

# EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON SUSTAINABLE INDIGENOUS TOURISM

Zuliah Abd Hamid, Shazali Johari, Puvaneswaran Kunasekaran

**Abstract:***The aim of this study is to holistically understand the role of social media in influencing the sustainable ethnic tourism practice. An inductive approach is used to identify the level of the study variables. Past studies relevant towards social media technology and sustainability were analyzed and discussed. It is evident that the existing literature heavily supports the need of social media in tourism development. Local communities especially the indigenous people are urged to utilize the virtual platform to sell their tourism products. However, unavailability of community capacity often hinder them to used social media at a desired level. Thus, a critical understanding of social media and sustainable tourism conceptualization is highlighted to provide a holistic perspective.*

**Keywords:***indigenous tourism, social media, community capacity building.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is recognized as a key driver of economic growth for many countries. In the development of tourism research, information and communication technology has continued to be a vital topic. The development of information and communication technology, which involves the usage of social media and internet tools, has brought awareness to millions of people. This has created new chances and choices for many people to communicate. However, this has not been verified in the context of indigenous tourism.

In the hospitality and tourism industry, the common problem of the research topic lies in concerns the use of information technology for various purposes. Social media have been increasingly adopted by hospitality and tourism companies and used by tourists. However, the results of this study show that social media in many hospitality and tourism sectors lack sufficient attention from academia (Lu et al., 2018). As Lu et al. (2018, p.11) stated, the 'interactive role of social media throughout the entire tourism experience has not received attention although the effects of social media in every stage of travel decision-making have been explored'.

Based on the review of the previous literature, it emerges that literature concerning the use of social media and information technology was focussed in some research areas only (e.g. hospitality marketing). As Roque and Raposo

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Faculty of Forestry, Universiti Putra Malaysia. [hailuzulfa1920@gmail.com](mailto:hailuzulfa1920@gmail.com)

Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia. [ahseng69@yahoo.com](mailto:ahseng69@yahoo.com)

Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia [puvaneswaran.kunasekaran@taylors.edu.my](mailto:puvaneswaran.kunasekaran@taylors.edu.my)

(2016) stated, 'without a solid understanding of the role played by social media in the process of finding online information by tourists, it is not possible for organizations to leverage this strategic knowledge and use it to their benefit'. To the best knowledge of the researcher, there are limited tourism studies on the use of social media among the indigenous people. Most of the researches on social media are concentrated on the consumer's perspective. Therefore, stakeholders are still looking for answers to this question since it has not been solved either practically or academically.

Similarly, there are gaps in contemporary literature on the use of social media among the local indigenous community. Moreover, analysing the uses and applications of information and communication technology (ICT) in the field of indigenous tourism has been relatively less researched by past studies. For example, Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) showed that research on social media in tourism is still in its infancy. They suggested a comprehensive inquiry into the influence and impact of social media should be undertaken, particularly relates to communities and economic benefits. Therefore, further contributions to the literature are needed. There are limited conceptual and empirical studies that link the relationship of these variables (social media,) together within the tourism industry. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) 'the extent to which social media constitute the online tourism domain is not well understood in an objective, comprehensive way'.

Although the development of social media has received increased attention from tourism researchers, very little empirical evidence has been used to examine the ... in the community, particularly indigenous tourism (Mkono, 2016). Research gaps are apparent in community-based tourism sectors, where literature reviews on social media have suffered from small numbers and few researchers. More social media studies are carried out from the perspective of the consumer than from the local community (Lu et al., 2018). While there has been much debate on how to make effective use of social media marketing in tourism research, there is a lack of empirical evidence in understanding its role in indigenous tourism. Currently, the literature on social media applications in indigenous tourism is at an embryonic stage, especially in the context of developing countries such as Malaysia (Samah, et al., 2013; Talib, et al., 2013).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The introduction of social media has changed the way of people interacting with each other. For example, it allows interested parties such as business operator, policymakers and individual to better understand the tourism market (Qualman, 2013). Today, social media experiences a transformation from tradition pattern to information pattern (Narangajavana et al., 2017) and influence people daily communication (Luo & Zhong, 2015), where eighty per cent internet users have a social media account (Narangajavana et al., 2017). Social media is a new form of online interactive learning (Hajli & Lin, 2014). Table 1 outlines the popular type of social media used by users.

