

Promoting Sustainable Tourism in “God’s Own Country”
Kerala: The Role of Social Media

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of social media platforms by Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) in Kerala, India, for promoting sustainable tourism. As digital marketing transforms the tourism industry, understanding how DMOs leverage social media to communicate sustainability messages becomes crucial. The research employed a qualitative approach, utilising netnographic methods to analyse social media content from selected Kerala DMOs. The study identified the social media platforms used for destination promotion and examined the types of sustainability-related content posted on their official accounts. Findings revealed that Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) were the predominant platforms used, with content focusing on showcasing natural beauty, promoting eco-friendly experiences, and highlighting community engagement initiatives. This research contributes to the literature on sustainable tourism marketing by exploring the intersection of social media strategies and sustainability communication in destination promotion. It also extends existing knowledge on how DMOs can effectively utilise digital platforms to foster responsible tourism practices. Furthermore, the study provides practical insights for DMOs seeking to enhance their digital marketing strategies in line with sustainability principles, potentially influencing tourist behaviour and destination management practices.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Social Media Marketing, Destination Marketing Organisations, Kerala Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Eco-Friendly Tourism, Eco-Tourism.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Date: 30/07/2024

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The advent of modern technology and the proliferation of social media platforms have fundamentally transformed various aspects of our lives, offering novel avenues for communication, information dissemination, and business promotion (Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021). One such area where this transformation is highly evident is that of the travel and tourism sector. Tourists now rely heavily on online platforms for researching destinations, planning trips, seeking recommendations from other travellers, and sharing experiences in real time (Shukla & Maitra, 2023; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Likewise, tourism organisations have adopted social media as a strategic marketing and engagement tool (Kumar, 2021; Leung et al., 2013). This emerging role of social media within the tourism landscape has prompted significant research interest. A growing body of academic literature has examined various aspects of how different social platforms influence travel behaviour, destination marketing, and tourism (Kilipiri et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2013). Destination marketing organisations (DMOs), tasked with promoting and managing tourism within their respective regions, have had to adapt their strategies to keep pace with the evolving landscape of marketing and communication (Hays et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2022). One of the most impactful developments in this domain has been the rise of social media, which has revolutionised the way DMOs engage with potential visitors and promote their destinations (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Shukla & Maitra, 2023).

Alongside the digital revolution, the global tourism industry has also faced growing concerns regarding the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of travel (Buckley, 2012; He et al., 2018). Sustainable tourism has emerged as a critical focus area, emphasising the need to balance economic development with environmental preservation and community well-being (Streimikiene et al., 2021; United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2005). This shift towards sustainability presents both challenges and opportunities for DMOs in their social media strategies. As travellers become increasingly conscious of their environmental footprint, DMOs must adapt their messaging to highlight sustainable practices and eco-friendly attractions (Font & McCabe, 2017). Moreover, social media platforms offer unique opportunities for DMOs

to educate visitors about responsible travel behaviours and showcase local conservation efforts (Camilleri, 2018; Gössling & Peeters, 2015).

The intersection of social media marketing and sustainable tourism practices represents a crucial area for research, as it has the potential to shape the future of destination marketing and contribute to more responsible tourism development (Lund et al., 2018; Marti-Parreño & Gómez-Calvet, 2020).

1.2. Background of the Study

Kerala, often referred to as "God's Own Country," is a state in southern India known for its lush landscapes, diverse ecosystems, and rich cultural heritage. The region has long been at the forefront of sustainable tourism initiatives in India, with its government and tourism board actively promoting responsible travel practices (Kerala Tourism, 2021). The state's commitment to sustainable tourism is evident in various initiatives, including the Responsible Tourism Mission, which aims to create better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit (Kerala Tourism, 2021).

In recent years, Kerala's DMOs have increasingly turned to social media platforms to promote the state's tourism offerings and sustainable initiatives. This shift aligns with the global trend of DMOs leveraging digital platforms for destination marketing (Kumar et al., 2022; Uşaklı et al., 2017). However, the extent to which these organisations are utilising social media to promote sustainable tourism practices, and the effectiveness of their strategies have not yet been explored.

The use of social media in destination marketing has been widely studied in various contexts (Hays et al., 2013; Mariani et al., 2016; Pino et al., 2019; Uşaklı et al., 2017). However, there is a dearth of research examining how DMOs in developing countries, particularly in India, are leveraging these platforms to promote sustainable tourism. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of social media's role in promoting sustainable tourism practices in emerging destinations.

1.3. Research Problem

While the potential of social media in destination marketing is well-recognised, there is limited understanding of how DMOs in Kerala are utilising these platforms to promote sustainable tourism practices. The research problem this dissertation addressed is the lack of comprehensive analysis of the social media strategies employed by Kerala's DMOs in communicating sustainability messages and promoting responsible tourism.

This gap in knowledge is significant for several reasons. Firstly, as sustainable tourism gains prominence globally, understanding how destinations communicate their sustainability efforts becomes crucial for both academic and practical reasons (Font & McCabe, 2017; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Secondly, the unique context of Kerala, with its strong emphasis on responsible tourism, provides an excellent case study for examining the intersection of social media marketing and sustainable tourism promotion (Kumavat, 2021). Lastly, insights from this study could inform best practices for other destinations seeking to leverage social media for promoting sustainable tourism (Haid & Albrecht, 2021).

1.4. Research Aim

The aim of this research was to investigate how destination marketing organisations (DMOs) in Kerala, India, utilise social media platforms to promote sustainable tourism practices. This aim was achieved by addressing the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Which social media platforms are used by destination marketing organisations in Kerala for destination promotion?

Research Question 2: What type of content is shared on these platforms concerning sustainability messaging?

By addressing these research questions, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social media strategies employed by Kerala's DMOs in promoting sustainable tourism. The findings will contribute to the broader academic discourse on social media marketing in tourism, sustainability communication, and destination marketing, and offer practical insights for DMOs seeking to enhance their digital marketing strategies in line with sustainability principles.

1.5. Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is organised into six chapters, each serving a distinct purpose in the exploration of how Kerala's DMOs use social media to promote sustainable tourism. This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research topic. It outlined the study's background, presented the research problem, and articulated the aim and research questions guiding this investigation. Following this, Chapter 2, critically examines existing literature on destination marketing, the role of social media in tourism, and the promotion of sustainable tourism. This chapter identifies gaps in the current body of knowledge and establishes the theoretical framework that underpinned the study. Chapter 3 details the research design, describing the methods of data collection and the analytical approaches employed. This chapter also discusses the ethical considerations and acknowledges the limitations inherent in the research process. Chapter 4 then presents the results of the data analysis. The findings are systematically organised according to the research questions, providing clear insights into the social media strategies of Kerala's DMOs. Chapter 5 interprets these findings within the context of the existing literature, discussing their broader implications for both theory and practice. This chapter explains how the study's results contribute to our understanding of sustainable tourism promotion and social media use in destination marketing. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the key findings of the study and discusses its overall contributions. It also reflects on the findings' implications and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the intersection of sustainable tourism, social media marketing, and the role of DMOs in promoting responsible travel practices. The review begins by examining the concept of sustainable tourism, its key principles, and the importance of its promotion. It then delves into the challenges faced by DMOs in marketing sustainable tourism destinations, including the need to balance economic growth with environmental conservation and social responsibility.

The chapter then critically reviews relevant literature on the role of social media in destination marketing, with a particular focus on its application to promoting sustainable tourism initiatives. It then explores emerging trends in social media marketing for sustainable tourism and addresses the challenges and opportunities presented by these digital platforms in the context of sustainable tourism promotion. Finally, the chapter considers the broader implications of social media marketing for sustainable tourism.

2.2. Destination Marketing in the Digital Era

The proliferation of digital technologies has transformed the ways consumers access information and make travel decisions (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Femenia-Serra et al., 2019). This shift has prompted tourism organisations to acknowledge the prominence of digital communication channels in the travel planning process. Traditionally, DMOs relied on print and television advertisements for destination promotion. However, global internet penetration and evolving consumer behaviour have accelerated the digitisation of tourism marketing (Dolan et al., 2019; Gretzel et al., 2015).

2.2.1. Defining Key Concepts

2.2.1.1. Marketing

Marketing is a fundamental business discipline that has evolved significantly over the years. The American Marketing Association (2017) defined *marketing* as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” In the

context of tourism, marketing involves understanding traveller needs, developing products and services to meet those needs, and effectively communicating the value proposition to potential visitors (Morrison, 2018)

2.2.1.2. Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is the application of marketing principles and strategies through digital channels and technologies. Kannan and Li (2017, p. 23) defined *digital marketing* as “an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders.” In the tourism sector, digital marketing encompasses a wide range of online activities, including search engine optimisation (SEO), content marketing, social media marketing, email campaigns, and mobile marketing (Li et al., 2017). Digital marketing enables tourism organisations to reach global audiences, personalise communication, and engage in real-time interactions with potential travellers (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

2.2.1.3. Tourism Destination

The concept of a destination is central to tourism marketing efforts. Buhalis (2000) provided a comprehensive definition, emphasising that a destination is not merely a physical location, but a complex amalgam of products, services, and experiences. Pike & Page (2014) further explained that a destination comprises both tangible elements (such as attractions, amenities, and accessibility) and intangible aspects (including image, brand, and visitor experiences).

2.2.1.4. Destination Marketing

Destination marketing refers to the strategic efforts to promote a specific location as an attractive travel destination. It involves creating and projecting a unique identity that differentiates the destination from competitors and appeals to its target markets (Pike & Page, 2014). In the digital era, destination marketing has expanded to include online reputation management, virtual reality experiences, and leveraging user-generated content to shape destination narratives (Munar et al., 2011).

2.2.2. Traditional vs. Digital Marketing for Destinations

Traditional destination marketing primarily relied on offline and one-way communication channels such as print brochures, travel guides, newspaper/magazine advertisements, and broadcast television/radio spots (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Shukla & Maitra, 2023; Werthner & Klein, 1999). The goal was to achieve mass awareness by distributing generalised information about a destination's attributes to stimulate interest. However, consumers had limited interactivity and marketing messages lacked personalisation. Additional traditional activities included public relations campaigns, trade shows, and direct mail distribution (Werthner & Klein, 1999). The measurement of campaigns' impacts was also challenging beyond circulation/viewership figures. Although they were able to increase basic brand recognition, these conventional methods provided limited data on consumer preferences and behaviours.

However, the rise of digital technologies in the late 1990s began revolutionising the industry. Destinations launched initial websites containing visitor guides and event listings, allowing around-the-clock information access (Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021; P. Kumar, 2021; Werthner & Klein, 1999). Over time, sites expanded to include immersive multimedia content, user reviews, interactive maps, booking functions, and personalised recommendation engines (Gretzel et al., 2015; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Shukla & Maitra, 2023; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Social media too, has profoundly impacted on destination marketing through new opportunities for engagement (Gretzel et al., 2015; P. Kumar et al., 2022; Munar et al., 2011; Shukla & Maitra, 2023). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube facilitate the sharing of user-generated photos, videos, and first-hand experiences that influence travel decisions (Coxs et al., 2009; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2013). These platforms offer participatory, two-way communications that help DMOs engage with potential visitors and build destination brands (Shukla & Maitra, 2023; Sigala & Marinidis, 2012; Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019).

This digital shift has provided and empowered destinations with nuanced consumer data, enabling customised narratives and tailored experiences (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The integration of online and offline campaigns also drives synergies while social proof and peer recommendations boost

engagement (Coxs et al., 2009; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2013; Shukla & Maitra, 2023). As digital adoption continues to grow, these interactive approaches will become increasingly essential for driving destination competitiveness and destination sustainability in a connected world (Kumar, 2021).

2.2.3. Impact of Digital Marketing on Destination Marketing Organisations

The integration of digital marketing strategies has revolutionised the way destination marketing organisations (DMOs) promote their destinations, offering numerous advantages. As highlighted by Hays et al. (2013), digital platforms have facilitated extensive reach and visibility, enabling DMOs to connect with a global audience of potential travellers. Online channels such as websites, social media, and search engines, have provided DMOs with the ability to promote their destination's unique offerings, and reach a wider, more diverse target market (Gretzel et al., 2015).

Furthermore, digital marketing enables DMOs to gather valuable data and insights about their audience, allowing for more targeted and personalised communication (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). By analysing user behaviour, preferences, and engagement patterns, DMOs can tailor their marketing strategies to specific traveller segments, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of their promotional efforts.

Another key advantage of digital marketing for DMOs is the ability to foster two-way communication and engagement with potential visitors (Hays et al., 2013). Social media platforms in particular, have become essential tools for DMOs to use to interact with their audience, respond to enquiries, and gather feedback, ultimately strengthening brand loyalty and destination reputation (Femenia-Serra et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2016).

Additionally, digital marketing offers cost-effective and measurable solutions for DMOs, enabling them to track the performance of their campaigns and optimise their strategies accordingly (Hays et al., 2013). This data-driven approach allows them to make informed decisions, allocate resources efficiently, and maximise the return on their marketing investments.

By leveraging these capabilities, DMOs can significantly enhance their competitive position in the global tourism market. Uşaklı et al. (2017) suggested that effective digital marketing can increase visitor numbers, enhance the image of a destination, and boost the

local tourism economy. Additionally, digital marketing allows DMOs to respond quickly to changes in the market and in traveller preferences, which is crucial in the unpredictable tourism industry (Mariani et al., 2016). This flexibility is especially important during crises, when fast and clear communication can reduce any negative effects such as how a destination is perceived, or decreasing visitor numbers (Avraham, 2020). Overall, incorporating digital marketing into DMO operations, not only enhances their promotional activities, but also redefines their role as managers of destinations and providers of positive visitor experiences.

2.3. The Rise of Social Media in Destination Marketing

“Social media” refers to internet-based applications that enable users to create, share, and interact with content and each other (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These applications/platforms facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC), fostering online communities and networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social media encompasses a wide range of platforms, including social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), microblogging services (e.g., X), and content-sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube and Instagram) (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

In the context of tourism and destination marketing, social media has become an integral tool for both travellers and DMOs. These DMOs undertake sophisticated multi-channel strategies, curating immersive digital stories, answering user questions, and collaborating with influencers to foster community engagement (Coxs et al., 2009). Today, social media pervades all aspects of travel planning and experience sharing (Shukla & Maitra, 2023; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The rise of new platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram Story, further grow opportunities to captivate future travellers through online contents (Kilipiri et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2022; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

2.3.1. Social Media in Destination Marketing

The emergence of social media platforms has transformed the way DMOs engage with potential travellers and promote their destinations (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Social media has become a powerful tool for DMOs to use to showcase a destination's unique features, share engaging content, and foster meaningful connections with their target audience (Hays et al., 2013). One key focus in the literature has been on social media's impact on destination brand equity. Studies have found that effective social media

marketing can positively influence brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty (Hays et al., 2013; Uşaklı et al., 2017). Leung et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of monitoring short-term engagement metrics, such as “likes,” “shares,” and “comments”, to gauge the success of social media campaigns. However, some researchers have also noted the need for more longitudinal studies to understand the long-term effects of social media marketing on destination visitation patterns and brand (Leung et al., 2013). This gap limits the ability of destination marketers to make fully informed strategic decisions regarding their social media investments.

Another area of research has explored cross-cultural differences in social media usage and effectiveness for destination marketing. Hays et al. (2013) found that cultural factors, such as individualism, collectivism, and power distance, can influence how travellers from different markets engage with and respond to destination-related content on social media. This suggests the need for tailored social media strategies to cater to diverse target audiences. As new social media platforms emerge, such as TikTok, researchers have emphasised the importance of studying how destinations can use these emerging channels for effective marketing (Uşaklı et al., 2017). Understanding the unique features and user behaviours of each platform can help destination marketers develop more targeted and impactful social media campaigns.

