

# ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL TOURISM

*Mr. Himanshu Tiwari<sup>1</sup>, Mr. Vidhey Soni<sup>2</sup>,*

*Prof. C. P. Gujar<sup>3</sup>,*

*Research Scholar<sup>1+2</sup>, Head of Department (HOD)<sup>3</sup>, Department Of Business Management Mahatma Gandhi Chittrakoot*

*Gramodaya Vishwavidyalaya, Chittrakoot, Satna, Madhya Pradesh*

## ABSTRACT

*In a nutshell, social media are restricted, evergreen mass communication channels that operate on the internet and allow users to perceive interactions with one another while also benefiting from user-generated material. New forms of information and communication technology (ICT) have a major impact on how people plan their vacations, and social media plays a big role in this. Cultural variations are the most important factor in deciding how much of an impact social media has on vacation travel planning across various tourist source markets. Additionally, in order to create successful digital marketing prediction models, multidisciplinary collaboration is required to use social media in the tourist industry. To improve the results of religious tourism, it is crucial to strategically link the digital habits of pilgrims with the outreach activities of stakeholders. There is an opportunity and a need to provide local institutions with the resources they need to participate successfully in online communities.*

**Keywords:** *Social, media, promoting, religious, cultural, tourism*

## INTRODUCTION

The term "social media" refers to a broad category of online platforms that allow users to create and share information and foster the illusion of community among them (Carr & Hayes, 2015). According to Weber (2007), it is "an online place where people with common interests can come together to share their thoughts, comments and ideas". People are able to search and get information from a variety of sources, not only traditional ones, thanks to social media, which plays a significant role in communication among individuals, groups, and organizations (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Additionally, it has served as a platform for them to generate original material, share personal stories and insights, and converse with one another (Dickey & Lewis, 2011).

To stay ahead of the competition and tap into new markets in today's increasingly globalized world, it's essential to be active online (Karaca, 2012). With the help of websites and social media, businesses in all sorts of sectors can connect with customers in new and exciting ways, fostering lasting connections with them. As an example, consider the travel and hospitality sector. It is among the most prevalent sectors that has utilized websites to connect with clients since the beginning of the internet era (Ip & Law, 2011; Hemsley & Dann, 2015). This could be because, unlike other distribution channels, tourist companies' websites allow customers to make direct bookings, which results in lower prices for customers (Lim & Hall, 2008). Consumers increasingly rely on social media platforms to research available hotels, compare prices, and ultimately book their stay (Ghose et al., 2011; Siamagka et al., 2015). Hence, several hotels have swiftly embraced social media as a means to gather feedback, track trends, execute marketing and promotional campaigns, meet sales goals, and stay ahead of the competition (Wang et al., 2011).

## Social Media and Cultural Tourism Association

The significance of utilizing social media as a marketing tool for all businesses is growing in tandem with the utilization of social media. Word of mouth, user evaluations, information distribution, and destination image have had a significant impact on the tourist sector in recent years, leading to an increase in the use of its channels (Peco-Torres et al., 2021). In cases where DMOs have included social media into their marketing plan, such as the "Discover Chicago campaign" and the "Pure Michigan campaign," there have been impressive and quantifiable improvements in visitor rates and satisfaction. By virtue of its ubiquitous presence on social media and its ongoing engagement with the public, the Alhambra in Granada—the most visited monument in Spain—has emerged as one of the leading international cultural tourism sources and brands (Patronato de La Alhambra y Generalife, 2016; Comunidad IEBS, 2013).

Covarrubias (2014) argues that cultural tourism resources are crucial in determining tourist destinations and are the foundation of cultural tourism development. Hence, they need to be powerful enough to entice visitors to the area. Having natural resources next to cultural riches is a common way for destinations to acquire this power. Cultural resources include things like performances, exhibits, crafts, traditional architectural areas, economic activities, ceremonies, and man-made attractions like theme parks and casinos. They also include things like festivals, fairs, and sporting events (Tinuoye, 2020). Due of their unique qualities, these resources necessitate approaches to increase their visibility, draw in more visitors, and retain existing patrons. The need to get more people involved with the brand among site visitors should also inform these tactics. Thus, engaging with tourists interested in cultural tourism through social media while expressing the brand's personality may be a successful tactic (Liasidou, 2018).

In addition, travellers' decision-making is heavily influenced by social media, and developments in ICT have a major impact on tourist consumer behavior (Peng et al., 2021). According to Fotis et al. (2012), cultural variations are the main factor that determines the influence of social media on vacation trip planning across different tourist source markets. In addition, multidisciplinary teams are required to develop digital marketing prediction models that are effective when used to social media marketing for the tourist industry (Lin et al., 2020). Bandung and other COVID-19 hotspots have seen increased tourism thanks to social media (Wahyuni et al., 2021). Additionally, Kurniawati et al. (2022) found that social media platforms are a powerful tool for conservation efforts in the tourist industry, encouraging stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices. According to Khan et al. (2022), the dissemination of useful information through user-generated content on social media platforms increases tourist satisfaction and boosts the tourism business.

