

The Effect of Social Media on Foreign Travelers' Travel Decision-Making Process: Evidence from Sri Lanka

H M W M Herath

Department of Management Sciences Uva Wellassa University

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000721>

Received: 26 September 2025; Accepted: 01 October 2025; Published: 28 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of social media in foreign travelers' decision-making processes when visiting Sri Lanka. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 travelers from America, China, India, Australia, Bangladesh, Spain, England, Japan, and the Netherlands who visited Sri Lanka in 2025. The study explores three main areas: the importance of social media across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip stages; the influential factors shaping travelers' decisions; and the most effective platforms for promoting Sri Lankan destinations. Findings indicate that social media strongly influences travelers' destination awareness, itinerary planning, real-time trip adjustments, and post-trip sharing. Content quality, peer influence, emotional engagement, influencer credibility, and platform features emerged as key factors. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook were identified as the most effective platforms. These insights provide practical implications for Sri Lanka's tourism marketing strategies and contribute to the broader literature on social media and tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Social Media Across Travel Stages

Social media influences tourism decisions across three stages: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip.

Pre-Trip Stage. Prior research highlights the role of social media in inspiring destination choice and shaping itineraries. User-generated content (UGC), including photos, vlogs, and reviews, enables travelers to visualize experiences before committing to a destination (Wang, 2022). Influencers amplify this process by creating aspirational content (Pourazad et al., 2025).

During-Trip Stage. Social media acts as a real-time guide, providing information about trending attractions, restaurants, and activities. Travelers adapt plans based on posts, reviews, or videos shared by others, which enhances satisfaction and flexibility (Yang et al., 2025).

Post-Trip Stage. Sharing experiences online reinforces destination images and provides social proof for others (Wang et al., 2022). Travelers' reviews and posts become digital word-of-mouth, influencing the decisions of their networks.

Influential Factors in Social Media Use for Travel Decisions

Research identifies several determinants of social media's impact on decision-making:

1. **Content Quality and Credibility.** Reliable, high-quality posts build trust and motivate travelers (Wang, 2022).
2. **Peer Influence and Social Proof.** Friends' posts and destination popularity drive choices (Yang et al., 2025).
3. **Influencer Content.** Influencers' expertise and lifestyle appeal shape aspirational travel desires (Pourazad et al., 2025).

4. **Emotional Engagement.** Content that evokes excitement or curiosity increases motivation (Hussain, 2024).
5. **Platform Features.** Platforms with strong visual and interactive functions, such as TikTok and Instagram, are especially effective (Hussain, 2024).

Effective Social Media Platforms for Destination Promotion

Different platforms cater to diverse traveler needs:

- **Instagram:** Visual storytelling for scenic destinations and cultural experiences.
- **TikTok:** Short-form, viral content popular among younger travelers.
- **YouTube:** Long-form vlogs offering detailed itineraries and authentic experiences (Wang, 2022).
- **Facebook/Forums:** Peer discussions and reviews supporting decision validation (Yang et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed. Twenty foreign travelers who visited Sri Lanka in 2025 were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse cultural perspectives. Respondents represented America, China, India, Australia, Bangladesh, Spain, England, Japan, and the Netherlands.

Data Collection. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' use of social media across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip stages, their perceptions of influential factors, and preferred platforms.

Data Analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns. Responses were coded according to the research questions, ensuring alignment between empirical evidence and study objectives.

RESULTS

Sample Overview

The respondents were aged 22–40, with a mix of genders and nationalities. Their varied cultural backgrounds provided rich, comparative insights into how social media shaped travel decisions.

1. Importance of Social Media Across Travel Stages

Pre-Trip Stage.

Respondents consistently emphasized social media as their main source of travel inspiration. One participant explained:

"I discovered many places in Sri Lanka through Instagram reels and YouTube travel vlogs. It helped me choose my itinerary and know what to expect" (Respondent 1).

Another highlighted how saving social media content influenced planning:

"Normally while scrolling, if I find interesting destinations, I take screenshots and analyze them later before deciding" (Respondent 2).

This reflects the literature that underscores social media as a critical pre-trip planning tool (Wang, 2022).