Additionally, scholars have highlighted the need to explore the optimal integration of social media marketing with traditional marketing channels (Leung et al., 2013). Effective cross-channel integration can enhance the overall impact and synergy of destination marketing efforts. Lastly, the literature has identified a significant gap regarding the ethical implications of data collection and personalisation in social media marketing for destinations (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). With evolving privacy regulations, destination marketers must carefully consider the appropriate use of consumer data to maintain trust and comply with legal requirements. Addressing these gaps through future studies can help destination marketers develop more effective, responsible, and sustainable social media strategies.

2.3.2 Popular Social Media Platforms for Destination Marketing

Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) have a wide array of social media platforms at their disposal for tourism promotion, each offering unique engagement opportunities

based on its functionality and user base (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Among the most commonly used platforms are Instagram, Facebook, X, YouTube, TikTok, and LinkedIn. Instagram has emerged as a particularly powerful promotional channel for DMOs due to its strong visual focus and interactive storytelling capabilities (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Studies have shown that viewers spend more time engaged with visually rich posts as compared to text-heavy updates, and DMOs capitalise on this by producing high quality imagery highlighting scenic landscapes, cultural attractions, and local experiences (Hays et al., 2013). The platform's features such as Stories and Reels, also allow DMOs to offer snapshots of destination personalities and daily life, further enhancing engagement with potential visitors.

While Instagram focuses on visual storytelling, Facebook maintains a large global audience reach, making it useful for broad awareness campaigns (Hays et al., 2013). Its diversified content format supports multiphase trip planning, from initial interest to travel logs. DMOs leverage this multilayered engagement by mixing informational posts with immersive experiences such as virtual tours and destination quizzes (Leung et al., 2013). The platform also facilitates user-generated reviews and discussions that build community around a place, fostering a sense of connection and authenticity that can be crucial in destination marketing (Leung et al., 2013).

X and YouTube serve distinct roles in DMOs' social media strategies, with each platform fulfilling important yet different functions. X functions as a real-time information hub, allowing DMOs to participate in trending travel conversations, answer visitor questions, issue advisories, and curate content from partners (Hays et al., 2013). YouTube, along with other video hubs such as TikTok, capitalise on the experiential pull of the medium by offering virtual trips through scenic videos and local storytellers (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Their compelling formats help destinations feel discoverable and memorable to varied demographics.

Beyond these mainstream platforms, DMOs also explore niche networks to engage specific traveller segments. LinkedIn, for example, while predominantly business focused, enables engagement with meeting planners and corporate event stakeholders to promote a destination's conference amenities and capabilities (Hays et al., 2013). By sharing industry reports, economic impact studies, and partnership opportunities, DMOs

can strengthen their reputation as viable locations for professional gatherings and inward investment, diversifying their appeal beyond leisure travel.

2.4. Sustainable Tourism and its Promotion

Tourism has emerged as one of the world's largest and fastest growing economic sectors in recent decades (Risteska, 2021). While tourism promotes economic development and cultural interaction, unregulated mass tourism can also negatively impact the environment and local communities (United Nations, n.d.). In response to this, the concept of sustainable tourism has emerged. As awareness of climate change and environmental degradation has increased, so too has the need to ensure tourism's long-term viability and inclusiveness through more sustainable models. Sustainable tourism aims to meet present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their needs (United Nations, n.d.). It typically encompasses considerations of environmental protection, economic prosperity, and socio-cultural authenticity in a way that optimises benefits for the local community. While definitions vary, most frameworks emphasise balancing these triple bottom line priorities now and into the future through practices such as ecotourism and community-based initiatives (Butler, 1999)

2.4.1. Defining Sustainable Tourism

There are various definitions of sustainable tourism offered by scholars and organisations seeking to capture the multifaceted goals of the concept. The UNWTO (United Nations, n.d.) provided one of the most widely accepted definitions, describing sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.” Butler (1999) defined *sustainable tourism* as tourism that is developed and maintained in a way that remains viable indefinitely and does not harm the environment to the extent that it hinders other activities and processes. This foundational definition has been expanded upon by more recent scholars, who have emphasised minimising negative impacts on natural and cultural resources while maximising benefits to local communities (Ko, 2005). This involves ensuring environmental protection, socio-economic inclusion, and cultural preservation are prioritised.

Recent research underscores the need for a holistic approach to sustainable tourism. For instance, Gössling et al. (2020) argued that sustainable tourism must address not only

environmental concerns, but also social and economic dimensions, including issues of equity and justice, and emphasised the importance of considering tourism's role in global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Cárdenas-García & Alcalá-Ordoñez (2023) suggested that tourism can be an instrument for economic development, but that environmental sustainability factors must be considered, and Brida et al. (2023) discussed the importance of analysing tourism's environmental impacts, particularly energy consumption, in the context of sustainable tourism. Baloch et al. (2023) proposed a framework for sustainable ecotourism that balances economic benefits with environmental conservation, emphasising the role of government support and policy interventions. Their study revealed that while tourism development brings socio-economic benefits, it can also lead to environmental degradation and social vulnerability. These findings collectively underscore the need for careful management of tourism development to ensure long-term sustainability and minimise negative impacts on local communities and ecosystems.

Sustainable tourism encompasses three main pillars:

1. **Environmental Sustainability:** This pillar focuses on practices that reduce negative impacts on natural resources, ecosystems, and biodiversity. It emphasises the reduction of carbon emissions and waste, advocating for minimal interference with natural habitats (Buckley, 2012).
2. **Socio-Cultural Sustainability:** This pillar is concerned with the respect and preservation of local cultures, traditions, and heritage. It seeks to foster positive interactions between visitors and host communities, ensuring that tourism enriches rather than disrupts the cultural fabric of destinations (Bramwell & Lane, 2010).
3. **Economic Sustainability:** Economic sustainability ensures that tourism activities deliver long-term economic benefits to local communities. This includes generating employment opportunities, supporting local entrepreneurship, and contributing to overall economic development (Saarinen, 2006).

2.4.2. Importance of Promoting Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a crucial paradigm in the travel industry, offering a balanced approach that contributes to environmental conservation, cultural preservation,

and economic development. Buckley (2012), emphasised the multifaceted benefits of sustainable tourism practices, highlighting their potential to address the complex challenges faced by destinations worldwide. As the global tourism industry continues to expand, the implementation of sustainable practices becomes increasingly vital to mitigate the negative impacts associated with over-tourism, and enhance destination competitiveness in the global market (Dodds & Butler, 2019). This approach not only helps preserve natural and cultural resources, but also provides a framework for long-term economic viability in tourism-dependent regions.

The economic implications of sustainable tourism extend beyond mere environmental protection. Font and McCabe (2017) noted that sustainable tourism initiatives often lead to improved economic outcomes by attracting environmentally and socially conscious travellers who tend to stay longer and spend more at their chosen destinations. This demographic of tourists, driven by a desire for authentic and responsible travel experiences, represents a growing market segment that destinations can tap into through the implementation of sustainable practices. Furthermore, Bookbinder et al. (1998) argued that well managed sustainable tourism can generate significant revenue for conservation efforts and create tangible incentives for local communities to engage in environmental protection. This symbiotic relationship between tourism, conservation, and local economies, underscores the potential of sustainable tourism as a tool for holistic development.

The promotion of sustainable tourism plays a vital role in preserving local cultures and social structures, particularly in indigenous communities (Butler & Hinch, 2007). By involving local stakeholders in tourism planning and management, destinations can ensure that tourism development aligns with community values and needs, fostering a sense of ownership and pride among residents (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). This participatory approach not only helps maintain cultural authenticity, but also contributes to the overall sustainability of tourism initiatives by ensuring they are rooted in local contexts and supported by the communities they affect.

As Gössling et al. (2016) pointed out, the continued growth of the tourism industry necessitates a stronger focus on promoting sustainable practices to balance economic benefits with environmental and social responsibilities. In this context, the role of effective promotion and education becomes paramount. Camilleri (2018) highlighted the

potential of digital media and social platforms for educating tourists in responsible practices and encouraging sustainable behaviour at destinations. These modern communication channels offer unprecedented opportunities for engaging with travellers throughout their journeys, from the initial planning stages to their on-site experiences and post-trip reflections.

DMOs have recognised the power of social media platforms in promoting sustainable tourism and raising awareness about environmental issues. These digital channels provide unique opportunities for engaging with tourists and encouraging responsible behaviour at destinations (Camilleri, 2018). The interactive nature of social media allows for real-time communication and information sharing, enabling DMOs to disseminate up-to-date information on environmental conditions and sustainable initiatives. This empowers tourists to make more informed choices throughout their journeys, potentially reducing their environmental impacts and enhancing their overall travel experiences (Hays et al., 2013).

Moreover, the data-driven nature of social media marketing allows DMOs to target specific demographics interested in sustainable travel. By leveraging on data analytics, they can tailor sustainability messages to resonate with environmentally conscious travellers, increasing the effectiveness of their promotional efforts (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). DMOs also use these platforms for real-time updates on environmental conditions and sustainable initiatives, helping tourists make better informed choices throughout their journey (Hays et al., 2013).

Furthermore, social media facilitates the creation of online communities centred around sustainable tourism. DMOs can establish groups in which travellers share experiences and learn about sustainable practices, fostering a sense of collective responsibility (Királ'ová & Pavlíčka, 2015). However, DMOs must also navigate the issues of credibility and transparency, ensuring that their sustainability messages are authentic and backed by genuine actions (Beldad et al., 2010). They need to balance promotional content with educational material to maintain engagement while effectively communicating sustainability principles.

2.4.3. Challenges in Marketing Sustainable Destinations

Marketing sustainable destinations presents unique challenges for tourism organisations and DMOs. As the global tourism industry faces increasing pressure to adopt more sustainable practices, destinations must navigate complex issues related to balancing economic growth, environmental conservation, and social responsibility.

One of the primary challenges in marketing sustainable destinations is that of effectively communicating sustainability initiatives to potential visitors. Many tourists are increasingly interested in sustainable travel options, but there is often a gap between stated intentions and actual behaviour (Budeanu, 2007). Destinations need to find ways to convey their sustainability efforts in a way that resonates with travellers and influences their decision-making process. This requires careful messaging that emphasises the tangible benefits of sustainable practices without appearing preachy, or compromising the overall appeal of the destination (Font & McCabe, 2017).

Another significant challenge is in overcoming the perception that sustainable tourism is synonymous with sacrifices or reduced enjoyment. Some travellers may associate sustainability with a lack of luxury or comfort, potentially deterring them from choosing eco-friendly options (Gössling & Peeters, 2007). Destinations need to dispel these misconceptions and demonstrate that sustainability can enhance the overall travel experience rather than detract from it.

Balancing the need for economic growth with sustainability goals is another significant challenge. Many destinations, particularly those in developing countries, rely heavily on tourism for economic development (Brohman, 1996). There is often pressure to increase visitor numbers and tourism revenue, which can conflict with efforts to limit environmental impacts and preserve local cultures. Destinations need to find ways to market themselves in a way that attracts responsible travellers and encourages sustainable growth rather than unsustainable mass tourism (Gössling et al., 2016).

Authenticity is a critical factor in sustainable tourism marketing but can be challenging to maintain in the face of commercialisation. As destinations become more popular, there is a risk of losing the unique cultural and environmental attributes that initially attracted visitors (Cohen, 1988). Marketing sustainable destinations requires a delicate balance between promoting a destination and preserving its authentic character.

Collaboration among various stakeholders is crucial for successful sustainable tourism, but it can also present marketing challenges. Destinations need to coordinate messaging and initiatives across multiple organisations, including government agencies, private businesses, and local communities (Jamal & Stronza, 2009). Ensuring consistency in marketing efforts while respecting the diverse interests of these stakeholders can be a complex undertaking.

Finally, the evolving nature of sustainability itself presents ongoing challenges for destination marketing. As new environmental and social issues emerge, destinations must continually adapt their sustainability practices and marketing strategies to remain relevant and responsible (Buckley, 2012). This requires a commitment to ongoing learning and innovation in both sustainability practices and marketing approaches.

2.5. Social Media and Sustainable Tourism Promotion by Destination Marketing Organisations

Destination marketing organisations can use the power of social media to showcase their destination's commitment to sustainable tourism and highlight the specific initiatives and practices that contribute to the destination's environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

2.5.1. Highlighting Sustainable Practices on Social Media

Social media has become an integral part of tourism marketing strategies, offering DMOs an effective channel through which to communicate sustainable practices to a wide audience (Hays et al., 2013). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, allow DMOs to share real-time information, engage with potential visitors, and showcase sustainable initiatives in an interactive and visually appealing manner (Királ'ová & Pavlíčeka, 2015).

A key strategy employed by DMOs is the use of user-generated content (UGC) to promote sustainable tourism. By encouraging visitors to share their experiences of eco-friendly activities or responsible travel practices, DMOs can leverage on authentic content that resonates with potential travellers (Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021). This approach not only increases engagement, but also helps in building a community of environmentally conscious travellers. DMOs are also utilising social media to educate visitors about local conservation efforts and cultural preservation initiatives. Through informative posts,

videos, and infographics, they can raise awareness about the importance of responsible tourism and provide practical tips for sustainable travel (Font & McCabe, 2017). This educational approach helps in fostering a sense of responsibility among visitors and encourages them to make more sustainable choices during their trips.

Another effective strategy is the use of influencer partnerships to promote sustainable tourism practices. By collaborating with eco-conscious travel bloggers, vloggers, and social media personalities DMOs can reach a wide audience and lend credibility to their sustainability initiatives (Kilipiri et al., 2023). These partnerships often involve showcasing sustainable accommodation, promoting low-impact activities, and highlighting local conservation projects. DMOs are also leveraging social media to promote local businesses that adhere to sustainable practices. By featuring eco-friendly hotels, restaurants using locally sourced ingredients, or tour operators offering responsible wildlife experiences, DMOs can support the local economy while promoting sustainable tourism (Hanna et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the use of hashtags and social media campaigns focused on sustainability has become a popular strategy for DMOs. Campaigns that encourage visitors to reduce plastic use, support local communities, or engage in volunteer tourism activities, can generate significant engagement and raise awareness about sustainable travel practices (Kumar, 2017). By effectively leveraging social media platforms to highlight sustainable tourism practices, DMOs can not only attract eco-conscious travellers, but also contribute to raising awareness and promoting responsible tourism behaviours among a wider audience.

2.5.2. Engaging with Eco-Conscious Travellers

In the current digital age, social media platforms present DMOs with unique opportunities to connect with eco-conscious travellers and cultivate a community centred around sustainable tourism. This engagement is vital for fostering shared values and promoting responsible travel practices. Research underscores the importance of multi-directional communication in these interactions. A study by Munar and Jacobsen (2014) on TripAdvisor postings revealed that ecotourists often prioritise social bonding over merely sharing information. This highlights the need for DMOs to create spaces that facilitate genuine connections and community building among travellers.

Furthermore, soliciting feedback via social media platforms such as X, enables tourism boards to gain a deeper understanding of their audience's environmental concerns. Hays et al. (2013) found that such interactive engagement allows DMOs to address specific issues more effectively, aligning their strategies with the expectations and values of eco-conscious tourists. Peer recommendations and emotional storytelling also play significant roles in influencing travel decisions. Research by Leung et al. (2013) indicated that visually compelling content shared on Instagram, especially when infused with emotional narratives, has a profound impact on travel planning. This suggests that DMOs should encourage visitors to share responsibly captured images and stories that resonate emotionally, thereby promoting the destination's sustainable tourism ethos.

Moreover, fostering user-generated content can lead to viral enthusiasm for eco-friendly practices. Coxs et al. (2009) highlighted the power of visitor perspectives in generating excitement and interest. By actively engaging with travellers on platforms such as Instagram and X, DMOs can amplify authentic voices that champion sustainability. By leveraging social media to engage with eco-conscious travellers, DMOs can build robust relationships, nurture a sense of community, and continuously gather valuable insights. These interactions not only enhance the promotion of sustainable tourism practices, but also contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of environmentally responsible travel destinations.