### Integral role in the customer journey:

- Travelers utilize social media at every stage of their journey, from planning their trips (via vlogs and time check) to creating content (via live uploading) and sharing it afterward.
- These days, a lot of people plan their trips based on what they see on social media and their mobile devices.

### Support for local economies and businesses:

- Local companies, suppliers, and transportation services may reap the rewards of an uptick in visitors brought about by social media's elevated profile.
- It allows small enterprises to reach a wider audience with less money spent on marketing.

## Data-Driven Models for Strategic Destination Marketing

This is where we find the focus on smart tourism, which aims to create creative, intelligent, and sustainable tourist ecosystems through the integration of ICT and the Internet of Things. The Internet of Things (IoT) is essential for the many facets of smart tourism, including smart mobility, smart hospitality, smart attractions, and smart destinations. The existing literature does, however, present a plethora of difficult problems and potential next steps for investigation. To begin, the terminology used to describe the new Internet of Things (IoT) solutions in the tourist industry is inconsistent and leaves much to the imagination. Example: the research environment is becoming more disorganized and fragmented due to the increased usage of terminology like "smart tourism," "e-tourism," and "digital tourism" without clear difference.

Through a rigorous analysis of literature and industry reports, this endeavors to establish a distinct and all-encompassing typology of Internet of Things (IoT) advancements for the tourist sector. Little is known about their practical implementation, despite prior research on their potential to save corporate expenses while also generating novel tourist experiences. Within this framework, the purpose of this part is to conduct case studies of early Internet of Things (IoT) installations across various tourist industries, focusing on their outcomes and lessons gained. Thirdly, the ethical and sociological effects of the Internet of Things on the tourist industry have received surprisingly little attention in academic writings. As travel experiences get increasingly mediated, these worries may be associated with digital discrimination in addition to privacy and security concerns. This provides an ethical framework for developing the Internet of Things (IoT) in the tourist industry, which tackles these concerns from the standpoint of responsible innovation. Lastly, some studies have shown that the Internet of Things (IoT) might help with sustainable tourism growth, but we still need more data and evidence to know how much of an effect it will have on society and the environment.

By identifying and addressing the critical gaps in the framework, the findings will enrich the smart tourism literature with an emphasis on in-depth examination of Internet of Things (IoT) advancements utilized in the tourist sector. As a result, the anticipated study will offer groundbreaking insights that will facilitate strategic planning and decision-making with an eye on molding the industry's future trajectory in relation to the Internet of Things.

**Strategic Destination Management:** By allowing for real-time, evidence-based decision-making, data-driven models connected with the IoT are revolutionizing strategic destination marketing in religious and cultural tourism. In order to keep tabs on things like visitor flows, peak visiting periods, movement patterns, stay length, and service consumption, tourist authorities and temple management organizations can use digital payment systems, smart cameras, mobile devices, GPS tracking, and sensors that are enabled by the Internet of Things. Destinations may use these models in conjunction with analytics platforms and social media data to learn about tourists' preferences, anticipate demand spikes around religious holidays or festivals, and divide pilgrims into different groups based on their actions rather than their demographics. Such data-driven Internet of Things (IoT) frameworks provide optimized infrastructure, crowd control, tailored communication, and targeted digital marketing within the context of cultural and religious tourism, guaranteeing an improved tourist experience while also facilitating sustainable destination administration. Therefore, the promotion of religious tourism is moving away from the old model of mass outreach and toward models of interaction that are adaptable, intelligent, and context-aware, thanks to the Internet of Things (IoT). This is to ensure that spiritual travel is in line with the development of smart tourist ecosystems.

## **Enhance the Pilgrim/Tourist Journey through Strategic Digital Alignment**

### **Spiritual Tourism with AI-Powered Customization:**

The rise of personalized experiences in contemporary tourism is largely attributable to developments in AI technology. Customization is key to this technique, since it allows us to cater to each client's tastes and demands, guaranteeing their pleasure. Thanks to AI, tailor-made vacation packages can be easily put together to meet the needs of all kinds of tourists.

The essence of customization is learning about a tourist's likes and dislikes in order to create individualized itineraries. By encouraging steadfast client loyalty to travel businesses and partners, this not only improves the entire tourist experience but also helps the sector expand. On top of that, customization boosts operational efficiency, which in turn lowers costs for tour operators and increases pleasure for travelers. A win-win situation is created when the service providers and visitors work together in this way.

Personalization influences pricing tactics in a big way, and it also improves consumer experiences. Companies in the tourism industry may take advantage of demand-based pricing, especially during busy seasons, by using dynamic pricing strategies. By doing so, we can maximize the use of our resources and the amount of money we make.

