

Social Media Promotions of Tourism and Hospitality Industry: Implications for Bangladesh

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Abstract

Lately, the world has gotten rid of a massive outbreak of a deadly virus named COVID-19; the whole world was shut down for several months. Tourism was one of the most affected sectors by this epidemic. This industry needs a robust promotional strategy to get back in good shape. Nowadays, social media promotion has taken over traditional promotional methods. During the last two years, social media has had almost a billion new users, which is excellent news for all marketers who need to promote their commodities and services using this social media. Now that the world is returning to normal, social media promotion can be a game-changer for tourism. There are as many as 4.62 billion users of social media in the whole world (which is 58.4% of the world population). Again, the number is 49.55 million in Bangladesh. These users can be targeted for this type of promotion by the tourism operators in Bangladesh. With a rigorous search of secondary information, this research has attempted to examine social media's role in promoting tourism and hospitality services in the country.

Keywords: Social Media, Promotion, WOM, Tourism and Hospitality Industry, and Bangladesh

DOI: 10.7176/JTHS/65-04

Publication date: October 31st 2023

1. Introduction

Previously, the internet was a medium for broadcasting only. The internet became one of the most significant participatory platforms due to the evolution of social media. This participatory platform as media allows the operators to present their offerings and disseminate information, allowing potential customers to get the necessary information. In some cases, users of goods and services may put their satisfaction/dissatisfaction-related comments (Li and Wang, 2011). In this media, users can share thoughts, ideas, suggestions, and comments related to their travel plans, travel photos, videos, blogs, and many other things that tourism firms can use as a promotional tool. Promotion in social media can help tourism firms build their brand image, create brand awareness, provide quality customer service, and thus create loyal customers (Gohil, 2015).

Social media (SM) favors tourism firms, providing information about consumer needs, wants, and demands (Nezakati et al., 2015). Tourism marketers can better understand their demands through the content tourists post on social media. Information derived from social media can provide tourism marketers with the tourists' actual preferences based on which tourism marketers can enhance their products and service quality (Leung et al., 2013). Authors also argued that tourists use these media in the early phase of their trip, which is information search for planning the trip. Thus, SM is essential for tourists, customers, suppliers, tour operators, and marketers.

Russel (2010) mentioned in his exploratory study that these SMs are considered a promotional platform for tourism marketers to promote their products, services, and activities almost free of cost. Properly using this free marketing tool can benefit the industry with lower costs and high returns. A study by Karim (2018) found that among the surveyed participants, 97.26% agreed with the statement that social media have high promotional impacts on the tourism industry in Bangladesh to help grow and prosper. The study also found a highly competitive strength of such SMs as integrated tools for marketing service industries like tourism.

2. The Research Problem

Social media promotions have now become popular among marketers. These types of promotions are popular among Small and Medium Enterprises (EMEs) whose customers are dispersed over a large geographical area. Through SM, they can reach their promotional messages among the markets in any corner of the world. Tourism industry marketers worldwide utilize and exploit SM to the fullest extent in their promotional activities of destinations, products, services, and activities. Promotion this way is one of the easiest, cheapest, most flexible, least time-consuming, and efficient methods for marketers. Thus, SM can be influential in promoting tourism activities, services, and businesses.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism businesses were shut down for about 30 months. The businesses have lost billions of dollars due to this epidemic, and now they need a solid promotional tool to create renewal market appeal for a large number of tourists and to regain their lost charm. Under such situations, tourism marketers need effective, lower-cost, and less time-consuming promotional approaches to regain the markets. SM should be the appropriate tool for the promotion of the tourism industry.

However, circumstantial pieces of evidence and literature suggest that tourism marketers in Bangladesh still need to be able to utilize SM promotions extensively. That is because the tourism marketers in Bangladesh have yet to gain and achieve wide popularity on SM for promoting their services and activities. Though a certain number of researches are available on SM promotions, researchers-cum-academics in Bangladesh have not yet focused on studying SM's role in the promotional activities of Bangladesh tourism. As such, while discussing the SM promotion of tourism, we can hardly find any research work in this field in Bangladesh. Because of the role and significance of this topic in the present-day circumstances in tourism promotion, the authors have undertaken this area for research in detail.

