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Editor's Note

As of February 2023, the global tourism industry continues its journey towards recovery from the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the sector has made significant strides, it remains in a state of flux, with several key trends and developments shaping its trajectory.

The tourism industry has shown resilience and adaptability in the face of the pandemic. Many countries have eased travel restrictions, leading to a gradual increase in tourism activities, both domestically and internationally. However, recovery rates vary across regions. Domestic tourism has been a lifeline for the industry. Travelers have been exploring their own countries, contributing to the revival of local tourism economies. This trend is expected to continue as people prioritize safety and convenience. The vaccination campaigns worldwide have been a critical factor in reopening borders and restoring traveler confidence. Vaccine passports and proof of vaccination are becoming commonplace for international travel.

The digital transformation of the tourism sector has accelerated. Online booking platforms, contactless payments, and virtual experiences have become standard, enhancing both convenience and safety for travelers. Environmental and social sustainability have gained prominence. Travelers are increasingly interested in eco-friendly and responsible tourism options, pushing the industry to adopt more sustainable practices.

Traveler behavior has shifted, with a greater emphasis on health and wellness. Wellness tourism, outdoor activities, and remote destinations have seen increased interest. The integration of technology, including artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR), has enhanced the travel experience. AI-driven chatbots and AR-enhanced tours are examples of these innovations. The aviation sector has seen a gradual recovery in passenger numbers. Airlines have implemented safety measures, such as improved air filtration systems, to mitigate health risks during flights. Challenges persist, including uncertainty about the emergence of new variants, sporadic travel restrictions, and a need for industry-wide standardization of health and safety protocols.

The tourism industry's recovery journey is ongoing, marked by a mix of optimism and caution. While the path ahead may still be uncertain, the industry's ability to adapt, embrace sustainability, and prioritize traveler safety positions it well for future growth and resilience. Monitoring the evolving landscape and embracing innovation will continue to be essential in the months to come.

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Travel Planning and Decision-Making Process: An Era of Digital Marketing

Richa Mishra

Abstract

Technological inclusion in our day to day lives has completely changed the way things are done. Technology is here to stay. It has impacted our lives in the smallest possible way. It has impacted our thoughts, beliefs and attitude. We have willingly become dependent on technology as it is highly convenient and reduces human efforts. Using smart phones and laptops has become extremely common. The exposure to Internet has changed the entire process of information flow. Any information we require is just one click away. Tourism industry is no exception. From industry professionals to tourists everyone is using digital platforms as per their requirements. Tourists these days are relying on internet for everything. They are on internet all day looking for travel destinations and other travel related information. They even go back to internet to cross check the information they get from a service provider. The benefit model for tourism service providers proposed in the paper try to lay down all the benefits of strong digital presence for them.

Keywords: Tourism, Hospitality, Digital Marketing, Tourist Behaviour, Technology.

Introduction

Digital transformation is seen to have transformed the way tourism industry works. The industry that use to rely majorly on face to face interaction is now craving for latest technology. The most important reason is the growing inclination of the tourists towards technology and digital mediums. Technology has impacted the tourism industry in all its spheres. Digital development is used for gaining competitive advantage among other service providers and to build a larger client base. Tourism and Hospitality industry is among the many industries that are most impacted by this digital era. The use of Digital marketing is on the rise and the tourism service providers are using it extensively to cater to their customers. The transportation and accommodation service providers are using the digital marketing techniques to provide personalised and best possible services to their clients. Hospitality industry is also using digital marketing for enhanced customer engagement, increased social media presence to communicate with their prospective clients, increasing online presence and to attract customers looking memorable and worth remembering travelling experience. The concept of digital tourism in which digital

tools are used for preparing, organising and controlling the process of travelling for more efficiency and effective results is becoming quite popular. Digital marketing involves techniques like E-mail marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, search engine optimisation, digital advertising and search engine marketing. Digital marketing in hospitality is basically maximising the online presence on social media platforms such as google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other search engines. The service providers also use digital marketing strategies such as having your own website, having a blog, uploading of videos, using influencer marketing and most importantly making sure that they have a positive reputation online. Digital marketing techniques has become an integral part of all hospitality businesses. The key factors for succeeding in tourism business are government initiatives, geographical diversity, changing consumer behaviour, customised and personalised tour packages and availability of finances. Unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing allows customers to get unlimited information in one single search. Digital marketing also pave way towards building a brand and brand equity. It helps the service providers to cater to