Incorporating predictive technologies, like AI-driven weather forecasts, into customization helps make travel safer by giving visitors up-to-the-minute information about the destination's circumstances. These features highlight the many advantages of AI-driven customization, which improves tourist services in many ways, including efficiency and safety.

### **Virtual and augmented reality for enhanced religious encounters:**

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are technologies that bridge the virtual and physical worlds, offering innovative applications in the tourism industry. VR creates virtual environments, allowing tourists to experience destinations without physically visiting them. AR overlays digital elements onto real-world views, enriching the user's perception of their surroundings. VR provides a realistic representation of sites, making it useful for pre-trip planning or for those unable to travel due to constraints. AR reveals hidden details or historical reconstructions, reshaping the tourism experience by combining convenience with innovative storytelling and engagement.

### **Virtual reality's impact on spiritual encounters: a moral and genuine examination**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be used to support spiritual progress by enhancing pilgrims' spiritual beliefs and experiences. While AI cannot embody spirituality, it can offer insights and tools for studying spiritual practices. The primary objective of AI in spiritual contexts is to uphold ethical standards, such as mitigating bias, ensuring user safety, protecting sensitive data, and maintaining spiritual integrity. This aligns with values that promote fairness and trust. The integration of AI into spiritual activities has sparked diverse perspectives, with some advocating for its benefits and others expressing concerns about the ethical implications of merging human experiences with machine intelligence.

### **Empowering local heritage institutions in the digital ecosystem**

Building capacity, making technology accessible, and developing strategic content are three facets of a strategy that might help local cultural organizations become legitimate voices in the digital ecosystem. Important measures consist of:

## Capacity Building and Training

- **Digital Literacy Workshops:** Providing opportunities for workers and volunteers to learn fundamental digital skills such as content production, social media management, and online archiving through seminars and training sessions
- **Access to Funding:** In order to help institutions overcome financial hurdles to acquiring required technology and knowledge, there should be financing opportunities and incentives expressly for digitalization initiatives.
- **Partnerships:** One way to gain access to pooled resources, mentorship, and technical support is to form partnerships with bigger, more established museums, colleges, and IT businesses on a national level.

## Technology and Infrastructure Support

- **Accessible Tools:** The successful implementation of digital asset management software and user-friendly content management systems that do not necessitate IT expertise
- **Cloud Storage Solutions:** Digital collections may be safely stored in the cloud, where they will remain accessible and preserved for the future without requiring expensive equipment purchases.
- **Mobile Accessibility:** Because many consumers, particularly younger ones, get information mostly through cellphones, it is important to make sure that digital platforms and content are mobile-friendly.

## Content Strategy and Engagement

- **Showcasing Unique Stories:** Inspiring cultural institutions to showcase local, underrepresented histories and one-of-a-kind artifacts that strike a chord with locals and provide a refreshing change from the usual tales
- **Interactive Experiences:** Building more compelling multimedia material, virtual tours, and interactive digital exhibitions to attract more visitors and provide a more immersive experience
- **Community Participation:** To increase authenticity and ownership, local communities can be included in the digitization process through co-creation initiatives. This can be done by crowdsourcing historical knowledge or sharing personal tales.
- **Strategic Online Presence:** Engaging with the community and making collections discoverable through popular search engines and platforms through the use of social media, local history blogs, and online forums

## OBJECTIVES

1. To include data-driven, predictive models for strategic destination marketing.
2. To Use Strategic Digital Alignment to Customize and Improve the Pilgrim/Tourist Experience.
3. To Strengthen Regional Heritage Organizations as Real Voices in the Digital Environment

## RESEARCH METHOD

Examining the impact of digital interaction on pilgrimage visitation to Ayodhya and Chitrakoot from 2022 to 2024, this study takes a comparative descriptive-analytical approach. By integrating interpretative estimation with secondary data analysis, the methodology is organized to conform to the requirements of peer-reviewed social science and tourist research.

Secondary data comes from a variety of sources, such as statistics reported by the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, reports from the Madhya Pradesh Economic Survey and Tourism Department, summaries of official reports on pilgrimage tourism, and financial disclosures made public by the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust. These sources were chosen because of the trustworthiness of their institutions and how often they are cited in research that aims to inform policy. To improve the credibility of the data, data triangulation was used by checking financial indicators and tourist footfall counts across several reports. Patterns of digital involvement across two pilgrimage sites with different degrees of institutional support and media exposure are the focus of the comparative and longitudinal analytical approach. We look at Ayodhya as an example of intense digital mediation and Chitrakoot as a case of slow digital adoption within the context of traditional pilgrimages. By comparing trends over the course of three years, the study is able to record how event-driven exposure and ongoing online outreach have accelerated digitally impacted travel.

