Research Article 03

Assessing the Impact of Instagram Hotspots on Travelers' Destination Choice: Empirical Evidence from Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The rise of social media platforms, notably Instagram, has fundamentally altered the landscape of how individuals share and consume travel experiences. Instagram, with its visual-centric nature, user-generated content, and social validation mechanisms such as likes and comments, has become a powerful tool in influencing travelers' perceptions and decisions about their preferred destinations. Instagram exposes travelers to captivating imagery, personal stories, and peer recommendations, shaping their travel aspirations and preferences. Using a quantitative research methodology, this study aims to examine how Instagram hotspots influence traveler choice and how online trust functions as a mediator between Instagram hotspots and traveler choice. A sample of 384 Instagram users of Generation Y was determined as the sample size using the convenience sampling technique. Structured self-administered questionnaires were distributed to collect the primary data, and Structural Equation Modelling through Smart PLS was applied to analyze the data. The research found that Instagram hotspots significantly influence destination choice, with online trust partially mediating this relationship. This study's findings shed light on the relationship between Instagram content, user engagement, and destination choices, offering Sri Lanka's tourism stakeholders valuable insights for strategic decision-making. The insights from this study empower stakeholders to enhance their promotional strategies and resource allocation. By understanding the factors influencing travelers' choices and preferences, tourism authorities and businesses can customize their marketing campaigns, craft targeted messaging, and create engaging content that resonates with their audience. By understanding the factors that influence travelers' choices, tourism authorities and businesses can tailor their marketing campaigns, develop targeted messaging, and create engaging content that resonates with their audience.

Keywords: Destination choice, destination promotion, Instagram hotspots, online trust, travelers' behavior, User-Generated Content

Introduction

In the contemporary travel landscape, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter serve as powerful catalysts, seamlessly connecting potential travelers with captivating destination experiences and the potent influence of social media in attracting tourists to destinations is undeniable (Smith, 2020; Tham, Mair & Croy, 2020). Through visually compelling content, user-generated reviews, and interactive engagement, social media platforms create a virtual allure that inspires wanderlust and fuels the decision-making process for prospective tourists (Gupta, Dogra & George, 2018). Instagram hotspots have become popular among tourists due to their frequent appearances on Instagram. These hotspots can be anything from natural landmarks to historical sites to trendy cafes (Fan & Zhang, 2022). In Sri Lanka, there has been a significant increase in the number of tourists visiting Instagram hotspots in recent years (Hewapathirana, 2023). This is due in part to the growing popularity of social media, as well as the ease with which travelers can find and share information about these hotspots online. There are a number of reasons why Instagram hotspots are so popular with travelers. First, these locations are often seen as being visually appealing and photogenic (Deng, Lin & Chen, 2021). The impact of Instagram hotspots on traveler's destination choices in Sri Lanka has been significant (Petrus-Mudoy, 2020). According to Hewapathirana (2023), it was found that over 70% of tourists who visited Sri Lanka had seen social media content before booking their trip. Additionally, Hewapathirana (2023) reveals that tourists visiting Instagram hotspots were likelier to spend more money and stay longer in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government and private sector have yet to actively contribute to enhancing Instagram hotspots, focusing instead on traditional destination improvement methods, possibly due to a knowledge gap in innovative strategies (Hewapathirana, 2023; Rathnaweera, Dharmarathna, & Jayasekara, 2021). Thus, the understanding of the significance of the Instagram Hotspot in influencing travelers' destination choice can be vital in developing innovative and sustainable strategies.

One of the most popular social networks today is Instagram, which gathers over 1 billion monthly active accounts (Roberston, 2018). It is one of the fastest-growing photo and video-sharing platforms (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) and an essential research medium in the tourism industry (Sedera et al., 2017). Engelbrecht, Sotiriadis and Swart (2019) argued that influence along with attitude, is an important factor to consider in determining tourists' destination choices. Therefore, tourism scholars are keen on studying in nature of impact made by Instagram hotspots over the travelers' destination choices and other purchase decisions.

