

Marketing Destinations Through Social Networking Sites: An Exploration of Government Destination Management Organisations of North-East India

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ABSTRACT

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Social Networking Sites (SNS) are virtual spaces where users connect and interact regardless of time or space barriers. SNS are internet-based platforms that allow the creation and dissemination of user and firm-generated content. Lately, the use of social media by the tourism industry is on the rise. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) are taking advantage of this to customize information for tourists and enhance visitor traffic. DMOs act as core entities for marketing a destination and managing its resources, whether tangible or intangible. This study aims to understand the social media usage of governmental DMOs of Northeast India by analyzing their content, frequency of posts and customer interactions through likes, shares and comments. The study is exploratory and quantitative and uses data analytics of social media pages. Data reveals how DMOs use SNS to promote their rich natural bounty and its diverse culture and traditional ethos. The policy implications highlight managerial strategies for improved destination marketing, enhanced visitor retention and improved DMO engagement in SNS.

Keyword: consumer behaviour, destination management organisations, digital marketing, destination marketing, social media, social media analytics, North East India

1. Introduction

In their work, Brake and Safko (2009) defined 'social media' as, "Social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audio." (p. 6). All aspects of tourism are now being covered by social media, leading to major shifts in the way they plan, consume, evaluate and market tourist experiences (Gretzel, 2018). Approximately, one-fifth of global travellers use social networking platforms for travel-related decisions including Hotels (23 percent), Vacation activities (22 percent), Attractions (21 percent) and Restaurants (17 percent) (Forbes, 2014). User-generated content (UGC) is more relevant to travellers than firm-generated online content. The line of communication in the presence of social media has radically changed thus giving marketers the option of using it to stimulate discussion, encourage interactions and participate in a way similar to what conventional marketing might do. Multiple factors contribute to the success of a social medium in terms of customer reach as discussed by Park & Gretzel (2007) such as quality of information, responsiveness, personalization, ease of use, privacy, trust, interactivity,

appearance and fulfillment. Major metrics are the number of website visitors, content uploaded by users or DMOs (photos, text, reels etc.), visitor interactions on platforms (likes, comments, shares etc.) as well as response time on posts (Socialbakers, 2015). DMOs are often termed as 'destination developers' entitled to the task of promoting cities and states to consumers and other stakeholders (Goswami, 2023). Today, when social media has taken over the conventional form of marketing, a DMO's web presence is deemed necessary to ensure a good online relationship with potential tourists and to facilitate the most authentic destination information (Stoklosa, Marchiori, & Cantoni, 2019). The present study revolves around the governmental DMOs of the eight northeastern states of India. Although the use of various social networking sites (SNS) by Indian DMOs is quite evident, scanty literature on this area remains the gap of the study. To fill this gap, the authors have tried to explore the social media efforts put in by the DMOs and consumer interactions on the platforms. The underlying objectives for this paper are: a) to check the online presence of northeastern DMOs in different SNSs, b) to analyse the contents posted by the organisations, and c) to analyse user engagement on these SNS. The paper starts with an exclusive review of the literature of available studies followed by a description of the methodology employed. The next segment is a discussion of the results generated which finally ends with the important contributions of this research and the practical/ managerial implications for DMOs.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Destination Management by DMOs

Tourism is known to be the fastest-growing industry contributing a significant share to the world's economy and employment. Digitalization has impacted almost every segment of the economy and the tourism sector is no exception. Being a strategic leader in destination development, a DMO's prime function is to coordinate the elements of the destination mix: attractions, amenities, accessibility, marketing and pricing (UNWTO, 2007). It focuses on uniting customer's needs with the destination's resources. Their key goals are defined as increasing profitability, reducing seasonality, ensuring the availability of long-term funds and finally enhancing destination image (Antonsen, 2010; Abou-Shouk, 2017). Considering the marketing role of DMOs, stakeholder partnerships and collaborations are crucial to improve destination competitiveness. Ruhanen (2012) stresses the need to include the perspective of stakeholders in the planning process so as to attain sustainable tourism objectives along with community well-being. Having said that, contemporary DMOs are using digital marketing technologies to collaborate with stakeholders and market their services to the world. With the employment of information and communication technologies in tourism, DMOs have dramatically changed their marketing strategies. Destination managers use social media for two significant reasons: customer engagement and branding. By interacting with customers online, DMOs try to develop customer loyalty and a positive destination image (Socialbakers, 2015). User-generated content and firm-generated content on social networks create e-wom which eventually impacts the pre-trip behaviour of a tourist. This helps to mentally visualize a destination and avoid perceived risks associated with it (Kumar, Mishra & Rao, 2021). Hays et al. in the year 2012 studied a few Italian DMOs and pointed out a sizeable gap in literature on social media use by them. The findings showed that an innovative approach to destination marketing and management has been adopted by the DMOs under study through the introduction of diverse web tools to enhance interaction, co-creation of products and stakeholder engagement. More recent works of literature suggest the growing understanding of social media on the one hand, but the inability of DMOs to fully utilize such medium on the other. In their research on governmental DMOs of India, Kumar et al. (2021) highlighted how Indian DMOs lack a dedicated social media strategy for the promotion of their respective destinations.

