Impact of Social Media on Spiritual Tourism in India: An SEM analysis of the critical factors impacting on decision making

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Over the last two decades, an exponential rise has been observed in the growth of spiritual tourism where travellers are preferring and visiting places of religious inclination seeking to align their body and mind. In the current fast paced life where stress, anxiety, insecurities and depression have become common place, travelling to certain places that provide connection with the almighty or peace to the traveller has become very important. Spiritual tourism in India has always been very highly valued and is active as an industry in a country known as the land of temples and gods. Many globally popular destinations exist in India that attract both domestic and international travellers alike. Destinations like Puri Jagannath, Kedarnath, Amarnath Yatra, Rishikesh, Varanasi, and Haridwar have developed their image and branding power over the years for the peace and meditating impact they have on their tourists. This trend has also been enhanced by the overall image of India as a country for religious and spiritual tourism where lakhs of international tourist come for relaxation and peace.

The transformation of social media platforms has had an important and significant impact on the destination branding of spiritual locations and the final decision making of travellers. As travellers are active on social media platforms in sharing their stories of travel, sharing posts and videos, highlighting their travel, they are sharing their experiences with a large community. Thus, social media impacts on decision making for spiritual destinations needs to be studied in depth to understand the underlying factors that impact the final decision. For the purpose of this paper, various variables are analysed through the SEM framework to determine their interdependency and how they influence the final decision of the tourist. The study is important for academics in tourism as it discusses the most relevant examples and key factors. The study is also meaningful to practitioners of tourism who can ensure that the correct social media marketing can be undertaken for attracting tourists to spiritual destinations.

Key Words: spiritual tourism, social media, destination branding, SEM analysis

Introduction

In today's fast-life wherein work and life have integrated closely, people need a break when they can disconnect themselves from work and duties. Tourism for such people is nothing but seeking desired experiences (Vembu *et al*., 2017). Some people prefer to travel for adventure, religion, explore new places, cultures, peace, history, etc., in addition, there are tourists who seek spirituality. According to Norman (2011), travelling to places in search of mindfulness while searching for the real purpose of life has been largely termed as spiritual tourism, which can be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature (Haq & Jackson in Rogers, 2007). Spirituality is understood not just as a state of mind but the holistic integration of body, mind and heart while channelling energies to investigate the true meaning of life for oneself. Spirituality can have many aspects and perspectives depending upon the expectations of the person and what is aimed to be achieved from life. Many consumers search and investigate places in the world they can travel to in order to draw positive physical, mental and emotional energies, where they can attain the next level of spirituality for their inner self.

Religious tourism on the other hand implies travelling with the prime motive of experiencing religious activities and the viewing of religious monuments and artefacts (Tomljenović & Dukić, 2018). It mostly covers tourist trips to perform actions related to religious beliefs and/ or to see the centres of one's faith in connection with the tourism phenomenon (Heidari *et al*., 2017). According to Tomljenović and Dukić, (2018) spiritual tourism can be, but is not necessarily, a part of religious tourism. Nevertheless, religion has long been associated as the most universally accepted motivation for travel especially in the Indian scenario where many shrines and temples are the epitome tourist attractions throughout the year. The enforcement of religious sentiments while selecting a preferred destination is highly influenced by the solace that one expects to achieve from a visit (Buzinde, 2012). Nonetheless, deciphering the true meaning of religion or spirituality differs from person to person based on the culture and environment in which the person has been brought up. Also, religion is closely linked to achieving spirituality as it brings the person's inner self closer to god or the eternal power one believes in, thus, religious destinations have globally been accepted as the preferred choice for seeking to attain spiritual connection while drawing on the true meaning and purpose of life (Shinde, 2018).

At the current time, consumers and travellers are digitally connected through their social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc. These platforms are widely used by travellers for sharing their stories and experiences which in many ways influence other potential travellers seeking to visit a place for their own spiritual wellbeing (Jauhari *et al*, 2010). The manner in which this influences the final decision of the travellers is based on many determining variables. With the growing relevance and impact of social media in the lives of people, it becomes critical to understand their impact on the selection of destinations for spiritual tourism. This paper has undertaken research on such spiritual tourism places in India and how 'user generated content' on various social media platforms impacts the final decision making of the traveller. The study has employed SEM analysis of the key moderating variables to link, spirituality, religious inclination, perception formation and final decision making through social media intervention. The following sections will develop upon the key concepts of spiritual tourism in India, social media penetration and impact on decision making of the traveller. With the help of this literature review,

key theoretical underpinnings will be evaluated which are then studied through the SEM framework in order to provide meaningful managerial implications for the future.

