

Digital Marketing of Ecotourism: An Analysis of the Ecotourism Businesses in Bhutan

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Abstract

In recent years, ecotourism has been recognized as a significant aspect of a number of topics, including sustainability, conservation, and social welfare, and has been the focus of numerous scientific studies. The literature indicates that new strategies, rather than traditional methods, are required in marketing ecotourism. Digital marketing provides a significant solution and opens up numerous options for ecotourism firms. The use of digital marketing activities in ecotourism, with their various dimensions, is remarkable in terms of its outcome as well as how businesses implement it as a solution. Although the benefits of digitalization in ecotourism have been demonstrated, there remain concerns regarding its effectiveness. In this study, the digital marketing activities of ten ecotourism enterprises in Bhutan, a South Asian country with a high ecotourism potential due to its geographical position, have been discussed from several perspectives. The mixed-methods analysis has revealed that businesses use digital marketing in a restricted way and are required to improve.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism, also known as ecological tourism, is a type of responsible system of travel that focuses on visiting natural locations while avoiding negative environmental impact and aiding local ecosystem conservation. It is a sustainable tourism approach that tries to maintain and protect natural environments, animals, and cultural heritage while also offering travelers significant educational experiences (Tershy et al., 1999). Ecotourism's main principles include awareness of conservation, education, respect for cultural diversity, sustainability, and economic support for developing or underdeveloped countries. Essentially, ecotourism aspires to aid and

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contribute to the preservation of natural and cultural resources. It frequently entails actively sponsoring and engaging in conservation efforts to safeguard endangered animals and environments. It is an educational experience for tourists since it strives to enhance awareness and understanding of the environment, local cultures, and sustainable development (Fennell, 2020). Visitors are frequently invited to learn more about the habitats they are seeing. Ecotourism encourages ethical and sustainable tourism practices such as minimizing waste materials, conserving energy, and preserving local cultures and traditions.

Efficient ecotourism marketing is critical for fostering sustainable and responsible travel while protecting natural and cultural resources. Among the most crucial features of ecotourism marketing are authenticity, social engagement, certifications, customer reviews and testimonials (Buckley, 1994). These key features have made ecotourism a popular topic on social media. Ecotourism businesses have achieved successful results when they use digital marketing channels effectively (Go and Nam, 2020). The contributions of digital marketing channels to ecotourism businesses are to increase the recognition of the region in question, to reach large masses through digital word of mouth, and to create a positive background for the development of customer satisfaction and trust by informing the target audience about the destination.

To reach a wider group of customers, some aspects of communication should be prioritized by ecotourism businesses. The target group that is interested in ecotourism should be convinced of the uniqueness and authenticity of their experience. At the same time, this responsive group should be convinced that, as a result of this experience, they contribute not only to themselves but also to the conservation of the communities and the environment in the region they are to visit (Sangpikul, 2010). For this, it should be demonstrated that the travel company has obtained all necessary permits and certificates. Since the places to be visited within the scope of ecotourism are not very widely known destinations, the observations and testimonials of people who have visited the region previously are also of great importance. All these key points have rendered digital marketing channels indispensable for ecotourism businesses. Thus, the way to make all these goals possible in a fast and measurable way is through digital marketing channels.

In an industry where presence on digital platforms has become a *sine qua non*, it is natural for every destination and business to use different methods in ecotourism marketing. However, certain digital marketing approaches and

strategies common to some destinations with distinctive characteristics need to be carefully considered and analyzed. These approaches and strategies could reveal in what ways ecotourism businesses contribute to digital marketing as well as what they gain from it.

The purpose of this research is to review and analyze the use of digital marketing channels by a group of ecotourism businesses in Bhutan, a country which has a distinctive potential in the field of ecotourism due to its location, climate, and culture and generates a significant portion of its national income through tourism. Within the scope of this research, 10 tourism businesses operating in the field of ecotourism in Bhutan were identified and their one-year digital marketing activities were examined.

