

The Influence of Social Media on Tourism Destination Choice, Tourist Satisfaction, and Behaviour: Empirical Evidence from Heritage and Religious Destinations in Rajasthan, India

Gargi Madaan¹, Dr. Shiv Raj²

¹Research scholar School of Hotel Management, Airline and Tourism -CT University, Jagraon (Ludhiana)

Gargimadaan3@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor School of Hotel Management, Airline and Tourism- CT University, Jagraon (Ludhiana)

Shiv25070@ctuniversity.in

Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has profoundly reshaped the global tourism landscape, fundamentally altering the ways in which tourists search for information, evaluate destinations, and share travel experiences. With the shift from traditional information sources to user-generated content, social media has emerged as a powerful tool influencing tourists' cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes before, during, and after travel. The present study examines the influence of social media on tourism destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and behaviour pertaining to the heritage and religious destinations of Rajasthan in India. The findings reveal that social media significantly influences destination choice and tourist satisfaction, while tourist satisfaction plays a strong mediating role between social media and tourist behaviour. The study offers robust theoretical contributions and actionable implications for destination marketers and policymakers in digitally evolving tourism markets.

Keywords: Social media, Destination choice, Tourist satisfaction, Tourist behaviour, PLS-SEM, Rajasthan

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1. Introduction

Tourism is widely recognised as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors of the global economy, playing a pivotal role in economic development, employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development [1], [2]. In the Indian context, tourism has emerged as a key driver of inclusive growth, contributing approximately 6% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and supporting millions of direct and indirect jobs across allied sectors such as hospitality, transportation, handicrafts, and retail [3]. Notably, the sector has demonstrated strong resilience and adaptability during the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, supported by rising domestic tourism, digital transformation, and increased government focus on destination development and promotion [4].

Parallel to this growth, the rapid expansion of internet penetration and the widespread adoption of smartphones have fundamentally transformed the tourism information ecosystem. Social media platforms have become integral to how tourists search for travel-related information, evaluate alternative destinations, form expectations, and share experiences before, during, and after travel [5], [6]. Unlike traditional marketing channels, social media enables interactive communication and empowers tourists to act as content creators through user-generated content (UGC), online reviews, travel blogs, and visual narratives [7]. These digitally mediated interactions significantly influence tourists' perceptions, trust, and decision-making

processes by reducing information asymmetry and perceived risk [8].

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), peer recommendations, and real-time visual storytelling on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and travel review websites have become particularly influential in shaping destination image and destination choice behaviour [9], [10]. Tourists increasingly rely on online reviews and shared experiences of fellow travellers rather than official destination marketing communications, making social media a powerful determinant of travel-related attitudes and expectations [11]. These expectations, once formed, directly influence tourists' on-site experiences, satisfaction levels, and subsequent behavioural intentions, including revisit intention, recommendation behaviour, and online content sharing [12].

Despite growing scholarly interest in social media-tourism linkages, existing research has largely examined fragmented or isolated relationships, such as the influence of social media on destination image or intention to visit [13], [14]. There remains a paucity of integrated empirical studies that simultaneously examine the relationships among social media usage, destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and post-travel behavioural outcomes, particularly within emerging tourism markets such as India [15], [16]. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to culturally rich and religious-heritage destinations, where experiential narratives and peer influence play a crucial role in shaping tourist behaviour.

Addressing this research gap, the present study empirically tests a comprehensive conceptual model examining the influence of social media on destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and post-travel behavioural intentions in the culturally and economically significant tourism destinations of Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar. By focusing on these prominent destinations in Rajasthan and employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), the study contributes to a deeper understanding of digitally driven tourist behaviour in the Indian context. The findings offer valuable theoretical insights and practical implications for destination marketers, tourism planners, and policymakers seeking to leverage social media for enhancing tourist satisfaction and sustaining destination competitiveness in a digitally evolving tourism environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tourist Destination Choice

Tourist destination choice is a multi-stage cognitive and behavioural process influenced by motivations, perceptions, and external information cues. Prior studies conceptualize destination choice as a dynamic filtering process shaped by psychological, situational, and informational factors. In the digital era, social media has emerged as a dominant information source, particularly influencing travellers with limited prior destination experience.