Review of Literature

Rigorous review of literature has been done to gain deep insight about the academic contributions on spirituality and how tourism is undertaken to reach spiritual connectivity. Many aspects of religion-based tourism are discussed along with how social media plays an important role in building motivation for choosing a spiritually connected destination. The next section will elaborate upon the key variables impacting on consumers for undertaking spiritual tourism.

Background to spiritual tourism in India

The practice of spirituality is not limited to finding solace through a search for the real purpose of life. According to Jauhari and Sanjeev (2010), spirituality is based on the quest by consumers seeking to disengage themselves from their daily life and grind to find inner space and peace. As per Dowson *et al*. (2019), spiritual enlightenment is a state of mind that requires an aura or environment to be built so that people can live and visualise this within themselves. Jauhari (2010) connects spiritual tourism with destination branding that exists in the knowledge level of travellers. Spiritual enrichment and well-being have different connotations for different people as the source of finding inner peace differs from person to person. These differences are embedded in personality traits, cultural upbringing and environmental impacts, leading to people drawing different meanings from different spiritual connections (Norman, 2014). Mukherjee *et al*. (2020), in their study explored a range of activities which are part of spiritual tourism like yoga, Ayurveda, meditation, cultural, religious and spiritual activities. The main resources for any of these tourist activities is place of worship, temple, monastery, shrine, mosque, church or cathedral, etc. (Shackley, 2001, Naumov 2019, Williams-Oerberg, 2020). The Indian market is comprised of various spiritual and religious locations which attract a variety of travellers of different profile and psychographic attributes. Many of these destinations have been branded for religious spirituality, like Vaishno Devi in J&K (Jammu and Kashmir); Bodh Gaya (for Buddhism enlightenment); Varanasi (for cultural heritage); Amritsar and its Golden temple; Rishikesh; Kerala; Yoga ashrams in Haridwar, etc. (Venbu *et al*., 2017).

Each person feels a special connect with the power or almighty that they believe in, and many indulge in regular visits to sacred places to connect with the god within. For many, spirituality builds when one undertakes geo-psychological separation from their daily grind to engage in some relaxing and peaceful place where they find inner peace and connect their body and soul. This is regularly noted in reported visits to sites such as Rishikesh, Dharamshala, Art of Living Ashrams, Brahmkumaris, etc (Javed *et al*., 2020). When people move away and detach themselves from daily stress and confusions, they find relaxation and solace. Thus, travelling to such places while aiming to change their view of life can lead to spiritual connectivity. The ongoing transcendent engagement with a place, its people and the activities that travellers indulge in, helps them in reaching the goal of spirituality (Haq & Medhekar, 2017).

Spiritual tourism based on achieving a reaffirmation of identity that builds upon activity driven result is a common trend in tourism for spirituality. Many travellers are keen to develop their wellness quotient, adventure inclination or recreation by engaging with spiritual tourism to certain locations (Willson, 2016). Globally and domestically, many locations are seen as resorts of spiritual well-being. These places are aimed at social transformation which people expect to happen when they travel to such locations - they fulfil certain latent needs for spiritual transformation of the self.

Currently, a change from religious to more spiritual personal growth is taking place globally, leading to a change in travel decisions which are impacted upon by a broad range of information (Boley *et al*., 2018). Potential travellers are now impacted by a multitude of offline and online modes of information and experiences that have created the need for more integrated models to be employed by travel destination marketers (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). However, up to now, not much exploration and theory building has taken place on the impact of social media on spiritual tourism in either Western or Eastern economies.

As per Michel Foucault's theory on the heterogeneous aspects of discursive formation, individuals and societies adopt religious tourism as part of their transition to form common opinions about the way life should be lived. This theory mainly focusses on societal change - the manner in which people of society change and transform over time to adopt various spiritual based inclinations

(Wood *et al*., 2013). This theory contributes in a limited manner to explaining the determining variables for spiritual tourism. Another theory by Joseph Campbell (1973) proposes stages of a mythic quest which builds upon the single core theory of a 'monomyth' or hero's journey upon which many myths are based. Through their Hero's journey, an archetypical person grows and is transformed through cultural developments to form their orientation for myths, their quest, their religion and spirituality (Reisinger, 2013). Certain stages of this myth-based quest help in building the core theories of spirituality. Many later theories have been built upon the core theories of these two authors thus they are considered here in developing theories of spiritual tourism.