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the needs of the niche market segments having specific needs eg: tourists looking for yoga & spiritual tourism, wellness & health tourism, rural tourism etc. Not only the tourism and the hospitality industry but the entire world is moving towards digital mediums as these are certainly more streamlined, versatile, fast and affordable. The most important aspect of going digital is that the performance evaluation is on the spot and hence can be monitored on real time basis. Using digital marketing strategies has become a necessity for businesses in order to keep pace with the changing business and marketing environment and consumer behaviour. Digital marketing helps the service providers to reach their prospective clients in the most innovative ways and give them customised services.

The existing intense competition among travel agents has made it important for conventional agent to go digital. All conventional travel agents must go online or at least do a combination between online and offline marketing. Furthermore, going digital also constitutes an important factor for achieving the success of local travel agencies. Opportunities for tourist's organizations to interact with tourists expand dramatically. According to professional opinion, social media are more reliable and their content is wide and varied (Agung Suryawan Wiranath et al., 2016)

It is the current generation of tourists commonly known as the generation Z leading the tourism industry towards digital mediums. It is only due to digital marketing techniques that the tourism industry is able to reach its customers worldwide and entice them to travel.

The opportunities in digital marketing exists in terms of social media marketing, content marketing and mobile marketing which are driven by population (e.g. 50 percent of Nigeria's population use smartphones), internet and mobile users as well as social media capacity as Facebook subscribers which implies that digital marketing like social media marketing, creative content and mobile advertising can act as digital marketing trends, hence, assist to increase international tourist arrivals (Kezia Herman_Mkwizu, 2020).

This paper aims at answering the following objectives:

- ✪ To understand the impact of technological inclusion on tourism industry
- ✪ To understand the impact of technology on tourist behaviour.
- ✪ To understand the importance of digital marketing for tourism service providers.
- ✪ To understand how digital marketing has changed the travel planning and decision making for the tourists.

Literature Review

The idea behind digital marketing is to reach existing and potential customers through internet and engaging online

with them. Digital marketing has completely changed the way businesses approach their clients. Digital marketing helps businesses to keep a track on the behaviour of the customers and the performance of the marketing campaigns on real time basis. In tourism industry the businesses have to keep in mind the following to be succeed digitally, these are content, user friendly website, email marketing, SEO, social media presence and a mobile friendly app (Gurneet Kaur, 2017). Digital marketing has become a necessity for the tourism industry in order to grow and prosper. Tourism service providers are constantly looking for latest and efficient technology to reach their customers and gain that competitive edge by offering them customised and personalised products. Tourism is highly impacted by this digital transformation. The online presence of service providers not only helps in increasing their sales but also allow tourists to make instant purchase decisions and buy products instantly. Digital marketing helps service providers to reach their customers 24*7 via mobile apps along with their desktops and laptops (B M Avinash et al., 2016). It is important to note that digital marketing if implemented correctly will certainly help in improving guest relationship and interaction, reducing cost, improving simplicity and speed in communication, easy monitoring and resolving geographical and temporal issues. Digital marketing is also used for customer loyalty and support (Rita Abreu Leite and Antonio Azevedo, 2017). Interactive efficiency is desired by all enterprises. Earlier the decision making of tourists was based on limited and one way information however with digital transformation and new age of digital marketing the customers has the option to compare the available choices. Also their reaction is noted in real time giving service providers a chance to make necessary changes and persuade them to make purchases. The emphasis on user experience has increased. Digitalisation will support sustainability and cost effectiveness in the tourism industry with newer payment methods coming up (Martin Zsarnoczky, 2018). The introduction of new and latest technology and the internet has changed the way marketing is been done and internet marketing is becoming popular day by day. Digital marketing is seen to be a powerful medium to reach the existing and the potential customers in no time thus helping businesses to reach their desired goals. Businesses are incorporating digital marketing to their marketing plans in order to be successful. Digital marketing helps customers to access unlimited information almost immediately. The videos, pictures and all important points related to a destination is available to tourist just one click away. Digital technologies are seen to be influencing the tourist behaviour and the entire tourism industry (G Gupta, 2019). The digital mediums has completely changed the process of researching, shopping and communicating. The enterprises have changed the way of interacting with their clients and the way business is