Problem Identification

The role of social media cannot be ignored within the context of the tourism industry as it makes this world a global village (Saeed & Shafique, 2020). Social media makes it possible for tourists to collect a wide range of information about their desired destination. In contrast, the pre-social media era had limited information about the available destinations and the only way to collect information for decision-making was through brochures (Hu and Wei 2013). Unfortunately, Sri Lanka relies on traditional promotion methods, neglecting the impactful strategy of leveraging its destination as a unique attraction (Petrus-Mudoy, 2020). Instagram Hotspot can be a useful factor in promoting Sri Lanka as a popular destination among travelers who immensely engage in social media.
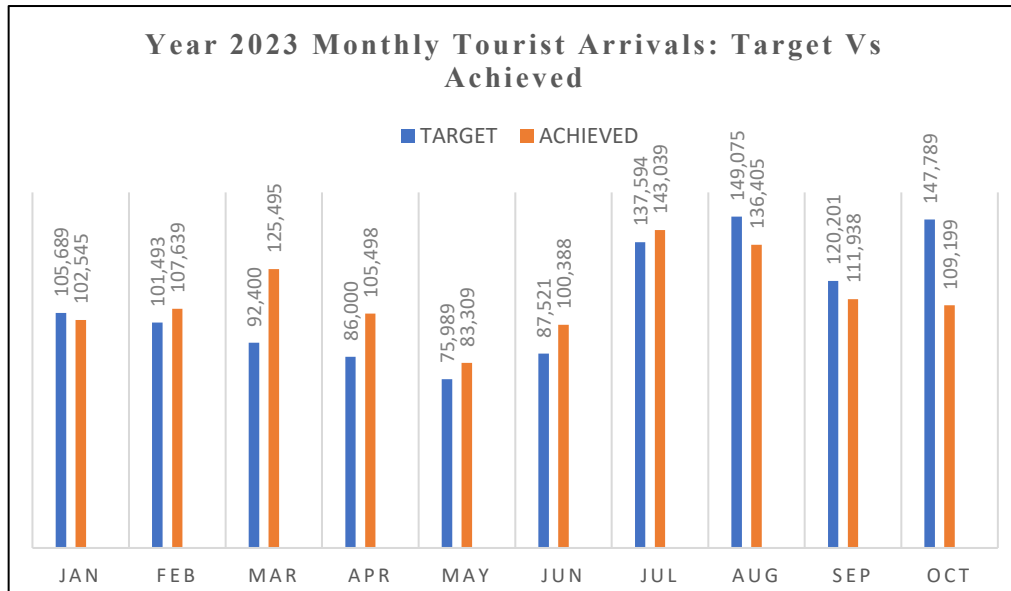
Figure 1: Year 2023 Monthly Tourist Arrivals: Target Vs Achieved
Source: SLTDA (2023)

As per the above figure, the Sri Lankan government had high hopes for tourist arrivals in 2023, but unfortunately, the reality doesn't match their expectations. Travelers aren't visiting as anticipated, and the government is struggling to achieve its targets, largely due to ineffective promotion efforts. The disconnect between expectations and reality is posing a challenge to the government's tourism aspirations. Furthermore, in the vibrant landscape of Sri Lanka's tourism industry, the emergence and utilization of Instagram hotspots as influential factors in shaping travelers' destination choices have become increasingly apparent. While the global relevance of social media in travel decisions is well-documented (Tham et al., 2020), a notable research gap exists regarding the specific impact of Instagram hotspots on traveler behavior within the unique context of Sri Lanka. As a burgeoning destination, Sri Lanka's tourism stakeholders lack comprehensive insights into how the strategic management of Instagram hotspots can strategically contribute to shaping and enhancing travelers' destination preferences. While previous studies have explored the general impact of social media on travel decisions, there is a need for more in-depth research that specifically examines the role of Instagram hotspots in shaping travelers' itineraries and preferences in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, despite the undeniable growth of Instagram as a pervasive platform for travel inspiration (Litvin et al., 2018), there remains a dearth of empirical studies that delve into the nuances of its influence on destination choices, particularly within the rich and diverse tapestry of Sri Lanka. According to the SLTDA 2020 annual report, most of the tourists visiting Sri Lanka are between 20 and 39 years old at forty-one-point three percent, while 20-39 age range can be identified as a cohort comprised of Generation Y, according to Bolton et al., (2013). Such a target market segment can be strategically influenced by a well-planned Instagram promotional strategy. Therefore, this study primarily aims to investigate the influence of Instagram hotspots on Sri Lankan travelers' choice of destinations while addressing the serious research gaps found in the prior literature. Its secondary goal is to ascertain the mediating function of online trust in the relationship between Instagram hotspots and destination choice.