Qiu, Masiero, and Li [17] studying the psychological process of tourist destination choice highlighted that there is strong relation between the personality of the traveller and the travel motivation factors. People with different purpose choose different destinations for traveling and similarly different people choose different destinations. They described that while making a choice of tourist destination the travellers collect the information for the potential destinations and compare and evaluate it on the basis of their visit intention among the potential destinations.

A systematic literature review conducted by Henok [18] to find out the factors determining the international tourist flow have put forth various factors which can be categorized into various categories such as the demand side factors which include economic factors and sociodemographic factors, supply side factors include destination characteristics, socio-cultural factors, geographical factors, international mobility and infrastructure, psychological factors and lifestyle factors, peace, security and policy factors and health risk factors.

2.2 Social Media and Tourism Decision-Making

Social media contributes to destination awareness, image formation, and risk perception through visually rich and peer-generated content. Empirical studies suggest that user-generated reviews, ratings, and influencer content significantly affect tourists' perceived credibility and trust, especially among younger travellers.

Wu et al. [19] investigated the factors affecting destination choice among international visitors to Vietnam in the post-COVID-19 context. They surveyed 208 international tourists using convenience sampling and SPSS analysis, and identified five key determinants which are- tourist motivation, tourist attitude, destination image, social media, and environmental quality. Each of these factors significantly influenced the travel decisions. Social media, as per the study, emerged as a critical channel for shaping perceptions and information exchange, while environmental quality which is a growing concern in the pandemic era, also played a meaningful role.

Aziz and colleagues conducted a study examining the factors influencing medical tourists' behavioural intentions to choose Malaysia as their destination of choice [20]. By using a quantitative questionnaire design among 200 medical tourists, their analysis found that perceived destination image, perceived service quality, perceived value, and patient satisfaction, were all positively and significantly related to behavioural intention to visit Malaysia for medical treatment.

Nguyen et al. [21] investigated the determinants influencing tourists' choice of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) as a travel destination through a mixed-methods design in their study. They used semi-structured interviews with 10 domestic and 8 foreign tourists yielding the qualitative insights, while a quantitative survey of 615 visitors between October 2023 and February 2024 provided statistical rigor to the study. The results revealed that destination image had the strongest direct influence on destination choice, followed by tourism motivation. In addition, the source of information which is not a primary factor but was found to have a significant indirect effect by shaping the perceptions and motivations of travellers.

Utari et al. [22] conducted a study of 609 domestic Indonesian tourists during the health crisis, which focused on five key destinations with diverse characteristics. The analysis revealed that 'health and hygiene concerns' emerged as the dominant factor influencing destination choice, while 'destination image' and 'experience' had no significant impact during the pandemic period.

2.3 Tourist Satisfaction and Behaviour

Tourist satisfaction is a critical antecedent of behavioural outcomes such as revisit intention, recommendation, and positive word-of-mouth. Recent studies increasingly position satisfaction as a mediating construct linking pre-travel information sources (including social media) to post-travel behaviour.

Nguyen Viet, Dang, and Nguyen [23] explored how destination image, cultural contact, perceived risk, and tourist satisfaction interplay to influence revisit intention among international visitors in Binh Thuan province of Vietnam. Analysing the data collected from 405 international tourists and utilizing PLS-SEM

analysis, the study demonstrates that revisit intention is directly and positively affected by tourist satisfaction, perceived attractiveness of the destination, quality of accommodation services, and cultural contact, while perceived risk acts as a deterrent. Additionally, satisfaction itself is directly shaped by attractiveness, accommodation service, cultural contact, and perceived risk. The authors further reveal that nationality and marital status moderate the relationship between cultural contact and attractiveness on satisfaction but not on revisit intention, highlighting the complex, contingent nature of determinants in repeat visit behaviour.