done. Customers are relying on digital mediums for their purchase decisions and there is a shift in their planning process. Websites, social networks are been used largely for customers interaction, creating brand awareness, consumer research, opinion sharing and advertising (Jose Magano and Maria Nascimento Cunha, 2020). The increasing competition in the tourism industry has put pressure on the travel agents to go digital or at least a combination of digital and traditional form. Digital mediums helps making sure that the tourists are having a good experience at the destination by providing the real time evaluation of their travel, local travel agencies are also benefitted by going digital as they are able to serve their clients in a better way. Digital mediums has a wider reach towards customers. Through digital mediums the customers themselves share their needs and wants and what exactly they expect from the service providers (I Gde Pitana et al., 2016). A promotional channel will only be successful if it has a wider customers reach and is able to satisfy the interest and requirements of the clients. The tourist usually get the required information from internet, tourist offices, guides and brochures. They plan their travel based on the information they get from all these and other external mediums. Therefore it important for the service providers to make sure that correct and relevant information about their products and services reaches the customers. It is important to design tourism marketing strategies carefully as it consist of areas of contact between the tourists and the service providers. These marketing strategies will determine the customer satisfaction levels and in turn will be responsible for the tourist's perception of the destination and building an image in front of the potential tourists (Arturo Molina, 2010). The technological advancements has led to digitalization of the travel industry giving a new direction and shape to the marketing strategies. Digitalization has made it so convenient for the tourists to gather all required information regarding the transportation facilities, accommodation available, food etc. All kinds of information is available on social media, websites and other digital mediums. Digital marketing is enabling local businesses and service providers to reach to customers worldwide. It is playing an important role in promoting online travel enterprises. Digital marketing is also helping in boosting economies through global tourism activities (Kishore Prabhala and T. Umamheswara Rao, 2017). Digital marketing is a new and developing marketing technique due to global competition and rapid technological advancements. It has become an integral part of tourism businesses and is way of marketing their products and communicating with their clients through social media, mobile applications and e-WOM. This has led to change in the behaviour pattern of tourists and their thinking. With the growing options of products and services for the tourists in tourism the industry

cannot rely on older methods and has to adapt to this digital transformation to serve better. The tourists also prefer getting exposed to larger set of information and even the destination are not like the old times (Mahmoud Alghizzawi, 2019).

Theoretical Approach

Digital marketing has become an essential part of any marketing plan for a business. The marketers are especially focusing on and spending a lot of time on designing the digital marketing strategies. The sudden shift of the industries from traditional marketing to digital marketing is a result of the customers over inclination towards digital mediums. Tourism industry is also greatly impacted by this digital transformation. Tourists today rely on internet for anything and everything. Internet has become their go to person for information requirements. Their travel planning and decision-making process is highly influenced by the digital mediums as it based on the information and reviews they read online. Digital marketing has changed the way tourism industry is approaching their customers and it has been able to make its mark among them. Digital marketing has been able to bring the tourism industry and the tourists closer to each other and has certainly changed the tourist's perceptions with vast availability of required information 24*7. Digital marketing has facilitated in the phenomenon of global tourism where service providers are able to reach tourists from worldwide. Therefore it becomes important for tourism professionals, researchers, academicians and students to discuss and understand how the tourist's behaviour has changed in this digital era with growing technology usage and increasing dependency on digital mediums.

