

Impact of Digital Media on Consumer Behaviour of Gen Z with Special Reference to Varanasi



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Abstract-Social media is a vital point of contact in today's consumer decision-making process. The basic leadership process, linked to social media promotion, is associated with consumer behaviour. The clarity and accessibility of information have significantly influenced the decision-making process. Every social media platform contributes to the unfettered exchange, reception, and distribution of knowledge. The advancement of information technology has had a significant impact on the travel and tourism sector, which is heavily reliant on social media. For the tourism business to determine customer desires, decision-making processes and data searches heavily rely on social media. Digital media has been a crucial factor in influencing consumer behaviour in the modern period, especially among the technologically sophisticated Generation Z (Gen Z). This study, with a focus on Varanasi, India, aims to investigate how digital media fundamentally impacts the choices, attitudes, and purchasing decisions of Gen Z. Varanasi, a historically significant and culturally active city, is currently experiencing a spike in digital media consumption, which influences this group's consumer preferences. The research examines several digital platforms, such as social media, online marketing, influencer interaction, and e-commerce, to identify the distinctive ways digital media influences Gen Z in Varanasi. The study's conclusions will be helpful for marketers, decision-makers, and companies trying to adjust their strategies to successfully engage and serve the Gen Z consumer category in Varanasi and related cultural contexts.

Keywords-Digital Media, Consumer Behaviour, Religious Tourism, Varanasi, Gen Z.

I. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic segments of the travel industry over the last two decades. [1]Many travelers now seek experiences that offer both recreation and spiritual enrichment, driven by stress, uncertainty, and emotional fatigue in the world. Visiting sacred destinations provides opportunities for self-reflection, peace of mind, and a renewed sense of purpose. [2]India, celebrated as the land of spirituality and temples, attracts millions of visitors annually.[3] Its religious diversity, represented through various sacred routes and sites, positions it as a global hub for spiritual travel.[4] Prominent destinations like Varanasi, Haridwar, and Ayodhya instill tranquility and hold immense historical and spiritual significance remarkably. [5]Modern tourists are active contributors who share experiences, photos, and reflections online.[6] This behaviour

shapes how others perceive destinations and influences subsequent travel decisions. [7][8]Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube are powerful tools for destination branding and promoting visibility. [9]Varanasi, often described as the spiritual heart of India, stands out for its religious and cultural heritage. It is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, holding immense significance in Hinduism. Through social media, visitors share encounters in real-time, allowing others to virtually experience the city's rituals and wonders.[10]

The influence of digital platforms is particularly evident among Generation Z (Gen Z) travelers. [11]As a cohort raised with smartphones, Gen Z relies heavily on online reviews, visual content, and peer recommendations.[12][13] Their travel choices are often shaped by experiences shared in digital communities. For Gen Z, social media serves as a medium for inspiration, validation, and cultural exploration, not just a source of information. The current study focuses on understanding how digital media impacts the consumer behavior of Gen Z travelers in Varanasi, emphasizing religious tourism. The research aims to contribute to tourism marketing by helping stakeholders develop strategies that resonate with Gen Z's digital habits and values.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Understanding Spiritual and Religious Tourism

Spiritual or religious tourism has evolved, with travelers pursuing journeys offering self-discovery, peace, and spiritual enlightenment. The meaning of spirituality is subjective, varying across individuals and societies. Religious tourism acts as a bridge between faith, culture, and individual well-being. An individual's comfort and sense of belonging significantly shape their destination preferences. Religion and spirituality are intertwined concepts, helping individuals connect their inner self with a transcendent power[14]

B. Social Media and the Digital Transformation of Spiritual Travel

Social networking platforms like Facebook and Instagram have redefined engagement with religious destinations. Modern tourists use these media to share travel experiences and recommendations, influencing the expectations of potential visitors.[15] Today, User-Generated Content (UGC)—photos, reviews, blogs, and videos—plays a central role in shaping perceptions. Online participation creates a

"digital community of influence," where shared experiences become reference points.[16] Social media functions as both an information source and a decision-making catalyst. Platforms encourage emotional engagement and stimulate curiosity. describe this as vicarious enlightenment, where spiritual meaning is derived indirectly from others' narratives.[17]