Linkage to social media and impact on decision making

With the advent of platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter (to name but a few), people around the world have become active users of socially connected digital platforms for both personal and professional reasons. India alone accounts for around 300 million Facebook users which makes it the biggest market for the platform after the USA (Mint, 2017). The same is also true for Instagram and Twitter which are widely used for information sharing, communicating and social interactions. Such platforms are actively used by all consumers and travellers in particular, to share their travel experiences – thereby giving them social and emotional gratification (Heidari *et al*., 2018). Many consumers are actively engaged in online communities and groups related to travel wherein information about certain locations are shared and questions are answered. In recent years, many comparison / review sites like TripAdvisor and Thrillophilia have become popular locations where potential travellers seek active information about locations, places to stay, sites to visit, food to try, culture and heritage stories, etc (Boley *et al*., 2018). Such user generated content creates images and perceptions about certain places in the minds of consumers. In India, 60% of all tourism is reported to be based on religion and spirituality where travellers seek to visit places either for pilgrimage purpose or to seek spiritual salvation (Zepp, n.d).

Information and views shared by travellers or travel experts impact on the perception formation and final decision making of people exploring the multitude of travel related posts. In the modern digitally connected

world, consumers actively seek blogs, travel advice and shared online content related to traveller reviews and comments when they are making final decisions on their selection of a destination to be visited (Haq & Medhekar, 2016). The consumer's decision making begins with a problem-solving approach as to why they want to travel to a spiritually oriented place and what could they possibly get from it. This converts into an information search for which the easiest and most convenient way is to use digital platforms; this is facilitated by people who are eager to share their experiences online via the digital identities that they have created. This creates a wide range of data and posts which help potential travellers to evaluate the destinations available to them. For example, a person seeking to visit a yoga retreat and meditation centre would be influenced by locations in India while trying to make their decision. This consumer bases their decision on the reported experiences of other travellers in tandem with their own experiences or knowledge of the location. The traveller's experience of the location may be similar, of lesser, or of higher gratification when compared to the other travellers. Based on the spiritual satisfaction obtained by the travel destination, the traveller might also be interested in sharing their own stories on social media platforms and thereby influence or deter other potential travellers (Berriane, 2015). That is how a chain of experience sharing becomes a trend on social media sites.

In the words of Hoover and Emerich (2010), social media is having a deep and subconscious impact on the manner in which people consider their social and psychological identity. In the modern digitally connected world, people are often more connected online than offline and are constantly adjusting their perceptions about content which is shared through their personal and professional networks. Travel information shared by people is seen in the light of self-moderating variables like religious orientation, meaning of spirituality and link of self with spiritual connection, the significance of spiritual well-being, spiritual outcomes which are expected from visiting a particular destination, etc (Javed *et al*., 2020). Each social media platform and the content shared on it leads to image formation while consumers take the final decision on which location they would want to visit. As per Minazzi (2015), each social media platform has a different moderating impact on the final decision taken by the traveller, based on the place the social media platform is given in the consumers' cognitive metamorphosis of evaluating travel locations. Many internal and external

cognitive and emotional factors play important roles in evaluating the impact of each social media posting about each travel destination by travellers (Sigala & Gretzel, 2015). When other potential travellers view and make meaning out of each message, this information gets converted into an image, with motivating drive that influences the decision towards visiting a place for spiritual fulfilment. Thus, it becomes critical to study the impact of social media usage by travellers in influencing the adoption of spiritual tourism in India. This involves a large number of locations in India that cater to different kinds of spirituality for different sets of consumers.

Moderating Factors

With the help of a literature review undertaken of both Western and Indian based studies, certain key variables have been identified that impact upon the final decision of consumer and thereby, the growth of spiritual tourism.