Tabular layouts and trend-based interpretations are used to show data, making it easy to compare digital effect percentages and major drivers over years. In line with qualitative-quantitative hybrid methodologies frequently utilized in cultural studies and tourism research, this study avoids inferential statistical testing owing to the estimated attribution's nature and instead places an emphasis on policy-relevant interpretation within a contextual framework. We used NVivo to record the interviews, transcribe them, and then analyze them thematically. In addition, visual narratives, hashtags, and geotags pertaining to the pilgrimage locations were the primary foci of an ethnographic study of user-generated content (UGC) across social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube (Sigala, M. et al. 2011).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: Annual Tourist Arrivals – Ayodhya (2022–2024)**

Year	Total Tourist Arrivals	Year-on-Year Growth (Qualitative)
2022	2,39,10,479 (≈ 23.9 million)	Baseline (post-COVID recovery)
2023	5,75,70,896 (≈ 57.6 million)	Sharp increase (religious tourism revival)
2024	16,44,12,137 (≈ 164.4 million)	Exponential surge (Ram Mandir inauguration, mass media focus)

*(Source: Media-reported UP Tourism data)*

Tourism Explosion in Ayodhya from 2022 to 2024, the number of tourists visiting Ayodhya increases at a non-linear, exponential rate. The opening of the Ram Mandir, together with extensive online campaigning, livestreamed ceremonies, and widespread coverage in national and international media, turned Ayodhya into a popular destination for religious tourists from across the world.

**Table 2: Tourist Footfall – Chitrakoot (2022–2024)**

Year	Tourist Footfall (Annual)	Source / Notes	Reliability
2022 (FY 2021–22)	35.7 lakh (≈ 3.57 million)	Swadesh / regional tourism estimates	Moderate
2023	9,001,126 (≈ 9.0 million)	MP Economic Survey / Tourism Dept.	High
2024	1.19 crore (≈ 11.9 million)	MP Govt. notified tourism summary	High

A linear increase in tourist footfall has been seen in Chitrakoot. There has been slower growth compared to Ayodhya, despite the significant religious importance, due to low institutional digital adoption, small infrastructural size, and media centrality.

**Table 3: Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust – Income Profile**

**A. Annual Income Snapshot**

Financial Year	Total Income (₹ crore)
2022–2023	208.97
2024–2025	327.00

**B. Revenue Breakdown (FY 2023–2024)**

Revenue Source	Amount (₹ crore)
Total Revenue	363.34
Donations (Total)	173.86
Donation Boxes	94.30
Online Donations	71.00
Interest from Bank Deposits	204.00
Foreign Contributions (FCRA)	10.43

Following the Ram Mandir's opening, the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust's income profile shows a rapid and steady increase in its financial basis. Rapid commercialization of religious tourism and greater devotional involvement are shown by the large yearly income growth from ₹208.97 crore in 2022–2023 to ₹327 crore in 2024–2025. The income model for FY 2023–2024 is diverse and fundamentally stable, as shown by the full revenue breakdown. Although ₹174.86 crore is still mostly contributed by donations (₹94.30 crore from conventional donation boxes and ₹71 crore from digitally enabled online contributions), the most remarkable aspect is the remarkably high interest income of ₹204 crore received from bank accounts. There has been a strategy change toward financial sustainability and institutional maturity, and the size of the accumulated corpus funds is also evident. Further evidence of the temple's worldwide devotional appeal is the ₹10.43 crore in contributions received from outside the country. The data as a whole show that the Trust is no longer a religious

organization that relies on donations for its funding. Instead, it is a financially strong institution that can weather economic storms thanks to digital giving, pilgrimage-driven inflows, and careful financial management.

**Table 4: Estimated Digital Engagement Contribution (%)**

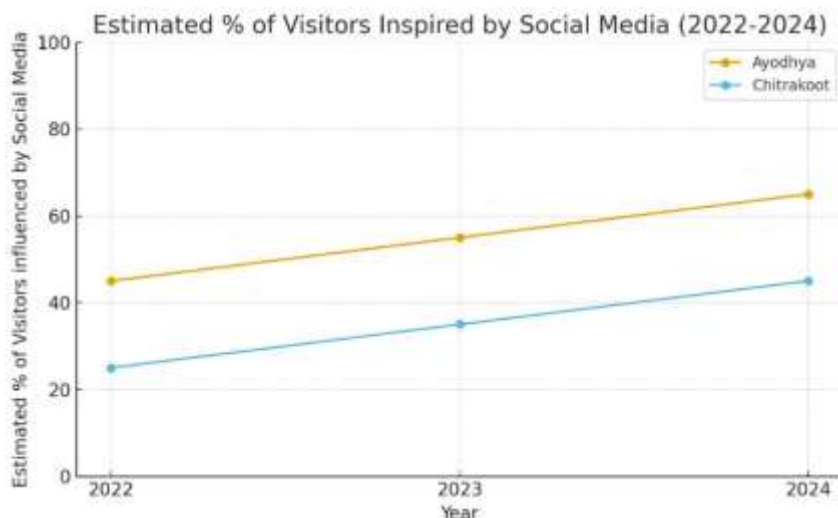
*(Based on growth patterns, media penetration, and institutional digital adoption)*