C. Theoretical Perspectives on Spiritual Travel

Scholars propose frameworks to explain why individuals pursue spiritual tourism. Michel Foucault's theory of discursive formation suggests tourism can reflect broader social transitions in belief systems[18]. Joseph Campbell's "monomyth" or Hero's Journey theory describes journeys seeking transformation or wisdom. Reisinger and Timber et al. apply this, viewing spiritual travel as mirroring the hero's quest.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA CONNECTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON DECISION-MAKING

A. The Growing Role of Social Media in Travel Decisions

Social media is indispensable in consumer decision-making for tourism. It fosters two-way communication and affects destination image formation. Social media acts as both an information source and a trust-building mechanism. For Gen Z, it is the primary channel for discovering and validating travel ideas. Gen Z relies more on peer-generated content than traditional marketing, perceiving online opinions from peers and influencers as more genuine and relatable.[19]

B. User-Generated Content (UGC) as a Decision Driver

The abundance of UGC (photos, videos, reviews) has transformed travel dynamics. Travelers place greater trust in UGC than in company-generated advertising, as it appears more authentic and unbiased. This shift requires Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to integrate consumer voices into strategies. Marketing scholars term this phenomenon "electronic word of mouth (e-WOM)", which strongly impacts awareness and perception of tourist destinations.[20]

C. The Emotional and Psychological Influence of Social Media

Visual storytelling triggers aspirational desires and emotional engagement. Captivating imagery motivates potential tourists to experience spiritual ceremonies in person.[21] The behavior is linked to social comparison and belonging. Social media is highly relevant in spiritual tourism, where travelers seek personal transformation or emotional healing. Social validation (positive comments, likes, and shares) reinforces perceptions of credibility and desirability for Gen Z.[22]

IV. TYPES OF DIGITAL MEDIA AND MARKETING TOOLS

Digital platforms are categorized into owned, paid, and earned media.[23]

A. Owned Media

Owned media includes digital channels an organization controls (websites, social media pages). The main advantage

is long-term brand equity, but effectiveness relies on SEO optimization and engagement.

B. Paid Media

Paid media involves investing money to reach audiences, including Search Engine Marketing (SEM), social media advertisements, and influencer partnerships. SEM and Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising are highly effective, driving measurable traffic and conversions.[24]

C. Earned Media

Earned media is organic publicity (reviews, shares, influencer coverage). In spiritual tourism, it has immense value, as peer-generated endorsements are perceived as trustworthy and unbiased.

D. Core Digital Marketing Tools and Techniques

Search Engine Optimization (SEO): Improves website visibility using relevant keywords.

Content Marketing: Involves creating valuable information (blogs, videos) to attract and engage the target audience.

Social Media Marketing: Uses platforms like Instagram and YouTube to build brand communities and drive engagement, strengthening emotional connections for Gen Z.

Influencer and Affiliate Marketing: Influencer marketing leverages individuals with strong social followings to promote destinations authentically.

Analytics and Performance Tracking: Measures effectiveness using tools like Google Analytics, providing metrics on reach and conversion rates.[25]

V. OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESES, AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Objectives of the Study

To analyze Gen Z's perception of digital media and its influence on their decision-making process. To assess the role of social media and influencers in shaping Gen Z's purchasing behavior in Varanasi. To study how digital marketing tools affect awareness, trust, and loyalty among Gen Z consumers. To examine the relationship between digital interaction and cultural or religious tourism participation. To recommend strategies for marketers and tourism authorities to better engage Gen Z audiences.

B. Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1

- H_{01} (Null Hypothesis): Digital media has no significant influence on Gen Z consumers' purchasing behavior in Varanasi.
- H_{11} (Alternative Hypothesis): Digital media has a significant positive influence on Gen Z consumers' purchasing behavior in Varanasi.

Hypothesis 2

- H_{02} (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant relationship between social media engagement and brand awareness or consumer loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

- H_{12} (Alternative Hypothesis): Social media engagement has a significant positive relationship with brand awareness and consumer loyalty among Gen Z consumers.