Nguyen Huu et al. [24] studying the factors of tourist satisfaction that most strongly influence revisit intention among the visitors in Can Tho City, Vietnam. Employing structural equation modelling on 300 responses, the study identifies cultural contact, perceived value, and green practices as significant predictors of satisfaction that, in turn, influence the intention to revisit with cultural contact being the most influential factor. In contrast, service quality and novelty seeking were found to have negligible effects on revisit intention. The authors suggested that tourism and hospitality stakeholders should emphasize strategies that foster authentic cultural engagement, enhance perceived value, and promote eco-friendly practices to enhance visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visits.

2.4 Research Gap and Hypotheses

Despite growing literature, integrated empirical models testing social media's simultaneous influence on destination choice, satisfaction, and behaviour remain scarce in emerging tourism markets. Accordingly, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were established.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social Media	>0.80	>0.85	>0.50
Destination Choice	>0.78	>0.83	>0.50
Tourist Satisfaction	>0.82	>0.87	>0.55
Tourist Behaviour	>0.80	>0.86	>0.52

All values exceeded recommended thresholds, confirming measurement adequacy

4.2 Structural Model Results

Table 2. Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Social Media → Destination Choice	Positive	>1.96	<0.05	Supported
H2	Social Media → Tourist Satisfaction	Positive	>1.96	<0.05	Supported
H3	Destination Choice → Tourist Satisfaction	Positive	>1.96	<0.05	Supported

- **H1:** Social media has a significant positive effect on tourism destination choice.
- **H2:** Social media has a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction.
- **H3:** Tourism destination choice has a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction.
- **H4:** Tourist satisfaction has a significant positive effect on tourist behaviour.
- **H5:** Tourist satisfaction mediates the relationship between social media and tourist behaviour.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using a structured questionnaire. The target population comprised tourists who had visited or were visiting Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar and actively used social media for travel-related purposes.

3.2 Measurement of Constructs

All constructs were measured using multi-item Likert scales adapted from validated tourism and digital marketing literature. Social media was operationalised as a multidimensional construct encompassing information availability, user-generated content, eWOM, ratings, reviews, and social networking.

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed using a two-step approach:

1. Assessment of the measurement model (reliability and validity)
2. Assessment of the structural model (hypotheses testing and mediation analysis)

PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for complex models and predictive research objectives.

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H4	Tourist Satisfaction → Tourist Behaviour	Strong Positive	>1.96	<0.001	Supported

The model explained substantial variance in tourist satisfaction and tourist behaviour, indicating strong predictive power.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping results confirmed that tourist satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between social media and tourist behaviour, supporting **H5**. This highlights satisfaction as a key mechanism translating social media influence into behavioural outcomes.

5. Interpretation of Empirical Analysis and Results

5.1 Measurement Model Interpretation

The measurement model evaluation confirms that all latent constructs—Social Media, Tourism Destination Choice, Tourist Satisfaction, and Tourist Behaviour—are measured with a high degree of reliability and validity.

Internal Consistency Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. This suggests that the indicators within each construct consistently measure the same underlying phenomenon. In practical terms, the items capturing social media usage (information availability, user-generated content, reviews, and eWOM) reliably represent tourists' digital engagement behaviour.

Convergent Validity

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.50 confirm that each construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators. This demonstrates that respondents clearly associate the observed items with their intended constructs. For instance, items measuring tourist satisfaction strongly converge on perceived fulfilment derived from social media-assisted destination planning and experience evaluation.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity assessment confirms that each construct is empirically distinct. This is particularly important in this study, as social media, satisfaction, and behaviour are conceptually related. The results indicate that although related, tourists are able to distinguish between using social media for travel decisions, being satisfied with the destination experience, and engaging in behavioural outcomes such as recommendation and experience sharing. Overall, the measurement model results establish a robust and credible foundation for testing the structural relationships.

5.2 Structural Model Interpretation

The structural model evaluates the hypothesised causal relationships among constructs and provides insights into the strength, direction, and significance of these relationships.

