

# Impact of **social media** on choice of tourist destinations by university students

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**Abstract** | Social media is a buzzword and its impact on human behaviour is being widely studied. This paper is based on a study carried out to understand the impact of social media on the choice of tourist destinations by University students. The study is very clear on the fact that social media does have a considerable impact on the choice of tourist destinations among the University students. Though not conclusive, a couple of demographic variables are important in the context of the impact of social media on the choice of tourist destinations as found from the detailed investigation of selected demographic variables.

**Keywords** | Dibrugarh, Social Media, Students, Tourist Destinations, University

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## 1. Introduction

Social media is a kind of online platform which can be used by an individual or an organization to create or be part of a virtual network so as to share, seek, disseminate and discuss information. The various ways through which the interactions happen on the platforms are posts, likes, comments, shares, replies, etc. According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary (n.d.), Social Media has been defined as 'forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other contents (such as videos)'. The first known use of the word 'Social Media' has been listed as 2004 in the dictionary. It has been a game changer in the context of societal communications. Today people and organisations remain connected and updated through various forms of social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. Users usually access social media services via web-based technologies on computers, smartphones, tablets, etc. As users engage with these online services, they create highly interactive platforms through which individuals, communities, and organisations can share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content or pre-made content posted online.

Networks formed through social media change the way groups of people interact and communicate. They introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organisations, communities, and individuals. Social media thus can be of vital importance for the tourism industry, especially in terms of engagement with the tourists. Today's generation heavily use social media on a regular basis for a host of activities including the sourcing of information. Social media have been found to be popular among those attending universities and higher education institutions (Parusheva, Aleksandrova & Hadzhikolev, 2018). They are thus a group of interest as far as the use

of social media is concerned.

A study by Xiang & Gretzel (2010) noted that since social media constitute a significant portion of search results, it has a growing importance in the online tourism domain. According to Bilgihan, Barreda, Okumus & Nusair (2016), online social networks have not only created collective knowledge but have also become important information gathering sources for tourists. Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides (2012) have through an empirical study not only shown a high degree of correlation between perceived level of social media influence and changes made in holiday plans before taking final decisions but also that user-generated content (UGC) is considered more trustworthy over official tourism websites, travel agents and advertising on mass media. With tourists' propensity to share their memories on social media (Sotiriadis, 2017), more user-generated content is available on social media for tourists to go through. A study by Öz (2015) has also shown that social media is used more in pre-travel vis-à-vis the travel stages. No wonder, the tourism industry is using social media in a big way to influence the behaviour of the tourists. Social media has effectively connected the travellers and tourists around the world from one hand, and the tourism and hospitality businesses from the other hand much more than ever before (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social media is thus an important technological avenue for tourism companies to interact with tourists. Ferreira, Alves & Quico (2014) through a case study demonstrated that social media has great potential vis-à-vis the promotion of tourism.

A tourist destination is a place or area which has a collection of products and attractions related to tourism and are offered in such a way so as to deliver a tourism experience to people and groups traveling away from their place of residence (Jalis, 2019). Tourist destinations are dependent on revenues accrued from tourism and related activities to a considerable extent and will be marketed in such a way as to attract tourists (Beir-

man, 2003). The attraction of a destination is because of the image that tourists or potential tourists have of that particular place. The features that make a destination unique are intangibility, perishability, seasonality, inseparability and complementarity (Dileep, 2011). Tourist destinations are classified into different categories like Wildlife destinations, Religious destinations, Shopping destinations and the like. The classification is important for marketing as well as for building tourism circuits. Destination Management Companies provide ground services based on local knowledge of select destinations. A Destination Management System (DMS) on the other hand may be used to provide complete and up-to-date information on a particular tourist destination. DMS's facilitate interface between the tourism businesses in and around a tourist destination and the external world (Dileep, 2011). In Assam, India, Kaziranga National Park is a major tourist destination. It is well known by virtue of it being a World Heritage Site. But there are many tourist destinations which are not well known and as such have tourist arrivals far below their potential. A 2015 Report lamented that the Government of India usually focusses on the more famous tourist destinations. This means that many of the lesser known tourist destinations in India fail to realize their potential in attracting tourists. Along with tourism policies and brand ambassadors, social media can be a game changer in bringing these lesser known tourist destinations to the limelight (EY, FICCI, 2015). Destinations may be promoted by communicating all its advantages and generating information so as to make them attractive to tourists (Cordente-Rodríguez, Esteban-Talaya & Mondéjar-Jiménez, 2015). Social media can be effectively used for this purpose.

The aim of this study is to investigate if social media has an impact on the choice of tourist destinations as far as university students are concerned. This makes the study novel. The impact is also investigated in terms of some demographic variables so as to have better insights.