User generated content (UGC)

In order to gain information about spiritual places, potential travellers actively search for 'user generated content' in the form of posts, videos, photos, reviews and ratings on various social media platforms (Singh & Dhankhar, 2021). For the achievement of social gratification of inner self and also to showcase to the social media world, people actively share content about where they went, what they did and what they achieved (Štefko *et al*., 2015). Such user generated content is authentic, first hand and immediate and thus, can impact the psychology of the travellers who are seeking to visit certain places to uplift them spiritually (Javed *et al*., 2020). Many social media posts are based on location specific content that is generated by governments or marketeers. As governments and administrators of spiritual locations continue to promote the place for tourism purposes, social media content becomes increasingly relevant for building up the image of potential travellers, however, it can be less trustworthy when compared with the generation of data from actual travellers, who can provide much more engaging material about their spiritual fulfilment and wellbeing.

Self-conscious spiritual betterment (SCSB)

In the modern world people are facing lot of stress and pressure due to their personal and professional commitments. Individuals regularly seek to explore ways in which they can achieve self-mediated spiritual

betterment and have a better connection with their spiritual self. As discussed in the literature, spirituality may have a different meaning for different people and is determined by the actual events taking place in their life (Sigala, 2016). The normal daily grind and the pressures of work and life does not let consumers find solace, thus, travel to spiritual locations helps them in retrieving their inner selves and connecting with the self they aim to become. Social media can lead to the creation of an image and perception about locations that can help people achieve their spiritual goals, or at least they start believing that these places can help them to reach their final goal (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

Perception of Spiritual location (PCB)

The modern-day communication and advertising world is highly cluttered with destinations and locations claiming to provide spiritual fulfilment for people who visit. This content adds to the material which is available on social media and impacts how each location is perceived by viewers. Also, since the content on social media platforms is based on actual reviews, it acts as an indirect marketing platform for spiritual locations (Richards, 2011). People interested in knowing about new locations actively seek information on social media and eventually form a perception which is a key element in decision making (Singh & Dhankhar, 2021). Such perception plays a critical role in each stage of the decision making and in particular, while planning an itinerary to visit the place. Thus, in many stages of the process, consumers are impacted by content which is shared by unknown people.

Linkage to Religious Orientation (LRO)

Most of the earlier studies are built upon religious tourism as one of the most universally accepted forms of tourism. In India, the land of many religions and Gods, 60% of domestic tourism is focussed on pilgrimage and religious tourism (WARC, 2018). Different parts of the country have adopted an inclination towards certain religious places. Most religious locations are identified as places for solace in academic research, due to the habitual and ritualistic impact of visiting the locations for both tourism and spirituality (Yesil, 2013). However, past research has not proven that religious inclination leads to spiritual satisfaction of the inner soul. Thus, while religion and spirituality are connected, this may not be a strong relationship, as religion does not necessarily connect the mind and soul of the people visiting the places.

Spiritual Outcome Expectations (SOE)

Researches have shown that travellers form an image about the spiritual outcomes that they would like to achieve by analysing the messages floating around on social media (Sánchez-Amboage et al., 2017). But it also needs to be understood that spirituality is a very personal belief, differing from person to person. As spirituality differs so do the spiritual expectations and outcomes which are found in each spiritual location. Through the evaluation of a location by seeing others posting their stories on social media, people form their perceptions that may later turn out to be wrong (Indian panorama, 2017). This negative result may lead to dissatisfaction in the spiritual travel and may impact on their long-term perception. This will also result in 'feedback' i.e. the impact of their posts on their social media accounts. Hence, the linkage between social media and spiritual outcomes may be strong, but the results may be low. In addition, spiritual outcomes will be different for each person.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the above review of literature and identification of moderating variables, a theoretical framework has been designed for the study. The key variables that are expected to have an impact on the development and adoption of spiritual tourism are outlined in Figure 1.