Literature Review

Social Media and Travel Decision-Making

The influence of social media on travel decision-making is a well-documented area of research (Wang & Xiang, 2007; Xiang et al., 2017). A growing body of research has examined the impact of social media on travelers' decision-making process. For example, a study by Dwityas and Briandana (2017) revealed that social media has become a promising medium for current marketing communication strategies and influences on travel decision making. Social media makes it possible for tourists to collect a wide range of information about their desired destination, whereas the pre-social media era had limited information about the available destinations (Hu & Wei 2013) and the only way to collect information for decision-making was through brochures, travel agents of tourist organizations, and independent travel agents (Baruca & Civre, 2012). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Gretzel and Yoo (2018), it was revealed that social media platforms serve as a source of inspiration for travelers. The study highlighted that visually appealing content, such as travel photos and videos shared by influencers, significantly influences individuals' travel aspirations and destination choices. According to Li et al. (2020) social media platforms provide travelers to seek advice, opinions, and suggestions from their social network, enabling them to make more informed travel decisions.

Popularity of Instagram among Tourists

Instagram is one of the largest social media platforms concentrated on visual communication and one of the most active ones (Chaffey & Smith, 2022; Smith, 2021). Instagram has gained popularity among travelers in the 21st century (Badgaiyan, 2017). Instagram's popularity among travelers can be attributed to the social validation and peer influence it provides. Numerous studies have highlighted the significant role of visual content in influencing travel decision-making (Chung & Koo, 2015; Xiang et al, 2017). Thus, Instagram's emphasis on visual storytelling through photographs and videos aligns with travelers' desire for immersive experiences and destination inspiration (Gretzel et al., 2015). There are over 179 million posts with the hashtag #travel on Instagram, and the amount is continuously increasing (Instagram App, 2017). According to Social Media Today, forty-eight percent of Instagram users rely on Instagram to find new destinations, and thirty-five percent use it to discover a new place (Baker, 2017). In a similar manner, the user includes in his/her holiday planning process by looking up different destinations and places on Instagram, and later searching for the chosen destination (Terttunen, 2017).

Instagram Hotspots and Destination Choice

Instagram hotspots refer to specific locations or landmarks that have gained popularity and visibility due to their photogenic qualities and the high number of photos shared on Instagram (Teo et al., 2019). These hotspots often become viral sensations, attracting a large influx of tourists seeking to replicate the iconic images they have seen online (Schäfer & Hirsch, 2017). Influencers and user-generated content play a significant role in popularizing Instagram hotspots. Influencers with large followings often visit these hotspots and share visually captivating content, thereby amplifying their popularity (Teo et al., 2019). User-generated content also contributes to the virality of these hotspots, as travelers share their own experiences and inspire others to visit (Schäfer & Hirsch, 2017). The study by Kim et al., (2015) suggested that travelers' destination choice has a hierarchical structure when tourists split their Instagram hotspots into several chapters. Moreover, the authors highlighted one of the benefits of Instagram hotspot search, as an opportunity for traveler's to find information

in their context, rather than exclusively promotional context; this is possible due high variability of platforms providing user-generated content (Kim eta al., 2015). Further, the study found that Instagram hotspots have a profound influence on travel decision-making. Research suggests that travelers are increasingly relying on social media platforms like Instagram to gather destination information and seek inspiration (Neuhofer, et al., 2015).

Instagram Hotspot and Online Trust

The role of online trust in the context of Instagram cannot be overlooked. Instagram hotspots have become influential in shaping travel trends and consumer behaviour with online trust (Liu et al., 2019). These locations, often characterized by visually appealing backdrops and experiences, and online trust have gained popularity as a result of user-generated content on Instagram. A study by Kim and Lee (2019) highlights the impact of Instagram hotspots on travel decisions, through online trust, indicating that users are more likely to visit destinations that are popular on the platform. Online trust has been reported as influencing tourists' travel intentions and choice of destination (Jalilvand et al., 2012). In terms of the information consumers share with others, Online trust tends to reflect actual perceptions (Olson & Ahluwalia, 2021). For example, when consumers have a negative view of a particular product, their online trust in that product tends to be negative. Previous studies have suggested that trust is also an important antecedent of tourists' travel plans (Su et al., 2022). Tran and Strutton (2020) verified that e-services positively impact trust and that trust influences online trust and customer loyalty. The temporary nature of many tourism activities and visits to an unfamiliar locale can increase tourists' risk perceptions associated with a destination (Su et al., 2022). As such, online trust can be utilized by tourists as an important reference indicator to help avoid travel risks, with the valence and emotional intensity of online trust providing a significant impact on tourists' decision-making (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Jalilvand et al., 2012).