2. Digital Marketing of Ecotourism

The modern economy's development is linked to the digitalization of all its activities. The distinction between the digital economy and the traditional economy is that information and ways of managing it have become the most essential resources in the spheres of production, trade, and consumption, as well as distribution. That is, information takes on the character of the enterprise's core assets, playing a primary part in its economic activity (Natocheeva et al., 2020). The tourism industry, which has been the most active in the application of digital technology, has not been left out of the digitalization process.

According to Kaur (2017), the tourism industry encompasses all the individuals, activities, and organizations involved in providing services to tourists, such as hotels, restaurants, and tour guides. Prior to the introduction of digital marketing, the job of employees who provided these services was critical to the success of the firm. With the advent of the Internet, fresh methods of marketing various services to specific consumers emerged. The rapid expansion of the Internet has affected the tourism sector as a whole.

The digitalization of ecotourism businesses enables them to effectively use many marketing tools such as blogging, search engines, social media, and mobile applications. The use of digital tools has offered numerous opportunities for marketers, not only in advertising, but also in promoting the destination's image to a wide audience and enhancing customer communication (Khan et al., 2022). It is widely reported that ecotourism businesses use digital marketing opportunities effectively in many countries (Theodorov et al., 2020; Chai-Arayalert, 2020, Vaja, 2021).

A quality corporate website, strong social media presence, search engine optimization, engaging content production, and mobile-friendly tools are

the key elements (Kaur, 2017) in the effective use of digital marketing for ecotourism businesses. Among these, social media platforms have a special role as they offer many opportunities for user interaction. The effective elements in the field of digital marketing are not limited to these but expand with various intellectual and creative productions such as video broadcasts and podcasts, and gain strength with constantly changing and innovating digital trends.

Social media platforms are effective marketing channels for ecotourism businesses. According to Theodorov and his colleagues (2020), social media platforms continue to be the key marketing aspect of the current generation, providing the ability to engage with consumers and potential tourists, as well as to develop new relationships and enhance current ones. Social media platforms enable the widespread advertising of various travel offerings, such as holiday deals, early booking, and so on, as well as unique events such as tourism fairs. These platforms allow users to not only submit feedback on the areas they have visited or the services they have used in these areas, but also to post material that they have made to draw the attention of others.

There are still a limited number of studies in the literature that examine the effects of digital marketing on ecotourism. In these studies, the impacts and advantages of digital marketing tools and methods used by ecotourism businesses in various dimensions have been analyzed. The most significant common feature of these studies conducted in different countries in the literature is that digitalization increases the profitability of ecotourism businesses (Mitova et al., 2021; Ulfy et al., 2021; Zainol et al., 2023). However, the digitalization of ecotourism businesses should be addressed not only in terms of increasing their profitability, but also with the contributions they could make to these businesses in various dimensions. Digital marketing processes provide significant roadmaps in determining the development of businesses and their expansion into the world.

3. Ecotourism in Bhutan

Bhutan is a small landlocked country in South Asia with a population of 745,153 people, measuring 38,394 km² in the Southeast Himalayas. It just celebrated 108 years of monarchy; yet the country's first constitution was drafted in 2008. Tourism, agriculture, forestry, and the production and sale of hydroelectric power are the key contributors to Bhutan's economy. According to the 2011 National Health Accounts, the country's GDP per capita was USD 2,121. Bhutan is well-known for using the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index to measure welfare (Adhikari, 2016).

For much of the 20th century, Bhutan was a Buddhist kingdom isolated from the rest of the world, but the opening-up policies of the 1990s led to a tourism boom. The country's geographical location and socio-cultural characteristics ensured that it had a remarkable ecotourism potential. The foundations were laid in those years, and today tourism still accounts for a significant portion of the country's revenues (Einzin et al., 2007). These activities gained momentum with the introduction of the Internet, boosting both the number of businesses and international demand. Although the country's limited visitor policy has prevented it from meeting every demand, it has maintained its appeal in the field of ecotourism and helped it to take more controlled and robust steps in this field compared to similar countries (Namgyel, 2011).