2.2 DMO's presence on Social Media

The travellers in recent times are taking full advantage of the digital communication media for gathering tourism-related information. Empowered by the internet, tourists have become independent and choosy in making purchase decisions. A strong social media presence of DMOs to satisfy such sophisticated customers is necessary. Digital marketing, as described by Kannan and Li (2017), is the use of digitalized technologies to understand customers' needs, and accordingly promote brands that lead to increased sales. DMOs are attracted

to social media since it has a wider reach extending to a global audience and is cost-effective in all ways. The unlimited potential of social networking, especially Facebook, has attracted both state governments and the Department of Tourism who in turn have been using this network as part of their marketing strategies not only to promote tourist destinations but also to increase public awareness (Gupta, Bakshi & Dogra, 2018). Sheehan, Vargas-Sánchez, Presenza & Abbate (2016), pointed out that technological advancements have challenged marketing organisations to develop 'smart destinations' to improve tourism competitiveness. Thus, the destination becomes smart when it is embedded in a physical or virtual infrastructure with intelligent technologies and data can be used to achieve smart tourism objectives (Gomes, Gândara & Ivars-Baidal, 2017). The phrase "Content Is King" has been rightly taken up by destination marketing professionals in order to capture a large number of 4.8 billion social media users worldwide.

Facebook

'Facebook' became the most popular medium with almost three billion monthly active users in the first quarter of 2022. It has a broad audience, is mostly common among tourists and offers more interactive postings than Twitter (Gálvez-Rodríguez, Alonso-Cañadas, Haro-de-Rosario & Caba-Pérez, 2020). "Facebook has long been the most successful of all social networks, in terms of user numbers, audience reach, and brand awareness" (Statista, 2022). India has the largest Facebook audience with nearly 315 million users (Statista, 2023). These pages facilitate information sharing and allow users to post questions, share experiences through photos and videos, and express opinions by liking or commenting on posts. Such actions are then broadcast to the user's Facebook friends, increasing the page's reach and exposure. It has been accepted as the most suitable, most common and most useful social media platform for networking (Lu, Chen & Law, 2017; Lalicic, Huertas, Moreno & Jabreel, 2019; Kumar et al., 2021) and has become a DMO's first choice for destination promotion.

Instagram

'Instagram' hit 2 billion active monthly users across the globe by the end of 2022 with an ever-growing audience. In a preliminary finding, Kumar et al. (2021) found Instagram had a share of around 5 percent in India's social media market with the highest number of users from the country (249 million users). Among the diverse range of social networking channels accessible, Instagram has not only gained popularity among tourists as a stylish platform but has also become a favorite choice for marketers aiming to create compelling marketing strategies (Egger, Gumus, Kaiumova, Mükisch & Surkic, 2022). It is widely regarded as a mainstream social sharing platform, especially crucial when targeting the Millennial traveler as the primary age group of Instagrammers is between 18 to 29 years.

Twitter

The micro-blogging platform, 'Twitter', which was launched only in the year 2013 is one of the largest social media companies in the United States. It stands out as one of the most widely used social networking platforms providing users with a means to express their opinions, preferences, interests, and emotions related to various topics and daily life experiences like any other SNS. As of the second quarter of 2022, it had a daily active user base of 237.8 million worldwide with a steady growth in this number. Although popular, it is preceded by other social media giants including Facebook and Instagram. Twitter had a relatively low share of 3.07 percent by mid-2022 in the Indian social media market (Kumar et al., 2021).

2.3 DMOs in India and Northeast

In India, DMOs serve as strategic entities that facilitate the development and growth of tourism in the country. The Ministry of Tourism (MoT) serves as the primary governing body responsible for tourism development at the national level. Unlike a conventional DMO, it plays a crucial role in policy-making, providing guidelines, and coordinating efforts between various stakeholders. At the state level, State Tourism Development Corporations (STDC) function as DMO. Each Indian state has its own STDC, which focuses on the development, promotion, and management of tourism within their respective regions. India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), a public sector undertaking under MoT, also serves as a DMO. Apart from the national and state-level DMOs, several regions in India have their own organizations. These organizations, often established at the district or city level, work closely with local stakeholders to develop and market tourism products, manage tourist flows, and ensure sustainable tourism practices. Examples include Goa Tourism

Development Corporation and Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation. The Northeastern region, comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, is known for its rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and diverse wildlife. To harness the tourism potential of this region effectively, several DMOs have been established to facilitate sustainable development and promotion of tourism. Each state has its own tourism department. These departments actively collaborate with the DMOs at the regional level to develop and implement tourism policies, attract investments, and market their destinations. With the advent of social media, Northeastern DMOs are penetrating the world of SNS and every State Tourism Department has been engaged in interacting with customers and building a strong destination image through these platforms.

3. Research Methodology

The present study employs the social media analytics technique (Lee, Hong, Chung & Back, 2021) to identify the ways in which the eight Northeastern DMOs use social media to market their destination and enhance consumer engagement. It is a quantitative study that focuses on DMO's official handles on three SNS namely Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The authors have used a free analytics software named *Fanpage Karma* (Berlin-based software) for analysing data available on these SNS. Three months (June-August) time frame has been considered for data extraction and analysis. Due to the warmer temperatures elsewhere, the months of June through August typically herald the beginning of travel to this region of the country. With travel on the line, prospective tourists start screening the internet for an economical yet comfortable journey. Therefore, firm-generated content and user-generated content during these times are usually higher. The results generated through the software have been reproduced in tables and charts separately for all three objectives. A few variables for the study were taken from the works of Satghare and Sawant (2018), Park & Gretzel (2007) and Socialbakers (2015). A couple of others were noted by the authors after observing the social media pages of the Northeastern DMOs. Table 1 showcases the variables studied in this paper.