3. Literature Review

Nezakati et al., (2015) describe these SMs as knowledge-sharing display centers where people can present their photos, videos, experiences, opinions, and content about the places they travel. These travel-related contents may create an appeal to other SM users who are interested in traveling. One survey result showed that around 84% of leisure travelers take help from SM to plan their trip (Torres, 2010). SM benefits tourists and plays a significant role as an effective and cheap promotional tool for tourism marketers. Kotler et al., (2006) argue that as most of the potential customers of tourism businesses use SM, and they continuously share their feelings, needs, wants, desires, likes, and dislikes in SM, it becomes easier for the marketers to assess the expectations of their potential customers.

SM assists tourism and hospitality marketers with enormous possibilities, and they also help create a potential link between actual and potential tourism customers (Gretzel and Yoo, 2014). Bansal et al., (2008) state that during the last few years, SMs have proven to be effective platforms that have helped many national and international firms create their brand identity. They can utilize SM efficiently in their marketing; they need to create a company profile that will not cost money. SM promotion can play a momentous role for tourism start-ups. Mangold and Faulds, (2009) emphasized the SM and commented that these promotional tools, messages, and strategies have changed how marketers communicate with potential customers.

Hays et al., (2013) narrated that these media have offered the DMOs and NTOs a platform for business promotion since some years back. According to Leung et al., (2013), this type of media presents most information potential tourists need to plan their trips. They usually search for destination, cost, food, drinks, train, flight, accommodation, local transportation, and other necessary information. Different SM platforms create ample impacts on creating tourists' awareness and interest in the tourism destination. Modern tourists spend most of their time searching for information from SM before planning any trip; they end up watching many videos on YouTube, reading blogs, analyzing photos, reading comments, and tourist experiences on Facebook and other websites regarding the sites and attractions they are planning to visit (Larsen, 2007)

4. Rationale of the Study

Adequate and necessary information is required to review the power of this media on the promotional activities of tourism products, activities, and services of Bangladesh. It has now grown as an essential issue to analyze the role and contributions of this media to the promotion and sales growth of the tourism sector (Gulbahar and Yildirim, 2015). To investigate this media's role in promoting and developing Bangladesh tourism, the researchers have attempted to conduct a study on the present area. This present attempt will also assess the

value of such promotion for the suppliers and operators in Bangladesh.

5. Research Objectives

This present effort aims to analyze how SM contributes to promoting the tourism and hospitality sector and assesses how this type of promotion can shape the industry's sales. The detailed objectives are pointed out below:

- To find out the issues relevant to the concept of Social Media;
- to evaluate the role of SM's promotion of Bangladesh tourism;
- to assess their contributions to the suppliers of tourism as well as hospitality services; and
- to analyse the industry's limitations of this type of promotion and provide some relevant recommendations to handle them smoothly.

6. Research Methods

This present work is secondary information and observation-based research conducted by the researchers. Here, the secondary data are collected from different publications, including journals and newspaper articles, research reports, textbooks, websites, and other sources. All these sources have been rigorously and carefully observed and analyzed. Social websites and other online publications have also been rigorously searched to study the role of these media in promoting our tourism and hospitality sector

7. Research Findings

7.1 The Concept of SM

The SM application carries internet-based content marketers, and consumers generate (Xiang and Gretze, 2010). Consumer-generated content is again defined as the impression, observation, and experience created by consumers and shared through online media (Gretzel et al., 2008). Cambridge English dictionary defines SM as the 'collective shape of computer programs allowing its user to communicate and distribute information with the other users on the internet by using a smartphone or a computer' (Social Media, 2022). In this media, the user creates content through photos, comments, and audio videos for websites or apps, mainly developed and managed by SMOs (Social Media Organizations). "These are presented through Internet-based interactive Web 2.0 applications. These media help develop social networks. (Social Media - Wikipedia, 2022)". For general people, these media act as a podium that is used to share their content and experiences to communicate with others and the personal promotion of its users. For business people, social media is a platform to promote products, brands, and achievements, market their commodities, communicate with consumers, and finally sell their products. About 4.5 billion users utilize these media now throughout the world. Some popular social media sites include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Social Media: Sharing Ideas and Thoughts, 2022).