Bhutan has adopted a restricted tourist policy with a 'high value, low volume' strategy during the last few decades. This strategy is based on the country's policy for sustainable development. Tourism has been highlighted as the backbone of private sector growth in recent years. To that goal, a 'high value, low impact' approach was implemented, allowing for a doubling of tourist numbers over the next decade. Increasing tourist numbers could threaten the desired low impact on both nature and culture, which are key selling features for Bhutanese tourism (Rinzin et al, 2007).

Tourism was listed as a priority economic sector in Bhutan's Ninth Five-Year Plan, with an emphasis on the development and promotion of sustainable tourism in the country for the protection and integration of Bhutan's distinctive culture and natural resources. The Department of Tourism conducted a pilot study to test the feasibility of developing community tourism as a new approach to tourism for improving services, promoting seasonal and regional balanced development, diversifying products for tourists, and increasing the involvement of local communities and benefit-sharing (Gyeltshen, 2019).

The proneness of the Himalayan ecosystems to anthropogenic disturbances makes the benefits of ecotourism in the Himalayas debatable. However, ecotourism promotion requires special attention in protected areas of the upper Himalayas where possibilities for augmenting rural incomes are scarce (Gurung and Scholz, 2008). The country's "high value, low volume" strategy has been developed around this reality, and all operations of tourism businesses are state-controlled and strictly regulated. It can be considered that the fact that eco-tourism is state-controlled and strictly regulated in Bhutan will also affect marketing methods. However, no official source or research has been found on this subject.

The Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan 2022, published by the Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, provides important information about existing tourism businesses and their customers. The number of visitors to the country dropped drastically in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the figures from previous years are more relevant for businesses to assess the overall picture. In 2019, there was a tourism boom, and a record number of visitors visited the country. 315,599 visitors arrived in Bhutan, 85.98 percent of whom stated that they visited the country for its cultural purposes. In the same year, 1.45 percent of visitors said they visited the country for its natural beauty. For Bhutan, culture and nature are intertwined and are considered complementary when it comes to conservation. The fields of ecotourism operations are also shaped according to the situation (Frame, 2005). Since ecotourism includes attraction to both culture and nature and Bhutan's culture is shaped by its ecological integrity, it is concluded that 87.43 percent of those who visited Bhutan in 2019 preferred the country for reasons related to ecotourism.

Table 1. Number of Annual International Tourist Arrivals by Country of Nationality and Region, 2017 – 2020 (Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, 2022)

Number of Annual International Tourist Arrivals by Country of Nationality and Region, 2017 – 2020	2017	2018	2019	2020
Africa	106	135	207	25
America	12,299	14,109	15,099	1,445
East Asia and The Pacific	33,257	29,713	33,290	2,783
Europe	16,169	18,824	21,308	1,942
Middle East	70	138	306	25
South Asia	356	448	245,289	23,592
Total Arrivals	62,257	63,367	315,599	29,812

Table 2. Percentage of Tourist Arrivals by Major Attraction to Bhutan (Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, 2022)

Purpose of Travel	2019	2020
Cultural	85.98	90.10
Adventure	11.70	7.08
Spirituality and Wellness	0.87	0.58
Nature	1.45	2.24

Tourism is a very important source of income for Bhutan. According to a comprehensive report published by the Bhutan National Statistics Bureau in 2022, the country's tourism revenues increased consistently until the Covid-19 pandemic. Tourism is a very important source of income for Bhutan. According to a comprehensive report published by the Bhutan National Statistics Bureau in 2022, the country's tourism revenues increased consistently until the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is argued that this gain may bring socio-cultural costs to this country, as in any region with ecotourism potential. Ecotourism has clearly alleviated poverty and provided creative methods of dispersing tourism economic benefits to Bhutan's rural areas, but it has also resulted in the establishment of new views and values that control social and human-environment relations. As a result, policymakers continue to focus on the tangible aspects of ecotourism while overlooking the discursive effects (Montes and Kafley, 2019).

