morrison, 2013). In New Zealand, tourism is one of the sectors and industries under Ministry of Economic development whereas, in United Kingdom, it is with Department of Culture, Media and Sports (Morrison, 2013). The dual system of Destination Market Organization(DMO) may also exist in form of commissions, boards or authorities such as: Canadian Tourism Commission and Hong Kong Tourism Board. Both the public and private sector combine their strengths and work in partnership to enhance the tourism sector. They are supposed to offer an amalgam of public-sector and private-sector strengths. The private sector organisations such as corporations are governed by an independent board of directors called on the government, private-sector tourism industries.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media is seen as internet based applications where the target area is on the web content which encompasses “the media impressions created by the consumers, usually informed by relevant experience and shared or archived online for easy access by other impressionable consumers” (Hanan & Putit, 2014, p. 472).

The tool of social media is a digital platform which people use to build social networks and connect with other communities with likeminded interests. Such online mediums have become the regular norm of many tech savvy crowd. All young and adults even start and end their day by checking on their devices for any latest online updates. Gadgets and gizmos used by this population are laptops, tablet computers and smart phones to check Tweets, insta-stories and status updates from their friends and family. Social media is a digital form of data communication. The digital consumers are empowered to create, share and promote the web content. Its different forms such as blogs, micro-blogs, social networking sites, photo-sharing sites, instant messaging, video-sharing sites, virtual worlds, homestay sites and more can help propel the tourism sector.

Social media influencers have emerged as a result of the widespread use of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018, p. 1). SMIs (social media influencers) are a new breed of third-party endorsers who utilise blogs, tweets, and other forms of social media to shape audience sentiments (Freberg et al., 2011). They can boost the influence of the information they acquire and send to others since they are recognised as opinion leaders (Magno & Cassia, 2018).

Social media marketing is now widely regarded as a powerful marketing tool that businesses may employ to boost their marketing efforts (Tuten and Solomon, 2014). It can assist businesses in interacting with their customers by providing a low-cost and quick way to learn about their needs. An online or digital platform designed to facilitate interaction or networking among a large number of people is referred to as social media marketing (Walker, 2014).

POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR TOURISM

Over this pandemic phase social media has emerged as a market disruptor. In spite of incurring heavy economic losses, the tourism industry is still able to engage its clientele through the digital medium.

All kinds of audience belonging to different generations as Millennials as well as Boomers have their respective bucket list of travelling and acquiring the local delights from different communities. This dreamy thought is then processed and made real by well-known key contenders of the below giants from

the social media hubs.

Facebook in terms of total number of users and brand recognition, this is the largest social media network on the Internet. Over 1 million small and medium-sized enterprises utilise the site to advertise their business, which is unsurprising. Users can ask for guidance through Facebook recommendations.

Twitter: Only 140 characters is the method to promote the objective of the business on this online tool. Over 320 million monthly active users in this limitation communicate such information.

Google+ It is currently one of the most popular social media networks with its SEO benefits alone make it a must-have tool for any company. With 418 dynamics million clients, making it one of the most popular social media platforms.

YouTube, the world's largest and best-known video-based online networking platform, was founded on February 14, 2005, by three former PayPal employees. YouTube has over 1 billion monthly visitors and is the second most popular internet search engine after Google.

Instagram It's an online networking stage with a visual component to it. Facebook owns the website, which has over 400 million active users. Many of its customers use it to share information about travel, fashion, food, craftsmanship, and other related topics. The stage is also known for its unique channels, as well as video and photo editing features. Approximately 95% of Instagram users are also Facebook users.

Other online tools such as WhatsApp, AirBnB, TripAdvisor, Make my Trip.com are used by both groups promoting their deals and packages as well as customers looking for competitive deals.

Social Media – The ROCKET FUEL for the NORTH EAST Tourism Industry

Social media marketing acts as two-way tool as it helps in building and maintaining communication with the customers along with understanding their demands. It's a prominent business tool used by majority in the current pandemic storm. It's a faster and budget friendly means to retain and acquire its client base. Social media marketing can be defined as an online or digital platform that is developed for facilitating interaction or networking among a large number of users (Walker, 2014).

Social media marketing is now widely regarded as a powerful marketing tool that businesses may employ to boost their marketing efforts. It helps the companies become more accessible for both present and prospective customers. Along with this, it also makes a company more recognizable and familiar to the existing customers. In addition, social media marketing aids firms in increasing brand loyalty (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

Youtuber such as Tanya Khanijow with a subscriber base of close to 764k is a travel vlogger. Her video episodes "Travelling through North East India", "Take me to Nagaland" and "Backpacking in Meghalaya" has 2 million views. Another hit Youtuber Travelling Mondays who boasts of close to 400k subscribers has captured the North-East in a well-documented video and managed to garner close to 1.2 million views. Such vloggers should be approached by the government agencies to boost up the North East tourism department.