Social media, the biggest communication platform in this world, is significant for knowledge transmission and sharing (Nezakati et al., 2015). People share travel photos, audio, videos, travel experiences, and other related information on these platforms, attracting other users to visit the tourist destination. The study conducted by Torres (2010) reveals that among leisure travelers, around 84% of them utilize these media for making plans for their trips; the help includes information about the flight cost, availability of rooms, food, costs, and other relevant necessary information about the destination. In today's business world, travelers' experiences, feedback, and comments on the website are considered valuable assets.

Larsen, (2007) states that the tourist experience is built in three stages; the first stage starts with the planning for the trip, then the second stage during the trip, and the last stage ends with the memories of the tourist. In the first stage, where the tourists plan the trip, they need lots of information to make the whole trip plan. In this stage, the tourist usually searches for the necessary information about the attractions, destination, rooms, cost, food, flight, local transport, and other information (Leung et al., 2013). At the end of the trip, the visitors may share different pictures, videos, audio, experiences, and other necessary information, which other tourists can use to make their tour plans. Thus, this platform helps the tourist seek information to organize their trip and share their experiences through blogs, photos, stories, audio, videos, etc.

7.2 Social Media Promotion for Suppliers and Operators of Tourism and Hospitality Services

Torres, (2010) explained that a study conducted by Google revealed that among online travelers, 84% took help from the internet to plan their trip. In many studies, we can see how useful the social media platform is for the tourist to find any necessary information about a trip, and they can also share their trip information with other users. Some recent studies also indicated that these media platforms are helpful for tourists and suppliers as a promotional tool to promote their tourism services and activities (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Promotions of the tourism services are different, complex, and quite tricky from the promotion of the other consumer products. Stories and reviews that the experienced traveler on these platforms' writes are viewed and trusted by potential tourists. As such, tourism marketers can use this strategy to promote their destinations and other related services, activities, and facilities. Various forms of tools are used in social media promotion, and blogging has proved to be one of the most significant promotional tools for the marketers of the tourism industry.

Blogs created by a company provide credible and lively content to the customer and aid the business through the continuous engagement of the client with the company's website (Ellion, 2007). The client gets travel-related information they need to plan their trip, such as – lodging to stay, transport to use, restaurants to have food, best malls to shop, sites to visit, tourism-related activities to be involved, etc. (Schmollgruber, 2007). Blogs give them a lively atmosphere, and they can easily imagine their would-be trip. Studies found that blogging has been the most used social media promotional tool for tourism marketers for the past few years. Studies have also shown that in many countries, the hotel invites guests to visit their hotel rooms and leave a comment, videos, and reviews on their hotel blogs, and for that, they will get concessions and other vouchers or coupons. Of course, this leaves us with an ethical quandary but proves to be a significant approach for many tourism-related businesses (Price and Starkov, 2006).

Leung et al., (2013) suggested that apart from the company's blogs on their websites, there are other effective ways to promote on different social networking sites. Recently, Facebook has become one the popular social networking sites (SNS), which creates the biggest platform for the supplier of the tourism industry to promote their product, services, and activities. Facebook is easy, time-saving, and comparatively a cheaper platform for promoting products and services. During the COVID-19 period, thousands of online-based travel agencies have been formed using social media. Many travel companies worldwide are becoming active on such media, especially Facebook, for their promotional purposes.

Most users view this platform as an efficient method with massive potential for effective promotion. Distribution of travel products may be costly, but the indirect distribution of travel services through social media saves time and cost and works more efficiently. Travel blogs on the company's website can generate revenue by acting as a booking platform, where the clients may find the link to the blog and can effectively confirm the booking online (Sharda and Ponnada, 2008). As we know, Web 2.0 allows online users worldwide to share knowledge, ideas, and thoughts, as well as communicate, interact, and build relationships. The shift in this communication pattern allows marketers to shift their promotional campaigns from the traditional media to the Web 2.0 media. Schmallegger and Carson (2008) stated that the communication of the tourism industry through the Web 2.0 platform creates the opportunity for marketers to interact with their guests authentically.