Results & Discussion

Digital marketing is certainly changing the way businesses are done and for tourism & hospitality industry the impact of digital marketing had been enormous. Today's tourists are looking for experiences and with digital marketing they are able to get just that. The service providers are able to showcase the live experience of their destination in the form of videos, images, podcasts and blogs. Digital marketing also helps in customisation of products and services. The service providers have the opportunity to create personalised content and do personalised marketing via digital mediums quiet easily which was not possible by the traditional mediums. The tourists today like to be treated differently and certainly has unique choices. Therefore, treating each tourist differently and making sure that all their expectations are met as desired has only been possible with the help of digital mediums. Digital marketing helps service providers to treat their customers as per their expectation and keep them satisfied. The most important feature of

social media and digital mediums is that the feedback is available from the customers instantly. This helps the tourism service providers to make modifications in their product and services. The tourists are able to get feedback from their fellow travellers on the quality of services and products, the overall travelling experiences. The tourists rely a lot on these feedbacks to make their travelling plans and decision making. Digital marketing has also transformed the way information reaches the customers, the speed, accuracy and instant information transfer is only made possible due to digital mediums. Digital marketing has also led to improving international relations and has helped the tourism industry to keep pace with the continuous technological upgradation. People are inclining towards the virtual world and adapting it in their daily lives. The use of digital mediums is everywhere such for connecting with people, collecting information, entertainment, shopping, banking etc. Having a laptop and a smartphone is so common and because of this people are close to technology all the time. Seeing the customer’s faith and trust towards the digital platforms, the service providers are also not left with a choice but to turn towards technology. The businesses are using these digital mediums for building a brand and creating brand awareness. Digital marketing is seen as a necessary tool for customer accusation and reaching the desired sales. Digital marketing tools and techniques are certainly more convenient, cost effective, faster, accurate, easy to evaluate the performance, easy to monitor and control, supports in effective and relevant data collection and increases market reach. The market segmentation and market targeting has also become easier with these digital marketing tools and techniques. It will not be wrong to say that digital marketing consists of digital technology, data, devices, platforms and media. These help and support the service providers in reaching their target tourists market and formulating and implementing their strategies in a better way. The tourists can made responsible for all this digital transformation of the travel and tourism industry and the growing usage of digital mediums and digital marketing techniques by businesses. Tourists started relying on digital mediums for all their travel planning needs and decision making. Tourists today plan their entire trip online from accommodation, transport, deciding the attractions and activities to applying for a visa and a passport. Their decisions on which hotel to choose and what activities to do is based on the information they get over the internet. A user-friendly website and quick response over an email or chat box will surely impress today’s tourists. They decide the destination based on the images they see of it, the videos that are their online on the website or posted by a past traveller and the reviews they get from fellow travellers. The tourists tend to go back to internet even for cross checking the information they get from a travel

agent or a service provider. Today’s tourists believe that what is available on the internet is only true. Tourism and hospitality have been relying largely on reputation of its destinations, word of mouth publicity of its product and services to be positive, spread of information and consumer opinions but now it is important for them to use digital media for effective and efficient advertising and marketing. Tourism services and products are inseparable and intangible in nature and cannot be tested or experienced before the actual purchase therefore the entire decision making depends on the information the tourists collect from various sources and because internet has become the most trusted and reliable source of information for the tourists, the service providers have to make sure to be present on the internet, and in this digital marketing plays a very important role. Digital marketing is seen to be beneficial for the tourism service providers as well as the tourists. The service providers can really benefit from this digital transformation of tourism marketing. The model below suggests all major benefits of digital marketing for travel & hospitality industry. The model clearly underlines the reasons why the tourism & hospitality service providers should be more than willing to shift from traditional to digital.

Digital Marketing Benefit Model for Tourism



Conclusion

Digital marketing has certainly become front runner in any business strategy and planning. Tourism industry is also seen to completely blown by this digital era. The industry is busy adapting to this digital transformation and is rigorously working towards mastering the way to use technology for maximum benefit. Increasing use of Digital marketing is their most serious effort towards going all digital. The reason why tourism industry is so serious about their digital presence is nothing but the tourists themselves. Tourists are heavily relying on the internet and the web for all their decisions. Earlier tourists use to depend on travel agents and other service providers for all their travelling information but they have social media and the internet. The destination to

travel, the mode of transportation to use, the attractions to visit, the activities everything is decided based on the information tourists get from the websites, blogs, social media platforms and other digital mediums. They choose services and products having positive reviews on the social media, service providers having good functional websites, destination advertised with amazing pictures and websites, accommodation and transportation easy to book online etc. These all are part of digital marketing. Digital marketing has completely changed the way tourism industry's interaction with their present and prospective clients. Hence their travelling plan and decision making has one thing in common that is the internet or the digital platforms.

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