During-Trip Stage.

Participants used social media to make real-time decisions. For example:

“While I was in Ella, I saw a TikTok about a hidden waterfall. I added it to my trip, even though it wasn’t planned” (Respondent 5).

Others reported using WhatsApp or Facebook to share live updates and stay connected. These practices highlight social media’s function as a dynamic guide during trips (Yang et al., 2025).

Post-Trip Stage.

Many participants emphasized the importance of sharing their journeys online:

“I uploaded my photos and stories after the trip. It feels like a diary I can revisit, and it helps others too” (Respondent 9).

This supports Wang et al. (2022), who argue that post-trip sharing strengthens destination image and influences future travelers.

2. Influential Factors in Social Media Use

Five factors emerged clearly from the interviews:

- **Content Quality.** Respondents valued authentic, visually appealing posts for planning.
- **Peer Influence.** Many were motivated by seeing friends’ travel experiences online.
- **Influencer Credibility.** Several travelers mentioned following influencers for inspiration.
- **Emotional Appeal.** Exciting or adventurous content directly motivated destination choices.
- **Platform Features.** Visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok were preferred for inspiration, while YouTube and Facebook offered depth and validation.

3. Most Effective Social Media Platforms

Respondents identified four platforms as most influential: Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. A participant noted:

“Instagram reels made me fall in love with Nuwara Eliya, while YouTube helped me plan my day-to-day itinerary” (Respondent 12).

Cultural differences were observed; for instance, Chinese travelers also used WeChat, while European participants relied heavily on Instagram.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm the multi-stage influence of social media in the travel decision-making process. Pre-trip, it inspires and informs travelers; during the trip, it enables flexibility and real-time decisions; post-trip, it sustains engagement through sharing and advocacy.

The analysis also demonstrates that content quality, peer influence, influencer credibility, emotional resonance, and platform design are decisive factors. These align with prior studies (Hussain, 2024; Pourazad et al., 2025; Wang, 2022), reinforcing social media’s dual role as both an informational and motivational tool.

From a platform perspective, Instagram and TikTok dominated inspiration and visual appeal, while YouTube and Facebook served as planning and validation resources. This distinction highlights the need for platform-specific strategies in tourism marketing.

Cultural nuances further suggest that tourism marketers in Sri Lanka should adopt flexible approaches tailored to international travelers' preferences.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media plays a pivotal role in foreign travelers' decision-making processes when visiting Sri Lanka. It impacts all stages—pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip—by offering inspiration, information, and opportunities for experience sharing. Influential factors such as content quality, peer influence, emotional engagement, and influencer credibility significantly shape travelers' choices. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook emerged as the most effective platforms, though cultural variations exist.

Overall, social media not only shapes how travelers plan and experience Sri Lanka but also how they advocate for it afterward, reinforcing its image for future tourists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Produce High-Quality Visual Content:** Highlight Sri Lanka's landscapes, culture, and experiences through engaging media.
2. **Collaborate with Influencers:** Partner with authentic, credible influencers to expand international reach.
3. **Encourage User-Generated Content:** Incentivize travelers to share experiences to build social proof.
4. **Adopt Platform-Specific Strategies:** Leverage Instagram/TikTok for inspiration, YouTube for guidance, and Facebook for reviews.
5. **Support Real-Time Engagement:** Provide up-to-date information and respond actively to travelers' online needs.
6. **Cultural Adaptation:** Tailor strategies to fit diverse traveler demographics and platform preferences.
7. **Sustain Post-Trip Engagement:** Use hashtags, contests, and community platforms to encourage sharing after trips.

REFERENCES

1. Hussain, K. (2024). The role of social media content in attracting tourists. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*.
2. Pourazad, N., et al. (2025). Influencers and the choice of a travel destination. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing / Information Systems*.
3. Wang, H., et al. (2022). Effects of social media tourism information quality on consumers' travel intention. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.
4. Wang, Z. (2022). Impact of user-generated travel posts on travel decisions. *Tourism Research*.
5. Yang, X., et al. (2025). The echoes of social media friends' travels: Social influence on travel behaviour. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.