Table 1: Variables used in the study

Objective 2	Basis of analysis	Type of content	Quality of content	Activeness in posts
	Variables	Nature-based resources, festivals, events, food, responsible tourism, religious tourism, destination weddings, adventure activities	informative content, engaging content, transactional content	Timely and up-to-date information, time of posting content, response time on posts
Objective 3	Basis of analysis	Interactivity of users and DMOs (Likes, comments, shares, reactions, followers)		

Source: Authors

4. Data Analysis and Interpretations

4.1 Online presence of northeastern DMOs

The official social media pages of Northeast DMOs on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook were searched and identified. On their part, the DMOs are using the sites to reach out to prospective tourists through informative posts that are akin to advertising and marketing of their respective destinations. The outcomes of these efforts can be seen on the ground in terms of tourist footfalls. As tweeted by the Union Tourism Minister, G Kishan Reddy, the Northeastern part of India became the top tourism destination of the country in the year 2022-23 with 1 lakh foreign tourist footfalls and over 11.8 million domestic tourists (The Times of India, 2023). This has mostly been achieved through the intense promotional activities undertaken by the different state governments, tour operators and the DMOs operational in the region. Over the years, DMOs have invested substantially in establishing a strong presence on social media platforms, most of it as trial and error. DMOs have explored the

diverse functions that social media can serve. Today, almost all the Northeastern DMOs can be found in at least one SNS interacting and connecting with tourists from across the globe. They in fact have exclusive official websites. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are argued to be the most relevant online communities for gathering posts and comments.

The 'Followers' metric in any SNS is an indicator of the audience reach of any social media page (see Table 2).

Table 2: Number of followers on various SNS of DMOs (as of May 2023)

State Tourism DMO name	Followers on Facebook	Followers on Instagram	Followers on Twitter
Assam Tourism	34,000	19,500	5,682
Meghalaya Tourism	59,000	29,900	6,562
Manipur Tourism	33,000	9,429	16,200
Mizoram Tourism	49,000	33,200	12,400
Nagaland Tourism	28,000	25,300	11,100
Arunachal Tourism	62,000	4,175	22,300
Tripura Tourism	41,000	37,100	17,400
Sikkim Tourism	5,400	33,500	24,200

Source: Authors

The above table shows how Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Sikkim is leading on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter respectively when put in comparison with the other states. The number of followers is mostly influenced by the frequency and nature of posts posted on the sites. In other words, the more active is the site, the more likelihood that it will generate more followers and vice versa. Notably, the figures for the three states portray that they are more prominent and active on one SNS or the other, but not on all three at a point in time. For example, in the case of Arunachal Tourism, it is seen as having the least number of followers on Instagram and is next to Sikkim on Twitter. Again, Sikkim has the least followers on Facebook but it leads in the context of Twitter. This can be taken as an indication of the rationalization of time, energy and efforts of the various DMOs when it comes to opting for an optimum SNS (Facebook or Instagram or Twitter) that fits their needs. It is important to note that even while these figures represent audience size and DMO effectiveness, they tend to vary depending on the platform. 'Type of audience' and 'number of users' of a particular networking channel might influence the number of followers.

Table 3 illustrates the overall profile metrics of DMOs. How well DMOs are performing on SNS, can be understood through this table. The page performance index (engagement and growth and ultimately depicting page success) of Assam, Mizoram, Arunachal and Nagaland records at the maximum taking all three platforms into consideration. The states of Manipur and Tripura are selectively active on social networks. They sometimes post a number of things on media and at other times appear to be totally passive. Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh are constantly pushing themselves for better audience reach with more content. This is basically an outcome of post per day and posts interaction rate and supplemented by the growth in the number of followers. The numbers depict a concerted effort on the part of the DMOs to market their respective destinations and quite naturally this reciprocates in the form of interactions with the tourists. The overall result of this phenomenon is the increase in popularity of the destination supplemented by an increase in tourist footfall. Any outcome on the contrary would raise a question on the potency of SNS to market a destination effectively, as social media activeness may not directly lead to an increased number of tourist inflows. Notably, leading tourism states like Sikkim and Meghalaya present an average reading on the metrics. This can be because of their well-established popularity amongst the tourists resulting in enough or saturated inflows thereby resulting in a lesser need to engage through SNS. This is even more so in the case of Sikkim tourism. The official page of Sikkim is quite inactive and dull. However, another page under the handle 'Sikkim Tourism', managed by a private user, seems to have more followers than the official one.

4.2 Analysing firm-generated content by destination management organisations

With the help of Fanpage Karma, we analysed the contents posted by Northeastern DMOs on their social media for a total of 90 days. To achieve the second objective, data was collected in the form of photos, videos,

carousels, links, status and reels (Table 4). The authors classified this content into three major heads namely, *nature of content*, *quality of content* and *activeness of posts*. The ‘nature of content’ or the kind of content was analysed by focusing on posts related to nature-based resources, festivals, events, food, responsible tourism, religious tourism, destination wedding and adventure activities. ‘Quality of content’ was analysed as informational, navigational or transactional in nature. Finally, the ‘activeness of posts’ was studied with variables such as timely and up-to-date information, time of posting content and number of posts.