Online Trust and Destination Choice

According to Narangajavana et al (2017), user-generated content on social media results in visitors' expectations and trust. Tourism-related organizations should exercise this opportunity and provide adequate information on social media platforms with a certain content quality level to generate visitors' trust. Moreover, tourists tend to evaluate information from various sources before forming an opinion. Hence, the development of comprehensive social media is essential for the destination's success (Xiang et al., 2017). Online trust has been reported as influencing tourists' travel intentions and choice of destination (Jalilvand et al., 2012).
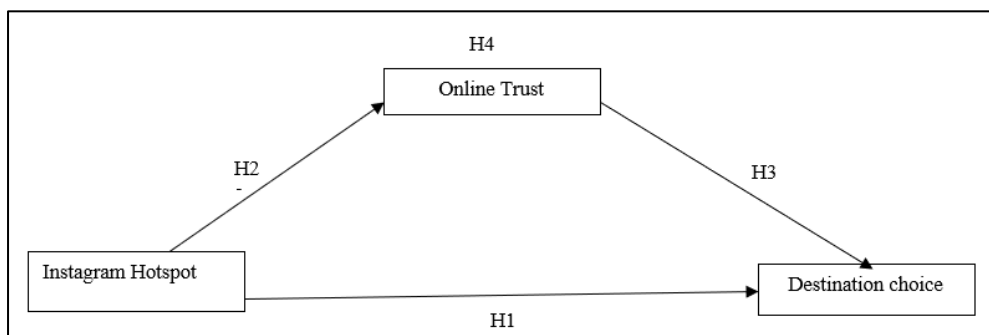
Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework
Source: Developed by the researcher based on literature review (2024)

Hypothesis Development

H1 – There is a significant impact of Instagram hotspot on destination choice

H2 - There is a significant relationship between Instagram hotspot and online trust

H3 - There is a significant relationship between online trust and destination choice

H4 – Online trust mediates the relationship between Instagram hotspot and destination choice

Research Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to investigate the impact of Instagram hotspots on travelers' destination choices in Sri Lanka. By utilizing quantitative methods, such as statistical analysis and numerical data collection, the research aims to provide empirical evidence and insights into how Instagram impacts traveler behavior. The primary data was collected from a sample of 384 respondents from Instagram users from Generation Y in Western Province using the convenience sampling technique. A self-administered questionnaire was developed based on a Likert scale and the questionnaire consisted of six sections. The first section intends to analyze the demographic profile of the respondents with nine questions and the remaining sections comprise questions related to User-Generated Content (UGC), Visual aspect, Impact of social media influencers, online trust and marketing variables, and traveler variables. The collected primary data was analyzed using the structural equation modelling technique in Smart PLS software.

Results and Interpretations

Data analysis was performed using Smart PLS, a computer-based statistical analysis software. Smart PLS software was employed to analyze the collected data and test the proposed research model (Becker et al, 2023). The measurement model was assessed to ensure the reliability and validity of the latent constructs. Composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were evaluated to ascertain the quality of measurement (Sarstedt et al., 2021). The structural model was estimated to analyze the relationships between latent constructs. Path coefficients were computed to determine the strength and significance of relationships between constructs (Sarstedt et al., 2021).

PLS – SEM Model Assessment

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Destination Choice	0.989	0.990	0.948
Instagram Hotspot	0.955	0.962	0.539
Online Trust	0.994	0.994	0.963

Source: SmartPLS data output (2024)

Under the reliability test, Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability were tested. Convergent validity was tested using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity was tested using HTMT, Cross Loadings and Fornell-Lacker Criterion. Cronbach's Alpha is used

as the measure of internal consistency reliability to test the reliability of scales or sets of items which measured a certain construct (Coakes & Steed, 2009) and the calculated values in Table 1 for each construct are more than 0.7, which means that validated questionnaire is reliable to measure the construct of destination choice, Instagram hotspot and online trust. Composite Reliability measures similar to Cronbach's alpha, but at the construct level, to evaluate the internal consistency of a scale or a set of items. The values indicate the soundness of internal consistency within the measurement of constructs. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is one of the important statistical measures that is used in Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to assess the amount of variance that is captured by the construct's indicator. The maximum AVE can be 1 and the minimum can be anything greater than 0. The AVE varies from 0 to 1. When AVE is more than 0.5, it is considered to have good confidence, which means the construct has moderate convergent validity (Deyshappriya, 2019). In this study, the values signify that the model's convergent validity is met.

