

**ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA
INGENERATINGTOURISMENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS: AN
EMPIRICAL STUDY IN KERALA**

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has become one of the major sources of economy in the beautiful state of Kerala, also referred to as 'God's Own Country'. However, the ecosystem is facing pressure due to the rapid development of tourism activities, which necessitates sustainable tourism and environmental awareness. Social media platforms have become vital in the digital era as far as changing environmentally friendly behavior, creating awareness and shaping perceptions are concerned. Tourists' Environmental Sustainability of Tourism has gained importance as one of the major global issues. With their rapid evolution, social media platforms are increasingly being utilized to influence ecofriendly attitudes as well as ecofriendly tourism practices. In this empirical study, we aim to identify how social media is used to enhance awareness regarding environmental issues in tourism by foreign and local tourists in Kerala. Specifically, this study aims to explore the relationship between the social media exposure of travelers and the level of environmental awareness as well as the effectiveness of social media sites in creating such awareness among tourists. Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied to examine the relationship between social media use by travelers and the impact it has on travelers' environmental awareness. A standardized questionnaire was distributed to 50 travelers where 25 tourists belonged to foreign countries and the remaining tourists were domestic tourists. The results of the study indicate that social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube and TripAdvisor have helped create awareness regarding environmentally friendly tourism. According to the findings of the study, social media can serve as an effective tool to promote ecofriendly tourism in Kerala.

Keywords: *Social Media, Tourism, Environmental Awareness, Sustainable Tourism.*

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INTRODUCTION

Even though tourism plays an important role in any economy, this sector often deteriorates the environment due to its mass tourism activities. There is an urgent necessity to educate and motivate tourists to be environmentally conscious due to the growing popularity of sustainable tourism across the globe. Social media has turned into an efficient instrument for communication, networking, and information exchange in today's digital world. Nowadays, social media impacts numerous aspects of modern life, including travel and environmental awareness. Currently, social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, TripAdvisor, and YouTube are extensively used in the tourism industry to motivate environmentally responsible travel and educate tourists about the benefits of protecting the environment and cultural heritage.

In recent times, social media has evolved as an efficient instrument for disseminating environmental information and influencing the attitudes of tourists. The encouragement of sustainable tourism practices through social media plays a crucial role in shaping environmental consciousness in the tourism industry. This platform provides an opportunity for community engagement, user-generated content, and digital marketing campaigns, thus promoting environmental awareness and responsible travel behavior. The impact of social media on sustainable tourism practices and demands has been proven due to its integration into marketing strategies. Social media platforms can be successfully employed in digital marketing campaigns that promote eco-friendly travel behavior. Significant correlations between high social media use and exposure to digital marketing and sustainable travel decisions were revealed through logistic regression analysis (Suraj and Yadav, 2024).

The attitude and concerns of tourists regarding environmental issues are affected by User-Generated Content (UGC) on social media, which encourages responsible behavior. In addition, the cognitive and affective influences of UGC are the major drivers of these behaviors (Mohammad et al., 2020). By focusing on content emphasizing eco-friendly travel, social media profiles like Instagram's @travelxism employ digital activism to promote sustainable tourism. Digital activism involves charitable contributions, volunteering, and visual campaigns highlighting sustainability (Firna et al., 2023). Social media allows local communities to participate in sustainable tourism activities, thus fostering community participation in regenerative tourism. Social media marketing campaigns increase awareness of sustainability, having a positive impact on the demand for sustainable travel. As a result,

knowledge motivates people to adopt sustainable activities and creates connections between green tourism (Gulati, 2021). Despite the usefulness of social media as an efficient instrument for increasing environmental awareness within tourism, challenges arise in connecting potential eco-friendly tourists and ensuring that awareness transforms into sustainable demand.

Social media's impact on environmentally responsible travel practices is in its early stages, and further research should be conducted to utilize its potential effectively in various markets and cultural contexts (Gulati, 2021). In recent years, social media has emerged as an efficient instrument for communication. Social media significantly influences many aspects of modern human life, such as travel and environmental awareness. Thanks to the development of digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, people are better connected than ever before. These platforms have become essential tools for information exchange, awareness-raising, and behavior change. The expansion of the reach of social media technology has brought enormous benefits to the tourism industry, which is often associated with environmental challenges. Social media allows people to highlight the need for protecting natural landscapes and maintaining their attractiveness by using various photographs, stories, and communications.