2.6. Challenges and Opportunities

While leveraging social media for sustainable tourism promotion presents numerous opportunities for DMOs, it also comes with challenges that must be addressed.

2.6.1. Challenges of Social Media Marketing for Sustainable Tourism

Social media platforms have become a vital marketing tool for tourism businesses and destinations. However, sustainable tourism aims to balance economic, environmental, and social needs to create long term benefits (Lee, 2013). This creates certain challenges for social media marketing efforts of sustainable tourism organisations. Studies by Pantano and Priporas (2016) have highlighted the challenge of effectively communicating sustainability values and initiatives through social media. However, most social media users prefer entertaining or personally relevant content rather than sustainability messages (Pantano and Priporas (2016). This makes it challenging for sustainable tourism

destinations to engage audiences and change mindsets solely through social media campaigns.

According to Papaoikonomou et al. (2011), travellers are increasingly sceptical of green claims made by businesses, emphasising the need for authenticity in social media marketing strategies. Green-washing perceptions harm rapport unless addressed proactively through transparency. However, achieving transparency while maintaining a positive brand image on social media requires careful strategy and communication skills. Reaching and engaging diverse audiences through social media platforms is crucial for promoting sustainable tourism initiatives. Wang and Kim (2017) emphasised the need for targeted messaging that resonates with different demographic groups to foster a culture of sustainability among travellers.

To overcome these challenges, DMOs need to adopt a strategic and adaptable approach, prioritising transparency, continuous learning, and collaboration with stakeholders, to ensure the effective promotion of sustainable tourism practices through social media channels (Hays et al., 2013; Uşaklı et al., 2017).

2.6.2. Emerging Trends and Opportunities

The integration of social media marketing trends in sustainable tourism promotion offers significant opportunities for DMOs to enhance their effectiveness in promoting responsible travel practices. This approach addresses the triple bottom line of sustainability — environmental, socio-cultural, and economic (Stoddard et al., 2012).

Personalisation and audience segmentation in social media marketing enable DMOs to tailor sustainable tourism messaging to specific audience segments. Kandampully et al. (2018) argued that this targeted approach allows for more effective promotion of sustainable practices and experiences. For example, eco-conscious travellers might receive content highlighting a destination's conservation efforts, while culture enthusiasts could be shown information about local heritage preservation initiatives. This personalised marketing approach not only increases the relevance of sustainable tourism offerings, but also contributes to more balanced tourism distribution. As Lalicic et al. (2020) suggested, promoting niche products and locally diverse experiences can help spread tourism demand more evenly across time and space, aligning with the economic and environmental pillars of sustainable tourism.

Real-time engagement capabilities of social media platforms create opportunities for DMOs to foster ongoing dialogues about sustainable tourism practices. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) emphasised that this continuous interaction can occur before, during, and after a visitor's trip, creating a more holistic and immersive sustainable tourism experience. For example, potential visitors can engage with local community members or sustainability experts in live question and answer (Q&A) sessions or virtual tours, gaining insights into a destination's sustainable initiatives. Gössling (2016) noted that this kind of engagement facilitates discussions around critical issues such as sustainability, carrying capacity, and responsible tourism practices, potentially transforming visitors into advocates for sustainable tourism.

As DMOs stay abreast of emerging trends and embracing new technologies, they can enhance their ability to promote sustainable tourism effectively. The increase of influencer marketing in tourism presents an opportunity for DMOs to collaborate with eco-conscious influencers who can authentically showcase sustainable travel experiences to their followers (Xu & Pratt, 2018). By integrating these trends, DMOs can create more holistic and effective social media strategies for sustainable tourism promotion. This approach not only engages eco-conscious travellers more effectively, but also contributes to the long-term sustainability of destinations. As Font et al. (2018) concluded, effective use of social media in promoting sustainable tourism is a powerful tool for DMOs to use to shape the future of sustainable tourism, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are maximised while its negative impacts are minimised

2.7. Summary

This literature review examined the intricate relationship between sustainable tourism, social media marketing, and the role of DMOs in promoting responsible travel practices. The integration of social media into destination marketing for sustainable tourism presents a dynamic landscape with both opportunities and challenges. Destination marketing organisations have access to a diverse array of platforms, each offering unique advantages for engaging eco-conscious travellers and promoting sustainable practices. Visually driven platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, alongside real-time engagement tools such as X, enable DMOs to craft multi-faceted strategies that effectively reach and influence their target audiences.

The review underscores the importance of authenticity and transparency in social media marketing for sustainable tourism. As travellers become increasingly sceptical of green washing, it is imperative for DMOs to prioritise genuine and verifiable sustainability initiatives in their promotional efforts. User-generated content and influencer partnerships have emerged as powerful tools for building credibility and fostering community engagement around sustainable tourism practices. The strategic engagement of travel influencers offers DMOs credibility and access to new demographics, amplifying the reach of sustainable tourism messages. Building a supportive community around the destination experience, promptly responding to user-generated content, and nurturing ongoing ambassador relationships, are pivotal strategies for driving long-term engagement and loyalty among followers. Additionally, analysing social metrics and user insights allows DMOs to refine their strategies, understand audience behaviours, and adapt to evolving social landscapes effectively.

However, the challenges faced by DMOs in this arena are significant. Balancing economic growth with environmental conservation and social responsibility is a complex task. Destination marketing organisations need to navigate issues of over-tourism, cultural preservation, and the evolving nature of sustainability itself while maintaining an effective and engaging social media presence. Looking forward, emerging trends such as personalisation, virtual reality experiences, and data-driven marketing, all offer new avenues for DMOs to use to enhance their sustainable tourism promotion efforts. By leveraging on these technologies and approaches, DMOs can create more immersive and tailored experiences that resonate with eco-conscious travellers and drive positive behavioural change.

Ultimately, the successful promotion of sustainable tourism through social media requires a delicate balance of strategic planning, authentic communication, and adaptive management. As DMOs continue to refine their approaches and embrace new technologies, they have the potential to drive meaningful change in the tourism industry, ensuring that the benefits of travel are maximised and negative impacts minimised.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this study to investigate how DMOs in Kerala are leveraging on social media platforms to promote the destination as sustainable. The chapter begins by revisiting the research aim and questions, to provide a clear context for the methodological choices made. It then delves into the philosophical underpinnings encompassing the research paradigm, and ontological and epistemological stances, all of which shape the overall research approach. The chapter continues by discussing the qualitative research methodology and the rationale for adopting a netnographic research design. The selection criteria for the DMOs under investigation are also presented, along with the data collection methods and procedures. The data analysis approach, employing thematic analysis, is then outlined, and the chapter concludes by addressing the ethical considerations and limitations of the research.

3.2. Research Aim and Questions Revisited

The primary aim of this study was to understand how DMOs in Kerala are leveraging social media platforms to promote the destination as sustainable. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

Research Question 1: What social media platforms are used by DMOs in Kerala for destination promotion?

Research Question 2: What type of content is shared on these platforms concerning sustainability messaging?

3.3. Research Philosophy and Paradigm

A research philosophy serves as a cornerstone upon which the entire research is built, shaping the researcher's fundamental approach to acquiring knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Muhaise et al., 2020). It encompasses the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs, which profoundly influence the formulation of research questions, the selection of methodologies, and the interpretation of findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2014). Ontology, a branch of metaphysics, deals with the

nature of reality and the fundamental questions about what exists. A researcher's ontological stance, whether objectivist or subjectivist, determines their approach to studying a particular phenomenon (Bryman, 2016). Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with the nature and acquisition of knowledge, addressing questions about what constitutes valid knowledge and how it can be obtained (Wicks, 2017). By explicitly articulating their research philosophy, researchers can align their ontological and epistemological perspectives with appropriate methodologies and methods, ensuring consistency and coherence throughout the research process (Al-Ababneh, 2020). This alignment is crucial, because a mismatch between a researcher's philosophical stance and their chosen methods can lead to invalid or unreliable findings (Shaheer et al., 2022).

3.3.1. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm acts as a guiding framework for scholarly inquiry, incorporating views on ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Scotland, 2012). In academic discussions, three primary paradigms stand out: positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012).

Positivism is based on a realist ontology that proposes an objective reality existing independently of human cognition (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this paradigm, knowledge is exclusively drawn from empirical observation or experimentation, aligning with an objectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). Conversely, interpretivism assumes a relativist ontology with multiple socially constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It follows a subjectivist epistemology in which realities can be understood through direct experiences and interactions (Crotty, 1998). Critical theory diverges from both positivism and interpretivism, prioritising transformative action over simple comprehension (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). Grounded in a constructionist ontology, critical theory suggests that realities are shaped by socio-political, cultural, and economic forces, imbuing knowledge with inherent values (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012)

This study embraced the interpretive paradigm, which asserts that the social world is complex and should be understood through the meanings and interpretations individuals assign to their experiences within their specific contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretivists believe that the nature of multiple realities is socially constructed, and they

accept multiple meanings and ways of knowing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Under the interpretive paradigm, the researcher seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being investigated by engaging with the participants and interpreting their experiences and viewpoints (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This approach is well suited for studying complex social phenomena, such as the use of social media for destination marketing, where subjective experiences and interpretations play a significant role.

By employing an interpretive lens, this study sought to uncover the nuanced ways in which Kerala's DMOs construct and communicate sustainability narratives through their social media activities. This approach allowed for a rich exploration of how sustainability concepts are interpreted and presented in the context of destination marketing for Kerala.

3.3.2. *Ontology*

Ontology refers to the philosophical study of the nature of being, existence, or reality (Killam, 2013). It essentially examines different understandings of what counts as real or what exists (Pernecky, 2016). There are two main types of ontological perspectives discussed in research – realist and relativist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In a realist ontological view, researchers aim to accurately represent and measure this objective reality through research methods such as experiments and surveys (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Relativists, on the other hand, propose that realities are socially constructed through human experiences and interactions (Bergin et al., 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). Relativist researchers believe that multiple realities exist that are shaped by context and individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

This study adopted a relativist ontological stance, which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities that are socially constructed and context dependent (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This perspective acknowledges that individuals and groups construct and interpret reality based on their unique backgrounds, experiences, and social contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In the context of DMOs in Kerala utilising social media for sustainable destination promotion, this relativist approach recognised the potential for diverse perspectives and approaches. These variations may stem from factors such as organisational goals, target audiences, and individual interpretations of sustainability. This ontological stance shaped

the research design by acknowledging that the concept of sustainable tourism and its promotion may be understood and implemented differently by various DMOs in Kerala.

The relativist perspective influenced the data analysis approach by encouraging the researcher to consider multiple interpretations of social media content rather than seeking a single "correct" understanding. This was particularly important when examining how different DMOs framed sustainability messages and how these messages might be perceived by diverse audiences.

3.3.3. Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge (Killam, 2013), and considers what knowledge is and how it can be acquired or communicated (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Pernecky, 2016). There are three main epistemological positions: objectivism, constructivism, and subjectivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Objectivism asserts that knowledge is objective and can be discovered through empirical observation or experimentation independent of human beliefs or experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). From an objectivist perspective, knowledge reflects a true reality that can be measured through scientific methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivism posits that knowledge is socially constructed through human interactions and experiences (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivists believe that reality is interpreted through individual perceptions and that there is multiple "constructed" realities. Subjectivism contends that knowledge is based on individual experiences and perspectives, rather than objective facts (Killam, 2013). Subjectivists argue that the only truth is a subjective one derived from individual consciousness, and that reality can only be known through personal experiences.

This study adopted a subjectivist epistemological approach, which recognises that knowledge is subjective and co-constructed through the interactions between the researcher and participants (Crotty, 1998; Saunders et al., 2019). In this approach, the researcher and participants are actively involved in the co-creation of knowledge, and their values, beliefs, and experiences shape the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of this study, a subjectivist epistemology acknowledged that the knowledge generated about how DMOs in Kerala

use social media for sustainable destination promotion would be influenced by the subjective experiences and interpretations of both the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher's positionality, background, and prior knowledge, as well as the participants' perspectives and experiences, contribute to the co-construction of knowledge throughout the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In the context of this research, it acknowledges that the researcher's interpretation of social media content is influenced by their own background, experiences, and understanding of sustainable tourism concepts. The subjectivist epistemology informed the research process by emphasizing the importance of reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis stages. It also guided the presentation of findings, ensuring that results were presented as interpretations rather than absolute truths.

3.4. Research Methodology

Research methodology refers to the various approaches used to collect and analyse data to address research questions or hypotheses (Crotty, 1998; Levers, 2013). The methodology is informed by the researcher's underlying philosophical assumptions regarding the ontology, epistemology, and paradigm. It encompasses the entire process of research from conceptualisation to the reporting of findings.

There are two main streams of research methodology: qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Qualitative methodologies focus on understanding phenomena through direct experience, words, or images rather than numbers, whereas quantitative methodologies employ tools such as experiments and surveys to collect numerical data that can be analysed statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.4.1. Qualitative Research

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, which is well suited for exploring complex social phenomena and gaining an in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences and perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is particularly relevant in the interpretive paradigm, as it enables the researcher to engage with participants, interpret their experiences, and with them, co-construct knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019).

Qualitative research is characterised by several key features that align with the aims and philosophical underpinnings of this study. First, it emphasises understanding the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, allowing for the exploration of subjective meanings and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Second, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, enabling flexibility and adaptability in the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Third, a qualitative methodology allows for the collection of data that can be subjected to interpretation, leading to the development of thick descriptions and a deep understanding of the phenomenon (Geertz, 1973). This was particularly relevant in the context of this study, as the researcher sought to capture the DMOs' perspectives, experiences, and the meanings they ascribed to their social media practices for sustainable destination promotion.

This approach allowed for a detailed examination of the types of content shared, the language used, and the visual elements employed in sustainability-related posts. It also facilitated the identification of themes and patterns in how different DMOs approach sustainable tourism promotion on various social media platforms.

3.5. Research Design

A research design is the overall plan or strategy for conducting a research study. It outlines the methods and procedures that will be used to collect and analyse the necessary data to address the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the research design provides a framework for the research, guiding the researcher in the selection of data collection and analysis methods.

3.5.1. Netnographic Research Approach

For this study, a netnographic research design was selected, which is a qualitative research approach that uses online and digital data sources to investigate and understand cultural phenomena (Kozinets, 2015). *Netnography* as defined by Kozinets (2015), is an "adaptation of ethnographic research techniques to the study of online communities and cultures" (p. 79). It involves the systematic observation, analysis, and interpretation of online interactions, user-generated content, and digital artifacts to understand the social and cultural aspects of the studied phenomenon (Kozinets, 2002).

Netnography has been widely applied in tourism research to collect and analyze social media data. For example, For instance, Mkono & Tribe (2017) used netnography to examine tourist experiences shared on TripAdvisor, demonstrating its effectiveness in capturing authentic online narratives. Similarly, Tavakoli & Wijesinghe (2019) employed netnographic techniques to analyze Instagram posts related to sustainable tourism, showcasing the method's applicability to sustainability-focused research.. These examples demonstrate the effectiveness of netnography in collecting and analyzing social media data in tourism research, supporting its application in this study of Kerala's DMOs and their sustainability messaging on social media platforms.

The netnographic research approach is well aligned with the interpretive paradigm, as it enabled the researcher to become immersed in the online environments of the DMOs, understand their social media practices, and interpret the meanings and significance of their sustainable destination promotion strategies (Kozinets, 2015). This approach acknowledges the socially constructed nature of reality, as the researcher sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the DMOs' perspectives and the ways in which they used social media to construct and communicate their sustainability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Netnography was particularly suitable for this study, as it allowed the researcher to observe the DMOs' social media activities and content in their natural, digital settings, without the need for intrusive data collection methods that may have influenced the phenomena under investigation (Kozinets, 2015). This approach aligns with the relativist ontology, as it enabled the exploration of the DMOs' social media practices and sustainability messaging without imposing predetermined assumptions or theoretical frameworks on them.