Table 3: Overall DMO profile metrics

Profile	Facebook				Instagram				Twitter			
	Page Performance Index	Follower Growth (in %)	Post interaction rate	Posts per day	Page Performance Index	Follower Growth (in %)	Post interaction rate	Posts per day	Page Performance Index	Follower Growth (in %)	Post interaction rate	Posts per day
Arunachal Tourism	62.0%	5.92%	0.4%	0.85	100.0%	24.16%	8.37%	0.43	33.0%	3.38%	0.19%	0.54
Awesome Assam	100.0%	3.59%	2.32%	1.53	100.0%	17.09%	2.21%	1.59	100.0%	10.83%	0.74%	1.71
Manipur Tourism	2.0%	0.13%	0.03%	0.03	-	-	0.72%	0.03	-	-	0.1%	0.03
Meghalaya Tourism	74.0%	3.24%	0.5%	0.97	89.0%	12.96%	1.73%	0.91	65.0%	16.67%	0.28%	0.93
Mizoram Tourism	100.0%	12.56%	1.31%	1.92	100.0%	7.57%	2.22%	1.80	42.0%	4.66%	0.08%	2.23
Nagaland Tourism	100.0%	53.59%	0.4%	2.39	-	-	1.17%	2.28	-	-	0.38%	2.26
Tourism & Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim	-	-	0.5%	0.48	8.0%	2.68%	0.0%	0	-	-	0.09%	0.14
Tripura Tourism	64.0%	1.86%	0.57%	0.75	88.0%	8.52%	1.99%	0.77	33.0%	3.1%	0.12%	0.85

...
‘-’ Not available

Source: Fanpage Karma

Table 4: Type of posts by DMOs

Profile	Number of posts (on Facebook)	Number of posts (on Instagram)	Number of posts (on Twitter)
Pictures	498	335	508
Videos	183	2	166
Reels	73	274	-
Links	59	-	31
Status	1	-	90
Carousels	-	103	-

‘-’ None

Source: Fanpage Karma

4.3 Nature and Quality of Content

Through posts about nature, adventure, sports, literature, culture, and other related topics, DMOs have been successful in attracting visitors from all tourist demographics. The northeastern region as a whole is characterized by natural beauty as a unique selling position. The region includes rolling hills and mountains, rivers and waterfalls, lakes and caves, etc thereby making it a popular destination for adventure and sports activities. In addition, wildlife, culture and cuisine tourism is also quite popular as tourism products. The authors selected the Top 8 postings made by DMOs across all three platforms throughout the study period in order to better comprehend this. It is quite apparent from Table 5.1, Table 5.2 and Table 5.3 that content posted on one platform finds a place on the other two platforms as well, with the same captions and hashtags. This has more to do with DMOs choosing the most optimum SNS that fits their needs. For some, Facebook is preferred, while for others it is Instagram and/or Twitter. As such, the most popular posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are very similar. Top posts are so attributed because they have outperformed the others in terms of likes, shares and reactions.

Table 5.1: Top 8 posts on Facebook

Message	Profile
Step into the thrilling world of cave exploration ...	Mizoram Tourism
Mizoram offers plenty of diversity when it comes to traveling for outdoor adventures...	Mizoram Tourism
Weddings in Thenzawl Golf Course & Resort are often adorned with creative floral arrangement...	Mizoram Tourism
Mizoram has devoted huge acres of land to the cultivation of fruits, vegetables...	Mizoram Tourism
Nagaland: A Foodie's paradise! If you're a foodie, Nagaland is the perfect...	Nagaland Tourism
Bhaleydhunga Roapway. Getting ready for opening. This will bring Yangang in...	Tourism & Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim
Nishangram is located in Dudhnoi Circle of Goalpara district...	Awesome Assam
Take a break from the hustle & bustle of city life and immerse yourself in the beautiful mountainsides...	Nagaland Tourism

Source: Fanpage Karma

Table 5.2: Top 8 posts on Instagram

Message	Profile
Step into the thrilling world of cave exploration ...	Mizoram Tourism
Mizoram offers plenty of diversity when it comes to traveling for outdoor adventures...	Mizoram Tourism
Weddings in Thenzawl Golf Course & Resort are often adorned with creative floral arrangement...	Mizoram Tourism
Nagaland: A Foodie's paradise! If you're a foodie, Nagaland is the perfect...	Nagaland Tourism
Mizoram has devoted huge acres of land to the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, spices and flowers...	Mizoram Tourism
Nishangram is located in Dudhnoi Circle of Goalpara district...	Awesome Assam
Take a break from the hustle & bustle of city life and immerse yourself in the beautiful mountainsides...	Nagaland Tourism
Mizo Hnam Lam Intihsiak...	Mizoram Tourism

Source: Fanpage Karma

Table 5.3: Top 8 posts on Twitter

Message	Profile
Step into the thrilling world of cave exploration and embark...	Mizoram_Tourism
zira_pc_198 is here again!!!Mizoram offers plenty of diversity when it comes to traveling for outdoor adventures...	Mizoram_Tourism
Weddings in Thenzawl Golf Course &...	Mizoram_Tourism
Nagaland: A Foodie's paradise! If you're a foodie...	tourismdeptgon
Mizoram has devoted huge acres of land to the cultivation of fruits, vegetables,...	Mizoram_Tourism
Nishangram is located in Dudhnoi Circle of Goalpara district...	aweassam
Take a break from the hustle & bustle of city life and immerse yourself in the beautiful mountainsides...	tourismdeptgon
RT @narendramodi: Happy to see Meghalaya's Pineapples receiving the recognition...	meghtourism