Year	Ayodhya (%)	Chitrakoot (%)	Key Drivers
2022	45%	25%	Initial digital outreach, post-pandemic recovery
2023	55%	35%	Social media amplification, pilgrimage campaigns
2024	65%	45%	Temple inauguration, live-streams, online donations, national media

Online platforms are becoming increasingly important in pilgrimage tourism, as seen in the table, which shows that the expected percentage of travelers impacted by digital interaction in both Ayodhya and Chitrakoot consistently rises from 2022 to 2024. Online outreach impacted 45% of visitors in Ayodhya in 2022, compared to 25% in Chitrakoot. This disparity was mostly caused by initial digital promotion and post-pandemic travel recovery, with the former seeing a stronger digital impact. Due to increased social media amplification and organized pilgrimage campaigns, the proportion of Ayodhya's visitors impacted by digital factors reached 55% in 2023, widening the gap between the two locations. In contrast, Chitrakoot had a more moderate growth, reaching 35%. The Ram Mandir inauguration, live-streamed religious ceremonies, online contribution systems, and sustained national media coverage had a revolutionary effect, and by 2024, the influence of digital media had peaked in both Ayodhya (at 65%) and Chitrakoot (at 45%). Ayodhya is positioned as a digitally driven pilgrimage center thanks to better institutional digital initiatives and high-profile religious events, according to the research, whereas Chitrakoot demonstrates consistent but more slower digital integration. The Multiplier Effect of Digital Mediation on Growth Rather of supplanting more conventional types of pilgrimage, more and more individuals are turning to digital channels to enhance their experience. Faith, finance, and technology have all been well-integrated in Ayodhya, as seen by its greater digital share. Perspectives on Comparison The Ramayana pilgrimage stops at Ayodhya and Chitrakoot are similar; yet, Ayodhya has transformed into a mega-religious economy reliant on digital media, while Chitrakoot has maintained its traditional pilgrimage character while embracing modernization.

### **Ayodhya's Ram Mandir is Now The 4th Richest Temple**

One of India's most popular pilgrimage destinations, the magnificent Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, has reached a new financial milestone. In FY 2024-25, the Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust earned ₹327.07 crore, making it the fourth highest-earning temple in India, all within a relatively short time after its opening, as per the most recent financial records.



**Graph 1 Estimated percentage of visitors inspired by social media (2022-2024)**

From 2022 to 2024, the graph reveals that the percentage of Ayodhya and Chitrakoot visitors impacted by social media increased significantly, demonstrating the increasing power of digital platforms to shape pilgrimage travel decisions. The Ram Mandir inauguration, along with relentless media coverage and intense digital campaigns, turned Ayodhya into a prominently featured, digitally mediated religious site, and the percentage of visitors attracted by these platforms surges from 45% in 2022 to 55% in 2023 and even higher to 65% in 2024. Although Chitrakoot began from a lower base, it has been consistently showing an upward trend. The percentage of visitors influenced by social media increased from 25% in 2022 to 35% in 2023 and 45% in 2024, demonstrating a progressive acceptance of digital tools and an expansion of online exposure. Parallel upward trajectories prove that social media is a key driver of pilgrimage tourism, more frequently converting online religious engagement into in-person visits; nevertheless, the ongoing disparity between the two locations implies disparities in size, institutional digital outreach, and national media attention.

**Table 5: Results from Research on the Impact of Social Media on the Promotion of Cultural and Religious Tourism**

Category	Findings
Social Media Usage Patterns Among Pilgrims	<p>Before, during, or after their pilgrimage, 87% of those who took part used social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The two most important sites were YouTube and Instagram. Travel vlogs, temple schedules, and pilgrim evaluations were important resources for planning the trip.</li> <li>• Instagram Stories, Facebook Live, and the ability to create content in real-time while there.</li> <li>• More than two-thirds of pilgrims (65%+) documented their experiences online after their trip.</li> </ul>
Alignment with Previous Research	<p>The results corroborate those of Kapoor et al. (2021), who found that digital factors impact the choice of spiritual sites.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In line with the findings of Xiang and Gretzel (2010) about the significance of material created by peers.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unique approach: zero in on pilgrimages in smaller districts (like Chitrakoot) where the use of digital technologies has been traditionally low.</li> <li>• Offers a dual viewpoint by including the perspectives of both pilgrims and tourist stakeholders.</li> </ul>
Practical Implications for Tourism Authorities and Temple Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An effective social media presence requires constant effort and careful planning.</li> </ul> <p>Why More pilgrims interact with digital information and services that are mobile-friendly.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organic promotion may be achieved by utilizing user-generated content (UGC).</li> <li>• Increasing exposure through reviews, hashtags, tagging, and geotagging</li> </ul>
District-Level Digital Variation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With the help of the government and temple administrators, Ayodhya has become more visible online.</li> </ul> <p>Lower online engagement is a result of Chitrakoot's behind-the-curve digital outreach.</p>
Identified Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disparity in digital literacy: pilgrims tend to be more tech-savvy than many tour operators.</li> <li>• Communication and branding are impacted by religious institutions' inconsistent adoption.</li> <li>• The pilgrimage circuit's lack of a unified digital approach</li> </ul>
Overall Interpretation	<p>Decisions, motives, and sharing behavior related to modern pilgrimages are now heavily influenced by social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online resources not only encourage community involvement but also educate and inspire religious pilgrimages.</li> </ul> <p>To increase exposure and maintain the growth of cultural tourism, coordinated digital initiatives are crucial.</p>