The criterion of Fornell and Larcker states that the square root of the AVE for each construct is larger than the corresponding correlation between that construct and the other constructs. The values shown in the table below mean that this model possesses discriminant validity, which means that each of the constructs is without question measuring its unique concept or trait.

Table 2: Fornell and Lacker & HTMT

	Destination choice	Instagram Hotspot	Online Trust	Destination Choice	Instagram Hotspot
Destination Choice	0.974				
Instagram Hotspot	0.735	0.734		0.695	
Online Trust	0.435	0.747	0.981	0.438	0.767

Source: SmartPLS data output (2024)

Designed to be an improvement to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) assesses discriminant validity in structural equation modelling (SEM). Essentially, it tells you if your measures are distinct in a model. Practically speaking, a value of a number higher than 0.85 is the recommended threshold to uphold. Hence, if the HTMT value is above 0.85, you could be experiencing problems with discriminant validity. After checking HTMT values in the above table, the researcher noted that all values are lower than 0.85, which is recommended. It means that they gain acceptable HTMT values in the model.
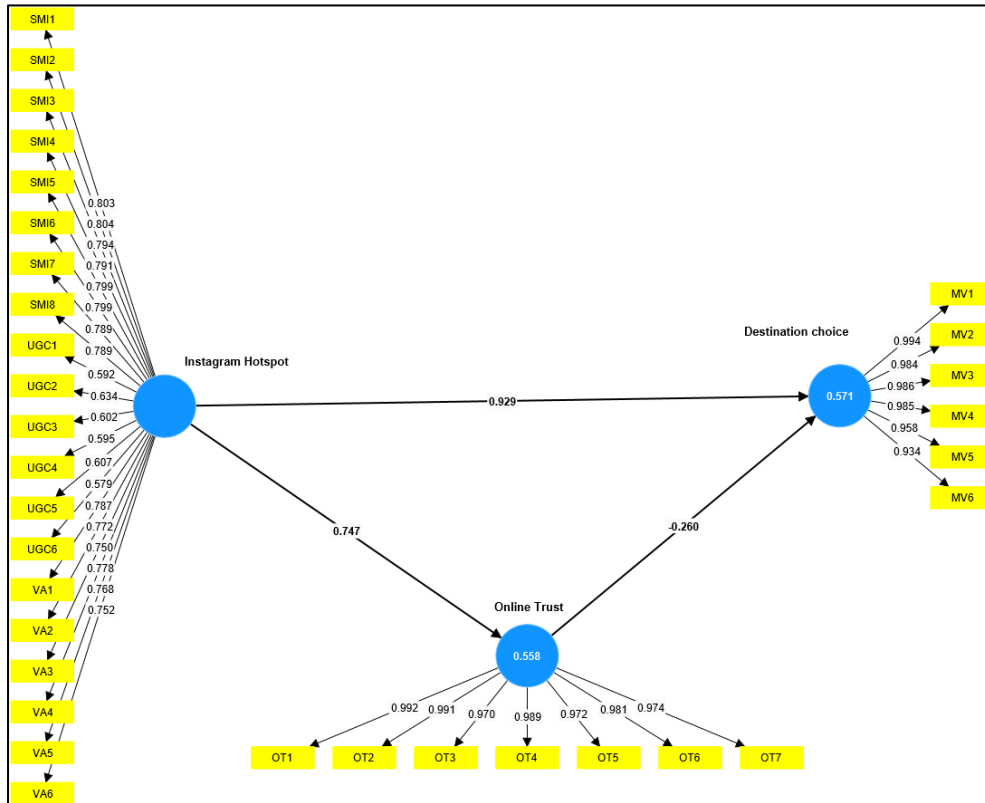
Smart PLS – Structural Equation Model

Figure 3: SEM Algorithm
Source: SmartPLS data output (2024)

The researcher utilized the Bootstrapping method to generate the path coefficients of the hypotheses. P values, and T values were generated using the bootstrapping method to test the hypotheses of the study.