Source: Fanpage Karma

Mizoram Tourism frequently promotes the state as an adventure-based travel destination on Facebook. The top post by Mizoram is on “Cave exploration and underground adventure” followed by some other posts on “outdoor adventures”, “mystical mountains” and one post on “destination weddings”, which has the third-highest user engagement. Nagaland markets itself as a “foodie's paradise” for those who enjoy delving into a wide array of delectable regional cuisines. They have also posted on “Asia’s first green village, Khonoma” hinting at the efforts put into responsible forms of tourism, in addition to posts promoting their plentiful natural beauty. Among the most popular posts are two posts from Assam featuring the “lush tea gardens” and another of a responsible tourism destination, “Nishangram”. One of Meghalaya Tourism’s posts was about “exploring fossil-rich terrains in Mawlyngbna” which highlights the availability of nature-based resources in the state. Sikkim made two general but ‘informational’ posts for awareness of tourists. A post paying tribute to the “Architect of Modern Tripura” by Tripura Tourism was an ‘informational’ post for the users. Meghalaya Tourism made an ‘informational’ post on “Meghalaya pineapples” getting worldwide recognition.

As observed, firm-generated content on DMO pages is by and large ‘informational’. Posts of Assam Tourism are mostly dominated by historical architecture, pilgrimage sites, religious tourism destinations and wildlife tourism. There are some ‘transactional’ posts requiring the participation of users like photography competitions, marathons and so on. ‘Navigational’ posts on waste reduction while travelling and responsible travel tips could also be found. Arunachal Tourism portrays their music, tribes, cuisines and handlooms over and above their natural beauty. Posts on festivals like Ziro Music Festival, Food Festival and Rang Mahotsav can be easily traced. They have posted ‘transactional’ content featuring mural-making competitions, weaving workshops, jewellery-making workshops and baking workshops for kids amongst others. Posts by Mizoram DMOs focus mainly on rural tourism regions and sometimes on food or culture. Noteworthy, initiatives taken by the Tourism department are highly showcased by means of photos and videos on all three platforms. Manipur Tourism's official pages had absolutely no postings in June and July, with only three posts made on August 13, 14 and 15 consecutively. More than half of Nagaland’s social media posts are about its culture. The notable ones among these include distinctive tribes, traditional handloom and native food. Meghalaya Tourism posts ‘transactional’ content over ‘informational content’. However, nature-based content, adventure activities and festivals are primarily portrayed here. Tripura’s DMO posts ‘informational’ content on religious and pilgrimage destinations of the state along with posts highlighting the Department’s initiatives. Sikkim, being one of the most famous Northeastern State, provides its users with magnificent nature-based content.

In essence, the posts of DMOs primarily cover nature, scenic beauty, adventure activities, food and beverages, culture and festivals. This makes the northeastern region a destination unique from the rest of India and even the global scenario. The tourism marketing of DMOs has primarily been on these grounds and in most likelihood shall continue into the foreseeable future. Although the DMOs do not collaborate in terms of posts, the bird’s eye view tells us that they are all connected in the context of nature, adventure, food and festivals.

4.5 Activeness of Posts

The activeness of DMOs on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter was studied by aggregating the total number of postings made during the study period (Table 6.1). Nagaland Tourism tops the list with more than 200 postings. These figures are inclusive of pictures, videos, reels and statuses put up by the eight DMOs. Data for Twitter could not be drawn using the software. As authors observed the social media pages of all DMOs, it was noticed that the states of Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura have fully updated pages. Meghalaya has fully updated Facebook and Twitter pages but a not-so-regular Instagram page. Manipur has an updated Facebook page but content on Twitter is not regular. As mentioned, the Instagram page of Manipur DMO had only 3 posts in the month of August with no posts in June or July. The official page of Sikkim Tourism is active on Facebook but not on Twitter or Instagram (last posted in Jan, 2019).

The activeness of DMOs in posting content on their SNS is an important indicator of their marketing and promotional initiatives. It is seen that tourists do use a lot of social media to find tourist attractions, its features, services available, etc. Hence, by being more active they are extensively engaging themselves in attracting more

tourists into their states. Inactivity can be seen as unwillingness to promote their destination. This can be due to the poor nature of the attractions and/or the unavailability of tourism services for the tourist.