The **taleof2bagpackers** is a blog written by a couple Agni and Amrita. It features the beauty of North East from the picturesque images to mesmerising details of the hidden treasures of this Indian terrain. The blog covers the historic significance to the present information needed by a travelling spirit. Dimpu's blog is another hit channel on social media. He covers the indigenous population and how the locals really live. His videos have angles from the vantage points which is purely amazing. He has covered the local houses with the best local foods available in the kitchen. Travellers looking for a pure

North east experience which is different, Dimpus blog is different from the rest. The only problem is the dialect. He speaks only in his mother tongue which is Assamese. Vlogs with 1.91 million subscribers should be bilingual or atleast with English subtitles. Another interesting part of his vlogs are his engagement with the audience. Most of his videos are with hits and very positive comments to promote North East tourism. **Visa2explore** is another hit you tube channel with over 1.2 million subscribers. This a fully professional travel related content educating and sensitising the masses on food and travel experiences in Hindi language. *Harish Bali* is a well acknowledged personality in the travel vlogging tribe. He promotes local cuisines; street foods of the territory he is explores. Do look out for the indigenous cultures of both North East people and other parts of India in his content driven videos. Folk dance, song, significance of a particular custom is being covered in the most breath taking and engaging fashion.

The current generation of consumers use social media in their daily activities almost becoming a norm for both the millennials as well as generation Z. As per a study conducted in 2020, average time spent on Social Media per day stands at 145 minutes translating to 2 hours 25 minutes. Furthermore, considering the average lifespan as per WHO to be 72 years of age, and most people start using social media very young say 10 years old: it translates to 6 years 8 months on social media in their lifetime. Just imagine the impact it can have on any industry.



Source: <https://www.broadbandsearch.net/blog/average-daily-time-on-social-media>

Social media platforms have their built-in analytical tools that can enable any power holders in the tourism industry to keep an eye on any business engagement with a promotion of a hon bill festival, exotic experience or any other campaigns to its potential customers.

Social media can make useful contributions in brand promotion and attract customers for every SME company irrespective of size and nature of business as in food, cab, tourist guide, hotel bookings, shopping experience etc. In the west companies use social media for brand promotion ensure that every social media post is in the context of the strategic goal rather than just collecting shares, likes and pins. Videos, infographics, viral posts drive in a lot of traffic for this tourism industry.

Businesses make consistent efforts to increase traffic by sharing and updating up-to-date information about their company on their website or social media pages. This method of continuously updating information on social media platforms aids businesses in notifying clients about every important detail that affects their traveller's need. (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016)

According to the Globe Travel Market, the world of tourism would have surpassed 1 billion arrivals by 2012. As a result, the connection between travel and technology is stronger than ever, with businesses increasingly turning to social media to promote their services and connect with customers on a more personal level. Social media can be one of the most successful techniques for destination marketing and advertising, thanks to the widespread use of the internet in today's globe. Social media proved to be a powerful communication tool that quickly expanded over the region. The tourism industry has gained the most benefits from the internet, and as a result, social media has become an essential component of any federal or state tourism promotion and planning. In the current market situation, online travel bookings account for around 30% of total bookings. This amount, which totals \$8 billion and is anticipated to climb in the near future, is undoubtedly positive.

Internet users nowadays use social media content or as it is also called user-generated content in order to search for any type of information, compare products and services prices, search for new tourism destinations...etc. Internet celebrities, social media influencers have successfully made it to the top on various social media platforms. Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, (2018). Their effect is not confined to the local level, but also extends to the worldwide scenario, which is advantageous for people who share tourism and destination content since they may reach out to foreign travellers and investors. Social media influencers are the best example of social capital, which is the product of social interactions with the potential to contribute to the social, civic, or economic well-being of a community of common purpose. It is produced and used in everyday interactions and these interactions only make sense in the framework of a set of purposeful community activities (Jamieson, 2014, p. 59).

Conclusion

Social Media is powerful, no second thought s on the impact of social media on our lives and all other spheres of our life. It has the power to transform; it has brought about new ways to build a reliable brand. Gone are the days when marketing for tourism was limited to billboards, brochures, TV & Radio Ads etc. The key to success of any business now is strongly in the hands of Social Media. Tourism is no exception and why should it be? Social Media allows tourism companies to promote different areas of each destination: from its culture to history to food to demographics, collect social shares, reviews and feedback and of course the most important aspect: Customer Satisfaction

Being an extremely effective form of marketing which can be used to increase brand awareness, brand loyalty, customer service, and lead to increased sales. It can be used to present a business brand to millions of people worldwide. As the importance of using social media as a marketing tool for tourism-related businesses grows, so will the importance of using it as a marketing strategy for tourism-related businesses. Traditionally the tourist industry had relied on destination reputation, consumer opinion, information and favorable word-of- mouth promotion, but now it is well positioned to take advantage of social media sites.

This paper is an attempt to showcase that social media is a big opportunity for tourism companies of North- East Indian States not only to promote but actually to attract and convince a large section of the traveler community to bask in the glorious roots, culture and food/demographics on offer in these 8

North Eastern States which till now have been overshadowed by other popular destination inspite of being competitively at par or even better in what Travel Experience it can offer.

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