Hypothesis 3

- H_{03} (Null Hypothesis): Exposure to cultural and religious digital content does not significantly influence Gen Z's interest in religious tourism activities.
- H_{13} (Alternative Hypothesis): Exposure to cultural and religious digital content significantly enhances Gen Z's interest in religious tourism activities.

C. Research Methodology

The study follows a descriptive and exploratory research design as follows.

VI. DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from 110 respondents. A purposive sampling method was used to target digitally active Gen Z consumers in Varanasi. Data Sources: Primary data was collected through surveys and interviews, while secondary data was drawn from journals and academic studies. Research Variables: Independent variables include social media engagement and influencer exposure; dependent variables include buying intention and digital trust. Data Analysis Tools: Analytical tools such as descriptive statistics, correlation, and percentage analysis were used.

VII. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis of responses from Gen Z participants yielded several key findings:

A Questionnaire was prepared and administered to get it filled by respondents belonging to Gen Z. Responses were as follows-

1. GENDER
111 responses

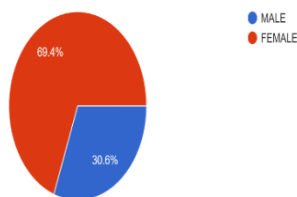


Fig 1: Majority of respondents are male.

2. AGE
111 responses

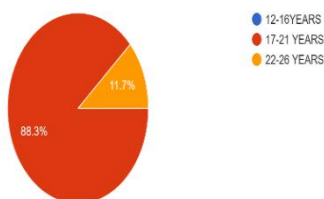


Fig 2: Most of the respondents belong to 17-21 years age grp

3. WHAT DIGITAL PLATFORMS DO YOU USE?

111 responses

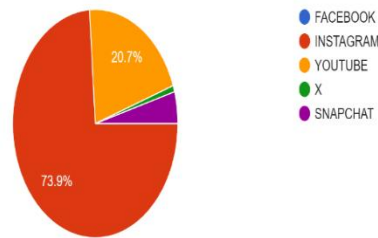


Fig 3: Most of the respondents use Instagram (73.9%) followed by you tube.

4. FOR HOW MANY HOURS DO YOU USE DIGITAL MEDIA PER DAY

111 responses

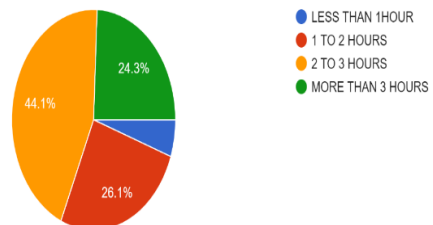


Fig 4: Majority (44.1%) of the respondents are using digital media between 2 to 3 hours

5. HAVE YOU EVER USED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM TO SEARCH RELIGIOUS TOUR DESTINATIONS?

111 responses

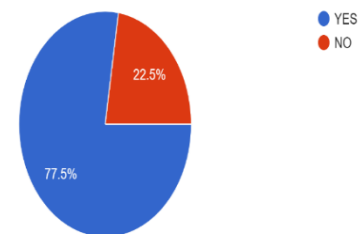


Fig 5: A good majority (77.5%) of respondents use social media platforms to search about religious destinations .

6. Which online platforms do you find most helpful in researching religious tours?

111 responses

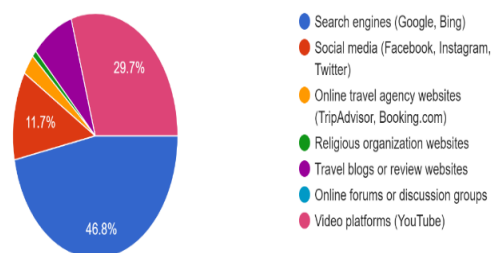


Fig 6: Nearly 50 percent use Google or Bing for searching closely followed by social Media. You tube also is used significantly.

7.What type of digital content influences your decision to choose a religious tour?

111 responses

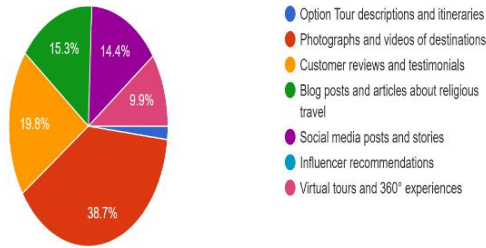


Fig 7: Reason for using digital media for search mostly is visual appeal through photographs and videos followed by customer reviews.