Research Methodology

This study is conducted in order to analyse the factors influencing spiritual tourism in India. The dependent variable is spiritual tourism, while independent variables of the study are user generated content, self-conscious spiritual betterment, perception of spiritual location, linkage to religious orientation and spiritual outcome expectations. The following hypotheses are proposed to test the variables:
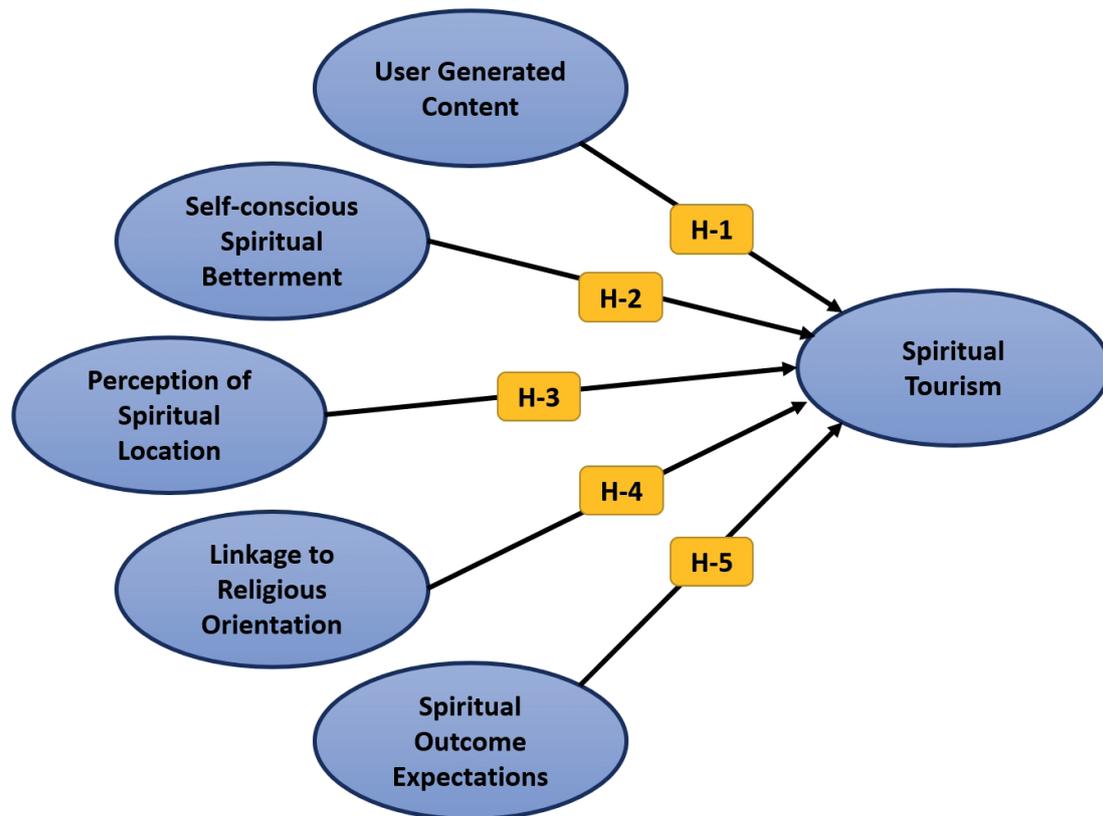
Hypothesis 1:

$H1_0$: There is no effect of user generated content on spiritual tourism in India

H1: There is a significant impact of user generated content on spiritual tourism in India

Hypothesis 2:

$H2_0$: There is no effect of self-conscious spiritual betterment on spiritual tourism in India

H2: There is a significant impact of self-conscious spiritual betterment on spiritual tourism in India

Figure 1: Conceptual Model Showing Factors Which Influence Perception of Spiritual Tourism in India

Hypothesis 3:

> $H3_0$: *There is no effect of perception of spiritual location on spiritual tourism in India*
>
> *H3: There is a significant impact of spiritual location on spiritual tourism in India*

Hypothesis 4:

> $H4_0$: *There is no impact of linkage to religious orientation on spiritual tourism in India*
>
> *H4: There is a significant impact of linkage to religious orientation on spiritual tourism in India*

Hypothesis 5:

> $H5_0$: *There is no impact of spiritual outcome expectations on spiritual tourism in India*
>
> *H5: There is a significant impact of spiritual outcome expectations on spiritual tourism in India*

Data Collection

This paper uses survey methodology via questionnaire to examine the hypotheses. Churchill's (1979) Scale Development Procedures were followed to construct the questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire were identified from the literature. The first items in the questionnaire collected demographic information like age, occupation gender, etc. Thereafter items pertaining to independent and dependent variables were included. In all there were 25 items in the questionnaire. A five-point Likert-type scale was adopted for collecting responses.

Before circulating the questionnaire among the respondents, it was shared with experts in survey and questionnaire design (Miller & Salkind, 2002). They checked the surveys for wording of items, ambiguities, leading question, intrusiveness, etc. They also checked that the relationships being examined were compatible with what the respondents could conceive (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002).