Social media has been found to be a strategic platform for branding and engaging tourists (Heras-Pedrosa, Millan-Celis, Iglesias-Sánchez & Jambrino-Maldonado, 2020). The study will thus help understand an important target group from a tourism marketer's perspective so as to better use social media in promoting tourist destinations in the targeted group.

## 2. Approach of the study

The study is based on a survey involving university students. Primary data has been collected to gauge students' perception on the use and impact of social media on choosing tourist destinations. The data is both quantitative and qualitative. The respondents are the students of Dibrugarh University – a state University of Assam which was established in 1965. It is one of the top 100 universities of India as per the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), 2020 of the Government of India. The current student strength of 4575 students constitute the population for the study. There are 17 Departments, 17 Centres of Studies and one constituent Institute in the University. The Departments, Centres and the constituent Institute function under seven Faculties - Biological Sciences (BS), Commerce and Management Sciences (CMS), Earth Sciences and Energy (ESE), Education (EDU), Humanities and Law (HL), Science and Engineering (SE), and Social Sciences (SS).

The data was collected through an Online Questionnaire administered through Google Forms. People (faculty member and/or students) of every Department, Centre of Study and the constituent Institute were contacted. The faculty members were requested to share the questionnaire with their students and get them filled. The students were requested to fill up the questionnaire as well as share it among their classmates.

Table 1 | Student strength of Dibrugarh University

| Level         | Males         | Females       | Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|
| Undergraduate | 932           | 532           | 1464  |
| Post Graduate | 875           | 1569          | 2444  |
| Total         | 1807          | 2101          | 3908  |
| PhD           | Not Available | Not Available | 667   |
| Grand Total   |               |               | 4575  |

Source: NIRF 2020 data submitted by Dibrugarh University

The study considers three social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. ICEF Monitor which is a dedicated market intelligence resource for the international education industry in one of its online reports says that Instagram has a weighty impact on the choice of travel destinations by highlighting that travel is one of the biggest niche subjects on the photo-sharing platform (“Instagram’s profound effect on travel destination choice”, 2020). The impact of social media on choosing tourist destinations by University students is understood in terms of a social media impact scale developed for this study. The reliability of the scale is also established.

### 3. Social media usage

We first look at the most popular social network platform in the context of our respondents. Total number of responses received were 520 within a 45-day period which constitutes the sample of the study. The sample size is 11.37% of the population. Responses were received from all the 17 Departments, the constituent Institute (Dibrugarh University Institute of Engineering and Technology) and 11 Centres of Studies. No responses were received from 6 Centres of Studies.

Table 2 shows that the most popular social media platform is Facebook with 85.96% of the respondents having an account in the said platform. Instagram comes second with 71.92% of the respondents being present in it. YouTube comes

third with a relatively poor 55.58% of the respondents having an account with the video sharing platform. The information obtained corresponds to the globally reported user base of Facebook, YouTube and Instagram where Facebook ranks first, YouTube ranks second and Instagram ranks sixth among the top 15 social media platforms (Kepios, 2020). Studies on University students elsewhere also show that Facebook is the most used social media platform (Aljuboori, Fashakh & Bayat, 2020; Nagel, Remillard, Aucoin & Takenishi, 2018; Kolan & Dzandza, 2018).

Table 2 | Social media accounts

| Platform  | Frequency |
|-----------|-----------|
| Facebook  | 447       |
| YouTube   | 289       |
| Instagram | 374       |
| None      | 9         |

Source: Survey done by authors

Table 3 | Social media usage

| Platform  | Frequency |
|-----------|-----------|
| Facebook  | 392       |
| YouTube   | 391       |
| Instagram | 319       |
| None      | 7         |

Source: Survey done by authors

Table 3 looks at the usage behaviour of the social media platforms. It is seen that 75.38% of the respondents use Facebook at least once a week. The corresponding figures for YouTube and Instagram are 75.19% and 61.35% respectively.

**Table 4 | Social media followers / subscribers**

| Platform  | Yes | No  |
|-----------|-----|-----|
| Facebook  | 301 | 219 |
| YouTube   | 257 | 263 |
| Instagram | 211 | 309 |

Source: Survey done by authors

We now look at the use of social media by the Dibrugarh University students in the backdrop of choosing tourist destinations. Table 4 gives us the information about the number of respondents following Facebook pages/Instagram accounts or subscribing to YouTube Channels on tourist destinations. 57.88% of the respondents are following Facebook pages on tourist destinations, 49.42% are subscribing to YouTube channels on tourist destinations while only 40.58% of the respondents are following Instagram accounts dedicated to tourist destinations.

