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SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

[1]**Tanvi Sarin**

[1]Account Executive

[1]Strobe Works, New Delhi, India

Abstract **:** This study investigates how the usage of social media impacts a consumer's decision-making process while selecting a hotel/homestay. Using a survey as a research tool, this study looks at how social media marketing influences decisions made in the real world about travel and finds that exposure to hospitality content is indeed very common. The paper offers businesses a guide to improve social media methods, encourage interaction, and establish trust. This research is a vital tool that will help hotel/homestay businesses move towards more effective content and resonate with online engagement that smoothly fits with the expectations of modern travelers in an era where digital impact greatly shapes consumer choices.

*Keywords***:** Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Social Networking, Hotel/Homestay, Influencer Marketing, Hospitality

INTRODUCTION

Marketing is a crucial component of any corporate enterprise or business, especially for the hospitality industry, in the competitive world that exists today. It can contact users of multiple platforms daily. It is imperative for every organization to understand the importance of communication, therefore they must take advantage of these platforms or they might lose a segment of their audience. Businesses need to always be looking for ways to attract and retain both new and existing customers to stay relevant (Lim, 2010)**.** Social media has transformed the way people connect globally. But social networking has been around since the beginning of mankind. Like other breakthroughs, the idea of social networking has changed over time and is getting more complex as technology advances. In a nutshell, social media refers to online communication platforms where users generate and share text, pictures, audio, and video content (Seth, 2012).

- Over the past few years, there has been a notable global upsurge in the utilization of social media and the overall advancement of new technologies. Highlighting the fact that sales have climbed and traveler numbers have increased over the last few years, particularly following COVID-19, the tourism and hospitality sectors have enjoyed impressive growth since their inception. Today, the sector continues to grow and has undergone a significant transformation due to the widespread appearance of social media platforms, which have opened up new avenues for advancement and client attraction through enhanced visitor involvement and eased communication (Benea, 2014)**.** Social media provides up-to-date, real-time information about a business, such as the quantity of Facebook fans and likes, Twitter followers, and Youtube views, in contrast to traditional marketing channels. Hotels can monitor the number of discussions surrounding a new service or product they are offering and may react fast to reviews, comments, and criticism. To stay ahead of the competition, the most prosperous hotels are coming up with creative ways to combine social media with conventional marketing techniques as well (Seth, 2012).

Due to the large number of users engaged with social media networks, social networking sites and applications offer several advantages to attract and interact with customers. This presents an attractive potential market for the goods and services being sold on social media. For instance, according to data from 2020, social media users in the United

Arab Emirates have been rising quickly. This is because popular media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter are frequently used for sharing information and drawing in new clients. According to the data, Twitter has a 53% market share in the United Arab Emirates, while LinkedIn has a 45% market share. The trend is growing because of the ease of use and increased consumer confidence in businesses. With 2 billion Facebook users globally, the hotel sector discovered that Facebook is the most popular social media platform for online connection with potential guests. Since many customers access online social media sites, the hotel sector has embraced new communication techniques. Social media applications are utilized to adapt to environmental changes and compete in the market. With the use of social networking sites, businesses may reach a global client base virtually and without physical boundaries by being visible online (Nuseir & Elrefae, 2022). Examining the effects of social networking sites is important from a marketing perspective because these apps provide a specific type of electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) communication that shapes customer behavior. More specifically, in the context of consumption, the content posted by some users on social networking sites may influence the attitudes and intents of other people (Crespo et al., 2014).

The Indian hospitality sector has been one of the main sectors driving the carrier sector's growth. The hospitality sector is the main employer both directly and indirectly in the workforce and offers a wide range of activities. The country's biggest significant foreign alternate earner and one that draws foreign direct investment is the hospitality sector (Khatwani & Bhut, 2020). The growth of the Indian hotel industry can be attributed to the surge in travel and tourism. According to 81% of respondents to a survey, they regularly or routinely read reviews before making a hotel reservation and to 80% of respondents, hotels that reply to feedback from past visitors are more concerned about their customers. In order to reach the ultimate aim of consumer pleasure, it is now crucial to keep an eye on one's presence on digital platforms and to promote the strategic use of these sites (Kulsreshta, n.d)

- **Influencer Marketing**

Social media is all around us these days, and a lot of people get their daily news from it. Approximately 50% of Twitter users who were polled said they had purchased as a result of an influencer's tweet. Influencers, as opposed to paid celebrities who are employed to promote items they frequently don't use, are regular people who have gained popularity through their online posts. This is how influencer marketing differs from traditional marketing. Influencer marketing increases followers' level of trust more than traditional advertising does (Sesar et al., 2021). Influencers' online material, mostly about hotels and destinations, has influenced consumer choices regarding purchases in the hotel and tourist industries since, before planning a trip, people typically utilize social media to look up ideas or information about the hotel or the location. The intangibility of online shopping is countered via shared multimedia content, such as images and videos, which enable the customer to visualize the hotel or destination (Peres & Silva, 2021).