Furthermore, the netnographic approach also facilitated the collection of gather rich, contextual data that could provide a comprehensive understanding of how the DMOs in Kerala were using social media to promote the destination as sustainable. This included analysing the types of content shared, the engagement patterns with their online audience, the use of specific sustainability-related hashtags and keywords, and the overall strategic approaches employed by the DMOs.

3.6. Selection of Destination Marketing Organisations

To address the research questions, this study focused on the social media activities of selected DMOs in Kerala, India. The criteria for selecting the DMOs were as follows:

- **Official DMOs:** The selected organisations should be officially recognised as destination marketing organisations responsible for promoting tourism in Kerala at the state or district level.
- **Active social media presence:** The DMOs should regularly engage on at least three major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X. This involvement should include consistent content sharing, audience interactions, and appropriate use of platform features to enhance visibility and engagement.
- **Sustainability focus:** The DMOs should demonstrate a commitment to promoting sustainable tourism practices and environmental conservation through their marketing and communications efforts.

Based on these criteria, three DMOs were selected for this study based on their prominence in Kerala's tourism sector and their active presence on social media platforms: Kerala Tourism, Wayanad Tourism (DTPC), and the Responsible Tourism Mission Kerala. These DMOs represent different levels of tourism management in Kerala, providing a comprehensive view of sustainable tourism promotion strategies.

3.6.1. Kerala Tourism

Kerala Tourism, the Department of Tourism under the Government of Kerala, is a state-owned organisation responsible for promoting tourism in Kerala. Since its establishment in the 1980s, the Department has been instrumental in transforming Kerala into a premier tourist destination known for its stunning natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and diverse tourism experience (Kerala Tourism, n.d.)

At the core of Kerala Tourism's success is its strategic and multifaceted approach. The Department focuses on developing a world class tourism infrastructure, from airports to accommodation. It has also pioneered product diversification, creating a wide range of experiences catering to various traveller preferences. Importantly, the Department prioritises sustainable and responsible tourism practices, working with stakeholders to preserve Kerala's environment and culture (Kerala Tourism, n.d.)

3.6.2. Waynard Tourism (DTPC)

The Wayanad Department of Tourism and Promotion Council (DTPC) is a government owned organisation responsible for promoting and developing tourism in the Wayanad region of Kerala. Located in the Western Ghats mountain range, Wayanad is known for its natural beauty, wildlife, and tribal culture.

The DTPC has been instrumental in transforming Waynard into a popular tourist destination known for its natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and diverse recreational offerings. Its core mission is to attract visitors, encourage them to explore local attractions, and ensure they have a memorable experience. To achieve this, the Department oversees the development and maintenance of tourism infrastructure, such as visitor centres and transportation hubs. It also spearheads promotional campaigns, participating in travel trade shows to generate interest and bookings. Additionally, the DTPC collaborates with local authorities to implement tourism policies and regulations, balancing the needs of visitors with the preservation of Waynard's resources (DTPC Wayanad | Wayanad Tourist Places, n.d.).

Recently, the DTPC has developed a comprehensive tourism master plan to guide future investments in infrastructure, product development, and marketing. This strategic approach aimed to ensure Waynard's tourism industry continued to thrive in the years to come. Through its multifaceted efforts, the DTPC plays a vital role in the economic and social development of the region, promoting it as a premier tourist destination (DTPC Wayanad | Wayanad Tourist Places, n.d.).

3.6.3. Responsible Tourism Mission Kerala

The Responsible Tourism Mission (RT Mission) in Kerala is a government led initiative launched in 2017, aimed at fostering sustainable and inclusive tourism development. Adopting a multifaceted approach, the mission encompasses a range of strategic interventions, such as community engagement, sustainable practices, cultural preservation, economic development, and capacity building (Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission Society, n.d.).

At the core of the RT Mission's ethos is the commitment to "Making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit" (Kerala Responsible Tourism

Mission Society, n.d.). This guiding principle reflects the mission's integration of tourism with broader local development objectives, ensuring that tourism growth aligns with the well-being of communities and the long-term sustainability of the environment.

By actively involving local communities and empowering residents to provide tourism related services, the RT Mission strives to ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are equitably distributed, thus contributing to poverty alleviation and improved living standards, particularly in rural areas with limited alternative income sources (Kerala Responsible Tourism Mission Society, n.d.).

The selection of these DMOs ensured a comprehensive representation of state and district level organisations, as well as a focus on popular tourist destinations in Kerala known for their natural beauty and sustainable tourism initiatives.

This study found that Responsible Tourism Mission Kerala did not have its own official social media accounts on the platforms selected. However, a Facebook page administered by the local community existed, where they disseminated information about responsible and sustainable tourism practices in Kerala. As this Facebook page was not an official account managed by the Responsible Tourism Mission Kerala itself, it was not included in this study's analysis. The study examined only official social media messaging from the main tourism organisations to ensure the information analysed was accurate and authorised by those organisations.

3.7. Data Collection Method

3.7.1. Social Media Content Analysis

The primary data source for this study was social media content published by the selected DMOs. Social media content analysis is a research method that involves the systematic examination and interpretation of user-generated content on social media platforms (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). This method was particularly relevant for this study, as it allows for the direct observation and analysis of the social media platforms used by the DMOs, the types of content shared, and the messaging related to sustainability.

Social media content analysis involved collecting and analysing the posts, videos, images, and other content published by the selected DMOs on their official social media platforms

(i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and X). The analysis focused on identifying patterns, themes, and strategies related to the promotion of sustainable tourism, the types of content shared (e.g., textual, visual, and multimedia), and the overall messaging and narratives employed by the DMOs.

To ensure a systematic and comprehensive analysis, a content analysis protocol was developed. This protocol included guidelines for data collection, such as the timeframe for data collection, the specific social media platforms to be included, and the types of content to be analysed (e.g., posts, comments, and shares).

3.7.2. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from the official social media pages of the selected DMOs in Kerala. Specifically, the collection focused on the following social media platforms:

- Facebook
- X (Formerly Twitter)
- Instagram

These three platforms are widely used by DMOs globally for destination promotion and engagement with their target audiences (Hays et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Focusing on these platforms ensured the research captured the dominant social media activities of the selected Kerala DMOs. Furthermore, Facebook, X, and Instagram are among the most popular social media platforms used by both DMOs and tourists in the tourism and hospitality industry (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020; Tham et al., 2013). Examining the DMOs' activities on these platforms aligned with the current social media landscape and trends in the industry.

The data collection involved a systematic observation and analysis of the social media content, including posts, captions, hashtags, and the use of sustainability-related messaging.

In line with Kozinets (2015) guidelines for conducting netnographic research, the data collection process was conducted in the following steps:

1. Identify the official social media pages of the selected DMOs in Kerala.

2. Conduct a comprehensive review of the social media content posted by the DMOs, focusing on the type of content, frequency of posting, and use of sustainability-related messaging in images, videos and texts.
3. Capture screenshots and take notes to document the observed social media activities and content.
4. Maintain a detailed research log to ensure the systematic and organised collection of data.

The proposed steps were aligned with the netnographic research approach and the study's aim by enabling a systematic and immersive exploration of the DMOs' online presence. Kozinets (2015) emphasizes that netnography involves careful observation and analysis of online interactions and content to understand cultural phenomena. Identifying the official social media pages ensured the collection of data from the authentic and authorised social media channels of the selected Kerala DMOs, rather than unofficial or fan-created pages, which may not have accurately represented the organisations' official social media strategies and sustainability messaging.

The data collection covered the specific time period of the previous year (i.e., June 2023 to May 2024), to ensure the analysis would reflect the current social media practices and sustainability messaging employed by the DMOs.

3.8. Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis is a crucial aspect of qualitative research that involves the systematic examination, interpretation, and extraction of meaningful insights from the collected data. In the context of qualitative research, data analysis is often an iterative and dynamic process, as researchers strive to uncover the underlying patterns, themes, and meanings embedded within the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The primary goal of data analysis in qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than to generalise findings or establish causal relationships, as is often the case in quantitative research (Patton, 2014).

3.8.1. Thematic Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis as the primary data analysis method. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis approach that involves identifying,

analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was particularly suitable for this study as it allowed for the systematic and rigorous examination of the social media content to identify themes and patterns related to the use of social media for sustainable destination promotion.

The thematic analysis process followed the six phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

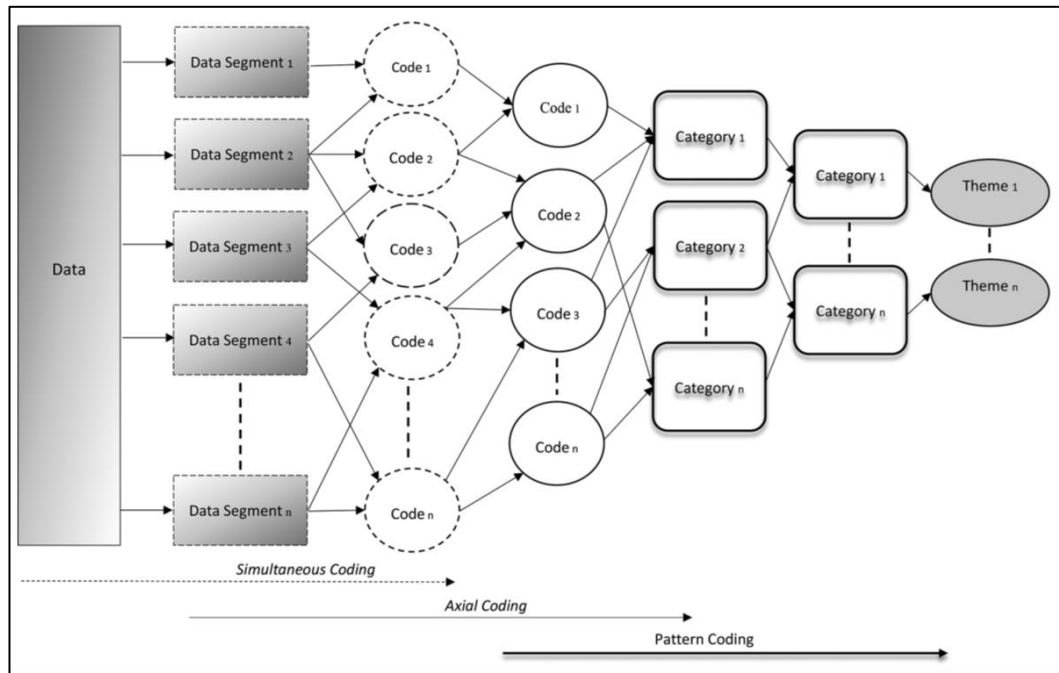
1. **Familiarisation with the data:** In this phase, the researcher became immersed in the data by reading and re-reading the social media content to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.
2. **Generating initial codes:** The data were then systematically coded by identifying and labelling relevant features and segments of the data that were pertinent to the research questions. This phase involved an open coding process, in which codes are generated inductively from the data.
3. **Searching for themes:** After initial coding, the codes were analysed and potential themes identified by collating codes into broader patterns and overarching themes.
4. **Reviewing themes:** The identified themes were refined and reviewed to ensure that they were coherent, distinct, and representative of the data. This involved merging, separating, or discarding themes as needed.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** The final themes were then further refined and defined to capture the essence of each theme and ensure that the themes were clearly defined and named in a concise and meaningful way.
6. **Producing the report:** The final phase involved presenting the findings in a comprehensive and coherent report. This required weaving together the analytical narratives, data extracts, and relevant literature to provide a rich and insightful account of the findings.

Throughout the thematic analysis process, a systematic and rigorous approach was maintained, ensuring that the analysis was grounded in the data and guided by the research questions. The analysis also involved an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data, codes, and themes, to ensure comprehensive and accurate findings.

3.8.2. Coding

The coding process followed the guidelines outlined by Faisal (2024). This approach involves a systematic and iterative process of identifying and categorising relevant themes and patterns within the qualitative data (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Coding Process



Note: Adapted from Faisal (2024)

The coding process began with an initial round of open coding, wherein the data were carefully reviewed, and preliminary codes assigned to capture the essence of the content. The codes presented in **Table 1** were then refined and consolidated through axial coding, and relationships and connections between the codes were established.

Subsequently, selective coding was employed to identify the core themes and categories that emerged from the data as also presented in **Table 1**. These themes were then analysed and interpreted in the context of the research questions, with a particular focus on understanding the social media platforms utilised by Kerala DMOs for destination promotion, and the types of content shared about sustainability messaging.

3.9. Data Sorting and Selection

To ensure the relevance and quality of the data, a systematic sorting and selection process was employed. The initial step involved identifying and extracting all content related to sustainability messaging from the social media accounts. This included posts, images, videos, and textual content that addressed topics such as environmental conservation, cultural preservation, responsible tourism practices, and sustainable development initiatives.

The extracted content was then further sorted based on its relevance to the research questions. Content that did not directly address sustainability messaging or lacked sufficient information was excluded from the analysis. The remaining data were organised and prepared for coding and analysis.

To focus on content related to sustainability messaging, a keyword-based sorting approach was employed. Keywords such as "sustainable," "eco-friendly," "responsible tourism," "conservation," "environment," "green," "biodiversity," "cultural heritage," "community," and "empowerment" were used to identify relevant posts. Additionally, posts with visuals or narratives depicting sustainable practices, environmental conservation efforts, responsible tourism initiatives, or community-based tourism projects were also included in the analysis.

The keyword search was conducted across all textual content, including captions, descriptions, and comments. Visual content was also examined for relevant themes and narratives related to sustainability messaging.

3.10. Limitations

This study was limited to analysing publicly available social media data from three prominent DMOs in Kerala, focusing solely on their digital communications without stakeholder inputs. Consequently, the findings may not have fully captured all the communication and outreach efforts undertaken by these organisations across various channels and over extended durations. Despite these limitations, the study aimed to offer initial insights into how Kerala's leading tourism boards were utilising social media for sustainable tourism promotion.

3.11. Ethical Considerations

Being an open-source social media analysis, informed consent from users were not required, as the required data were collected from public profiles without direct interaction. All necessary resources were gathered from publicly available sources such as social media platforms and libraries. It is important to acknowledge that certain secondary data, including user-generated content, may be subject to copyright protection. Therefore, the appropriate protocols and permission were taken as necessary to maintain academic integrity. Additionally, the researcher prioritised data adequacy for the study's aims, ensuring relevance and reliability, and carefully followed the correct APA 7th referencing style to avoid plagiarism and uphold academic honesty.

3.12. Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in this study to investigate how DMOs in Kerala were leveraging social media platforms to promote the destination as sustainable. The study adopted an interpretive paradigm, a relativist ontology, and a subjectivist epistemology, aligning with a qualitative research methodology and netnographic research approach. The chapter presented the selection criteria for identifying the DMOs included in the study, as well as the data collection methods of social media content analysis. The data analysis approach, employing thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the social media content was also explained. Ethical considerations were addressed, emphasising confidentiality and academic integrity. Despite its limitations, the study aimed to provide insights into DMOs' social media practices for sustainable tourism. By following this methodological framework, the study aimed to provide valuable insights into how DMOs in Kerala were utilising social media platforms to promote the destination as sustainable, contributing to the broader understanding of sustainable destination marketing and the role of social media in this context.

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This study examined the sustainability messaging strategies employed by two prominent DMOs in Kerala, India – Kerala Tourism and the Wayanad Tourism District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC) – over a 12-month period from June 2023 to May 2024. By analysing a total of 130 posts from their official social media accounts during this timeframe (19 posts from Wayanad Tourism and the remaining 111 from Kerala Tourism), this research provides valuable insights into how these organisations are leveraging on digital platforms to promote responsible tourism.

A 12-month period was selected to capture the most recent trends and developments in the destinations' sustainability messaging. As professionally curated entities tasked with promoting their respective destinations, Kerala Tourism and Wayanad Tourism embraced social media as a powerful tool to disseminate their messaging and engage with a global audience. Through a thorough content analysis, this study unveils the multifaceted approaches these DMOs adopted to integrate sustainability messaging into their promotional efforts.