Problems such as habitat degradation, pollution, and deforestation continue to aggravate. Using social media technology, one can spread information about the adverse environmental impacts of tourism and the need to adopt a responsible approach towards the environment. In this case, tourism industry representatives can promote sustainable activities by relying on the use of social media to encourage tourists to take responsibility for preserving natural resources for future generations. This research focuses on the ability of social media to contribute to increasing travelers' awareness regarding sustainable travel practices through the examination of the impacts of social media in terms of environmental consciousness in tourism in the state of Kerala, known for its biodiversity and ecotourism destinations. Although there is extensive literature on the impact of social media on tourism marketing, relatively few studies examine the contribution of social media to the formation of environmental consciousness in the context of tourism in the state of Kerala. To address this research gap, the current study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the best platforms for spreading eco messages?

RQ2: How much does social media affect travellers' awareness of the environment?

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Tourism, which is one of the major engines of economic development, often puts considerable strain on the environment, causing problems such as pollution, habitat loss, and over-utilization of natural resources. In such a situation, the contribution of social media towards resolving the above-mentioned problems has become more important than ever before. Social media sites can act as very effective means of information dissemination and persuasion that contribute toward encouraging tourists to act environmentally responsible. The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which social media sites could be used for raising the level of awareness regarding sustainable tourism practices, analyzing their influence on tourist behavior.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To determine preferred social media platform amongst Domestic and International visitors for Eco-tourism awareness in Kerala.
- To understand contribution of social media in eco-friendly behaviour of Domestic and International visitors in Kerala.
- To compare the domestic and International in Kerala visitors in terms of their levels of environmental awareness generated by social media.

HYPOTHESIS

- **H₀₁**: There is a significant difference between domestic and international tourists in terms of environmental awareness generated by social media.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool in shaping public perceptions and behaviours. In the context of tourism, it plays a significant role in promoting sustainable practices and environmental awareness. The present review will look at the scientific literature on the effect of social media on environmental consciousness among tourists. According to Suraj and Yadav's (2024) research, which examines the influence of social media on the sustainable

behaviour of travellers, high levels of exposure to social media usage strongly predict sustainable travel decisions. The study also explores the relationship between social media, which pays particular attention to user-generated content, and environmentally friendly travel behaviour.

User-generated material was examined in relation to conscientious environmental behaviour regarding coastal tourism by Mohamed et al. (2020). The cognitive and affective triggers of the user-generated material proved to have a considerable influence on environmental concerns of passengers, helping to form environmentally conscious behaviour. The usefulness of user-generated content for convincing the destination marketing organisations in adopting sustainable tourism practices can thus be increased by this study. The study conducted by Gulati (2021) indicates that social media can also be used to foster and generate sustainable tourism using data collected from Indian tourists. Social media campaigns positively affect people's level of knowledge regarding sustainability, contributing to eco-friendly travellers linking together.

According to Kostic and Dordevic (2019), social networks can be utilised in order to increase awareness of ecologically-conscious tourists, since they act as channels that allow disseminating ethical standards and behavioural norms long before tourists visit the particular destination. Based on this idea, it can be concluded that social networks play a significant role in raising the ecologically-oriented level of awareness due to functioning as a channel through which information regarding preserving nature and conducting eco-tourism can be delivered effectively.

In order to determine the factors affecting tourists' decisions related to their pro-environmental user-generated content sharing, Wei et al. (2018) focus on the intersection between personal and social norms. Thus, the paper proves the hypothesis that the two most significant motivators of engaging in such activities include environmental awareness and responsibility. As a result, those people who care about nature and feel responsible enough for their actions are more likely to get involved in online discussions and become socially active. Studies that are specific to a given location are scarce, nevertheless, especially in Kerala. Concentrating on the connection between environmental consciousness and digital platforms in the context of tourism. According to Nguyen et al. (2024), social media is essential for raising environmental consciousness and promoting sustainable travel. The

activities and network structure provide forums for the exchange of knowledge and environmental messaging, which promotes place connection, eco-friendly behaviour, and community involvement. In relation to how social networking can be employed to facilitate participation of the stakeholders in sustainable tourism, there are several implications from the study. As observed in the study, social networking enhances participation of the community in environmental activities, promotes eco-friendly behavior, and develops an emotional link between the community and the tourist destination, which results in place attachment and sustainability consciousness. According to Severo et al. (2019), individuals who are subjected to videos, pictures, and literature concerning environmental sustainability and social responsibility are more inclined to cultivate social responsibility and environmental sustainability. According to Haque et al. (2021), being eco-conscious is critical for the long-term development of the tourist destination. According to the study, social media positively impacts place attachment and environmental consciousness but negatively influences environmentally conscious behaviors.