**Table 5 | Search for tourist destinations in social media/ subscribers**

| Platform  | Often | Sometimes | Never |
|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Facebook  | 50    | 262       | 208   |
| YouTube   | 149   | 299       | 72    |
| Instagram | 78    | 210       | 232   |

Source: Survey done by authors

Table 5 gives us the information about the number of respondents searching for tourist destinations on social media. Considering the combined figures of 'Often' and 'Sometimes', 60.00% of the respondents are using Facebook to search for tourist destinations. A staggering 86.15% are looking at YouTube for tourist destinations. And, 55.38% of the respondents are using Instagram to look up for tourist destinations. YouTube is thus the most popular social media platform among the three under consideration as far as searching for tourist destinations are concerned and beats the other two platforms convincingly.

**Table 6 | Looking for information on tourist destinations in social media**

| Platform  | Often | Sometimes | Never |
|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Facebook  | 49    | 237       | 234   |
| YouTube   | 162   | 276       | 82    |
| Instagram | 67    | 211       | 242   |

Source: Survey done by authors

Table 6 looks at the number of respondents who look for information on tourist destinations using the three social media platforms under consideration. Again, considering the combined figures of 'Often' and 'Sometimes', we see that 55.00% of the respondents are using Facebook to look for information on tourist destinations. A very high number of 84.23% of the respondents are using YouTube and 53.46% are using Instagram for looking at information on tourist destinations using social media. We see that, in case of using social media in looking for information on tourist destinations, YouTube is again the top ranked platform pushing Facebook and Instagram to the second and third spot respectively.

The data suggests that the students of Dibrugarh University are active on social media and specifically the three platforms that are being considered. There is also considerable use of the social media platforms not only to search for tourist destinations but also to look for information about tourist destinations. YouTube is the most popular platform to search for tourist destinations as well as to look for information on tourist destinations among Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. A reason for this might be the fact that generally people use Google to search and Google will return YouTube videos as part of the search. A study by Rathore, Joshi & Ilavarasan (2017) had mentioned about the importance of video contents (YouTube) which is increasing in the online tourism domain.

#### 4. Social media impact scale

Aaron, Judith and Glen (2020) identified three contextual dimensions for social media influence – level of social media engagement (SME), destination novelty or familiarity (DNF), and complexity of the planning decision (CPD). Using these dimensions, a set of ten statements is put up to construct a Social Media Impact Scale. Respondents give a rating on each of the statements. A Likert Scale starting from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1) is used to get the rating. The intermediate ratings are Agree (4), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3) and Disagree (2). The ten statements are:

Statement 1 (CPD1): I have knowledge on Tourist Destinations because of Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 2 (SME1): When I see some posts / uploads on Tourist Destinations in Facebook / YouTube / Instagram, I go through them.

Statement 3 (DNF1): Before visiting a Tourist Destination, I look for contents on the Tourist Destinations on Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 4 (CPD2): I believe in the Information available about Tourist Destinations in Facebook/ YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 5 (SME2): I post queries about Tourist Destinations on Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 6 (SME3): I respond to queries on Tourist Destinations on Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 7 (DNF2): I view Sponsored Content on Tourist Destinations in Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 8 (CPD3): I go through Ratings / Reviews of Tourist Destinations which are present on Facebook Pages / YouTube Channels / Instagram Profiles.

Statement 9 (DNF3): I look for Recommendations on Tourist Destinations in Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Statement 10 (CPD4): I have decided to visit some Tourist Destinations because of Facebook / YouTube / Instagram.

Cronbach's alpha, the most widely used measure of reliability (internal consistency) has been used to determine the reliability of the scale. Table 7 (Reliability Statistics) provides the actual value for Cronbach's alpha as obtained from SPSS. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.927 which indicates a very high level of internal consistency for the scale with the specified sample.

Table 8 (Item-Statistics Table) presents the "Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted" (the last column). It talks about the Cronbach's alpha value if that particular item was deleted from the scale. We see that all the values are less than the Cronbach's alpha value of 0.927. Thus, none of the statements in the scale need to be removed.

Table 7 | Reliability statistics

| Cronbach's Alpha | Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items | No. of Items |
|------------------|--|--------------|
| .927             | .928   | 10           |

Source: Data processed by authors

Table 8 | Item-total statistics

| Statements   | Scale Mean if Item Deleted | Scale Variance if Item Deleted | Corrected Item-Total Correlation | Squared Multiple Correlation | Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted |
|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Statement 1  | 33.56                      | 69.870                         | .685                             | .521                         | .922                             |
| Statement 2  | 33.36                      | 72.119                         | .648                             | .472                         | .924                             |
| Statement 3  | 33.34                      | 69.574                         | .705                             | .544                         | .921                             |
| Statement 4  | 33.64                      | 69.998                         | .705                             | .519                         | .921                             |
| Statement 5  | 34.34                      | 64.209                         | .775                             | .717                         | .917                             |
| Statement 6  | 34.22                      | 64.587                         | .762                             | .718                         | .918                             |
| Statement 7  | 33.96                      | 65.577                         | .765                             | .618                         | .918                             |
| Statement 8  | 33.49                      | 67.888                         | .718                             | .591                         | .920                             |
| Statement 9  | 33.52                      | 68.057                         | .746                             | .615                         | .919                             |
| Statement 10 | 33.64                      | 67.101                         | .711                             | .543                         | .920                             |