The findings revealed a comprehensive strategy that encompasses three overarching themes: showcasing natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences, environmental conservation and awareness, and community engagement and empowerment. By skilfully weaving these themes into their social media narratives, the DMOs aimed to inspire a deeper appreciation for Kerala's natural wonders, foster sustainable tourism practices, and empower local communities.

Firstly, the DMOs used visually captivating imagery and narratives to promote Kerala's pristine landscapes, from the serene backwaters to the verdant tea plantations and rich biodiversity of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. This visual storytelling not only attracts potential visitors, but also cultivates a sense of awe and responsibility towards preserving these ecological treasures. Complementing this approach, the DMOs actively promoted eco-friendly experiences, such as sustainable accommodation, responsible tourism practices, and eco-tourism initiatives, encouraging visitors to engage with the environment in a conscious and respectful manner.

Secondly, the study revealed a strong emphasis on environmental conservation and awareness. The DMOs highlighted ongoing initiatives focused on wildlife protection, habitat restoration, and environmental protection, demonstrating their commitment to environmental stewardship. Furthermore, they actively promoted sustainable practices in the tourism industry, encouraging responsible waste management, energy efficiency, and the use of eco-friendly products. By empowering visitors with knowledge and tools for responsible tourism behaviour, the DMOs aimed to minimise the environmental impact of tourism activities.

Thirdly, the DMOs recognised the pivotal role of local communities in sustainable tourism development and dedicated significant efforts to community engagement and empowerment. Their social media content showcased collaborative efforts between stakeholders, capacity-building programmes, and initiatives that provided sustainable livelihood options and supported local entrepreneurship. Additionally, the DMOs emphasised the preservation of Kerala's rich cultural heritage and traditional practices, cultivating a deeper appreciation for the state's unique identity among visitors.

Through this multifaceted approach, Kerala Tourism and Wayanad Tourism were leveraging on the power of social media to shape perceptions, influence behaviours, and drive positive change towards sustainable tourism practices. By fostering a collective sense of responsibility among industry stakeholders, visitors, and local communities, these DMOs were paving the way for a more sustainable and responsible tourism industry in Kerala.

4.2. Analysing the Official Social Media Pages of the Selected Destination Marketing Organizations

The collected data from the social media pages of Kerala Tourism and Wayanad Tourism revealed that the DMOs in Kerala were actively utilising three major social media platforms for destination promotion: Facebook, Instagram, and X. The DMOs had established official accounts on these platforms, utilising their widespread popularity and reach to showcase the state's tourism offerings and attract potential visitors.

4.2.1. Kerala Tourism

Kerala tourism is the official DMO of Kerala that promotes the destination both domestically and internationally. The study found that Kerala Tourism had a presence on Instagram, Facebook, and X, and posted actively on all three platforms with at least two to three posts a day. Its official social media accounts were:

4.2.1.1. Instagram: @keralatourism

The official Kerala Tourism Instagram account had amassed over sixty thousand followers (Kerala Tourism [@keralatourism], n.d.), highlighting its popularity and effectiveness in reaching a global audience. The account featured a curated collection of photographs and videos that captured the essence of Kerala, from the tranquil backwaters and lush green hills to the bustling festivals and traditional art forms of the area.

Kerala Tourism used Instagram to promote various destinations within the state, including popular tourist spots such as Munnar, located in the eastern part of Kerala in the Idukki district, a picturesque hill station known for its vast tea plantations and scenic beauty, Alleppey (Alappuzha), in central Kerala, known for its network of backwaters, is famous for houseboat cruises, and Kovalam, on the southwestern coast, is known for its crescent shaped beaches and popularity for sunbathing and Ayurvedic treatments, as well as lesser known gems (Kerala Tourism, n.d.). Each post (for example **Figure 4**) was accompanied by descriptive captions, relevant hashtags, and location tags, making it easy for users to discover and explore the attractions. The visually appealing content was clearly designed to inspire potential visitors and create a desire to experience Kerala's beauty first hand.

The DMO also utilised Instagram Stories and Reels to share behind-the-scenes content, travel tips, and real-time updates. These features allow for more interactive and engaging content, helping to keep the audience informed and excited about visiting Kerala.

4.2.1.2. Facebook: Kerala Tourism

The official Kerala Tourism Facebook page had garnered over four million followers (Kerala Tourism [Kerala Tourism], n.d.), indicating its significant reach and influence. The page was being actively used to share high quality photographs and videos that captured the state's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and diverse tourist attractions. These

posts posts (for instance **Figure 3**, **Figure 6** and **Figure 7**) often included detailed captions, providing context and information about the locations and events featured.

Kerala Tourism utilised Facebook to announce upcoming events, festivals, and tourism campaigns. This included promoting cultural festivals such as Onam, Kerala's most important harvest festival, typically celebrated in August or September, a 10-day event commemorating the mythical, King Mahabali. It features elaborate flower carpets (*pookkalam*), traditional feasts, boat races, and various cultural performances, symbolising joy, unity, and cultural pride for Keralites. Thrissur Pooram, another important festival, is held annually in April or May in the city of Thrissur and is one of Kerala's most spectacular temple festivals. Known for its grand processions of decorated elephants, traditional percussion ensembles, and impressive fireworks displays, Thrissur Pooram brings together various temples in a friendly competition of pageantry, as well as new tourism initiatives aimed at attracting both domestic and international visitors. Facebook also served as a medium for sharing travel tips, itineraries, and testimonials from tourists, which helped build a positive image and encourage potential visitors to explore Kerala (Kerala Tourism, n.d.).

4.2.1.3. X (Formerly Twitter): @KeralaTourism

The official Kerala Tourism X handle had nearly two million followers (Kerala Tourism [@KeralaTourism], n.d.), reflecting its ability to reach a wide audience quickly. This DMO used X to share bite-sized updates, news, and announcements related to tourism in Kerala, including information about upcoming events, festivals, promotional campaigns, and travel advisories.

Kerala Tourism also utilised X to engage with its followers by responding to their queries, retweeting content shared by tourists and influencers, and participating in relevant conversations. This real-time interaction helped build a dynamic online presence and maintain a constant connection with potential visitors.

4.2.2. Wayanad Tourism - District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC)

Wayanad Tourism (DTPC) is an organisation that functions under the Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala, to promote the destination primarily to domestic

tourists. This study found that it had a presence on Instagram, Facebook, and X, and posted actively on Instagram Facebook. Its official social media accounts were:

4.2.2.1. Instagram: @wayanadtourism

Wayanad Tourism had a strong presence on Instagram, with around eleven thousand followers (Wayanad Tourism [@wayanadtourism], n.d.). The account focused on showcasing the district's natural beauty, wildlife, and adventure opportunities, through high quality photographs and videos. The content (as seen in **Figure 8**) often highlighted Wayanad's serene landscapes, rich biodiversity, and cultural heritage, appealing to nature lovers and adventure seekers.

Instagram was being used by Wayanad Tourism to promote various eco-tourism initiatives and sustainable travel practices. This DMO disseminated information about conservation efforts, responsible tourism guidelines, and eco-friendly activities available in the region. This emphasis on sustainability resonates with modern travellers who are increasingly conscious of their environmental impact.

Wayanad Tourism also engaged with its followers through Instagram Stories, where it shared real-time updates, travel tips, and user-generated content. By reposting photos and stories from visitors, the DMO fostered a sense of community and encouraged others to share their experiences in Wayanad.

4.2.2.2. Facebook: Wayanad Tourism

Wayanad Tourism used Facebook to promote the district's unique attractions. The official Wayanad Tourism Facebook page had 12,000 followers (Wayanad Tourism [Wayanad Tourism], n.d.), reflecting a strong local and regional presence. The content shared on the page (for instance **Figure 8**) included stunning visuals of Wayanad's natural landscapes, such the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, which is home to endangered species such as elephants and tigers, offering wildlife safaris and trekking opportunities, and the Edakkal caves in Wayanad district feature prehistoric rock engravings, providing insights into ancient human settlements, and attracting history enthusiasts.

Wayanad Tourism focused on promoting eco-tourism and adventure tourism through its Facebook posts. This DMO promoted various activities available in the region, such as

trekking, wildlife safaris, and visits to historical sites. By disseminating detailed information about these activities, Wayanad Tourism aimed to attract adventure enthusiasts and nature lovers.

The Facebook page also served as a platform for community engagement. Wayanad Tourism actively interacted with followers, responding to their queries and encouraging them to share their own travel experiences and photos. This interaction helps in creating a vibrant community of travellers who are passionate about exploring Wayanad.

4.2.2.3. X (Formerly Twitter): @wayanaddtpc

Wayanad Tourism's X account served a similar purpose, with a smaller but active following of just over 1,000 (Wayanad Tourism [@wayanaddtpc], n.d.). This account has been inactive since 2020.

While Wayanad Tourism maintained an official presence across the three social media platforms examined, the content posted through its Facebook and Instagram accounts did not significantly emphasise sustainability messaging. Instead, the primary focus of posts on these platforms appeared to be promoting Wayanad as a tourist destination and encourage visitors to explore the region.

4.3. Content Shared About Sustainability Messaging

The analysis examined the types of content shared on the social media platforms of Kerala Tourism and Wayanad Tourism (DTPC) related to sustainability messaging. The thematic content analysis of the Kerala DMOs' social media platforms revealed a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to incorporating sustainability messaging into its destination promotion efforts. The types of content shared across Instagram, Facebook, and X (as present in the figures below), were categorised into three overarching themes as presented in Table 1: showcasing natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences, environmental conservation and awareness, and community engagement and empowerment. A detailed explanation of each theme and sub-theme is provided.

Table 1: Overarching Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes
Showcasing natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences	Highlighting pristine landscapes	Scenic beauty Wildlife Flora and fauna
	Promoting eco-friendly experiences	Eco-tourism initiatives Responsible practices
Environmental conservation and awareness	Highlighting environmental initiatives	Conservation projects Wildlife protection
	Promoting sustainable practices	Waste management Energy efficiency Eco-friendly products
	Encouraging responsible tourism behaviour	Minimising environmental impact Respecting local communities Ethical practices
Community engagement and empowerment	Highlighting community participation	Local involvement Collaborative efforts Capacity building
	Promoting economic opportunities	Sustainable livelihoods Local entrepreneurship Fair trade practices
	Preserving local culture and heritage	Preserving traditions Safeguarding heritage Traditional practices

4.3.1. Showcasing Natural Beauty and Eco-friendly Experiences

The Kerala DMOs recognised the inherent appeal of the state's diverse natural landscapes and sought to use this as a key component of their sustainability messaging. By prominently featuring the region's captivating scenery, the DMOs aimed to not only attract potential visitors, but also to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the importance of preserving these natural assets.

4.3.1.1. Highlighting Pristine Landscapes

The social media content of the Kerala DMOs was replete with visually stunning imagery and vivid descriptions that showcased the state's diverse natural wonders, from the serene backwaters of Alleppey to the verdant tea plantations of Munnar and the rich biodiversity of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. The DMOs utilised their platforms, particularly

Instagram, to immerse their audience in the breathtaking beauty of Kerala's landscapes, fostering a sense of awe and appreciation for the region's ecological treasures.

Figure 2 captures the serene backwaters of Alleppey at sunset, where the tranquil waters mirror the warm hues of the setting sun, offering a prime attraction for those seeking scenic beauty and tranquillity. Similarly, **Figure 3** features a traditional houseboat gliding peacefully across the calm backwaters, framed by lush palm trees, reflecting Kerala's pristine and picturesque environment. **Figure 4** continues this theme with traditional boats drifting through the misty backwaters, inviting viewers into a world of serene and natural beauty. Adding to the scenic allure, **Figure 5** highlights a church nestled amidst the backwaters, seamlessly blending its architecture with the tranquil surroundings, offering a unique glimpse into the region's cultural and spiritual heritage.

Figure 6 showcases the mesmerising waterfalls in Thrissur, surrounded by lush greenery and rocky formations, emphasising the state's rich natural attractions. **Figure 7** captures the powerful cascade of the Thoovanam waterfalls in the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, set against a backdrop of rugged terrain and verdant foliage, making it a captivating spot for nature enthusiasts. **Figure 8** promotes the Kanthanpara waterfalls in Wayanad, inviting travellers to experience their majestic beauty and the adventure activities they offer.

Lastly, **Figure 9** focuses on the rich biodiversity of the Periyar Tiger Reserve, featuring a lion-tailed macaque amidst lush foliage. This image underscores the importance of wildlife conservation and offers a glimpse into the diverse fauna of Kerala's ecosystems. Collectively, these images portray Kerala as a destination brimming with serene landscapes, stunning natural beauty, and vibrant wildlife.

Figure 2: *Backwater Scene at Alleppey*



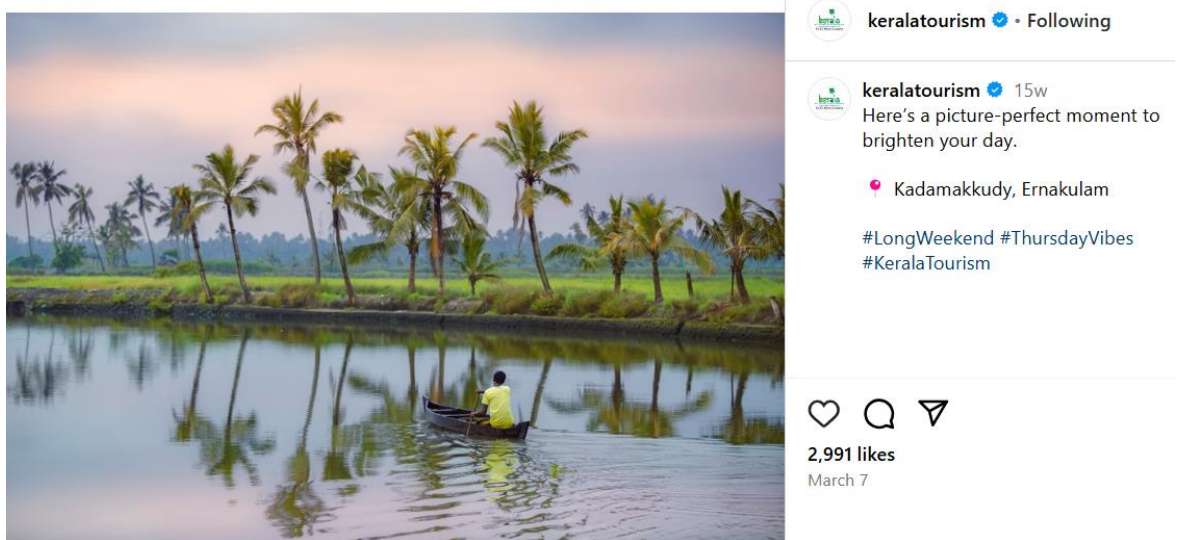
From Kerala Tourism. “Captivating View of the Serene Backwaters of Alleppey at Sunset.” X, 2024, 2 May, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1785902453679968729>

Figure 3: *Backwater Scene in Kerala*



From Kerala Tourism. “Serene backwater scene in Kerala.” Facebook, 2024, 4 February, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=769949118513279&set=a.656913436483515>

Figure 4: *Serene scene from the backwaters of Kerala*



From Kerala Tourism. “Serene scene from the backwaters of Kerala.” Instagram, 2024, 7 March, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4M2iKwB2-n/>

Figure 5: *A Church situated in the Backwaters*



From Kerala Tourism. “A Church situated in the Backwaters.” X, 2024, 31 May, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1796463606894403962>

Figure 6: *Captivating view of a waterfall in Thrissur*



From Kerala Tourism. "Captivating view of a waterfall in Thrissur." Facebook, 2024, 19 March,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=800903638751160&set=a.656913436483515>

Figure 7: *The breathtaking beauty of Thoovanam Waterfalls*



From Kerala Tourism. "The breathtaking beauty of Thoovanam Waterfalls." Facebook, 2024, 28 February,

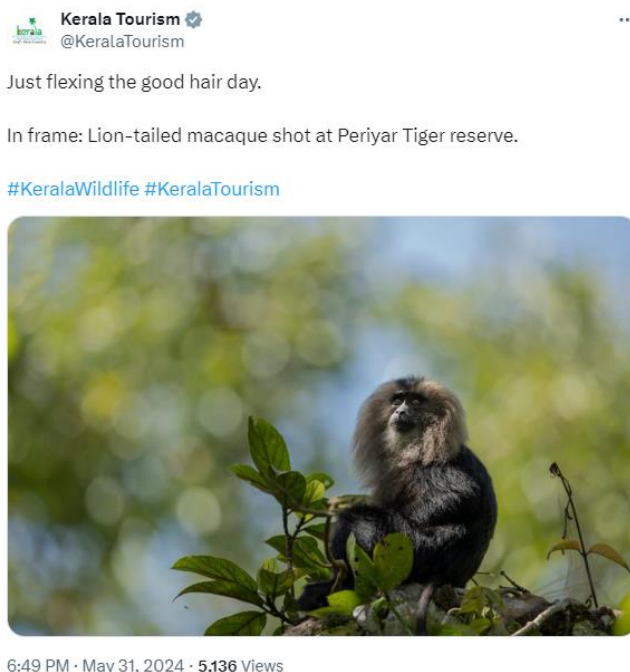
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=784130840428440&set=a.656913436483515>

Figure 8: A promotion to visit the Kanthanpara Waterfalls in Wayanad



From Wayanad Tourism. “A promotion to visit the Kanthanpara Waterfalls in Wayanad.” Instagram, 2024, 30 May, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7jWx9BqDmQ/>

Figure 9: Diverse wildlife in the Periyar Tiger Reserve



From Kerala Tourism. “Diverse wildlife in the Periyar Tiger Reserve.” X, 2024, 31 May, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1796433694955331970>

4.3.1.2. Promoting Eco-friendly Experiences

In addition to showing the natural beauty of the region, the Kerala DMOs actively promoted eco-friendly tourism experiences and sustainable accommodation. By emphasising these offerings, they aimed to cater to the growing demand for responsible travel while simultaneously raising awareness about the importance of minimising the environmental impact of tourism activities.