RESEARCH GAP

While existing literature highlights the role of social media in promoting tourism and sustainability, there is limited empirical research analyzing its specific influence on environmental awareness among tourists in Kerala. Few empirical studies have been conducted on social media's role in raising environmental consciousness in the Kerala context, despite a wealth of studies on the platform's impact on tourism marketing. The study fills that vacuum by examining the ways in which social media influences traveller behaviour and raises environmental consciousness in the tourism industry.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the proposed conceptual framework, it is assumed that the usage of social media by tourists plays an integral part in shaping their environmental awareness while visiting Kerala. The exposure to eco-campaigns, sustainable travel narratives, and destination branding through social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube gives them the knowledge and positive attitudes regarding sustainability. Environmental awareness then plays an important role in determining their tourism behaviour by practicing environmentally friendly tourism practices such as waste reduction, green accommodation, and community tourism. In addition, the framework also highlights the differences in the strength of the relationship

based on domestic and international tourists considering different reasons such as their cultural background, prior exposure to sustainability campaigns and tourism motivation. Moreover, demographic variables of the tourists like age, gender, and educational level can be considered influential in processing the information from social media. Hence, this framework encompasses the effect of social media on the tourists' environmental awareness in Kerala through direct relationships, environmental awareness as mediator variable, and conditional relationship based on type of tourist and demographic variables. This study relies on the following theories:

1. Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)- (Ajzen,1991)

This theory discusses how people's behaviour is determined by the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control factors. In the context of this study, the theory is applicable as social media shapes tourists' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control in promoting environmental awareness and responsible tourism practices. Attitudes can be influenced by positive stories about responsible tourism. Subjective norms will be created via social media by demonstrating eco-friendliness as valued practices. Perceived control will be enhanced through practical suggestions available on social media.

2. Social -Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)

The theory states that people acquire behaviour by observation. The core elements include observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism. The theory is applicable for the present study because the social media is an ideal platform to observe eco-friendly practices such as plastic waste management, protection of animals, and responsible tourism. Observations of such kind encourage travellers to behave in accordance with the eco-friendly practices such as avoiding plastics, encouraging local eco-tourism, and preserving natural resources like water.

3. Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz et al., 1973)

The theory argues that people make active efforts to use media for meeting particular needs including information, social, and entertainment purposes. In the case of tourism, the need for environmental information motivates travellers to visit the social media sites, and hence their environmental awareness will be generated

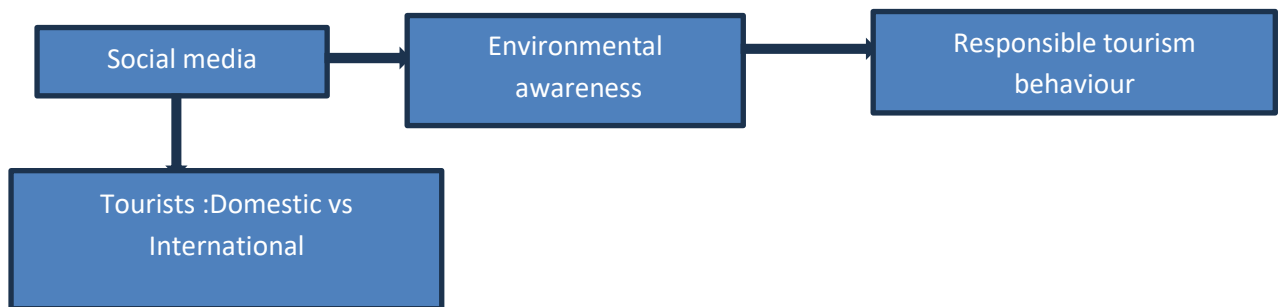
4. Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003)

The theory is relevant in providing a theoretical basis for understanding the diffusion of sustainable tourism practices. Social media becomes the medium through which innovative individuals such as eco-influencers and responsible travel bloggers initiate innovation that will be followed by other tourists who make up the majority of visitors in the region.

5. Sustainable Tourism Development Theory

This theory underlines that long-term tourism growth is only possible if it harmonizes economic, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions. In the context of enhancing environmental awareness among tourists, thereby fostering sustainable tourism practices.