Table 3. Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Instagram Hotspot -> Destination choice	0.929	0.934	0.046	20.255	0.000
Instagram Hotspot -> Online Trust	0.747	0.745	0.042	17.689	0.000
Online Trust -> Destination choice	-0.260	-0.266	0.058	4.442	0.000

Source: SmartPLS data output (2024)

H1 of this study tests whether there is a significant impact of Instagram hotspot on destination choice. P value of "Instagram Hotspot -> Destination choice" path is 0.000 and this value is less than 0.05. Moreover, T T-statistic value is 20.255 and this value is more than 1.96, therefore, H1 is accepted. It can be concluded that there is a significant impact of Instagram hotspot on destination choice. Moreover, the path coefficient value is +0.929, since this value is a positive value, there is a positive and significant relationship Instagram hotspot and destination choice.

H2 tests whether there is a significant relationship between Instagram Hotspot and Online Trust. P value of "Instagram Hotspot -> Online Trust" path is 0.000 and this value is less than 0.05. Moreover, T T-statistic value is 17.689 and this value is more than 1.96, therefore, H1 is accepted. It can be concluded that, there is a significant relationship between Instagram Hotspot and Online Trust. Moreover, the path coefficient value is +0.747, since this value is a positive value, there is a positive and significant relationship between Instagram Hotspot and Online Trust.

H3 tests whether there is a significant relationship between Online Trust and destination choice. P value of "Online Trust -> Destination choice" path is 0.000 and this value is less than 0.05. Moreover, the t-statistic value is 4.442 and this value is more than 1.96, therefore, H1 is accepted. It can be concluded that, there is a significant relationship between Online Trust and destination choice.

Mediating Analysis

H4 tests whether there is a mediation effect on online trust between Instagram Hotspot and destination choice. This hypothesis is tested using bootstrapping in Smart PLS. The researcher utilized a specific indirect effect to test the mediation impact of customer satisfaction.

Table 4: Mediating Analysis

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Instagram Hotspot -> Online Trust -> Destination choice	-0.194	-0.198	0.044	4.390	0.000

Source: Smart-PLS data output (2024)

H4 tests whether there is a mediation effect on online trust between Instagram Hotspot and destination choice. P value of "Instagram Hotspot -> Online Trust -> Destination choice" path is 0.000 and this value is less than 0.05; therefore, H4 is accepted. It can be concluded that, there is a mediation effect on online trust between Instagram Hotspot and destination choice. In this study, the P value of "Instagram Hotspot -> Destination choice" is 0.000, there the direct path is significant. Moreover, the P value of "Instagram Hotspot -> Online Trust -> Destination choice" is 0.000, then the indirect path is also significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that, online trust partially mediates the relationship between Instagram hotspot and destination choice.

Discussion

Objective 01 - To examine the impact of Instagram hotspot on destination choice

H1 of this study tests whether there is a significant impact of Instagram hotspots on destination choice. P value of the "Instagram Hotspot -> Destination choice" path is 0.000 and this value is less than 0.05. Moreover, the T T-statistic value is 20.255 and this value is more than 1.96, therefore, H1 is accepted. It can be concluded that there is a significant impact of Instagram hotspots on destination choice. Moreover, the path coefficient value is +0.929, since this value is positive, there is a positive and significant relationship between Instagram hotspot and destination choice. The impact of Instagram hotspot exposure on destination choice has recently been widely explored in the literature. Research has indicated that the proliferation of visually appealing landscapes on Instagram is a highly influential factor in changing people's preferences when it comes to choosing a destination to visit. (Gretzel et al., 2016). Instagram is an influential visual social media platform, used as a tool in destination marketing, that helps its users gain ideas and recommendations for holiday destinations via pictures showing off beautiful locations, rich cultural experiences and unique attractions. (Griffin et al, 2023). Travelers' perceptions and therefore decisions about their own travel destinations are altered by this digital exposure and are influenced by aspirations to match those portrayed on social media (Kim et al., 2015).

Furthermore, particularly in the social media era, Instagram hotspot imagery was found to evoke emotional responses among travelers' and contribute to the sense of anticipation and excitement for travel destinations (Li et al., 2023). Additionally, Marin (2023) showed the visually capturing content finally heightens travelers' desire for unique and unforgettable pre/post travel experiences. Therefore, Instagram hotspot exposure will bring destination choice and this was shaped by Instagram hotspot impacts on destination attractiveness, authenticity, and desirability when considering overall travel behavior and decision-making (Cvijikj, & Michahelles, 2013).