Table 6.1: Number of posts by DMOs

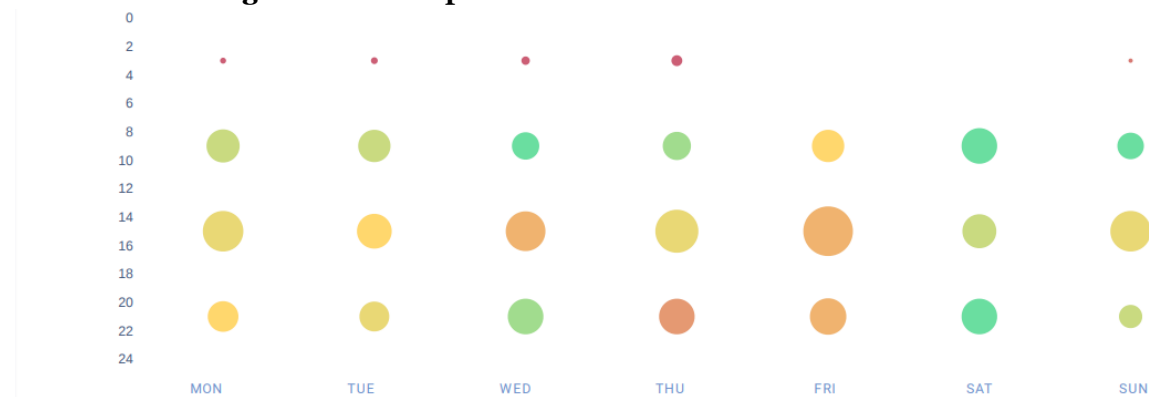
Profile	Posts on Facebook	Posts on Instagram
Nagaland Tourism	220	210
Mizoram Tourism	177	166
Awesome Assam	141	147
Meghalaya Tourism	90	84
Arunachal Tourism	77	40
Tripura Tourism	69	71
Tourism & Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim	45	0
Manipur Tourism	3	3

^Data for Twitter is not available

Source: Fanpage Karma

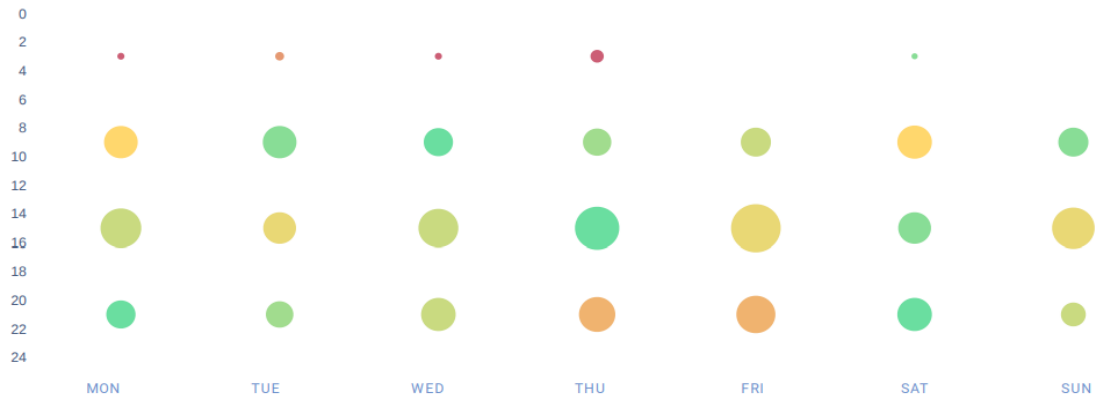
Fig. 1, 2 and 3 reveal the timings at which DMOs post their contents in a day over the week. The dots indicate interaction and the larger the dot size, the more content was posted at the time. The greener the dot, the more interactions were made on a post. On average, most postings were made between 2 - 4 pm on Fridays on all platforms. By observing the trend, DMOs use 2 - 4 pm as an ideal time to post content regardless of audience interaction. One explanation for this trend is that the destinations do tend to get a lot and most of the tourists during the weekends. The majority of the tourists are domestic in nature and weekend travel to various destinations and attractions is mostly the preferred option. The rate of user interaction, however, is the maximum on Saturdays compared to all other days on the three platforms. This corroborates with the weekend visits by the tourists to the destinations. The degree of interaction by the tourists with the DMOs across the SNS is a welcome development and can only bode well for tourism in the region. Whereas for Facebook posts, Wednesdays and Sundays are appropriate days to post most content due to high user engagement, Twitter posts receive very restricted engagement on any day except Saturdays. In a nutshell, DMOs are most active during the day around 8 O'clock in the morning to around 10 o'clock in the evening and the least active in the wee hours of the day.

Figure1: Time of posts on Facebook and the rate of interaction

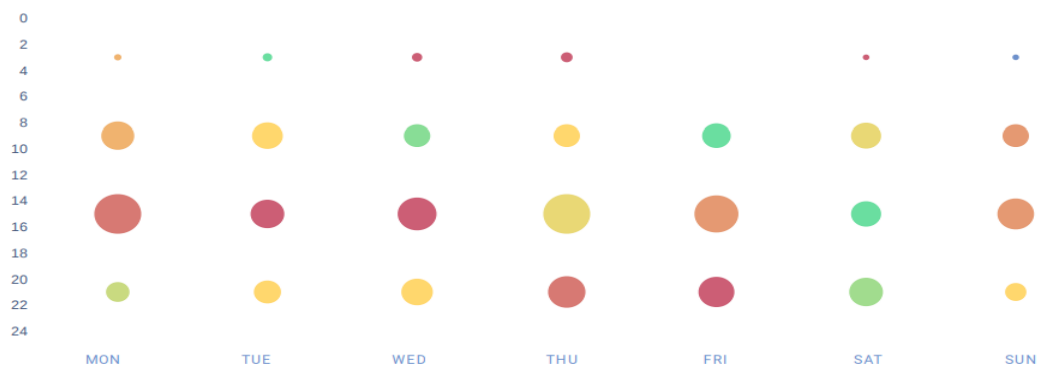


^ the larger a dot, the more was posted at that time. the greener, the more the posts were interacted with.