The paper applies Structural Equational Modelling to test the hypotheses. In the case of exploratory factor analysis, an acceptable sample size should have a 10:1 ratio (Haie *et al*., 2006). Thus, since there are 25 items in the questionnaire, the targeted sample size was 250. The respondents were chosen based on judgement sampling. The population included people who have visited or were planning to visit a religious place. In all, 500 questionnaires were distributed and after screening a total of 280 valid responses were obtained for analysis.

Data Analysis and Findings

The model was tested using SmartPLS 2.0 and SPSS 21 software. The SmartPLS 2.0 programming was set to 500 bootstrap tests for the estimation of significance of t-values. By and large, the analysis was undertaken in a two-step approach: this began with an Estimation of the Measurement Model (EFA) and then a Structural Model (CFA).

Estimation of the measurement model

The reliability of the items used in the questionnaire was checked using the Cronbach Alpha test. The results show a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.71, which demonstrates reliability of the questionnaire (Sekaran, 2000). Exploratory factor Analysis was then applied using SPSS 21 to examine the underlying factors associated with the items. The results of Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy both show a significance value above 0.70. This is evidence that the variables are suitable for factor analysis. The exploratory factor analysis resulted in 5 factors with eigenvalues more than 1, which explain 50.2 percent of the variance. For this study, items with loading greater than 0.70 were considered significant (see Table 1).

Estimation of the structural model

After conducting Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to examine the relationships between measured variables

Table 1: Factor Loadings of Items on the Constructs

Factors	Items	Factor Loading (>0.70)
User generated content	UGC 1	0.923
	UGC 2	0.898
Self-conscious spiritual betterment	SCSB 1	0.776
	SCSB 2	0.910
Perception of Spiritual location	PSL 1	0.73
	PSL 2	0.847
	PSL 3	0.917
	PSL 4	0.936
Linkage to Religious Orientation	LRO 1	0.826
	LRO 2	0.865
Spiritual Outcome Expectations	SOE 1	0.891
	SOE 2	0.893
	SOE 3	0.817
Spiritual tourism	ST 1	0.868
	ST 2	0.856
	ST 3	0.918

under each construct, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to test and confirm relationships between the variables under each hypothesised construct (Zikmund, 2003; Hair *et al*., 2006). The measured items loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) for all reflective constructs are presented in Table 1 and 2, and the results of the proposed model are depicted in Figure 2.

Convergence Validity, Composite Reliability (CR) and Discriminant validity

Table 2 shows the values of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) greater than 0.5, which support the convergence validity of the construct. Furthermore, the results of the analysis in Table 2 also shows that the composite reliability of all the factors are above threshold of 0.7, which is within acceptable range (Hair *et al*., 2010). The diagonals of Table 3 show that the square roots of all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are higher than the correlations of the construct. This supports the discriminant validity of the constructs.

Table 2: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR)

Constructs	Average Variance Extracted (>0.50)	Composite Reliability (>0.70)
UGC	0.811345	0.89583
SCSB	0.690298	0.815648
PSL	0.724705	0.912554
LRO	0.697713	0.821857
SOE	0.735522	0.892809