Table 3. Tourism Foreign Exchange Earning (2019-2020) (Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, 2022)

Tourism Foreign Exchange Earnings	2017	2018	2019	2020
Direct Revenue to Government (USD in Million)	22.36	22.63	23.42	2.76

Statistical data reveals the trends of visitors that Bhutan has accepted in recent years and how effective tourism is for Bhutan. According to Rinzin and his colleagues (2007), ecotourism businesses in this country play a significant role in terms of sustainable development. In a country where the development of tourism is so important and ecotourism is considered such an effective element for sustainable development and welfare, any data regarding business activities based on ecotourism should be carefully discussed.

4. Methodology

The purposeful homogeneous sampling method was preferred for the research due to the absence of sociodemographic noise in results and ease of recruitment (Bornstein et al., 2013). The technique of selecting a small, homogenous set of items or sets of people for investigation and analysis is known as homogeneous sampling. It seeks to produce a homogenous sample, or one in which the units have the same or similar qualities or traits. When the purpose of the research is to thoroughly comprehend and describe a certain group, homogeneous sampling is preferred (Mujere, 2016).

Furthermore, this sampling method provides the opportunity to study a particular group in detail over a period of time. This provides the researcher with an advantage in observational research such as this study, which was conducted over a specific time frame.

Within the study, the data collected from 10 Bhutan based travel companies offering ecotourism itineraries was analyzed. The companies were identified by determining the top 10 businesses after eliminating those which are not based in Bhutan from TripAdvisor's list of the Best Bhutan Eco Tours selected by customer votes. The digital marketing activities of these businesses between May 2022 and May 2023 were observed in terms of corporate website, social media presence, search engine optimization, and digital content production (Kaur, 2017). The names of the enterprises selected for the research were kept anonymous and coded as Company 1, Company 2 with numbers from 1 to 10. The data obtained was analyzed by mixed methods, based on qualitative and quantitative techniques.

5. Findings and Results

Within the scope of this research, the digital marketing activities of 10 ecotourism businesses based in Bhutan were examined over a period of one year with the dimensions of corporate website, social media presence, search engine optimization, and digital content production. Firstly, the corporate websites were examined for their main features, whether these features were present on the site was investigated, and the characteristics of the visual and textual content on the site were identified. Then, the social media presence of these businesses was investigated and their activities on popular social media platforms were observed. It was discussed whether these businesses applied search engine optimization for their corporate websites or content sites that they actively use. Whether these businesses are working on increasing visitor traffic to their own content or not was analyzed. Finally, businesses were discussed in terms of digital content production on the platforms where they are active. This channel could be their corporate website or social media platforms. It was investigated whether they included original content and how often they included it.



Figure 1. Distribution of corporate websites based on their content.

Corporate websites are one of the key elements of digital marketing since they offer stronger consideration of reliable and dependable interaction with online customers (Du Plessis, 2006). The corporate websites reviewed meet these expectations to a certain extent. All of them included links to social media accounts. The least common feature is online customer service. Only 30% of businesses provide online customer service, and all of them communicate with their customers or potential customers via WhatsApp. 50% of the businesses state their international certifications and memberships. All of them provide links to the websites of these certification institutions and professional associations to emphasize their reliability in travel and ecotourism. 40% of businesses include customer comments either on their own sites or on other sites, and these can be viewed from the home page.