Kotler et al. (2006) mentioned that to deliver the customer better value and quality products/services; marketers need a thorough knowledge of the needs of their customers; then they have to prepare a customer-driven marketing strategy. To understand their needs and wants, marketers need to conduct comprehensive research, and social media is taken as the most important way of collecting and assessing tourism information for marketers (Leung and others, 2013). It has been said in some research that the characteristics of customers can easily be traced who uses specific social networking sites (Noone et al., 2011).

For tourism marketers, it is an excellent opportunity to target their desired customer segment and create specific promotional message content that might create interest and make them aware. Gretzel and Yoo's, (2014) study found that social media opens the doors for the tourism and hospitality marketers full of opportunities and possibilities for a significant link between the potential and actual customers. To grab that opportunity, the tourism services and activities marketers need to design a customer-driven social media engagement. They also have to focus on continuous management and improvement to succeed

7.3 Social Media Promotion for Tourism - Bangladesh Perspectives

Bangladesh is blessed with natural resources, rich and dynamic cultures, heroic historical background, and heritage resources. The country's beauty lies in its greenery, mighty hills, vast sea and coastline, hundreds of

rivers, lakes, haors, colorful culture, and unique tradition of tribal life. This country has tourism resources that can meet the needs of both domestic and foreign tourists (Al-Masud et al., 2015). Over the last few decades, tourism within this country has significantly grown, and domestic tourism contributes an essential portion to the GDP of this country. In 2018, tourism contributed 4.4% to the total GDP of Bangladesh. Because of the significant growth in the tourism sector during 2019-2020, the Bangladesh government allocated 34 billion Taka for the tourism sector, which was (double) compared to the previous year (Khan and Abir, 2022).

According to the study "Digital 2022: Bangladesh – Data Reportal – Global Digital Insights," in January 2022, there were 52.58 million internet users in Bangladesh, which was 47.61 million in January 2021. During the Covid-19 year (2020-2021), 7.7 million internet users had increased in Bangladesh. During January 2022, the number of SM users stood at 49.55 million, equivalent to 29.7% of the total population. The data shows that the number of internet-based SM operators in Bangladesh is growing daily, creating tremendous opportunities for the promotion and growth of tourism businesses in our country. The table below shows the status of different SM tools utilized by the people in Bangladesh:

Table 1: Status of different social media platforms used by Bangladeshi people

Social media platform	User number at January 2022	Equivalent percentage to the total population of Bangladesh
Facebook	44.70 million	26.8%
YouTube	34.50 million	20.6%
Facebook Messenger	21.45 million	12.8%
LinkedIn	4.60 million	2.8%
Instagram	4.45 million	2.7%
Twitter	756.6 thousand	1.4%

Source: Developed by the author from the study of ("Digital 2022: Bangladesh — Data Reportal – Global Digital Insights", 2022).

If the tourism firms in Bangladesh choose social media platforms to promote their product, services, and activities, they have 49.55 million audiences within and many more outside this country. Promotion this way is cost-saving, less time-consuming, flexible, and significantly functional. Rahman, (2016) concluded in his study that tourism-related firms like accommodations, food houses, travel agencies, tour operators, and airline companies need to participate in this media platform to attract more tourists actively, and it would be a mistake if they do not do so.

7.4 Significance of SM Usages for Promotion of Tourism and Hospitality

With the evolution of consumer-generated media, i.e., social media, the promotional tools along with strategies to communicate with potential tourist customers have altered to a large extent (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Where this media has created new sources of information, it is used by the consumer to share knowledge of products, services, brands, personalities, and other issues (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2004). Marketers from the tourism industry now know that social media are powerful ways of ensuring sustainable marketing promotion, which can also help create positive word-of-mouth promotion. To implement a fruitful campaign on the SM platform, the marketers must select the right platform, create the right and meaningful content, and select the right audience to spread the message (Jashi, 2013). The review team in the tourism industry works continuously in collaboration with suitable media to attract millions of visitors from across the world (Jashi, 2013). Some well-recognized successful media for promoting the tourism and hospitality sector include Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Podcasts, Instagram, Twitter, and Travelshake.