Figure 2: Results of Conceptual Model Using SMARTPLS
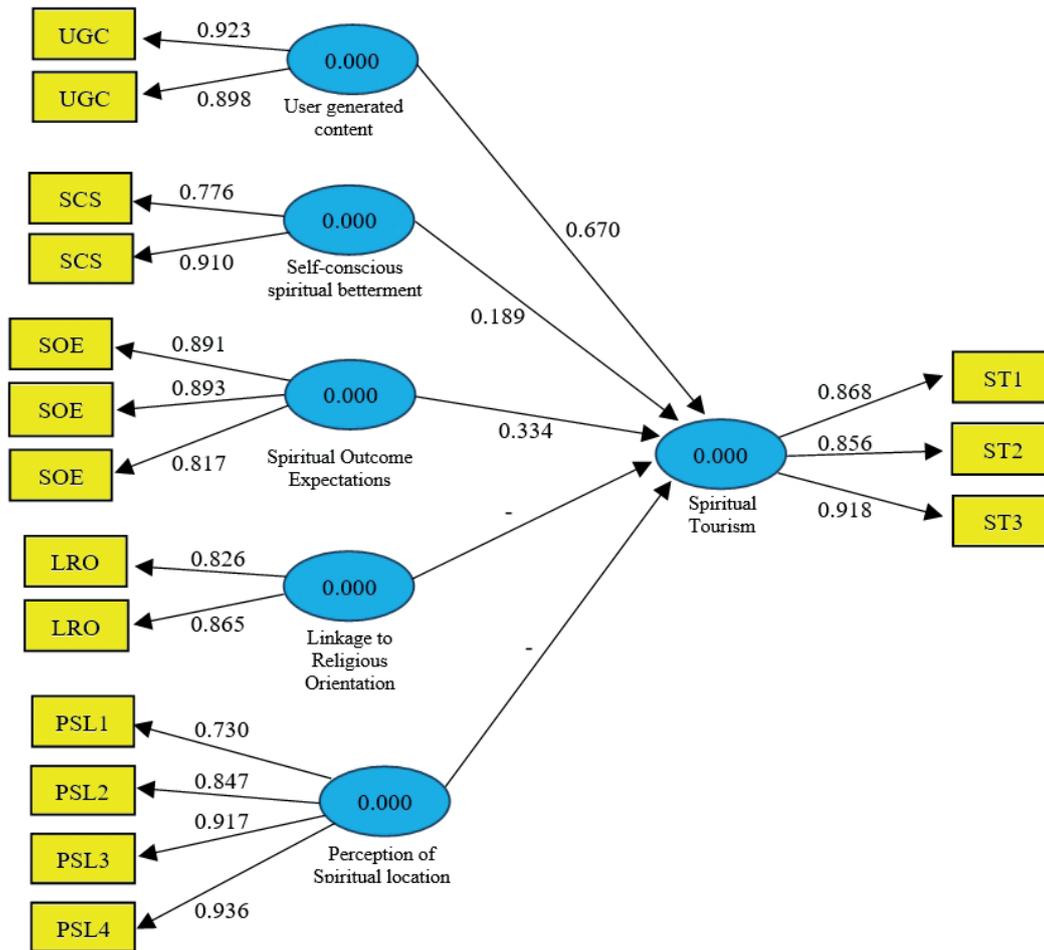
Structural Model testing

This study aims to test the influence of various factors on spiritual tourism. To achieve this, the authors examined the relationship of user generated content, self-conscious spiritual betterment, perception of spiritual location, linkage to religious orientation and spiritual outcome expectations with spiritual tourism. Figure 2 depicts the findings from the SEM-PLS path analysis. The results show the test results of H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5.

The *first hypothesis*, H1 presumed that user generated content has a significant effect on spiritual tourism.

Based on the analysis, H1 can be described as significant at 0.05 where the T-statistic value is > 1.96 and p = 0.00. User generated content indicates the highest beta value (β = 0.703). This means that this variable makes a salient contribution to explain spiritual tourism. Hence, H1 can be accepted.

The *second hypothesis*, H2 assumed that self-conscious spiritual betterment has a significant effect on spiritual tourism. Table 4 indicates that a positive significant effect can be traced between self-conscious spiritual betterment and spiritual tourism with T-statistic and p = 0.00. Therefore, H2 can be accepted.

Table 3: Construct Correlation for Testing Discriminant Validity						
SCSB	0.831					
UGC	0.501	0.901				
SOE	0.712	0.573	0.858			
LRO	0.777	0.415	0.795	0.835		
PSL	0.487	0.439	0.327	0.422	0.851	
ST	0.673	0.89	0.774	0.639	0.344	0.871

	Relationship	Path Coefficient (PC)	t- statistic (>1.96)	Standard Error	Standardised beta	p value	Remarks	Decision
H1	UGC --> ST	0.6602	12.9152	0.076	0.703	0	Significant	Accepted
H2	SCSB --> ST	0.1894	2.6151	0.097	0.182	0	Significant	Accepted
H3	PSL --> ST	-0.0557	0.8476	-0.244	-0.154	0.36	Significant	Accepted
H4	LRO --> ST	-0.0626	0.997	0.128	-0.045	0.41	Not significant	Rejected
H5	SOE --> ST	0.3343	4.3894	0.219	0.252	0	Significant	Accepted

Table 4: Structural Estimates of the Model

The ***third hypothesis***, H3 suggested that the influence of perception of spiritual location significantly affects spiritual tourism. Based on the analysis, it was found that the path coefficient, T-statistic and p-value produced insignificant results. Therefore, H3 can also be accepted.