## Discussion

The research shows that nowadays, pilgrims' expectations, behaviors, and experiences are greatly influenced by social media. The high degree of acceptance (87%) indicates that digital technologies are now integrated into the whole pilgrimage process, from preparing before a visit to engaging while on site and sharing after a visit (Mangold et al., 2009). This fits in with how tourists are changing their habits all throughout the world, with

more and more turning to internet resources to help them make judgments. The rising power of visual storytelling and user-generated material in inspiring spiritual journeys is exemplified by the dominance of platforms like YouTube and Instagram. A shift from more conventional means of information dissemination, such word of mouth, to digital guiding systems is seen in the increasing dependence of pilgrims on travel vlogs, reviews, and temple-related content. Previous research is also supported by the study's results. Digital media has a substantial impact on the locations chosen by spiritual tourists in India, according to Kapoor et al. (2021). The role of peer-generated information in shaping travel views and tourist expectations was also highlighted in the study of Xiang and Gretzel (2010). Pilgrimage tourism in less digitally prominent and smaller regions, such as Chitrakoot, is the topic of the present study, which adds to this conversation. With the help of government funding and well-organized temple management, large pilgrimage sites like Ayodhya have become more visible online, whereas many smaller districts have a disjointed or nonexistent presence. This discrepancy points to a digital divide inside pilgrimage circuits, which has an effect on the number of tourists and how well-known local landmarks are. The study's most important finding is the increasing importance of pilgrims as digital ambassadors. The Multiplier Effect of Digital Mediation on Growth Rather of supplanting more conventional types of pilgrimage, more and more individuals are turning to digital channels to enhance their experience. Faith, finance, and technology have all been well-integrated in Ayodhya, as seen by its greater digital share. Inconsistent institutional participation persists, nonetheless, notwithstanding its organic expansion. Particularly in less populous regions, there is a dearth of organized digital outreach initiatives among certain tourist boards and religious trusts. Because of this, they are unable to fully utilize the advertising opportunities presented by social media. The disparity in digital capabilities between pilgrims who are well-versed in technology and tour operators who are not presents a formidable obstacle. Although pilgrims are prepared to participate through digital reviews, social media hashtags, and mobile apps, institutional stakeholders frequently do not have the necessary staff, funds, or knowledge to implement effective digital marketing tactics. This void prevents pilgrimage circuits from being digitally branded as a whole and causes potential for coordinated cultural tourism promotion to be unrealized. Moreover, local vendors and businesses surrounding pilgrimage sites are still not well-connected to digital platforms, which limits their potential to draw in customers and improve service. In sum, the results show that social media is changing religious tourism in profound ways, beyond its role as a communication tool. By allowing users to interact in real-time, it improves the spiritual experience, impacts location choices, and strengthens collective cultural identity through shared storytelling. Local stakeholders, including tourist authorities and temple administrations, need to implement digital strategies that are consistent, professional, and culturally sensitive if they want to take full use of this potential. Religious and cultural tourism ecosystems may be strengthened by the appropriate integration of social media, which greatly increases the visibility, accessibility, and cultural value of pilgrimage places. Perspectives on Comparison The Ramayana pilgrimage stops at Ayodhya and Chitrakoot are similar; yet, Ayodhya has transformed into a mega-religious economy reliant on digital media, while Chitrakoot has maintained its traditional pilgrimage character while embracing modernization.