Objective 02 - To determine the mediating impact of online trust in the relationship between Instagram hotspots and destination choice

H4 tests whether there is a mediation effect on online trust between Instagram hotspots and destination choice. The p-value of the "Instagram Hotspot -> Online Trust -> Destination choice" path is 0.000 and this value is less than 0.05; therefore, H4 is accepted. It can be concluded that there is a mediation effect on online trust between Instagram Hotspot and destination choice. Research has identified the mediating role of online trust between Instagram hotspot exposure and destination choice, by recognizing the crucial influence of trust in online information sources on travel decision-making processes. As tourists encounter the presence of large amounts of user-generated content on platforms like Instagram, trust needs to be established in the way in which their destination attitudes and perceptions are shaped (Hu & Wei, 2013). It is stated that exposure to Instagram hotspots might result in the formation of not only direct destination preferences but also indirect destination selections by cultivating trust in online information shared by peers and influencers (Ghaderi, 2018; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The impact of insta-famous exposure on destination choice is hence mediated by online trust (OT2) – which does seem to fit into a more theoretical idea; by creating online trust, OT2 mediates the relationship between other emic variables such as the prior experience of word

of mouth, and on a less reassuring note, previous visits to a destination - think about those who went to an area before it was popular, and how they will likely vehemently not go again.

Further, the mediation role of online trust emphasizes how social media influences consumer behavior in tourism. More and more people find information and inspiration for travel on digital platforms. Credibility and authenticity of online content are the keys to driving destination preference and decision (Gao et al., 2018). Through the mediating role of online trust, the researchers aim to understand the mutual influences among social media exposure, trust establishment and destination choice. The study helps to disclose the mechanism that drives tourism behavior in the information era.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This research has been driven by the researcher's interest in studying the impact of Instagram hotspots on travelers' destination choices, particularly within the context of Sri Lanka. The focus on Instagram hotspots suggests an exploration of the influence of popular and visually appealing locations that gain popularity on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, on travelers' decisions when selecting their destinations. Moreover, the study comprises a literature review to identify the independent variable, which in this case is Instagram Hotspot, along with its relevant dimensions: user-generated content, visual aspect, and the impact of social media influencers. This indicates that the study aimed to investigate how these dimensions of Instagram hotspots influence various aspects of destination choices made by travelers.

Furthermore, the study determined that destination choice was the most appropriate dependent variable for the study. This suggests that the focus was on understanding the factors that influence travelers' decisions when selecting destinations, particularly in the context of Instagram hotspots. Additionally, online Trust was identified as the most appropriate mediator that affects both the dependent and independent variables of the research. This indicates that the study sought to explore how online trust, likely related to the content and influence of Instagram hotspots, mediates the relationship between the dimensions of Instagram hotspots and travelers' destination choices.

To assess the study on the effect of Instagram hotspots on visitors' destination selections, the study created two research questions and related goals. The study examined the mediating effect of online trust in this connection and sought to determine the influence of Instagram hotspots on destination choice using factor analysis and partial least squares structural equation modeling. All of the hypotheses were accepted, and according to the results, signifying important discoveries. In particular, the study found that Instagram hotspots had a significant influence on tourists' judgments about where to go, underscoring the power of these well-liked locales. Additionally, the study found a strong correlation between location preference and online trust, as well as between Instagram hotspots and online trust. Additionally, the study found evidence of a mediation effect, indicating that online trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between Instagram hotspots and travelers' destination choices. Overall, these findings provide valuable insights into the impact of social media influence and online trust on travel decision-making processes, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of destination choices in the context of Instagram hotspots.

According to the results of study H1, it was found that Instagram hotspots have a noteworthy influence on travelers' destination choices. It posits that the popularity and visibility of Instagram hotspots play a significant role in shaping the decisions of travelers' when selecting their destinations. Implies that the captivating and visually appealing nature of Instagram hotspots can attract and sway travelers' toward choosing specific locations for their travel experiences. Furthermore, it suggested that the influence of Instagram hotspots goes beyond mere aesthetics, impacting the decision-making process of travelers' and potentially guiding them towards destinations that are highlighted and promoted through social media platforms like Instagram.