Source: Data processed by authors

## 5. Impact of social media on choosing tourist destinations

To understand the impact, we find the mean score for all the statements taken together. It is found to be 3.73. The obtained value is close to Agree (4). As such, we can infer that the students of Dibrugarh University acknowledges the impact of social media in choosing tourist destinations. The highest score of 4.11 is for Statement 3 (Before visiting a Tourist Destination, I look for contents on the Tourist Destinations on Facebook / YouTube / Instagram) while the lowest score is for Statement 5 (I post queries about Tourist Destinations on Facebook / YouTube / Instagram). This means that the students take in more of the available information on social media for choosing tourist destinations.

An analysis of the impact of social media in choosing tourist destinations in terms of the various demographic variables can give us insights into whether these variables are important in understanding the impact. The demographic variables being considered are Gender, Age, Background, Faculty of Studies and Level of the Programme.

The mean scores taking into account all the ten statements are 3.75 and 3.74 for males and females respectively. There were no respondents of the third gender. We can therefore conclude that

Gender plays no role as far as impact of social media in choosing tourist destinations by students of Dibrugarh University is concerned. The mean scores taking into account all the ten statements for the age groups, "17 – 21", "22 – 26", "27 – 31" and ">31" are 3.67, 3.78, 3.89 and 3.51 respectively. In contrast to Gender, Age of the students of Dibrugarh University is slightly important when it comes to impact of social media in choosing tourist destinations by them. The mean scores taking into account all the ten statements together are 3.78 and 3.70 for the respondents with Rural and Urban backgrounds respectively. Since the difference in scores is very negligible, we can conclude that the rural or urban background of the Dibrugarh University students is not important as far as the impact of social media on the choice of tourist destinations by the students of Dibrugarh University is concerned.

The mean scores taking into account all the ten statements together for the seven faculties are: Biological Sciences (BS) – 3.72, Commerce and Management Sciences (CMS) – 3.65, Earth Sciences and Energy (ESE) – 3.39, Education (EDU) – 3.92, Humanities and Law (HL) – 3.46, Science and Engineering (SE) – 3.70 and Social Sciences (SS) – 4.11. The difference in mean scores for the Faculty of Social Sciences with the highest score of 4.11 and the Faculty of Earth Sciences and Energy with

the lowest score of 3.39 is 0.72. This difference is significant. As such, we have strong reasons to say that the Faculty of Studies to which the Dibrugarh University students belong is important as far as the impact of social media on the choice of tourist destinations by the students of Dibrugarh University is concerned. The less number of respondents for ESE which stands at only 12 might be a contributing factor for the lowest score and so the inference that the demographic variable Faculty of Studies is important is not conclusive.

The mean scores taking into account all the ten statements together for the Undergraduate (UG), Postgraduate (PG) and Research level students are 3.82, 3.71 and 3.62 respectively. If we ignore the Research level students, for which the number of respondents is only 5, the difference in mean score between UG and PG is 0.11. This implies that like the demographic variable Age, there is also a slight importance of the demographic variable 'Level of the Programme' as far as the impact of social media on the choice of tourist destinations by the students of Dibrugarh University is concerned.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of the data from 520 current students of Dibrugarh University clearly shows that there is significant impact of social media on the choice of tourist destinations among the University student community. Out of the five demographic variables considered, Gender and Background has no influence on the impact. Level of the Programme along with the Age showed a slight influence. Faculty of Studies is the only demographic variable which seems to have considerable influence even though there is an issue which has been flagged. It is a fact that destinations have to use social media to remain competitive (Királová & Pavlíček, 2015) and this study gives weight to this fact as the university students are using social

media to know about tourist destinations. The findings can be of considerable interest to Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO) for whom social media has become an important element of marketing strategy (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2012).

The study is based on university students who are a highly selected group of people. Their affinity to social media is high. As such, this study's scope is limited to the target group and cannot be generalized or used for other groups.

Social media in the context of tourism continues to be an important area of research. It provides exciting opportunities for carrying out different studies which can help the tourists as well as the tourism industry in different ways. Similar studies may also be carried out in other educational institutions and comparisons made with the current study. The study has made a sincere attempt to develop a social media impact scale. The scale can be improved upon further. The present study has been carried out on three social media platforms only. Any future study can consider more number of such platforms. The current study found that a sizeable number of Dibrugarh University students who are otherwise active on social media are not using it to search for tourist destinations or for looking at information on tourist destinations. This can be properly investigated. The reasons behind YouTube being the most preferred social media platform in the context of searching for tourist destinations and also for looking at information on tourist destinations may also be investigated.

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