The ***fourth hypothesis***, H4 assumed that the linkage to religious orientation significantly affects the spiritual tourism decision. Analysis has shown that the path coefficient and T-statistic indicate insignificant values with a T-statistic of 0.9970 and p > 0.05. This value demonstrate that religious orientation has no significant effect on spiritual tourism. Therefore, H4 is rejected within the Indian context. This also proposes that religious gratification may be adopted as a ritual and belief for gaining benefits when visiting a location but it may not have direct linkage with the spiritual outcome. There is found to be a significant difference between religion-based and spirituality-based tourism.

The ***fifth hypothesis***, H5 proposed that the spiritual outcome expectations significantly affect spiritual tourism. This study discovered that expectations from visiting spiritual places has a positive significant effect on spiritual tourism with a T-statistic of 4.3894 and p = 0.00. Thus, H5 can be accepted.

Managerial Implications

Each research study aims to gain deep insights into the problem at hand, studying the variables, understanding their inter-dependency and finally building managerial outcomes. The current study has multi-dimensional impacts for managers taking care of various aspects of spiritual tourism destinations - its marketing, adoption of social media tools and developing their effectiveness, influencing consumer decision making to travel to the site. The research findings clearly highlight the important role of social media as a positive element; user generated content impacts the decision making for spiritual destinations as people are impacted by what others share on their social media accounts. Hence each site / organisation / company operating in spiritual tourism should develop a strong digital marketing strategy encompassing the various social media technologies and engaging with participants to actively built upon user experiences, ratings, reviews, images and shared memories.

Social media platforms are found to be having positive impacts on the perception forming and likeability of spiritual destinations as people are influenced by what is going viral even when the trust level may be low. The awareness and reach created by social media platforms is of high value for managers as they need to develop a core strategy for collecting happy experiences on their social media channels, requesting travellers to tag them and involve them. Managers also need to build upon the core benefits that a spiritual place is providing to travellers as they play an important role in destination branding. As discussed above, spirituality has different meanings for different people; the marketing managers of such destinations need to formulate their overall digital footprint so as to attract regular consumers and also new consumers who may be seeking for such places.

Managerial implications also relate to mechanical aspects of a social media strategy that need to be considered when developing platforms – such activity needs to be built on technical analysis of the efficacy and impact of the various tools being utilised. Most of researches showcase that Facebook and Instagram play critical roles in influencing consumers, as they are personal and instant. The 'Insta Stories' posted by travellers create traction among followers and close networks. Facebook posts and tagging impacts people who are seeking information about places that others are visiting. This process (and a multitude of other technologies) needs to be understood by marketing managers as they create stories and enhancing their posts, seeking to make them viral. Thus, the roles of social media and/or the digital manager are manifold in creating the right spiritual image for a destination in order to influence consumers' decisions, and orient them towards one's destination.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research has provided an in-depth view of the impact of social media on spiritual tourism in India and how far it impacts the decision-making process. As there are not many studies linked to spiritual tourism in India and even less which are focussed on the role of social media, this paper has provided a detailed framework to begin a conversation and raise interest in this area of study. As India is positioned as a spiritual tourism destination with a focus on Yoga, meditation centres, therapies, Ashrams, etc, it is important to develop more studies which examine and suggest ways to improve both domestic and international tourism. The findings identify many areas for future research linked to this field. Not many theoretical or academic concepts exist which explain the connections between spirituality and tourism. In the case of India - the epitome of culture and heritage, this requires deeper studies to be undertaken and thus, the development of academic models that can help other researchers to undertake and develop research. Secondly, spirituality with respect to tourism requires more in-depth analysis, linking with other fields of study. This entails discussing the various forms of spirituality and how each aspect can be linked to tourism development. This study also builds upon the role of social media in this kind of tourism as not many studies have been carried out on social media and its impact. Thus, social media platforms need to be analysed in detail doing deep research on each to identify variations and nuances which are important going forward. This would also expand the overall level of study on social media in relation to other forms of tourism, which is still in the infancy stages of being understood as an important component of marketing strategy. The variables identified in this paper are limited to those identified by the researchers and it is likely that many other areas of research can be built upon that can broaden the horizons of this subject in the future.

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