Source: Fanpage Karma

Figure 2: Time of posts on Instagram and the rate of interaction

^ the larger a dot, the more was posted at that time. the greener, the more the posts were interacted with.
Source: Fanpage Karma

Figure 3: Time of posts on Twitter and the rate of interaction

^ the larger the dot, the more was posted at that time. the greener, the more the posts were interacted with.
Source: Fanpage Karma

4.6 Analysing user engagement on these SNS

For the final objective, the authors studied the engagement of users on content posted during the study period. This was calculated through likes, comments, shares and reactions received per post. States with high levels of likes and follows show high user engagement. This was established after a recent study demonstrated that having more likes and follows may result in increased user engagement (Kumar et al, 2021). Table 6.2 highlights how Mizoram generates the highest level of user engagement on Facebook and Instagram whereas Nagaland secures the highest on Twitter. The level of user engagement can also be understood by the 'post-interaction rate' metrics. The summarised tables (Table 7.1- Table 7.6) are an attempt to present the Top 5 pictures and videos posted on the SNS that have managed to generate the highest user interaction. On Facebook, Assam Tourism shows the highest levels of user engagement on pictures as well as videos with its posts on historical monuments and religious sites. Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram generate positive interactions when they post about nature-based resources or natural sights including caves, green landscapes and architectural wonders. In the case of Instagram, Nagaland, Arunachal, Assam and Meghalaya outshine the other states by posting content primarily about natural beauty. Twitter usually being a less interactive platform, does show user engagement but at a lesser rate in comparison to the other platforms. Here, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland become the torch-bearers with posts highlighting archaeological sites, historical monuments, wildlife, adventure and of course nature. When observed, Mizoram Tourism can be seen posting a lot of nature-oriented content which tends to be vibrant and eye-catching. Images of tall mountains, vast green fields and breathtaking sunsets induce a great deal of curiosity among users and hence, they often respond to such posts with likes or comments. Nagaland Tourism identifies itself as a culturally rich destination

and the portrayal of ethnic dance forms, local art and craft, and youth in traditional attires – everything seems surreal for users who wish to immerse themselves in such diversity. Not only this, Mizoram and Nagaland DMOs give their users the opportunity to leave suggestions on all posts that are put up. Such an initiative enables a two-way interaction between users and destination managers. To sum up, the top posts with the highest interactions explain the type of content DMOs should post on their pages to make them more attractive. If a specific kind of post manages to get more attention, DMOs can make use of it and post more of such content for improved user engagement.

Table 6.2: Number of Shares, Comments and Reactions (user-generated content)

Profile	On Facebook	On Instagram	On Twitter
Mizoram Tourism	123694	128012	2617
Awesome Assam	83336	67555	7105
Meghalaya Tourism	27889	48431	1802
Arunachal Tourism	20360	15956	2051
Tripura Tourism	16800	55417	1725
Nagaland Tourism	15731	66461	10854
Tourism & Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim	1277	0	267
Manipur Tourism	26	201	42

Source: Fanpage Karma

Facebook metrics:

Table 7.1: Top 5 pictures on Facebook

Date	Message	Profile	Post interaction rate
24 May 2023	Kachakanti Mandir, situated in the Cachar district, is an ancient Hindu temple...	Awesome Assam	65.62%
20 Jul 2023	Sitajakhala located in Morigaon is a famous ancient temple...	Awesome Assam	9.11%
17 Jul 2023	The Negheriting Shiva Doul is located in Dergaon. Perched on a hillock, The main temple...	Awesome Assam	7.61%
28 Jul 2023	Before reaching Arwah Caves, one will have to stroll through...	Meghalaya Tourism	7.18%
20 Aug 2023	Nishangram is located in Dudhnoi Circle of Goalpara district...	Awesome Assam	7.05%

Source: Fanpage Karma

Table 7.2: Top 5 videos on Facebook

Date	Message	Profile	Post interaction rate
28 May 2023	To highlight various destinations of Assam, Traveller's Trail 2023...	Awesome Assam	52.24%
10 Jul 2023	Cheraw is a popular Mizo dance. The cheerful mood of the Mizos...	Mizoram Tourism	36.18%
03 Jun 2023	Assam Tourism started an exciting "Travellers Trail 2023" initiative...	Awesome Assam	25.85%
05 Jul 2023	Fresh air, undisturbed nature, healing practices, nutritious, delicious food...	Mizoram Tourism	22.43%
09 Jul 2023	Travelling through the fresh air, lush green forest and a stunning sunset...	Mizoram Tourism	22.14%

Source: Fanpage Karma

Instagram metrics:**Table 7.3: Top 5 pictures on Instagram**

Date	Message	Profile	Post interaction rate
30 May 2023	Say yes to clean eating! Say yes to organic products! And in Nagaland...	Nagaland Tourism	31.72%
28 Jul 2023	Before reaching Arwah Caves, one will have to stroll through the...	Meghalaya Tourism	8.46%
22 Jul 2023	Imagine going on a relaxing drive and you pass by the alluring Kynrem Falls...	Meghalaya Tourism	6.42%
03 Jun 2023	Phe Phe Falls, located in Meghalaya, is renowned as a highly frequented and beloved waterfall...	Meghalaya Tourism	4.83%
01 Aug 2023	Kamakhya temple is one of most prominent of the 51 Shakti Peethas...	Awesome Assam	4.46%