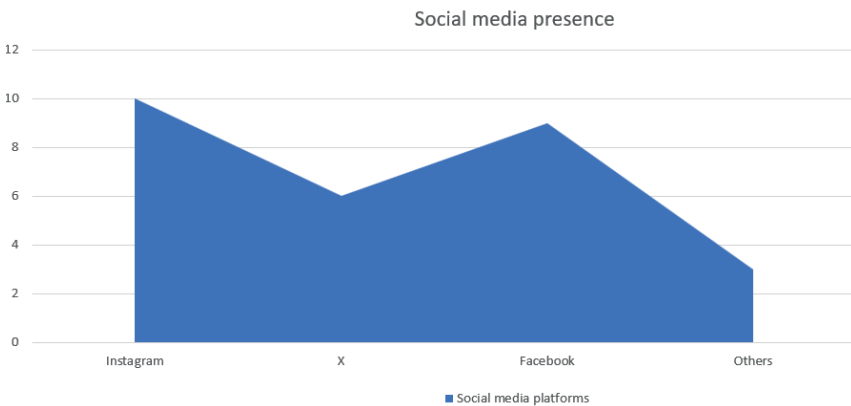


Figure 2. Distribution by social media usage

As a part of the research, the update frequencies of the official websites and social media accounts were examined, and the frequencies of adding new material were grouped based on seasons. According to this analysis, it was determined that the social media accounts are updated more frequently than the official websites, and the highest rate of new material is uploaded during the summer months, when festivals and trekking tours in the country are on the agenda. The content uploaded on social media during this period aimed to promote cultural festivals or trekking tours. While corporate sites are least updated in the winter months, social media accounts are least updated in the spring months, and the update rate of corporate sites and social media sites is closer to each other in the spring period. It is inferred that during the spring months, preparations regarding accommodation and transfers are made for the summer, which is a more active period for tourism, and less emphasis is placed on digital content during the period when physical preparations increase.

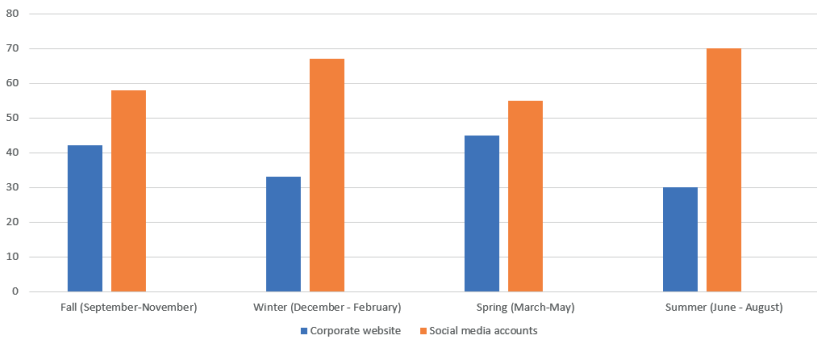


Figure 3. A comparison of the number of updates on the corporate websites and social media accounts

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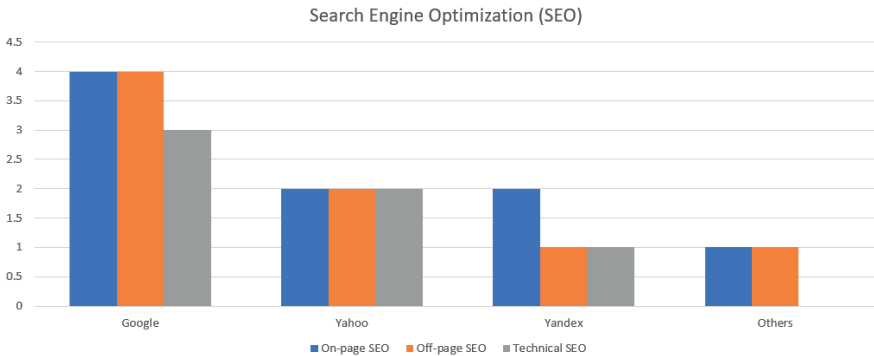


Figure 4. The distribution based on the usage of search engine optimization according to its types.

On-page SEO refers to all the content on a website, whereas off-page SEO refers to advertising and backlinks. Technological SEO includes any technological effort performed to boost search rankings, such as site indexing to aid bot crawling. According to findings on search engine optimization, it was revealed that 40% of businesses preferred Google. The number of companies that worked on Yahoo and Yandex is limited. Only 10% of organizations effectively optimize for other search engines, according to research. No improvements have been made in search engine optimization within a year. According to Berman and Katona (2013) there is a significant impact of search engine optimization (SEO) on the competition between advertisers for organic and sponsored search results. Their research in 2013 has indicated that a positive level of search engine optimization could improve the search engine's ranking quality and thus the satisfaction of its visitors. The shortcomings of the ecotourism enterprises in search engine optimization are a barrier to the efficiency of digital marketing efforts.