Traditional promotional methods need substantial financial resources, whereas promotion on social media is relatively cheap. Marketers can easily create their company profile on many popular social media sites, which will not even cost money, which is an excellent opportunity for startup businesses. Over the past few decades, social media has become a significant platform to create a brand identity for companies (Bansal et al., 2008). Almost every tourist is using social media platforms nowadays. Most of them keep posting about their tour experiences, like where they are going, the most-visited places in the destination, the perfect places for shopping and eating, and how to find a proper hotel room on a budget etc. (Sahoo and BG, 2017). People are now relying on different social media sites and value other people's reviews on social networking sites. People's engagement

in these networking sites and their faith in what they see on social media made the promotion easier for marketers. Because of that reason, advertising and other promotional campaigns on social media have dramatically increased in the past few years. After the COVID-19 pandemic, people have become more addicted to such networking sites and are starting to have more faith in them. For marketers of tourism services, this has created a golden chance to attract potential tourists and promote them for their offerings on social media.

Jashi, (2013) stated in her study that 40% of online tourists chose the destination they want to visit based on the reviews from the social networking sites. It also has significant control over the hotel choices of 87% of online travelers. It impacted the transportation mode choice for 84% of online travelers, and 78% chose the food and restaurant based on the online review. Travel blogs have an average impact on 50% of the online traveler. In the same study, Jashi, (2013) argued that 70% of online travelers believe in the recommendation on social networking sites. On the contrary, only 14% said they believed in the advertisement.

7.5 Interactive Marketing on Social Media to Shape the Tourism Industry

The two most popular buzzwords in this technology-dominated world, SM and Web 2.0, have significantly changed the B2B, B2C, and C2C communication patterns (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Gretzel and Yoo, (2014) define the buzzword SM media as a combination of technology-based applications and platforms where different people can interact socially. The authors mean Web 2.0 as a tool or technological application for content creation and sharing. Later, the authors concluded that the information from such media is now the prime source of tourist information, which highly influences tourists' purchase decisions.

In content creation and sharing, travel customers usually share their experiences on a place, people, hotel and transport services, food, and destination, which generates Word-of-Mouth (WOM) communications. Murray (1991) suggested that Word-of-Mouth communication is more effective for service promotion than product promotion, as tourism and hospitality products are service products. WOM messages are more reliable and have a high weight on the buying decisions of tourism consumers. In a promotional mix, social media can be considered a hybrid component that mixes some features of conventional Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and WOM communications (Mangold and Fauld, 2009).

Hays et al., (2013) in their study have stated that for quite a few years, social media offer them a different way of marketing by the DMOs and NTOs. The authors also discussed that social media enormously impacts tourism marketing, creating tourists' awareness and interest in the destination. Some researchers have found a strong link between internet information and tourist trip planning. Fodness and Murray (1999) have found that most modern tourists spend lots of time searching for information about the destination before planning the whole trip. As modern tourists are more active on social media, they mainly watch travel blogs, read website reviews, watch YouTube audio and videos, search for information in Facebook groups, stock Instagram photos, etc. As such, this has become an excellent opportunity for tourism marketers to promote their tourism services through this platform. Alghizzawi et al., (2018) discussed four significant impacts of social media on tourists. These are:

- Tourists can get necessary information about the tourist area.
- Marketers guide the client to be optimistic consumers of their services, which can benefit the marketers.
- Tourists can get a safe passage to book their trip by lying on their bed.
- Satisfied tourists make positive WOM (word-of-mouth) and disseminate positive information about their trips, which helps marketers promote their tourism services.

Živković et al., (2014) concluded their study by saying that the tourist activity on these platforms, especially on different social media, provides the tourism industry a proper insight into the needs and preferences of the world tourists

7.6 Challenges of SM Promotion of Tourism Services

Hays et al., (2013) argued the gap between SM promotion and the tourism sector. At first, the authors found that most destination management organizations in Bangladesh need to use this media more effectively to interact with potential tourist customers. Then, the authors observed that SM should be addressed as a campaign strategy by many tourism firms in Bangladesh. The authors suggest that destination management organizations and operators in Bangladesh should use the SM platform as their promotional tool to exploit its ultimate benefit.