The image in **Figure 10** invites travellers to explore the rich biodiversity and natural beauty of Wayanad, encouraging eco-tourism activities that allow visitors to engage responsibly with the region's ecological wonders. Similarly, **Figure 11** captures the serene beauty of a tranquil water body, surrounded by lush greenery and a reflective sky, with a small kayak inviting viewers to immerse themselves in eco-friendly activities such as kayaking or boating. **Figure 12** and **Figure 13** promote cycling as a sustainable way to explore Kerala, with groups of cycling enthusiasts and individuals joyfully navigating roads bordered by lush landscapes and palm trees, highlighting the state's picturesque scenery and advocating for environmentally conscious tourism practices.

Further emphasising adventure and sustainability, **Figure 14** highlights eco-friendly adventure tourism in Wayanad, featuring activities such as and camping while stressing the importance of minimising environmental impact and respecting natural surroundings. **Figure 15** continues this theme, depicting international cycling enthusiasts exploring Kerala's diverse natural beauty, promoting sustainable tourism through eco-friendly transportation. Finally, **Figure 16** underscores the significance of responsible and sustainable tourism by showing a tranquil stream winding through a dense forest with a small boat or kayak on the water, encouraging visitors to appreciate Kerala's natural beauty while minimising their environmental footprint and respecting local communities.

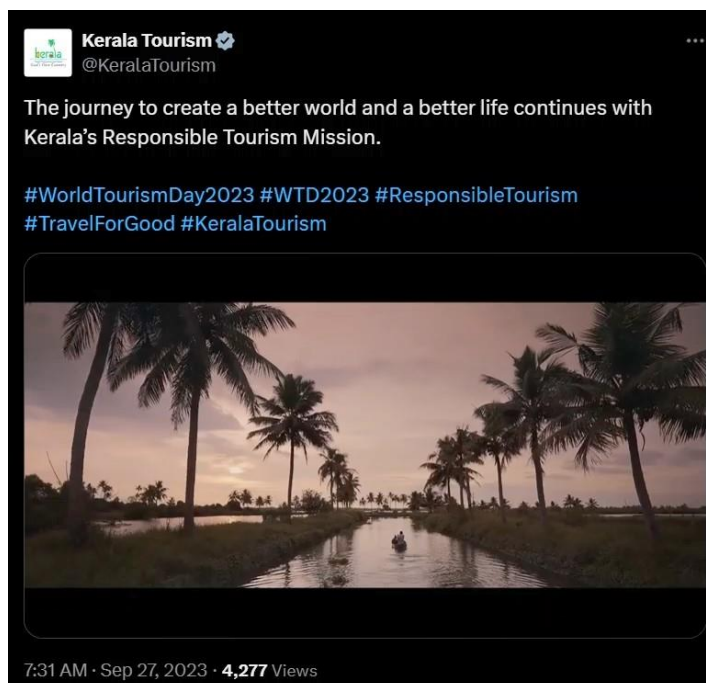
Together, these images vividly illustrate the appeal and importance of sustainable tourism in Kerala, showing its diverse natural beauty and encouraging visitors to explore it in an environmentally responsible manner.

Figure 10: A promotion to explore nature in Wayanad



From Wayanad Tourism. “A promotion to explore nature in Wayanad.” Instagram, 2024, 4 May, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6i4h9my8z-/>

Figure 11: Kayaking in a serene water body



From Kerala Tourism. “Kayaking in a serene water body.” X, 2023. 27 September, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1706738153992995199>

Figure 12: *Sustainable tourism and cycling in Kerala*



10:45 PM · Nov 25, 2023 · 10.7K Views

From Kerala Tourism. "Sustainable tourism and cycling in Kerala." X, 2023, 25 November, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1728349241133695184>

Figure 13: Promoting cycling as an eco-friendly way to explore Kerala



From Kerala Tourism. “Promoting cycling as an eco-friendly way to explore Kerala.”
Facebook, 2023, 29 September,
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=698340345674157&set=a.656913436483515>

Figure 14: A promotion to adventure tourism in an eco-friendly way



From Wayanad Tourism. “A promotion to adventure tourism in an eco-friendly way.”
Instagram, 2024, 16 May, https://www.instagram.com/p/C6_Tpe5MDIv/

Figure 15: *Sustainable tourism and cycling in Kerala*



From Kerala Tourism. “Sustainable tourism and cycling in Kerala.” 2023, 28 November, <https://www.facebook.com/keralatourismofficial/videos/841299701110649>

Figure 16: *Promoting responsible and sustainable tourism practices*



From Kerala Tourism. “Promoting responsible and sustainable tourism practices.” 2024, 25 January, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2g9mGpvueD/>

4.3.2. Environmental Conservation and Awareness

The Kerala DMOs placed significant emphasis on environmental conservation and awareness, recognising the critical role that sustainable tourism practices play in preserving the state's natural resources and mitigating the negative impacts of tourism on the environment. Through their social media platforms, the DMOs actively promoted various initiatives, sustainable practices, and responsible tourism behaviours.

4.3.2.1. Highlighting Environmental Initiatives

The social media content of the Kerala DMOs showcased the state's ongoing initiatives to protect and preserve its natural resources, including programmes focused on wildlife conservation, habitat restoration, and environmental protection. By highlighting these initiatives, the DMOs sought to demonstrate the state's commitment to environmental stewardship and to inspire both industry stakeholders and visitors to align their practices with the same principles.

The image in **Figure 17** from Wayanad Tourism reminds visitors to minimise their environmental impact by adopting sustainable tourism practices while enjoying the area's natural beauty. Similarly, **Figure 18** stresses the significance of respecting local communities, urging tourists to engage in responsible tourism practices that honour local cultures and support community well-being. The image in **Figure 19** offers practical tips from Kerala Tourism on becoming a more responsible traveller by using eco-friendly products and behaving in ways that reduce environmental footprints and support local economies and cultures.

Figure 17: A reminder to practice Sustainable Tourism Practices



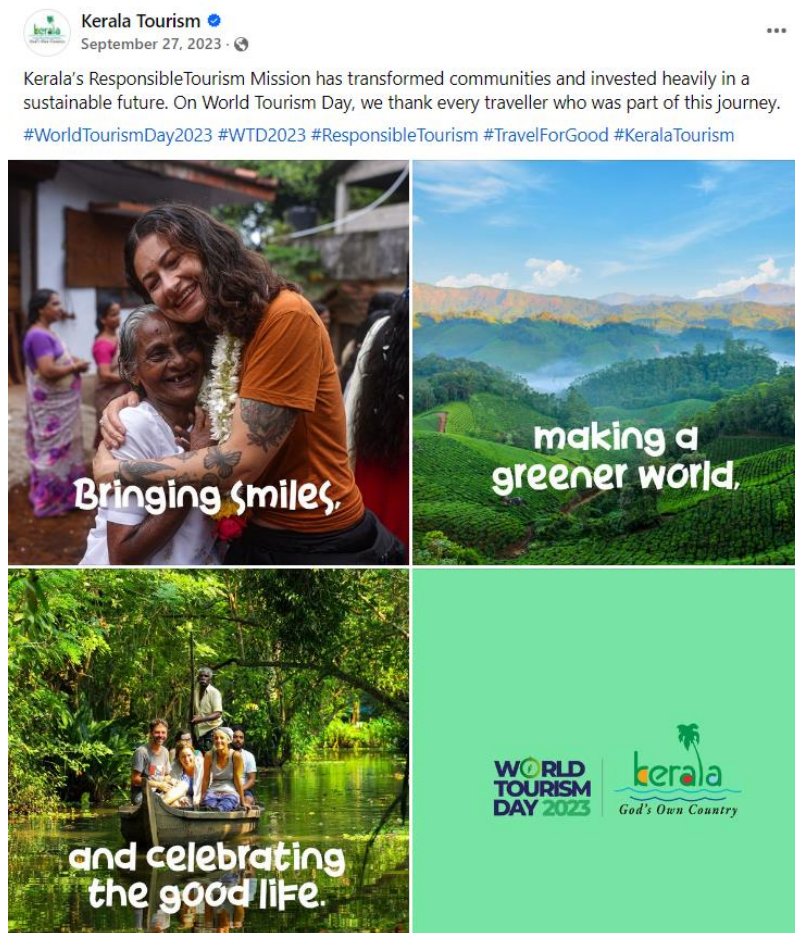
From Wayanad Tourism. “A reminder to practice Sustainable Tourism Practices.” Instagram, 2024, 22 April, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6Cy9w9rid0/>

Figure 18: A reminder to practice Responsible Tourism Practices



From Wayanad Tourism. “A reminder to practice Sustainable Tourism Practices.” Instagram, 2024, 22 May, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7Qy4geOTPd/>

Figure 19: *Initiatives to make Kerala a Sustainable Destination*



From Kerala Tourism. “Initiatives to make Kerala a Sustainable Destination.”

Facebook, 2023, 23 September,

<https://www.facebook.com/keralatourismofficial/posts/pfbid02YZruqGjcdFgCc5pn7Mbsir1TRsPossxZnSrY6Uri59L56gyUEfH4J4ky3Ch7v4RU1>

4.3.2.2. *Promoting Sustainable Practices*

In addition to highlighting environmental initiatives, the Kerala DMOs actively promoted and encouraged the adoption of sustainable practices among businesses, communities, and individuals. These efforts aimed to raise awareness about eco-friendly alternatives and inspire stakeholders to make conscious choices that contribute to the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry.

In **Figure 20**, a social media post appeals to individuals and businesses to embrace eco-friendly practices, underscoring the importance of waste management and advocating for

sustainable lifestyles and responsible tourism. This call to action aims to heighten awareness about the environmental impact of tourism and the need for sustainable practices. **Figure 21** portrays Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission receiving recognition for its energy efficiency and commitment to eco-friendly practices. This award highlights Kerala's dedication to sustainable tourism and serves as a model for other destinations to follow in promoting environmental conservation and responsible tourism development.

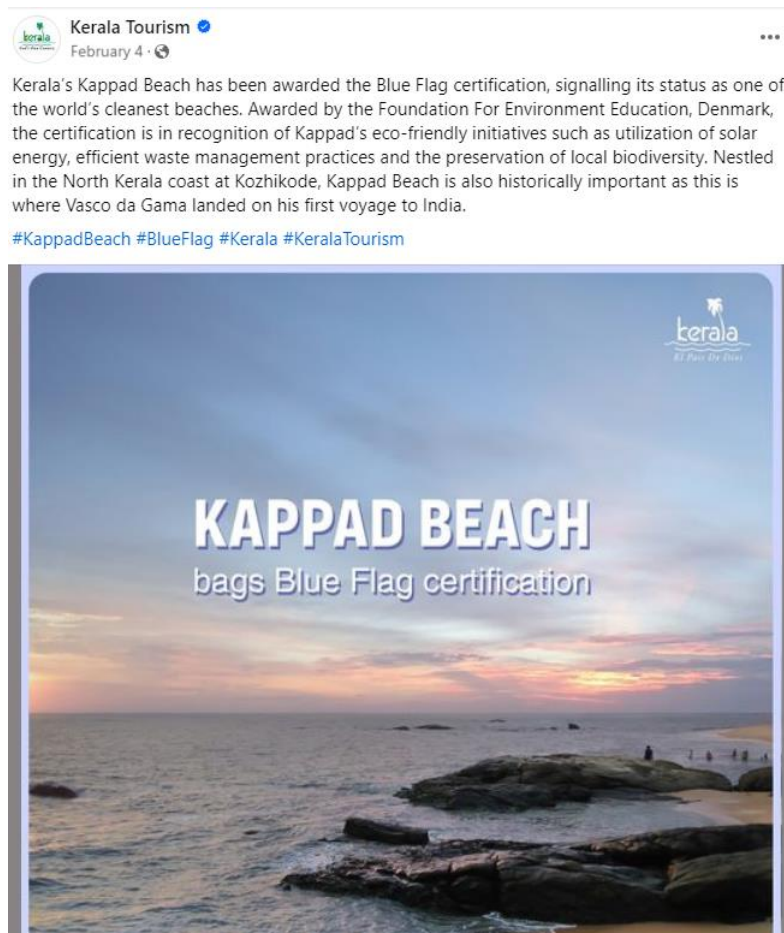
Figure 20: *An appeal to switch to eco-friendly practices*



From Kerala Tourism. "An appeal to switch to eco-friendly practices." Facebook, 2023, 5 June,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10159378376718144&set=a.432065093143>

Figure 21: *Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission*



From Kerala Tourism. “Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission.” Facebook, 2024, 4 February,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=769655368542654&set=a.656913436483515>

4.3.2.3. Encouraging Responsible Tourism Behaviour

Alongside their efforts to showcase environmental initiatives and sustainable practices, the Kerala DMOs also actively encouraged responsible tourism behaviours among their followers. This aspect of their social media content focused on empowering visitors to minimise their environmental impact, respect local communities, and adhere to ethical tourism practices, equipping them with the knowledge and tools necessary to engage in sustainable travel.

In **Figure 22**, the Minister of Public Works and Tourism of Kerala is shown speaking about the Green Tourism Initiative, a government led programme focused on promoting

sustainable and eco-friendly tourism practices across the state. This initiative is a key part of Kerala's commitment to conservation projects aimed at preserving its natural resources and cultural heritage. **Figure 23** highlights Kochi's recognition for its sustainable initiatives through awards and certifications, underscoring the city's dedication to wildlife protection and the implementation of eco-friendly tourism practices. **Figure 24** illustrates another accolade, this time received by Kerala's Responsible Tourism Mission, which honours its success in advancing conservation projects, benefiting local communities, and preserving the region's rich cultural and natural heritage through responsible tourism efforts.