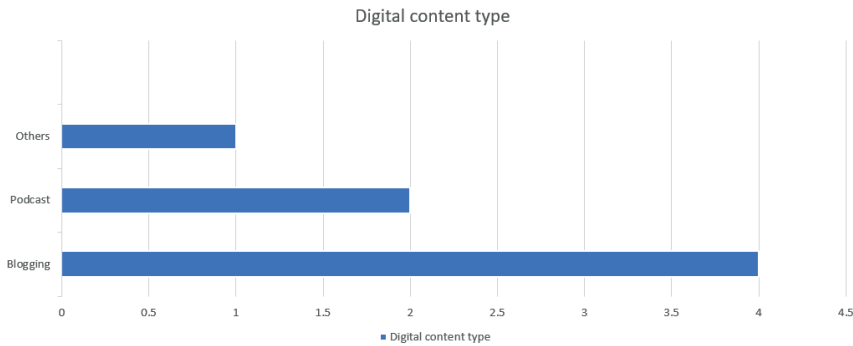


Figure 5. Distribution by digital content type

Digital content creation is an important aspect of digital marketing efforts and businesses should keep their digital communications active with regular or significant periodic updates rather than fixed content. (Rowley, 2008). The ecotourism companies profiled in the study regularly provide digital content for their corporate websites and social media profiles. However, diverse digital content generation is limited. Only 40% of firms create blog content, most of which are on ecotourism. The blog's content is updated infrequently and contains unique articles, photographs, and short films. Podcast content is less popular. Only 10% of firms create content that is not classified as blogging or podcasting. This group of content covers YouTube videos produced to introduce the natural life in the country. Throughout the year, digital content creation tends to peak in the summer months.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

This study focuses on the digital marketing activities of ecotourism businesses and includes the observation and assessment of the one-year digital marketing activities of the selected enterprises in a country where this industry is highly valued. Even though current marketing literature has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of digital marketing for ecotourism operations (Theodorov, 2020), particularly in terms of profitability, the dimensions and types of such marketing activities have not been effectively addressed. This study can serve as a starting point for researchers studying comparable topics to identify this gap in the literature and draw additional conclusions from larger samples, in-depth interviews with professionals in the field, or content analysis of websites or social media accounts.

This study is limited by the isolated structure of the country under examination and the limitations brought about by its unique policies such

as Gross National Happiness and the regulated commercial activities. Marketing operations are also affected by the country's unique regulations. Furthermore, the exact number of ecotourism enterprises operating in the country has not been determined, making it impossible to address the research population clearly. The digital marketing efforts of 10 organizations were evaluated, allowing for detailed analyses of activities and approaches rather than broad generalizations. In this regard, the research limits are considered as a benefit in approaching the dimensions to be explored more closely. Given the goal of the research, it is concluded that these limitations do not pose a barrier, but rather highlight the need for the research to be broadened as previously mentioned.

It has been revealed that the businesses on which they are focused do not completely utilize various digital marketing tools. Many deficiencies emerge based on the criteria determined by the content of corporate websites. Among social media sites, the most active presence is limited to one platform: Instagram. It has been revealed that search engine optimization is not considered important or that sufficient investment is not made in this field. Sharing of digital content is limited to the official websites and social media accounts, and blogging or podcast-style content is not adequately represented. Although promoting the country's natural and cultural beauty and expanding the visitor profile are necessary to attract new customers, digital marketing approaches, which are the simplest to implement, are not yet being employed properly in these enterprises.

Digital marketing is critical to the development of ecotourism businesses. It should be noted that the advantages of digital marketing not only boost profitability but also provide several benefits to the company and the market in the long term. Digital marketing activities of ecotourism companies in various nations should be addressed by using different research methodologies and focusing on different aspects. As a result, significant research will be added to the marketing literature.

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