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms what many already suspected: social media plays a significant role in the Uttar Pradesh and M.P. pilgrimage tourist industry, especially in the Ayodhya and Chitrakoot regions. Digital platforms have evolved into indispensable travel companions, impacting everything from location selection to in-visit behavior and post-visit sharing. These days, pilgrims aren't just observers; they're digital players who add to the story of holy pilgrimage as it unfolds. While there is a lot of activity from users, the collected data shows that institutional adoption of digital technologies is still in its early stages and not uniform. Additionally, the report emphasizes the wide gap between tech-savvy pilgrims and stakeholders in the tourist industry who lack the necessary

equipment. A small number of temples and operators are making the transition to the digital world, but the majority are woefully unprepared (Hudson et al., 2015). The potential for equitable growth in the industry is hindered by this separation, which in turn limits the overall influence of social media on pilgrimage tourism. A strategy alignment is required to close this gap; specifically, one that strengthens local institutions by increasing their digital literacy, fostering collaborative marketing, and developing necessary infrastructure (Kim et al., 2015). The pilgrimage industry in Uttar Pradesh and M.P. can modernize its outreach while preserving and promoting its hallowed traditions for a global, connected audience by developing a tourist environment that is digitally fluent (Raza et al., 2021). When it comes to the development of pilgrimage tourism, social media is far from being an incidental factor. The religious tourist experiences in Chitrakoot and Ayodhya are becoming more and more intertwined with digital threads. To improve the results of religious tourism, it is crucial to strategically link the digital habits of pilgrims with the outreach activities of stakeholders. There is an opportunity and a need to provide local institutions with the resources they need to participate successfully in online communities (Sahoo et al., 2020).

### **Recommendation and future scope**

Several new lines of inquiry and potential applications have been illuminated by this work. Although this study only looked at two districts in Uttar Pradesh, researchers might easily extend their findings to other pilgrimage areas in India to find more widespread patterns of online participation. The potential behavioral effects of social media on pilgrimage's spiritual components over the long term, such as how virtual encounters could alter views of sanctity, might be the subject of future studies. In addition, there is room to investigate how other digital interventions, such as AI-powered chatbots, QR-based temple guides, or mobile applications, may improve the pilgrimage experience. By utilizing these information, policymakers and tourism planners may create digital strategies that are tailored to certain regions. This will help to ensure that stakeholders from both urban and rural areas are included in the ever-changing religious tourism scene.

- Temple and tourist employees might benefit from digital marketing and social media management seminars that can be arranged through training programs.
- Collaborative Campaigns: Encourage DMOs to form alliances with influential people in the area.
- Incentives for material Creation: Use gamified incentive systems to motivate pilgrims to create and tag material. Multilingual Content: Make sure that social media posts may be seen in English, Hindi.
- Pilgrimage App Development: A location-based app that incorporates calendar events, darshan slots, live broadcasts, and maps

### **REFERENCES**

- [1.] Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A. (2015). Social media: Defining, developing, and divining. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 23, 46-65.
- [2.] Weber, L. (2007). *Marketing to the social web: how digital customer communities build your business*. Wiley, Hoboken.
- [3.] Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251.

- [4.] Dickey, I. J., & Lewis, W. F. (2011). An overview of digital media and advertising. In Easting, M. S., Daugherty, T., & Burns, N. M. (Ed.), *Digital media and advertising: User generated content consumption* (pp. 1-31). NY Information Science Reference.
- [5.] Karaca, Ş. (2012). İnternette Pazarlama ve Ürün Karar Stratejileri. *Çukurova Üniversitesi İİBF Dergisi*, 16(1), 37-51.
- [6.] Buhalis, D., & Law, R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the internet-The state of eTourism research. *Tourism Management*, 29(4), 609-623.
- [7.] Hemsley, B., & Dann, S. (2015). Social media and social marketing in relation to facilitated communication: harnessing the affordances of social media for knowledge translation. *Evid Commun Assess Interv*, 8(4), 187–206
- [8.] Lim, W.M. & Hall, M. J. (2008). Pricing consistency across direct and indirect distribution channels in South West UK hotels. *J Vacat Mark*, 14(4), 331–344.
- [9.] Siamagka, N-T, Christodoulides, G., & Michaelidou, N. (2015). The impact of comparative affective states on online brand perceptions. *Int Mark Rev*, 32(3/4), 438-454.
- [10.] Wang, Q., Chen, W., & Liang, Y. (2011). *The Effects of Social Media on College Students*. Johnson & Wales University, Providence, RI.
- [11.] Peco-Torres, F., Polo-Pen˜a, A. I., & Fri´as-Jamilena, D. M. (2021). Brand personality in cultural tourism through social media. *Tourism Review*, 76(1), 164-183.
- [12.] Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife. (2016). Observatorio turı´stico. [www.alhambrapatronato.es/index.php/Observatorio-Turistico/57/0/](http://www.alhambrapatronato.es/index.php/Observatorio-Turistico/57/0/)
- [13.] Comunidad IEBS. (2013). La voz del patrimonio: La Alhambra de Granada. <https://comunidad.iebschool.com/laculturasocial/2013/12/17/la-voz-del-patrimonio-la-alhambra-degranada/>
- [14.] Covarrubias, R. (2014). Evaluacion del potencial en municipios turı ´sticos a trave´s de metodologi´as participativas. *El Caso de Los Municipios de la Zona Norte de Colima*, Editorial Eumed.net, Me´xico.
- [15.] Tinuoye, O. I. (2020). Social media a tool for tourism marketing: A study among tourism students of federal Polytechnic, Ilaro. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference, The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro*, 10th – 11th Nov
- [16.] Liasidou, S. (2018). Representation of cultural tourism on the web: Critical discourse analysis of tourism websites. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 12(3), 327- 347.
- [17.] Kapoor, S., Bhatia, A., & Singh, R. (2021). Digital influence on spiritual tourism behavior in India: An emerging perspective. *Journal of Tourism Insights*, 12(2), 45–58.
- [18.] Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31(2), 179–188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.02.016>
- [19.] Munar, A. M., & Jacobsen, J. K. S. (2014). Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media. *Tourism Management*, 43, 46–54.
- [20.] Zeng, B., & Gerritsen, R. (2014). What do we know about social media in tourism? A review. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 10, 27–36.

