

THE ROLE OF KEY SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON DESTINATION CHOICE: A STUDY BASED ON SIGIRIYA, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media has revolutionized the tourism industry, particularly influencing travellers' destination choices. This study investigates the role of key social media influencers in shaping travel decisions, with a specific focus on Sigiriya, Sri Lanka, a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its historical, cultural, and archaeological significance. This research examines how various social media elements, such as information shared by other travelers, destination image, behavioral intentions, the effect of social media on marketing, and tourism satisfaction, influence tourists' decisions to visit Sigiriya. The primary objective of this study is to assess the impact of social media on destination choice within the context of Sigiriya's tourism industry. The study employs a quantitative research methodology using a convenience sampling method, collecting primary data through a structured questionnaire distributed to a sample of 382 travelers who engaged with social media for trip planning. The study focuses on key elements, such as shared information by travelers, the portrayal of destination image on social platforms, and the effects of social media on marketing and tourism satisfaction. Using a convenience sampling method, data were collected from travelers who had chosen Sigiriya as their destination based on social media interactions, with structured questionnaires administered both online and in person. Descriptive statistical techniques were employed using SPSS 21.0 to analyze the collected data. The findings revealed strong positive correlations between the examined social media elements and destination choice. Specifically, peer-shared content, destination image, and strategic marketing efforts on social media platforms play a significant role in influencing travelers' preferences for Sigiriya. The study's results also highlight the importance of behavioral intentions shaped by social media interactions in the decision-making process. They concluded that social media elements exert a substantial influence on destination choice, with 71.5% of the variance in travel decisions explained by these factors. These findings provide valuable insights for tourism marketers, destination management organizations, and stakeholders in Sigiriya, underscoring the need for effective social media strategies to enhance visibility, attract tourists, and sustain competitiveness in the global tourism market.

Keywords: Destination choice, destination image, Sigiriya, social media elements, social media influencers, traveler behavior, user generated content (UGC)