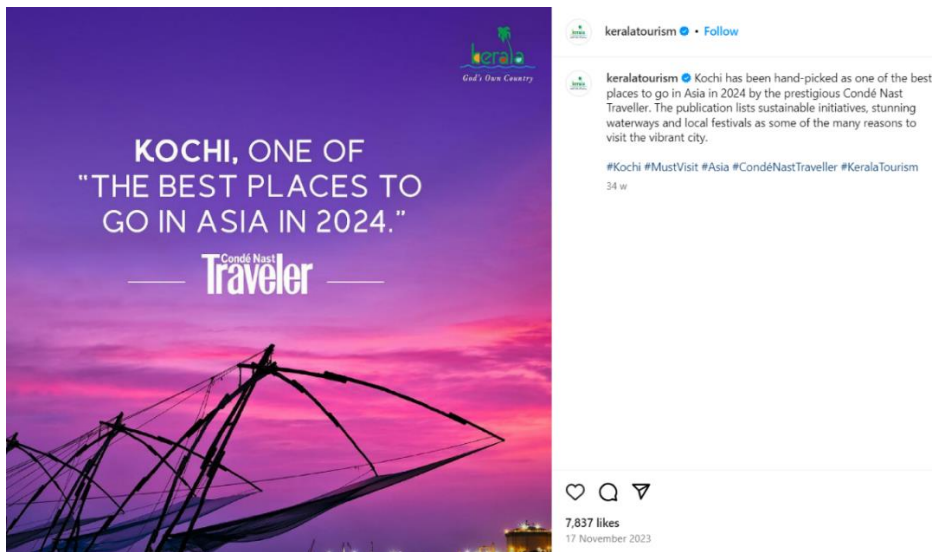
Figure 22: *The minister of Public Works and Tourism speaking about Green Tourism Initiative*



From Kerala Tourism. "The minister of Public Works and Tourism speaking about Green Tourism Initiative." X, 2023, 27 September,

<https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1706910707038449860>

Figure 23: Kochi being recognised for its Sustainable Initiatives



From Kerala Tourism. “Kochi being recognised for its Sustainable Initiatives.” Instagram, 2023, 17 November, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzvXSf6SmwE/>

Figure 24: Award received for Kerala’s Responsible Tourism Mission



From Kerala Tourism. “Award received for Kerala’s Responsible Tourism Mission.” X, 2023, 4 November, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1720745337105580315>

4.3.3. Community Engagement and Empowerment

The Kerala DMOs recognised the pivotal role of local communities in sustainable tourism development, and as such, dedicated a significant portion of their social media content to showcasing their active involvement and empowerment through various initiatives. This multifaceted approach underscored the DMOs' commitment to inclusive and equitable tourism practices.

4.3.3.1. Highlighting Community Participation

The social media content of the Kerala DMOs highlighted collaborative efforts between the DMOs, local communities, and other stakeholders in the tourism industry. This included initiatives that encouraged local community participation in tourism-related activities and decision-making processes, as well as capacity-building programmes that empowered communities to become active partners in sustainable tourism development.

Figure 25 shows a local artisan teaching visitor the traditional art of pottery, highlighting Kerala's rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship. This interaction, categorised under local involvement, allows tourists to engage deeply with the region's vibrant traditions and gain insights into the local way of life. Similarly, **Figure 26** captures visitors participating in local bee farming, an experience that supports collaborative efforts to preserve local livelihoods and promote sustainable agricultural practices. This activity fosters a greater appreciation for the region's cultural and natural heritage.

Figure 27 portrays visitors immersing themselves in the authentic village life of Kerala, providing an opportunity for capacity building by fostering cross-cultural understanding and a deeper appreciation of the daily lives, traditions, and culture of local communities.

Figure 25: *A local artisan teaching the art of Pottery*



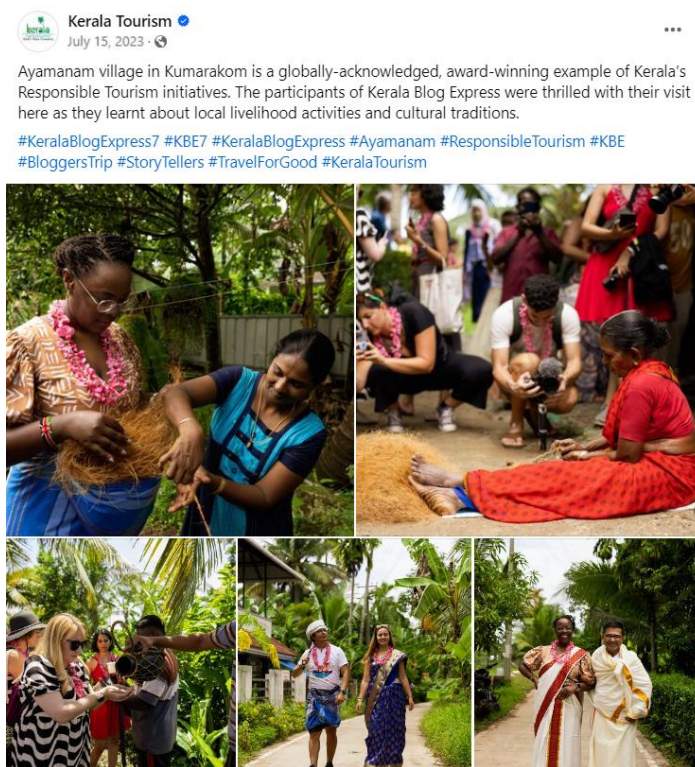
From Kerala Tourism. “A local artisan teaching the art of Pottery.” Facebook, 2024, 31 May, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1830614874072007>

Figure 26: *Visitors experiencing Local Bee Farming*



From Kerala Tourism. “Visitors experiencing Local Bee Farming. ” X, 2024, 9 May, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1788442994963558450>

Figure 27: *Visitors experiencing the local village life*



From Kerala Tourism. “Visitors experiencing the local village life.” Facebook, 2023, 15 July,

<https://www.facebook.com/keralatourismofficial/posts/pfbid0B4FE9DYSNAWXFU58wf2ARUhUtf24Yb6BkZB42MtGs2uEbsUx3dXPAM5X1YzwMLy5l>

4.3.3.2. *Promoting Economic Opportunities*

Closely aligned with their focus on community engagement was the Kerala DMOs' emphasis on promoting economic opportunities for local communities through sustainable tourism practices. The social media content highlighted initiatives that provided sustainable livelihood options and supported local entrepreneurship, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic well-being of the state's residents.

In **Figure 28**, an artisan is seen crafting pots, an illustration of sustainable livelihoods that emphasises the preservation and promotion of traditional arts and crafts. Such activities support local artisans and contribute to the region's sustainable tourism development. **Figure 29** depicts other visitors engaging with the art of coir making, an example of local entrepreneurship that aids in sustaining traditional skills and livelihoods while fostering appreciation for local craftsmanship.

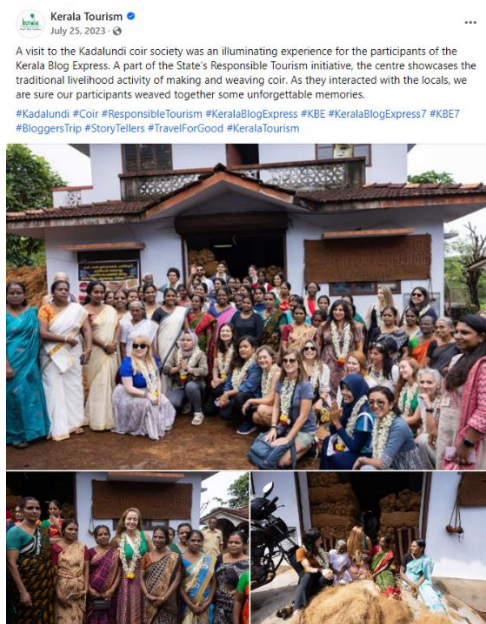
Similarly, **Figure 30** portrays honey collection from a local bee farm, demonstrating fair trade practices that encourage sustainable and eco-friendly honey production, thereby supporting local livelihoods and highlighting the importance of conserving habitats for pollinators. Finally, **Figure 31** captures the traditional method of winnowing in Kerala, an activity aimed at preserving traditions. This practice not only provides visitors with authentic cultural experiences, but also promotes the rich heritage and customs of the region through tourism initiatives.

Figure 28: *An artisan making pots*



From Kerala Tourism. "An artisan making pots." Facebook. 2024, 23 March, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=800997488741775&set=a.656913436483515>

Figure 29: *Visitors experiencing the art of coir making*



From Kerala Tourism. “Visitors experiencing the art of coir making.” Facebook, 2023, 25 July,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=662527479255444&set=pcb.662527575922101>

Figure 30: *Honey collection from the local bee farm*



From Kerala Tourism. “Honey collection from the local bee farm.” X, 2023, 26 September, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1706552553167552971>

Figure 31: *Traditional method of winnowing*



From Kerala Tourism. “Traditional method of winnowing.” X, 2023, 7 October, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/17110582013260972497>

4.3.3.3. *Preserving Local Culture and Heritage*

Alongside the focus on economic opportunities, the Kerala DMOs also dedicated a significant portion of their social media content to promoting the preservation of the state's rich cultural heritage and traditional practices. This aspect of their messaging aimed to cultivate a deeper appreciation for Kerala's unique identity among their audience and encourage visitors to engage with the local culture in a respectful and sustainable manner.

The image in **Figure 32** promotes visiting the Edakkal caves in Wayanad, ancient rock shelters adorned with prehistoric carvings and paintings, emphasising the need to preserve these invaluable archaeological treasures. Similarly, **Figure 33** shows Kerala's traditional net fishing technique, a practice vital to safeguarding heritage by allowing visitors to appreciate the region's age old fishing methods. **Figure 34** captures the vibrant

celebration of the Thrissur Pooram festival, highlighting the significance of promoting traditional practices to preserve Kerala's rich cultural traditions.

Figure 35 and **Figure 36** depict cultural dance performances, likely during the Nishagandhi festival, as seen in **Figure 37**, showcasing Kerala's diverse art forms. These events not only entertain, but also ensure the continuity of traditional practices and foster cultural exchange. The image in **Figure 38** indicates that the Kunnamangalam Bhagawati Temple was selected for a UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) award, underscoring the importance of preserving and promoting this significant heritage site. Finally, **Figure 39** encourages visitors to experience the culture and heritage of Wayanad, known for its rich traditions and natural landscapes, promoting cultural and heritage tourism while emphasising the need to protect the region's unique assets.

Figure 32: A promotion to visit the historical Caves of Edakkal in Wayanad.



From Wayanad Tourism. “A promotion to visit the historical Caves of Edakkal in Wayanad.” Instagram, 2024, 26 April, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6LwVNiJAec/>

Figure 33: The traditional net fishing technique.



From Kerala Tourism. “The traditional net fishing technique.” X, 2024, 27 May, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1795021003631755414>

Figure 34: *The celebration of Thrissur Poornam*



From Kerala Tourism. “The celebration of Thrissur Poornam.” X, 2024, 26 April, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1780183326776598698>

Figure 35: *Cultural dance Performance for the festival of Nishagandhi*



From Kerala Tourism. “Cultural dance Performance for the festival of Nishagandhi.” X, 2024, 16 February, <https://x.com/KeralaTourism/status/1758431302095892542>

Figure 36: Cultural Dance performance



From Kerala Tourism. “Cultural Dance performance.” Instagram, 2024, 20 February, https://www.instagram.com/p/C3jx1swh96a/?img_index=2

Figure 37: Nishagandhi Dance Festival



From Kerala Tourism. “Nishagandhi Dance Festival.” Facebook, 2024, 21 February, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=780274630814061&set=a.656913436483515>

Figure 38: *The Kunnamangalam Bhagawati Temple being selected for UNESCO's Award*



From Kerala Tourism. “The Kunnamangalam Bhagawati Temple being selected for UNESCO’s Award.” Instagram, 2023, 23 December,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1KIAQqBNQj/>

Figure 39: *A promotion to experience the culture and heritage of Wayanad*



From Wayanad Tourism. “A promotion to experience the culture and heritage of Wayanad.” Instagram, 2024, 18 April, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C55m0YOvVcy/>

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has comprehensively analysed how DMOs in Kerala utilised social media to promote sustainable tourism. Through a detailed examination of the content shared on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X by Kerala Tourism and Wayanad Tourism, several key themes emerged.

Firstly, the results show that Wayanad Tourism and Kerala Tourism use the same content strategy on all of their active social media channels. They accomplish this by effectively expanding their audience reach by sharing the same content across multiple channels. By utilizing the diverse user bases of each platform, this strategy maximizes visibility and engagement among a wide range of followers.

Secondly, the DMOs showcase Kerala's natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences. This is achieved through captivating images of pristine landscapes such as backwaters, waterfalls, and forests, which not only highlight the region's aesthetic appeal, but also encourage eco-tourism activities such as kayaking and cycling. These efforts aimed to attract tourists while simultaneously promoting activities with minimal environmental impacts.

Thirdly, there was a strong emphasis on environmental conservation and awareness. The DMOs actively highlighted various environmental initiatives and sustainable practices and used social media to advocate for responsible tourism behaviours, such as reducing plastic use and respecting wildlife. This approach helps educate travellers about the importance of preserving natural habitats and adopting eco-friendly practices during their visits.

Finally, community engagement and empowerment were central to the DMOs' social media strategies. By demonstrating local traditions, artisanal crafts, and community-based tourism initiatives, the DMOs emphasised the socio-cultural benefits of tourism. They promoted economic opportunities for local communities and worked to preserve Kerala's cultural heritage. This not only supports the local economy, but also enriches the visitor experience with authentic cultural interactions.

The findings illustrate that social media was a vital tool for DMOs in Kerala to effectively communicate and promote sustainable tourism. By leveraging on the visual and interactive nature of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X, these organisations successfully highlighted Kerala's natural and cultural attractions while advocating for environmental and community-friendly tourism practices. This strategic use of social media not only enhances the destination's appeal, but also fosters a sustainable approach to tourism that benefits both the environment and the local communities.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter critically examines the findings of the study presented in Chapter 4, in relation to the existing literature on social media use by DMOs for promoting sustainable tourism. The discussion is structured around the key themes that emerged from the data analysis: showcasing natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences, environmental conservation and awareness, and community engagement and empowerment. These themes are analysed in the context of current academic discourse on sustainable tourism marketing, social media strategies, and the role of DMOs in promoting responsible travel practices.

5.2. Showcasing Natural Beauty and Eco-friendly Experiences

The findings in section 4.3.1 revealed that Kerala's DMOs consistently used social media platforms to highlight the region's natural beauty and promote eco-friendly tourism experiences. This approach aligns with the growing trend of using visual content in destination marketing, as noted by Hays et al. (2013), who emphasised the power of imagery in creating emotional connections with potential visitors.

5.2.1. Highlighting Pristine Landscapes

Kerala's pristine landscapes, particularly its backwaters, waterfalls, and lush greenery, have become central to its tourism marketing efforts, especially on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. The strategic focus of the DMOs on nature-based tourism aligns with the work of Leung et al. (2013), who noted that visual content on social media significantly influences travellers' perceptions and decision-making processes. By consistently presenting Kerala as a destination rich in natural beauty as presented in section 4.3.1.1, DMOs capitalise on the growing demand for nature-based tourism experiences. This trend was also reflected in Buckley's (2012) analysis of global tourism, which underscored the increasing popularity of destinations offering unspoiled natural environments.

Kerala Tourism's social media presence is particularly noteworthy (see section 4.2.1). This DMO excelled in showcasing the state's diverse natural wonders with high quality imagery and videos. Posts frequently showed the serene backwaters of Alleppey, the

majestic waterfalls of Thrissur, and the lush, green landscapes that typify Kerala. This visually compelling content not only evokes a sense of wonder, but also appeals to eco-conscious travellers, aligning closely with the principles of sustainable tourism. According to the UNWTO (2005), promoting tourism in a way that preserves natural resources is essential. This approach resonates with modern tourists, who, as Font and McCabe (2017) suggested, increasingly seek destinations offering authentic, nature-based experiences that minimise environmental impacts.