- [21.] Dwivedi, M., Yadav, A., & Vyas, V. (2012). Social media as a tool for enhancing tourism marketing. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Technology*, 3(3), 28–34.
- [22.] Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: Influence on visitor engagement. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1–2), 148–166.
- [23.] Fotis, J., Buhalis, D., & Rossides, N. (2012). Social media use and impact during the travel planning process. In M. Sigala, E. Christou & U. Gretzel (Eds.), *Social Media in Travel, Tourism and Hospitality*, 13–24. Routledge.
- [24.] Sigala, M. (2018). Social media and customer engagement in tourism. *Tourism Management*, 70, 44–62.
- [25.] Moyle, B., Weiler, B., & Croy, G. (2019). Digital influence and tourist decision-making: The role of user-generated content. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 22(15), 1864–1880.
- [26.] Jalilvand, M. R., & Samiei, N. (2012). The impact of electronic word-of-mouth on intention to travel. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Technology*, 3(1), 12–29.
- [27.] Sarkar, S., & George, B. (2018). Social media and spiritual tourism: A study of pilgrim motivations. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 6(2), 22–37.
- [28.] Rahman, M. M., & Zaman, H. (2020). Social media in promoting cultural and religious destinations: A South Asian perspective. *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, 5(1), 1–15.
- [29.] Peng, M., Yang, X., Qu, W., & Fan, F. (2021). Research progress and enlightenment on the application of social media in tourism abroad. *Smart Tourism*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.54517/st.v2i2.1688>
- [30.] Fotis, J., Buhalis, D., & Rossides, N. (2012). Social Media Use and Impact during the Holiday Travel Planning Process. In *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2012* (pp. 13–24). Springer Vienna. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-7091-1142-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-7091-1142-0_2)
- [31.] Lin, H.-C., Han, X., Lyu, T., Ho, W.-H., Xu, Y., Hsieh, T.-C., Zhu, L., & Zhang, L. (2020). Task-technology fit analysis of social media use for marketing in the tourism and hospitality industry: a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(8), 2677–2715. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-12-2019-1031>
- [32.] Wahyuni, H., Purnomo, E. P., & Fathani, A. T. (2021). Social media supports tourism development in the COVID19 normal era in Bandung. *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi (Indonesian Journal of Communications Studies)*, 5(3), 600–616. <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v5i3.3805>
- [33.] Kurniawati, E., Meiji, N., & Apriyadi, D. (2022). The Role of Social Media in Strengthening the Conservation Movement as a Sustainable Trend in Indonesian Tourism. *KnE Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v7i16.12181>
- [34.] Khan, A., Senin, A. A., Zulfiqar, U., & Ashfaq, J. (2022). Influence of User Generated Content (UGC) on Tourist Satisfaction in Pre-Purchase Period of Tourism in Pakistan. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i1/12237>
- [35.] Sigala, M. (2011). Social media and customer engagement in the context of tourism service co-creation. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 25(6), 446–457. [16]. Li, X., & Wang, Y. (2011). Measuring the effectiveness of social media in promoting religious tourism. *Tourism Economics*, 17(3), 693–708.

- [36.] Mangold, W. G., & Faulds, D. J. (2009). Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix. *Business Horizons*, 52(4), 357–365.
- [37.] Hudson, S., Roth, M. S., Madden, T. J., & Hudson, R. (2015). The influence of social media interactions on consumer–brand relationships in tourism. *Tourism Management*, 47, 68–76.
- [38.] Kim, J., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2015). Sharing tourism experiences: The post-trip behavior of travelers. *Tourism Management*, 45, 151– 158.
- [39.] Sahoo, S., & Das, M. (2020). Pilgrimage tourism and digital communication: Changing patterns of religious journeys in Odisha. *Indian Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 13(1), 22–35.
- [40.] Raza, H., & Jain, S. (2021). Evaluating the effectiveness of digital marketing in temple tourism: A study in Varanasi. *Journal of Heritage Tourism Studies*, 9(3), 78–91.

**Copyright & License:**

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.