5.2.1 Social Media → Tourism Destination Choice (H1)

The positive and statistically significant path coefficient from Social Media to Tourism Destination Choice confirms that social media plays a decisive role in shaping tourists' destination selection decisions. This result indicates that tourists increasingly rely on peer-generated content, visual storytelling, ratings and reviews, perceived credibility of online information when shortlisting and finalising destinations. Social media reduces information asymmetry, increases perceived familiarity, and lowers perceived risk, especially for destinations that tourists have not previously visited.

In the context of Jaipur, Ajmer, and Pushkar, social media platforms act as virtual destination showcases, allowing tourists to compare heritage, religious, and cultural offerings before making a decision.

5.2.2 Social Media → Tourist Satisfaction (H2)

The significant positive relationship between Social Media and Tourist Satisfaction suggests that social media influences not only pre-travel decisions but also post-travel evaluations.

This finding implies that when social media provides accurate expectations, realistic visuals, trustworthy peer reviews, tourists are more likely to experience expectation–experience congruence, which enhances satisfaction. Additionally, social media continues to shape satisfaction during and after travel through experience sharing, validation from peers, and online engagement.

Thus, satisfaction is not derived solely from on-site experiences but is digitally co-created through continuous social media interaction.

5.2.3 Tourism Destination Choice → Tourist Satisfaction (H3)

The significant positive effect of Destination Choice on Tourist Satisfaction highlights that a well-informed and deliberate destination selection leads to higher satisfaction.

Tourists who choose destinations based on extensive social media evaluation are more confident in their decisions, which reduces cognitive dissonance, aligns expectations with actual experiences, enhances perceived value.

In destinations like Jaipur (heritage), Ajmer (religious), and Pushkar (spiritual-cultural), informed destination choice ensures that tourists' motivations align with destination attributes, thereby increasing satisfaction.

5.2.4 Tourist Satisfaction → Tourist Behaviour (H4)

The strongest path in the model is observed between Tourist Satisfaction and Tourist Behaviour, confirming satisfaction as the most critical driver of behavioural outcomes.

Satisfied tourists are significantly more likely to recommend the destination, share positive experiences online, engage in electronic word-of-mouth, influence future tourists' decisions. This finding reinforces the centrality of satisfaction as a behavioural catalyst, transforming personal experiences into collective digital influence.

5.2.5 Mediation of Tourist Satisfaction (H5)

Mediation analysis confirms that Tourist Satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between Social Media and Tourist Behaviour.

This means that Social media alone does not directly generate behavioural outcomes. Its influence is channelled through satisfaction.

In other words, social media creates expectations and perceptions, but only when these lead to satisfaction do they translate into advocacy, recommendation, and sharing behaviour. This establishes tourist satisfaction as a mechanism rather than a mere outcome.

6. Discussion

The findings strongly align with and extend prior tourism and digital behaviour literature. Previous studies have highlighted isolated effects of social media on destination image or intention; however, this study empirically validates an integrated, sequential process:

Social Media → Destination Choice → Tourist Satisfaction → Tourist Behaviour

This confirms destination decision-making as a digitally mediated behavioural continuum, rather than a set of independent actions.

The study advances tourist behaviour theory by empirically positioning social media as a foundational stimulus that influences both cognitive (choice) and affective (satisfaction) processes. Unlike many studies that treat satisfaction as an endpoint, this research confirms its mediating role, reinforcing its function as a bridge between digital engagement and behavioural outcomes. By focusing on India, the study fills a major geographical gap in tourism research, demonstrating that social media effects in emerging economies are strong, structured, and behaviourally consequential.

Destination marketers should prioritise satisfaction-oriented social media strategies rather than promotional exaggeration. User-generated content should be actively encouraged, as peer validation drives both satisfaction and behaviour. Policy makers should integrate digital tourism strategies into state tourism planning, particularly for religious and cultural destinations.

The findings empirically confirm that social media is a powerful determinant of tourism destination choice and

satisfaction in the Indian context. The strong mediating role of satisfaction underscores that social media influence extends beyond pre-travel decision-making to shape post-travel behaviours such as recommendation and experience sharing. The results align with contemporary tourism behaviour theories while extending them to emerging digital tourism markets.

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