Source: Fanpage Karma

Table 7.4: Top 5 videos on Instagram

Date	Message	Profile	Post interaction rate
16 Jun 2023	via tanyakhanijow .Tell us your favourite places in the comments section...	Arunachal Tourism Official	188.57%
08 Jul 2023	Aizawl: Past & Present. Video Presentation - Thlanrawkpa ...	Mizoram Tourism	115.67%
01 Jul 2023	Awesome Assam started an exciting “Travellers Trail 2023”...	Awesome Assam	39.31%
02 Jul 2023	Go with the flow like water ????Dumboor reservoir dam, Tirthamukh...	Tripura Tourism	38.94%
27 Jun 2023	Traveller’s Trail 2023 was an initiative by Assam Tourism to highlight...	Awesome Assam	35.46%

Source: Fanpage Karma

Twitter metrics:**Table 7.5: Top 5 pictures on Twitter**

Date	Message	Profile	Post interaction rate
23 Jun 2023	Maghnowa Doul is a famous archaeological site related to the Ahom dynasty...	aweassam	2.88%
07 Aug 2023	Jorhat Gymkhana is the oldest golf course in Asia and the third oldest...	aweassam	2.71%
07 Jun 2023	Bornadi Wildlife Sanctuary is nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas...	Aweassam	2.63%
08 Jul 2023	The Seven Lakes Trek is one of the best-kept secrets of Arunachal Pradesh...	Arunachal Tourism	2.43%
08 Jul 2023	Barekuri village is located at a distance of 19 km from Tinsukia town...	Aweassam	2.4%

Source: Fanpage Karma

Table 7.6: Top 5 videos on Twitter

Date	Message	Profile	Post interaction rate
07 Aug 2023	Jorhat Gymkhana is the oldest golf course in Asia and the third oldest...	aweassam	2.71%
04 Aug 2023	Music is the universal language! And Nagaland is immensely...	tourismdeptgon	2.1%
13 Jul 2023	The Umananda Island in Brahmaputra in Guwahati is the smallest inhabited river...	aweassam	2.08%
24 May 2023	Red Panda Spotted In Tawang. The species has been listed as Endangered...	ArunachalTsm	1.76%
11 Jun 2023	The Kamakhya temple in Assam is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas...	aweassam	1.74%

Source: Fanpage Karma

A word cloud for all three platforms (Fig. 4 to 6) was generated using the free software that narrowed down the 20 most popularly used words with the highest user interactions. As observed, DMOs extensively use words like 'traditions', 'culture', 'beauty', 'hills', and 'village' to promote their destination. The appearance of the word 'Nagaland' or 'Nagas' in the top 20 list on Facebook, as well as Twitter, is a clear indicator of how effectively the DMOs of Nagaland build their social media posts for better impact. Words like 'hills', 'explore', 'experience' and 'Assam' are frequently interacted with on Twitter and emphasize the need to post nature-based content over and above others. When such words are used by DMOs in a post, users tend to relate more and therefore engage by liking, sharing, or commenting on such posts.

Figure 4: Top 20 words on Facebook

traditions spots India located district Nag
aland Tourism make explore hills Visit
Experience beauty state Destinations
cultural Nagastime Village Assam

^the bigger the word, the more it was used. the greener, the more these posts were interacted with.

Source: Fanpage Karma

Figure 5: Top 20 words on Instagram

beauty located hills Credit village tou
rism visit video cultural explore time tra
ditions experience destinations distric
t Assam rich Nagaland statespot

^The bigger the word, the more it was used. The greener, the more these posts were interacted with.

Source: Fanpage Karma

Figure 6: Top 20 words on Twitter

exploredampNagaTourismhillstatevill
agedayAssamCelebrationexperienceN
agalandculturesvisitDistrictlocated
beautydestinationMizoramRT

^the bigger the word, the more it was used. the greener, the more these posts were interacted with.

Source: Fanpage Karma

5. Conclusion and implications

Social networking sites are central to the marketing and management of tourism destinations. No DMO can strategize effectively with regard to marketing a destination without engaging in at least one or all three popular mediums – Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Their potency in terms of sharing information/details about a destination, feedback, comments and most importantly discussions and engagements act as a hallmark of the sites. It can be said that the destinations have been gaining popularity, domestically and internationally, because of the content on social networking sites. The DMOs have been using SNS mainly to promote and market the natural beauty of the destinations, the cultural richness of the region along with its varied traditions. In addition, festivals and events have been primarily and extensively marketed through the various social networking sites in the case of all the states of the region. Looking at the potency of the sites in tourism marketing, the extent of use of the SNS by the DMOs is only going to continue and become more extensive in the near future. This can bode well for the tourism sector of the region as a whole as the more the number of tourists, more are the employment opportunities available. However, this comes with a caveat that the tourism services being offered have to meet the expectations of the tourist across food and beverages, transportation, accommodation, tourism activities, etc. This is one area where all the DMOs will have to properly strategize. The policy implications of the study are manifold. Firstly, DMOs can involve tourism-oriented social media influencers for a more robust marketing of the destinations. These influencers can be the bridge between the destination and the prospective tourist in terms of information sharing and travel planning. Secondly, in cases where the activeness and engagement of posts are less, the DMOs can get back to the drawing board and assess the status of tourism in the respective state. Poor engagement can be a result of poor tourism services and quality in a destination. Thirdly, the SNS content may be scaled from being marketing-oriented only into a more holistic space for retaining tourists and establishing a relationship with them. This would be beneficial for repeat tourism. Finally, in an era where social media has become all-pervasive, having a proper media team run by social media managers can make a destination stand out among others.

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