As the researcher found, there is a significant relationship between Instagram Hotspot and Online Trust. This discovery underscores the researcher's observation that the presence of Instagram hotspots has a substantial impact on the level of trust that individuals place in the content shared on social media platforms. The researcher's analysis indicates that the visually appealing and engaging nature of Instagram hotspots plays a pivotal role in cultivating trust among users, influencing their perceptions and attitudes towards the destinations or experiences showcased. This finding suggests that the compelling visual content shared through Instagram hotspots contributes to building credibility and authenticity, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the information presented online. The study's identification of this significant relationship emphasizes the influential role of visual storytelling and digital content in shaping individuals' trust and perceptions in the context of travel and destination choices.

As the study reveals, there is a significant relationship between online trust and destination choice and this conclusion highlights that the level of trust individuals place in online information and content directly influences their decisions when selecting destinations. The study's analysis indicates that individuals who have a higher level of trust in online sources are more likely to consider and choose destinations that are promoted or recommended through digital platforms. This finding suggests that trust in online information plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions, preferences, and decision-making processes related to travel and destination choices. The study's identification of this significant relationship underscores the importance of building trust in digital content and information to guide and influence travelers' destination choices effectively.

The study highlights that there is a mediating impact of trust between the choice and the Instagram hotspot. According to the findings, the level of people's trust in online content and information acts as a mediator between Instagram hotspots and travel interests. According to the study, those who have good ideas for Instagram hotspots and rely on the information offered on these platforms are more likely to consider and choose the featured places for their trips. This emphasizes the importance of authenticity and authenticity in digital content and proves the importance of online trust in strengthening connections between Instagram hotspots and travel interests. The results provide strong evidence that trust in the Internet plays an important role in the interview process.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings on the impact of Instagram hotspots on travelers' destination choices in Sri Lanka, several recommendations can be made to enhance and improve the utilization of Instagram hotspots in the country. Firstly, diversifying the content shared on Instagram hotspots to showcase a wide range of attractions and experiences across different regions of Sri Lanka can provide travelers with a comprehensive view of the destination and

appeal to a broader audience. Collaborating with influencers who have a strong presence on Instagram can help amplify the reach and visibility of Sri Lankan hotspots, attracting a larger audience and increasing interest in visiting the country. Encouraging user-generated content and interactive experiences on Instagram can enhance authenticity and engagement, creating a sense of community and trust among potential travelers. Highlighting the unique cultural, natural, and historical attractions of Sri Lanka through Instagram hotspots can differentiate the destination and attract travelers seeking authentic experiences.

Consistent branding and messaging across Instagram hotspots can help build a strong and recognizable identity for Sri Lanka as a travel destination. Collaboration with tourism authorities and stakeholders to promote Instagram hotspots effectively can leverage resources and expertise to reach a wider audience and drive engagement. By implementing these recommendations, Sri Lanka can optimize the impact of Instagram hotspots on travelers' destination choices, increase engagement and interest in the country as a travel destination, and ultimately drive tourism growth and economic benefits.

Several key recommendations can be proposed to attract more visitors to the country via Instagram hotspots as a result of the outcome of this study. Firstly, it is imperative to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the existing Instagram hotspots in Sri Lanka to identify areas with high potential for attracting travelers. This analysis should consider factors such as the diversity of attractions, geographical spread, and popularity among Instagram users. Once identified, efforts should be made to diversify the content shared on these hotspots to showcase a wide range of attractions and experiences across different regions of Sri Lanka. Collaborating with influencers who have a strong presence on Instagram and are aligned with the target audience of Sri Lanka's tourism sector can help amplify the reach and visibility of these hotspots, thereby attracting a larger audience and increasing interest in visiting the country. Moreover, encouraging user-generated content and fostering interactive experiences on Instagram can enhance authenticity and engagement, creating a sense of community and trust among potential travelers. Highlighting the unique cultural, natural, and historical attractions of Sri Lanka through Instagram hotspots can differentiate the destination and attract travelers seeking authentic experiences. Consistent branding and messaging across Instagram hotspots are also essential to build a strong and recognizable identity for Sri Lanka as a travel destination.

Lastly, collaboration with tourism authorities and stakeholders to promote Instagram hotspots effectively can leverage resources and expertise to reach a wider audience and drive engagement. By implementing these recommendations, Sri Lanka can optimize the impact of Instagram hotspots on travelers' destination choices, increase engagement and interest in the country as a travel destination, and ultimately stimulate tourism growth and economic benefits.

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