The ASTA (American Society of Travel Agents) survey 2012 found that around 39% of their surveyed travel agents are connected to social media for their business promotion, and 29% of their surveyed travel agents need to start using social media as their business promotional tool. Only 15% of the surveyed participants believe that social media is highly significant as a promotional strategy for their business.

Almost 80% of the tourism businesses are small and medium enterprises, facing many challenges in managing social media promotion (Gonzalo, 2022). The author found five key promotion challenges through social media, particularly for tourism services. The uncertainty in the Return on Investment (ROI) was a key challenge of promotion through social media. Hays et al. (2013) stated that traditional ROI measurement requires a qualitative approach, and it is tough for marketers to assess the whole thing they do on SM to earn revenue.

Promotion effectiveness does not come from social media alone; it may also come from other sources, including traditional promotional approaches, goodwill of the firm, recommendations by source countries' travel agencies and tour operators, and so many other sources. A lack of authentic and trustworthy sources of information is a barrier to effective social media promotional strategy in Europe and Southeast Asia (Sahin and Sengün, 2015). In those countries, the content of the information on social media has often been found confusing, inadequate, and weak. In many research articles, African tourism businesses have been found to lack an understanding of the significance of SM promotion (Howison et al., 2015; Rizk et al., 2018). Many argue that most South African tourism businesses use social media only to maintain a profile; they are unaware of this type of promotion's revenue or business significance (Howison et al., 2015).

Tourism organizations in many South Asian destinations, including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Vietnam, have found no control over the content that the tourist consumers are posting on these media, leaving the organizations vulnerable (Roque and Raposo, 2016). "On social media platforms, the consumers are more powerful than the marketers because of their convincing power to the potential tourists. Hence, the marketers are always afraid of negative reviews posted, which can ruin the company's brand image or the country's destination image (Tsiakali, 2018)". Another challenge for tourism businesses is that they face a competitive business environment in building a competitive brand image through this type of promotion (John et al., 2018)

8. Recommendations for Improvement

Kütük, (2016) argued on the value of SM in promoting tourism services and activities. The study reveals that this type of promotion played a massive role in tourism product and service promotion, establishing a brand identity for tourism firms and facilitating in-house information dissemination. Having enormous potential, the industry in Bangladesh needs a strong presence and appearance on social media to promote its services and attract domestic and international tourists to the country. To ensure a strong presence and appearance on social media, the ICT sector in Bangladesh needs to develop a sound Internet-based communication system, as tourism purchase primarily relies on proper information (Karim, 2018).

Bangladesh's public and other private sector operators should focus on developing other support systems for the tourism industry, like attractions, transportation, hotels, restaurants, safety, and security at the destination etc. The tourism operating firms in Bangladesh need to focus their service and activities using these platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) as these are their marketing tools. Tourism organizations should encourage customers to share travel-related information on the company's websites. If the SMs are utilized effectively by the operating firms in Bangladesh, they will be able to achieve global publicity, create public awareness, enhance the destination image, attract more visitors, create a buzz around the destination, and a fan base through Facebook and other platforms (Kiráľová and Pavlíček, 2015)

9. Conclusion

Technology is rapidly evolving, and so does its impact through social media. More than half of the world's people are now utilizing SM. Because of the wide popularity of the virtual world, many tourism firms are embracing social media to have an online presence without having the proper knowledge about online business. Social awareness needs to be created, and the government should arrange training programs for those businesses that use this platform effectively to boost their knowledge of online business. Social media promotion is relatively time and money-efficient, and this promotional method can hugely benefit almost all the Micro, Small, and Medium Tourism Enterprises in Bangladesh (Habiba, 2022). As most clients do their primary research on a tour program plan in SM, the existence of tourism businesses in social media can easily attract more tourists.

Moreover, the strong presence in social media helps the tourism sector in Bangladesh to regain its glory and shine in the future.

Acknowledgment: The authors acknowledge the contributions to each other. The authors acknowledge other authors whose articles and reports have been utilized to frame this article. Finally, the authors are grateful to the reviewers for their valuable suggestions to help improve this article.

Conflicts of Interest: There is no reason for any conflict of Interest. The authors did not copy from any other sources. Whatever concepts or statements are used in this article are correctly cited.

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