8.How important are the following factors when choosing a religious tour?

111 responses

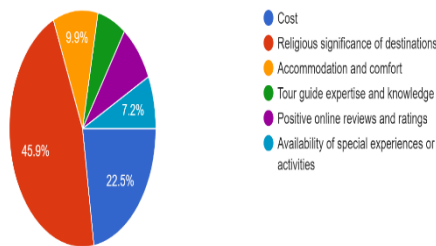


Fig 8: Customer is highly influenced by religious significance of the place and budget with cost of the tour playing a major role.

9.WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO TAKE RELIGIOUS TOURS?

111 responses

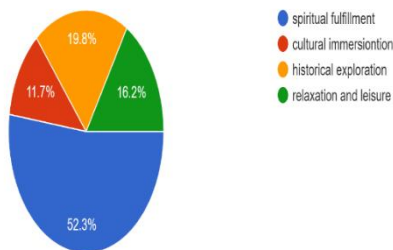


Fig 9: Spiritual and religious fulfilment is the most important reason people take religious trips. Historical exploration is also one of the motive.

13.DO YOU AGREE THAT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS INFLUENCE YOUR CHOICE FOR PLANNING SUCH A TRIP?

111 responses

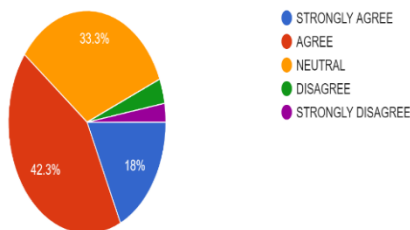


Fig 10: Majority of the respondents feel that social media plays a very important role in influencing choice for the religious trips.

15 HAVE YOU PLANNED ANY REIGIOUS TOUR BASED ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THESE PLATFORMS ?

111 responses

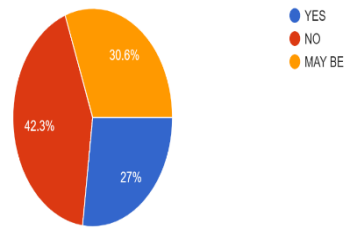


Fig 11: Platform Preference

Platform Preference: Most respondents used Instagram (73.9%), followed by YouTube. **Usage Time:** The majority (44.1%) of respondents use digital media between 2 to 3 hours per day. **Religious Search:** A large majority (77.5%) use social media platforms to search for religious destinations. **Search Tools:** Nearly 50% use Google or Bing for searching, closely followed by social media. **Decision Triggers:** The primary reason for using digital media for search is visual appeal (photographs and videos) followed by customer reviews. **Motivations:** Spiritual and religious fulfillment (52.3%) is the most important reason for taking religious trips; historical exploration is also a motive. **Influence of Social Media:** A majority feel that social media plays a very important role in influencing their choice for religious trips. **Planning Outcome:** There is nearly "neck to neck competition" regarding whether people actually choose religious trips based on social platforms or not.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Key Findings and Conclusions

Strong Correlation with Travel Intent: Social media exposure strongly correlates with travel intent, as respondents who spent more time on social media reported inspiration from online posts and advertisements. **Support for H1 and H3:** The dominance of visual content (photos/videos) and customer reviews as major decision triggers supports H1 (positive influence of digital media) and H3 (enhanced interest through content). **Spiritual Motivation:** Despite the digital influence, intrinsic motivations like spiritual appeal remain a major factor for visiting Varanasi. **Influencer Credibility:** Influencer credibility impacts trust and motivation, with respondents showing higher confidence when content was shared by trusted influencers.

B. Recommendations

Based on the research, the following strategies are recommended for engaging Gen Z audiences: **Adopt Influencer Collaborations:** Partner with local micro-influencers to target Gen Z audiences more authentically. **Interactive Campaigns:** Develop interactive storytelling formats using AR/VR and reels to attract attention. **Cultural**

Integration: Embed local culture and heritage in digital marketing to strengthen emotional resonance. Enhance Trust: Encourage real-time feedback and provide transparent information to build credibility. Sustainable Engagement: Promote eco-friendly and responsible tourism practices using digital media.

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