**Table 1. Example of social media**

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- Social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Faceparty)
- Creativity works sharing sites:
- Video sharing sites (YouTube)
- Photo sharing sites (Flickr)
- Music sharing sites (Jamendo.com)
- Content sharing combined with assistance (Piczo.com)
- General intellectual property sharing sites (Creative Commons)
- User-sponsored blogs (The Unofficial AppleWeblog, Cnet.com)
- Company-sponsored websites/blogs (Apple.com, P&G's Vocalpoint)
- Company-sponsored cause/help sites (Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, click2quit.com)
- Invitation-only social networks (ASmallWorld.net)
- Business networking sites (LinkedIn)
- Collaborative websites (Wikipedia)
- Virtual worlds (Second Life)
- Commerce communities (eBay, Amazon.com, Craig's List, iStockphoto, Threadless.com)
- Podcasts ("For Immediate Release: The Hobson and Holtz Report")
- News delivery sites (Current TV)
- Educational materials sharing (MIT OpenCourseWare, MERLOT)
- Open Source Software communities (Mozilla's spreadfirefox.com, Linux.org)
- Social bookmarking sites allowing users to recommend online news stories, music, videos, etc. (Digg, del.icio.us, Newsvine, Mixx it, Reddit)

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Source: Adapted from Mangold and Faulds (2009)

The use of social media is not only popular in information technology, but the application of social media in the tourism and hospitality sector has also grown rapidly (Sarkar & George, 2018). It has been accepted as an important tool and the use of social media is increasing tremendously (Hussain, Chen, & Nurunnabi, 2018) due to the fact that many tourists tend to use the internet to access travel info and plan their travel beforehand. Thus, social media becomes the main source of tool for people to plan their trip beforehand.

Social media channels emerging in the past few years, with the advent of Web 2.0, include social networks, photo and video sharing sites, wikis, blogs and online review sites. Such channels are of exponentially growing importance within the wider range ecosystem encompassing all the social media dimensions, including traditional channels such as mass media (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Luo and Zhong (2015) stated as internet competences progress, Social networking sites (SNSs) provide an interaction platform among tourists using electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and a tool for marketing. Pabel and Prideaux (2016) suggested that "the growth in the use of social media allied with increasing ownership levels of smartphones indicates that destination marketing organizations of small regional destinations need to pay greater attention to social media and its delivery systems including smartphones."

Some tourism studies highlighted that social media brings significant implications to local people such as employment (Safko 2010; Xiang & Gretzel 2010; Hays et al. 2013). Today, information about hospitality companies is all day long (Bowen & Baloglu, 2015). From a business perspective, information technology and the use of social media change the ways business organisation do business (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). Social media provides a

platform for tourism companies to interact with their clients to provide the best services (Howison et al., 2015). It also offers a destination marketing organization (DMO) to reach global consumers with lower cost (Hays et al., 2012).

### III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From a business perspective, tourism businesses utilise social media as a marketing tool to improve their business (Bowen & Baloglu, 2011; Gretzel et al., 2000; Hjalager, 2010; Roque & Raposo, 2016). This is because it is useful to provide a comparatively cost-effective and efficient means for business operators to promote their business and attract new customers while maintaining existing customers (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013). Social media is not only widely used by business organizations to surge the profits by promoting their products and services (Safko, 2010) but also for the ease of communication with their customers (Cooper et al., 2017). Adding to this, effective social media marketing could help site manager to create an extended channel to engage tourists and to achieve desired outcomes to manage the sustainability of the sites (Cheng et al., 2016). Thus, it is useful to assist tourists to cope with acculturation when travelling overseas.