Particularly in the hotel industry, the function of social media in the customer decision-making processes is still a relatively new and understudied subject. There aren't many references to this topic in literature and research as of yet from the perspective of a general consumer, therefore a study on it will close a knowledge gap, generate data, and offer a foundation for further research.

METHOD

Using a well-designed survey shared using Google Forms, this study explores the effect of social media marketing on the hotel/homestay industry. To gather both qualitative and quantitative insights into the dynamic relationship between social media techniques and important aspects of the hospitality sector, such as online presence, customer interaction, and promotional efficacy, the survey design includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The participant group is selected by combining the effective use of purposive selection for targeted inclusion and the snowball sampling approach for organic expansion. This ensures a thorough examination of a variety of viewpoints regarding social media's impact on the hotel sector.

FINDINGS

The study's results provide a thorough overview of the varied demographic of respondents, who ranged from the age from 20 to 60. In particular, 57.7% of respondents were women and 42.3% were men. A considerable number of respondents who fall within the 52(3)–53(9) age range completed the survey, indicating an advanced understanding of this group's viewpoints regarding social media's influence in the hotel industry. Geographically, Delhi(13) was the main source of responses; other few important contributors included Haryana(4), Maharashtra(4), Rajasthan(1), and even London (1), which helps us cover the NRI viewpoint as well.

The fact that the respondents have a wide range of professional backgrounds, which includes homemakers(3), lawyer (1), navy officer (1), as well as self-employed people(4) and business owner(1), deepens the findings. The study is made better by this blend, which captures perspectives from a range of lifestyle and professional experiences. The income distribution further illustrates the economic spectrum: 19.2% earn less than INR 5,00,000 per year, 15.4% fall within the INR 5,00,000 and INR 30,00,000 annual income range, and 34.6% reported an annual income of INR 30,00,000 or more. These results highlight how social media marketing in the hospitality industry has a widespread impact that cuts across many demographics, regions, and economic levels.

The first question the researcher asked was how frequently people come across content about this industry on social media. Surprisingly, 18 out of 26 respondents chose "very often" to suggest a high prevalence. Merely 7 participants selected "sometimes" while only 1 individual selected "rarely." This distribution shows that most respondents found the survey to be broadly relevant. The researcher then investigated the social media networks that the respondents favored. Instagram was the most popular option, as indicated by the 7 respondents who preferred this visually-focused platform. Facebook attracted the attention of 5 participants in close succession, and Trip Advisor came in third place with 4 respondents. The websites booking.com, akemytrip.com, and Airbnb.com were also mentioned. One response stood out for mentioning Pinterest, a website usually used for sharing photos and videos for inspiration and aesthetic appeal. The researcher was intrigued by this response since consumers don't typically use Pinterest to look for accommodations, but it can be beneficial if used properly. It is one of the more unique marketing websites on this list. On Pinterest, you share an image with a brief caption that can be clicked, rather than writing content for your readers to read. This is a popular platform for brands of tangible products, such as clothing and food brands, lodging establishments, e-commerce companies, etc. (Lakha & Vaid, 2021) Few other apps that can be utilized to a good potential are YouTube and sometimes X.

One important conclusion from the study on how social media influences travel decisions is that 13 out of 50 respondents said that social media "sometimes" influences their decisions to book accommodations. This observation calls for an in-depth study of the possible causes of this reaction. Remarkably, a sizable percentage of the respondents are between the ages of 52 and 53. Even while they actively use social media sites to look for accommodations, it appears that these sites may not be the main factor in their choice. The content that is frequently posted on social media pages, which is frequently geared towards trends that might not be particularly appealing to this age range, offers one valid argument. To have a better understanding of the dynamics, the researcher asked how often respondents based their hotel reservations on recommendations or reviews from social media. Interestingly, 18 people chose "sometimes" to imply a moderate impact. Still, a significant minority of 6 respondents selected "very often," suggesting that certain people have a great deal of influence. Conversely, 2 participants selected "rarely," indicating that, for some, recommendations from social media platforms have little bearing on the final decision-making process. The wide variety of answers demonstrates how social media influences decisions in the hotel/homestay industry to varying degrees. To enhance our knowledge, the researcher studied the precise influence of positive reviews and rankings on social media. A significant change in the responses was seen, as 14 respondents, or a large majority, stated that favorable reviews and ratings influence their decisions "very often." Furthermore, 11 respondents stated that these favorable reviews "sometimes" influenced their actions, whereas just 1 selected "rarely." This analysis emphasizes the critical role that positive content on social media feedback plays in the competitive landscape by demonstrating how it dramatically influences the preferences and decision-making processes of the majority of respondents.