The proposed Conceptual model



SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to investigate how social media might raise awareness of environmental issues in tourism. The study will concentrate on how influencers, travel agencies, and environmental NGOs use social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to promote eco-friendly travel.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it will analyze the vital connection that exists between social media and environmental sustainability in the tourism industry. The growth of technology at such an alarming rate has made social media an effective tool for behavior change, opinion formation, and dissemination of information regarding

environmental matters. The primary focus of the study will be on the role of social media in developing environmental awareness in the tourism industry.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to try and find out how far social media plays a role in making people environmentally aware in the case of tourists visiting Kerala. The sample collected for this study comprised 50 tourists, whereof 25 were local tourists and the other 25 were foreigners. The approach taken for collecting data is that of a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions formulated according to the Likert scale. The questions were framed taking into consideration the following issues: the use of social media, the platforms used, and the effect of using social media on creating awareness and behavior with regards to the environment.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

1. Profile of Respondents (Descriptive Analysis)

Table 1: Demographic profile of Respondents (N=50)

Variable	Category	Domestic(n=25)	International(n=25)
Gender	Male	14(56%)	13(52%)
	Female	11(44%)	12(48%)
Age	18-30 years	10(40%)	15(60%)
	31-50 years	11(44%)	8(32%)
	51 years & above	4(16)	2(8%)
Education	Graduate & above	20(80%)	22(88%)
Visit type	Leisure tourism	18(72%)	20(80%)
	Business/other	7(28%)	5(20%)

Interpretation: The sample was balanced between domestic and international respondents. most were young (18-30 years), highly educated, and visited Kerala mainly for leisure. This

profile indicates that respondents are digitally active, which strengthens the relevance of social media for eco-awareness.

2. Social Media Usage for Environmental Awareness

Table 2: Preferred social media platforms for tourism awareness and environmental

Platform	Domestic (%)	International (%)	Total (%)
Facebook	36(%)	28(%)	32(%)
Instagram	28(%)	36(%)	32(%)
YouTube	20(%)	24(%)	22(%)
Twitter	8(%)	4(%)	6(%)
Others	8(%)	8(%)	8(%)

Interpretation: Both groups use Instagram and Facebook equally for eco-tourism messages. International tourists rely slightly more on Instagram and YouTube, while domestic tourists depend more on Facebook.

3. Influence of social media on eco-friendly behaviour

Table 3: influence of social media on responsible tourism practices (percentage of “Agree/strongly Agree”)

Practice	Domestic (%)	International (%)	Total (%)
Reduced plastic usage	72%	80%	76%
Choose eco-friendly accommodation	64%	76%	70%
Participated in local eco-initiatives	48%	60%	54%
Supported community tourism	56%	68%	62%

Interpretation: Social media has positively influenced eco-friendly behaviours among both groups, particularly in reducing plastic and supporting sustainable accommodations. International tourists reported a slightly higher influence compared to domestic tourists.

4. Inferential Analysis (Hypothesis Testing)

Hypothesis (H_{01}): There is a significant difference between domestic and international tourists in terms of environmental awareness generated by social media.

Table 4: Environmental Awareness Generated by Social Media amongst Domestic and International Tourists in Kerala (scale 1 = not aware, 5 = highly aware)

Environmental issue	Domestic(mean)	International(mean)	t-value	Sig.(p)
Waste management in tourism	3.9	4.2	-1.05	0.29
Plastic use reduction	4.3	4.4	-0.42	0.67
Responsible wildlife tourism	3.7	4.1	-1.52	0.13
Energy&water conservation	3.8	3.9	-0.29	0.77

- Using an independent sample t-test, the mean awareness scores between groups showed no significant difference ($p > 0.05$).
- Therefore, H_1 is rejected. Social media raises similar levels of environmental awareness among both groups.

FINDINGS

Social media plays an important role in raising environmental awareness among tourists in Kerala, particularly on Instagram and Facebook. Both domestic and international tourists, show a high awareness of important environmental issues. Social media had a direct impact on eco-friendly practices such as avoiding plastics and encouraging community tourism. There is no significant difference between domestic and international tourists in terms of environmental awareness generated by social media, indicating that social media serves as a global equalizer in spreading eco-awareness.

CONCLUSION

The use of social media has proven effective in spreading environmental awareness among tourists through dissemination of information and adoption of responsible behavior. Social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube provide an avenue where people share information on sustainable tourist destinations and how to behave in an environmentally friendly manner while traveling. From the research findings, the study shows that social media does not only enable individuals who care about the environment to make their voices heard but also allows tourists to develop environmentally responsible behaviors. In this study, the researcher has examined the role of social media as one of the most effective ways through which environmental awareness among tourists can be created.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Small sample size (50 tourists) may not fully capture diverse perspectives.
- Study limited to Kerala; future studies can adopt a comparative approach across different states.
- Future research may use longitudinal methods to analyze the long-term impact of social media awareness.

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