Similarly, it provides an opportunity for event organizers to build enjoyment with attendees. Storytelling is another form of destination branding strategy, where many people now sharing their travel experience via social media or the internet. It has 'absorbed into the brand narrative, hence changing, diluting or disintegrating its identity. Law, Leung and Buhalis (2009) urge tourism managers to pay attention to the rapid growth of information technology as it influences the customer relationship. Thus, it is imperative today that business managers stay up to date on technology, customers and social media, to redirect marketing and business efforts toward customers' needs and problems (Moro & Rita, 2018). For example, Howison, Finger, and Hauschka (2015) demonstrated that social media can help tourism operators to increase the responsiveness of their products and services online. Meanwhile, it can be used for branding purpose (Moro & Rita, 2018). In their study, Howison et al. (2015) found that some tourism operators remain uncertain for committing themselves in online marketing and lack of understanding of the additional benefits of using social media.

Mkono (2016) conducted a study to explore the engagement of indigenous tour operators with tourists from a social media perspective. The data collected from tour operators and tourists showed that there is a mix of worldview difference. He contends that "indigenous tour operator voices are minimally represented in tourism social media - a missed opportunity to correct cultural misconceptions and clarify differences, to "speak" for themselves, creating a stronger, more assertive online voice". Hu, Li, Yang, and Jiang (2018) used social media information to detect tourist movement patterns, which was claimed to be important to understand tourist' behaviour. Information and communication technology (ICT) is frequently used to support sustainable tourism (Bystrowska et al. 2017; Lai et al. 2017). The use of social media also extends to the information science field. A graph-based approach to detecting

tourist movement patterns using social media data. On the other hands, location-based social media (LBSM) is another emerging application that provides information to tourists in overseas and unfamiliar destinations (Vu, Law, & Li, 2018).

In measuring the sustainability of community-based tourism, six dimensions were suggested including the political and technological dimensions (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006). On the other hand, Agyeiwaah, McKercher, and Suintikul (2017) categorized six core indicators under four dimensions (i.e. economic, social, environment, & cultural). They further added seven sustainable tourism indicators, namely job creation, business viability, quality of life, water quality, waste management, energy conservation and maintenance of community integrity. Table 2 outlines the core indicators and associated measures.

Table 2 Key indicators and associated measures.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Key indicator</b>	<b>Possible measures</b>
Economic	Employment	Number, type and duration of jobs Gender equity
	Business viability	Expenditure Arrivals Profitability Satisfaction, etc.
Social	Quality of Life	Resident empowerment Congestion and crowding Community attitudes to tourism Access to amenities Changes in crime rate
Environmental	Water quality and water management	Volume and changes in volume Water treatment, etc.
	Solid waste management Energy conservation	Recycling Reduction in energy usage
Cultural	Maintenance of integrity of local communities	Retention of local cultures and traditions Maintenance of cultural sites Authentic representation of local cultures.

Source: Agyeiwaah et al. (2017)

On the other hand, social media have deeply changed the way consumer make their decision (Hudson & Thal, 2013). For example, Osei, Mensah, & Amenumey (2018) stated that social media is useful in travel decision-making by international tourists' to travel to Ghana. Social media have changed the way people search for and share information, and even make decisions about their destination (Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal, 2019). Digital media has been increasingly replacing traditional information searching such as the use of travel guides, magazines, or even newspapers in an interactive way. Thus, it has changed the tourist's decision-making process. Typically, travellers get information from social media regarding views and suggestion on the trip (Lu, Chen & Law, 2018). In addition, social media platforms permit travellers to post and share travel information (i.e. images and videos), knowledge (Hu, Li, Yang, & Jiang, 2018), trip decision making (Sigala et al., 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chung & Buhalis, 2008). It is

also enriched tourism-related experience (Roque & Raposo, 2016) and understand how tourists' view the images of a destination (Chen, Guevara Plaza, & Alarcón Urbistondo, 2017).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From the reviews above, it is apparent that tourism brought both good and bad impacts to the destinations in three dimensions; economic, socio-cultural, and environmental (Samah, et al., 2012). To ensure long term success, the local community should work to maximize tourism benefits and minimize tourism by-product by adopting sustainability tourism development approach. Sustainable tourism development proposed for a balanced approach for economic, sociocultural, and environmental development with all stakeholders' concerted effort in understanding the best balance for the destination. Once the importance of social media is understood, utilizing the tools towards tourism development should be done in a sustainable manner. This strategy will help the local community to avoid over tourism, mass tourism and negative word of mouth issues.

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