An analysis of respondents' involvement in online competitions or giveaways offered by hotels or homestay companies identified a common pattern: 20 respondents said they participated in contests or giveaways rarely, 5 said they participated sometimes and 1 said they participated very often. The mentioned pattern indicates possible factors that could be influencing trust levels in social media promotions, including the age group of the majority, which is approximately 52-53 years old. It is assumed that respondents may be more likely to participate if these deals have been promoted on well-known websites like booking.com, TripAdvisor, or MakeMyTrip. On the other hand, the widespread distribution of this kind of content on particular social media sites, like Facebook and Instagram, may restrict its audience. Responses that shifted the focus to user-generated content, a critical factor in the decision-making process about accommodations showed an intriguing pattern. 19 out of the 26 individuals admitted that user-generated content "sometimes" affects their opinions, and 7 said it very often influences their decisions. Surprisingly, among the 7 respondents who selected the option of very often, 2 respondents are in the age ranges of 39 and 47 respectively and the rest above 50 acknowledged the importance of user-generated content. This research disproves presumptions by showing that influencer marketing, a relatively new phenomenon, is relevant even to people who might not be very familiar with the idea. The findings highlight the increasing significance of influencer marketing and user-

generated content in influencing decisions and viewpoints towards the hotel sector. Influencers are powerful over consumers for a variety of reasons. Research has indicated that the degree of trust consumers place in influencers can be evaluated by the experience level of these individuals. An influencer who exclusively works in one industry, for instance, will be seen as more credible and authoritative than other individuals in that industry. Influencers will have even greater trust with customers if their authority is reinforced by a sizable following and positive comments. The appeal of people on social media is another factor. People are subconsciously drawn to charismatic individuals, which strengthens the good relationship between the brand and the individual and makes it simpler to decide which product to purchase (Marin & Condrea, 2020).

The next two questions were open-ended questions to give the respondents creative freedom while sharing their thoughts. The examples of interesting and powerful social media content that respondents offered were varied and perceptive and had to do with the content quality of hotels and homestay businesses. Positive experiences at Tree of Life Resorts that welcome pets were mentioned, highlighting the significance of amenities for pet owners. An additional participant emphasized the significance of a Hyatt Indian wedding promotion, demonstrating the potency of social media campaigns with a theme. Several participants underscored the usefulness of brief emergency homestays and the importance of comprehensive details regarding outdoor activities. Some appreciated how user-generated material, such reviews and videos, captured the spirit of a place and influenced reservations. Remarkably, a respondent when going to Las Vegas altered their hotel selection due to a review referencing construction, highlighting the significance of user feedback in the decision-making process. The constructive thoughts offered by the respondents pertain to changes they would like to see in the social media promotion of hotel and homestay businesses. A common theme was the need for greater details about events like weddings, to help with the planning of peaceful getaways. Transparency was seen as a major issue by respondents, who emphasized the necessity of thorough information on room conditions, services, and related expenses to prevent misunderstandings and establish reasonable expectations. There was another demand for authenticity, imploring companies to match their marketing materials to the property's actual state and use real photos instead of photoshopped ones. The participants expressed a preference for transparent communication regarding laws, fees, and surrounding amenities, as well as a focus on using videos to emotionally connect with users through narrative. The intent of a customer's behavior is greatly influenced by the quality of the information provided. Perceived information quality is a key factor in the digital environment that supports decision-making. In the social media setting, the customer's close interactions with the brand and other users shape their sense of quality. This will therefore have a favorable effect on buying intention (Veloso & Suarez, 2023).

CONCLUSION

With a respondent pool that is diverse in terms of age, occupation, and income, the study offers insightful information on the widespread effects of social media marketing. The results of the survey show that social media users are frequently exposed to content about hospitality, with Instagram being the most popular platform. This suggests that users who are looking for inspiration for their next trip are drawn to Instagram's aesthetic appeal. Although the extent to which social media influences travel decisions vary, it is evident that favorable evaluations and rankings have a significant impact.

User-generated content is crucial in influencing perceptions in the hospitality industry, especially positive reviews. The expanding significance of influencer marketing is an important discovery. The research highlights the growing importance of influencers and user-generated content in a range of age groups, highlighting their significant influence on customer decisions in the hotel sector. The results indicate areas where social media strategy has to be improved, making these areas an invaluable compass for hotel and homestay companies. The opinions expressed by the respondents support increased openness, sincerity, and detail regarding facilities and activities. The demand for authentic, unedited images and powerful, emotive storytelling in videos reflects the necessity for brands to build meaningful relationships with their customers.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A few limitations have been found while using the survey approach to do research. The small sample size of the study restricts the applicability of the findings, and the limited variation in participant residences limits the evaluation of various perspectives. Other constraints include limited research on similar businesses in India and a restricted amount of survey questions. The lack of enough open-ended questions makes it more difficult to get qualitative data that is complex. It is recommended to increase the sample size for better representativeness, include one-on-one interviews to learn more about participant perspectives, and add more survey questions, especially open-ended ones, to improve

qualitative insights to lessen these limitations. By putting these suggestions into practice, the highlighted limitations will be addressed and a more robust and complete research framework can be developed.

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