In comparison, Wayanad Tourism's (DTPC) social media efforts, while effective, did not reach the same level of visual quality and consistency as those of Kerala Tourism. The DTPC's (**Figure 8**) content showed the natural beauty of the Wayanad region but lacked the professional imagery and cohesive branding seen in Kerala Tourism's presentations.

However, this emphasis on promoting natural attractions also presents challenges. Gössling and Peeters (2015) cautioned that the excessive promotion of sensitive ecological areas can lead to overtourism and environmental degradation. Thus, Kerala's DMOs need to strike a delicate balance between attracting visitors and safeguarding these natural resources. This challenge is particularly pertinent in the context of social media-driven tourism, where the visual appeal can quickly turn into a double-edged sword (Lund et al., 2018).

5.2.2. Promoting Eco-friendly Experiences

Kerala's Destination Management Organisations were effectively leveraging on social media to promote eco-friendly tourism experiences. By showcasing activities such as kayaking, cycling, and nature walks, these organisations positioned Kerala as a prime destination for environmentally conscious travellers (refer to **Figure 11**, **Figure 12**, **Figure 13**, **Figure 14** and **Figure 15**). This strategic focus aligns with Munar and Jacobsen's (2014) recommendations, which emphasised the importance of promoting sustainable tourism offerings to cater to the growing segment of eco-conscious tourists.

Highlighting these eco-friendly activities on social media serves several purposes. Firstly, it aligns with the sustainable tourism principles outlined by Buckley (2012), who advocated for the promotion of low impact activities to mitigate the environmental effects of tourism. This approach resonates with the preferences of modern travellers, who, as

noted by Xiang and Gretzel (2010), increasingly seek authentic and sustainable experiences when choosing their destinations.

Moreover, by consistently featuring eco-friendly activities, Kerala's DMOs play a crucial role in educating and raising awareness among potential visitors about sustainable tourism practices. This aligns with the work of Gretzel et al. (2015), who asserted that social media can effectively shape visitor expectations and promote responsible tourism behaviours. The consistent promotion of eco-friendly experiences contributes to a broader understanding and appreciation of sustainable tourism among travellers.

Kerala Tourism stood out in its approach. This DMO not only showcased eco-friendly activities, but also provided contextual information to educate travellers about the environmental benefits of these activities. For example, posts about kayaking might include details on how this activity supports local ecosystems by minimising water pollution when compared to motorised water sports. This educational messaging aligns with the findings of Lund et al. (2018) and Mariani et al. (2016), which suggest that DMOs can utilise social media to promote sustainable tourism and raise awareness about responsible travel practices.

In comparison, while Wayanad Tourism (DTPC) also promoted eco-friendly experiences (**Figure 14**), its approach was less comprehensive. The DTPC's social media content, although highlighting activities such as cycling and nature walks, lacked the depth of contextual information and educational messaging of Kerala Tourism's content. This difference points to a more coordinated and strategically aligned effort by Kerala Tourism in promoting sustainable tourism.

However, the effectiveness of these promotions in actually influencing tourist behaviour remains a topic of ongoing discussion in the literature. Hays et al. (2013) argued that social media content can significantly influence travel decisions, yet Gretzel et al. (2015) cautioned that the relationship between online engagement and actual travel behaviour is complex and not always straightforward. To address this, Kerala's DMOs could usefully consider implementing mechanisms to measure the real-world impact of their social media promotions on visitor behaviour and local sustainability outcomes.

5.3. Environmental Conservation and Awareness

The study's findings revealed a significant emphasis on environmental conservation and awareness in the social media content of Kerala's DMOs. This focus aligns with the growing recognition of tourism's environmental impacts and the need for more sustainable practices in the industry (Buckley, 2012; UNWTO, 2005).

5.3.1. Highlighting Environmental Initiatives

The DMOs' efforts to promote various environmental initiatives like those presented in **Figure 19** and **Figure 20** through their social media channels, demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing sustainability concerns. This strategy aligns with the recommendations of Font and McCabe (2017), who argued that transparency about sustainability efforts can enhance a destination's appeal to environmentally conscious travellers. This aligns with SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, promoting sustainable practices within the tourism industry.

By highlighting initiatives such as waste management programmes, conservation projects, and eco-friendly infrastructure development, Kerala's DMOs were not only promoting their commitment to sustainability, but also educating their audience about the importance of these efforts. This approach resonates with the findings of Gössling and Peeters (2015), who emphasised the role of tourism organisations in raising awareness about environmental issues and promoting responsible travel behaviours.

However, it is crucial to consider the potential challenges associated with communicating environmental initiatives on social media. As Hays et al. (2013) noted, the brevity and fast paced nature of social media platforms can make it difficult to convey complex sustainability messages effectively. Therefore, Kerala's DMOs should consider developing strategies to provide more in-depth information about their environmental initiatives, perhaps through linked blog posts or dedicated website sections, to complement their social media content.

5.3.2. Promoting Sustainable Practices

The findings indicate that Kerala's DMOs were actively using social media to promote sustainable tourism practices among visitors, contributing to SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. This includes encouraging responsible behavior in natural areas and

promoting the use of eco-friendly transportation options presented in 4.3.2.2. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Lund et al. (2018), who argued that DMOs have a crucial role in shaping visitor behaviour in favour of more sustainable practices.

By consistently promoting sustainable practices across their social media channels, Kerala's DMOs were contributing to the broader goal of sustainable tourism development outlined by the UNWTO (2005). This strategy also responds to the growing demand for responsible travel options, as identified by Buhalis and Foerste (2015) in their analysis of digital marketing trends in tourism.

However, the effectiveness of these promotional efforts in actually changing visitor behaviour requires further investigation. While social media provides an excellent platform for disseminating information about sustainable practices, translating online engagement into real-world behaviour change can be challenging (Xiang et al., 2015). Therefore, Kerala's DMOs should consider implementing mechanisms to measure the impact of their social media campaigns on visitor behaviour and sustainability outcomes.

5.3.3. Encouraging Responsible Tourism Behaviour

The study revealed that Kerala's DMOs were using social media to encourage responsible tourism behaviour among visitors which aligns with SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. This includes promoting respect for local communities (**Figure 27**), advocating for wildlife protection, and encouraging the reduction of plastic waste (**Figure 20**). This approach aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism outlined by Buckley (2012), who emphasised the importance of minimising negative impacts on local environments and communities, contributing to SDG 14: Life Below Water and SDG 15: Life on Land.

By using social media to promote responsible tourism behaviour, Kerala's DMOs are utilising the power of these platforms to shape visitor expectations and actions. This strategy resonates with the findings of Munar and Jacobsen (2014), who argued that social media can be an effective tool for educating travellers about responsible tourism practices.

However, it is important to note that encouraging responsible behaviour through social media is just one part of a broader strategy for sustainable tourism development. As Gretzel et al. (2015) pointed out, DMOs must also work to ensure that the necessary

infrastructure and policies are in place to support responsible tourism practices on the ground. Therefore, Kerala's DMOs should consider how their social media messaging aligns with and supports broader sustainability initiatives in the destination.

5.4. Community Engagement and Empowerment

The emphasis placed by the Kerala DMOs on community engagement and empowerment aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism development outlined by researchers such as Chok et al. (2007) and Frey and George (2010). These scholars underscored the importance of involving and empowering local communities in the tourism industry, ensuring that the benefits of tourism development are equitably distributed and contribute to the overall well-being of the region. The DMOs' efforts in this regard demonstrated a recognition of the critical role that local communities play in the long-term sustainability of tourism.

5.4.1. Promoting Community-based Tourism Initiatives

The study also revealed that Kerala's DMOs were actively using social media to promote community-based tourism initiatives. This includes showcasing local artisans (**Figure 25** and **Figure 28**), promoting village tours (**Figure 27**), and highlighting community operated businesses (**Figure 26**, **Figure 29** and **Figure 30**). This approach aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism outlined by the UNWTO (2005) that emphasise the importance of community participation and economic benefits for local populations.

By promoting these initiatives on social media, Kerala's DMOs were not only attracting visitors interested in authentic cultural experiences, but also supporting local economic development. This strategy aligns with the findings of Lund et al. (2018), who argued that social media can be an effective tool for promoting alternative community-based tourism models that contribute to sustainable development.

However, it is important to consider the potential challenges associated with promoting community-based tourism on social media. As Munar and Jacobsen (2014) noted, there is a risk of commodifying local cultures and traditions for tourist consumption. Therefore, Kerala's DMOs must strike a balance between promoting these initiatives and preserving the authenticity and integrity of local communities. This requires careful consideration of how community-based tourism experiences are represented on social media platforms.

5.4.2. Highlighting Cultural Heritage and Traditions

The findings indicate that Kerala's DMOs were using social media to promote the region's rich cultural heritage and traditions such as local festivals, traditional art forms, and culinary experiences (refer section 4.3.3.1). This approach aligns with the recommendations of Xiang and Gretzel (2010), who emphasised the importance of cultural content in destination marketing.

By highlighting cultural heritage on social media, Kerala's DMOs were not only attracting cultural tourists, but also contributing to the preservation and promotion of local traditions. This strategy resonates with the principles of sustainable tourism outlined by Buckley (2012), who argued that tourism can play a role in supporting cultural preservation when managed responsibly.

However, it is crucial to consider the potential risks associated with promoting cultural heritage on social media. As Gössling and Peeters (2015) warned, there is a danger of oversimplifying or misrepresenting complex cultural practices for easy consumption on social media platforms. Therefore, Kerala's DMOs should strive to provide accurate and respectful representations of local cultures, perhaps by collaborating with community members in creating social media content.

5.4.3. Preserving Local Culture and Heritage

The study also revealed that Kerala's DMOs were using social media to promote initiatives aimed at preserving local culture and heritage. This included highlighting restoration projects (**Figure 38**), promoting traditional crafts (**Figure 39**), and illustrating efforts to document and preserve local and traditions (**Figure 31**, **Figure 33**, **Figure 34**, **Figure 35**, **Figure 36** and **Figure 37**). This approach aligns with the recommendations of Font and McCabe (2017), who argued that sustainable tourism should contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.

By presenting these preservation efforts on social media, Kerala's DMOs were not only attracting culturally conscious travellers, but also raising awareness about the importance of cultural preservation. This strategy resonates with the findings of Hays et al. (2013), who noted that social media can be an effective tool for educating audiences about complex issues related to sustainability and cultural preservation.

However, it is important to consider the limitations of social media in addressing the complex challenges of cultural preservation. As Xiang et al. (2015) pointed out, while social media can raise awareness, it may not be sufficient to drive meaningful action or policy changes. Therefore, Kerala's DMOs should consider how their social media efforts can be integrated with broader cultural preservation initiatives and policies.

5.5. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how DMOs are using social media to promote sustainable tourism, using the case of Kerala, India. The findings reveal a multi-faceted approach that integrates sustainability messaging into various aspects of destination marketing, from showcasing natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences, to promoting community engagement and cultural preservation.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable tourism marketing in the digital age, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for DMOs and other tourism stakeholders. It highlights the potential of social media as a tool for promoting sustainable tourism practices, while also acknowledging the challenges inherent in this approach.

As the tourism industry continues to grapple with the imperative of sustainability, the role of social media in shaping visitor perceptions and behaviours will likely become increasingly important. This study therefore provides a foundation for future research in this area, pointing to the need for more sophisticated strategies for leveraging social media to promote truly sustainable tourism development.

Ultimately, the success of sustainable tourism initiatives will depend not just on effective marketing, but also on the genuine commitment of destinations to implementing sustainable practices on the ground. Social media, as demonstrated by Kerala's DMOs, can play a crucial role in communicating this commitment and engaging visitors in the journey towards more responsible and sustainable forms of tourism.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This study has undertaken a comprehensive investigation into the utilisation of social media platforms by DMOs in Kerala, India, for the promotion of sustainable tourism practices. The research focused on identifying the primary social media platforms employed by Kerala DMOs and conducted an in-depth examination of the types of sustainability-related content shared on these platforms. Through a qualitative approach employing netnographic methods, the study has provided valuable insights into the intricate relationship between social media marketing and sustainable tourism promotion in an emerging destination context.

The findings of this research underpin the pivotal role that social media plays in the promotion of sustainable tourism practices by DMOs in Kerala. Instagram, Facebook, and X, emerged as the predominant platforms used for destination promotion, with content primarily focusing on three key areas: showcasing natural beauty, promoting eco-friendly experiences, and highlighting community engagement initiatives. This final chapter aims to synthesise the key findings, discuss their implications for theory and practice, acknowledge the limitations of the study, and suggest directions for future research.

The importance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding how digital marketing strategies can be leveraged to promote sustainable tourism practices. As the global tourism industry grapples with the challenges of balancing economic growth with environmental conservation and social responsibility, the role of DMOs in shaping visitor perceptions and behaviours becomes increasingly critical. The findings of this study provide insights into how DMOs can harness the power of social media to communicate sustainability messages, engage eco-conscious travellers, and contribute to the development of more responsible tourism practices.

6.2. Implications for Theory and Practice

6.2.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes significantly to the growing body of literature on social media marketing in tourism and sustainable tourism promotion in several ways. By focusing on Kerala, India, the study adds to the limited literature on social media use for sustainable tourism promotion in developing countries. It provides a nuanced understanding of how DMOs in emerging destinations can utilise digital platforms to communicate sustainability messages, filling a gap identified by scholars such as Hays et al. (2013) and Uşaklı et al. (2017). The study reveals that Kerala DMOs have adapted global social media marketing practices to suit local cultural contexts and sustainability priorities, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of digital marketing in tourism.

This research advances theoretical understandings of how the principles of sustainable tourism can be effectively communicated through social media channels. It builds upon the work of Font and McCabe (2017) by demonstrating how DMOs can use digital platforms to educate visitors about responsible travel behaviours and promote local conservation efforts. The findings reveal a symbiotic relationship between sustainability messaging and social media marketing, in which the interactive and visual nature of social platforms enhances the communication of complex sustainability concepts. This finding contributes to bridging the gap between sustainable tourism theory and digital marketing practice.

The findings also provide insights into how DMOs can engage eco-conscious travellers through social media, contributing to the literature on consumer engagement in sustainable tourism (Gössling & Peeters, 2015; Lund et al., 2018). They reveal specific strategies, such as user-generated content campaigns and interactive storytelling, that can foster deeper engagement with sustainability issues among potential visitors. These findings enhance our understanding of how social media can be used not just as a promotional tool, but also as a platform for meaningful engagement around sustainability issues in tourism.

Additionally, this study provides new insights into how DMOs in an emerging tourism destination like Kerala utilize social media platforms to promote sustainable tourism

practices. Previous research has largely focused on tourism destinations in developed countries, so this adds valuable context from a developing country perspective. Furthermore, the findings extend existing knowledge on the specific types of sustainability-related content DMOs share on social media, including showcasing natural beauty, promoting eco-friendly experiences, highlighting environmental conservation efforts, and engaging with local communities.

The study also contributes to the existing literature on the intersection of social media marketing and sustainable tourism promotion by DMOs. Most prior studies have examined these domains in isolation, so this research offers a more integrated view.

Furthermore, a qualitative approach to analyze social media content provides a methodological contribution, complementing the predominantly quantitative approaches used in many prior studies on this topic. The study's focus on Kerala, a destination known for its sustainability initiatives, offers a unique case study that can inform theory development around how emerging tourism markets leverage digital tools to communicate sustainability messages.

Lastly, the findings also demonstrate how social media content can shape the image of a destination as sustainable and responsible, adding to the literature on destination image formation in the digital age (Mariani et al., 2016; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). They show how consistent sustainability messaging across platforms can create a strong brand identity associated with responsible tourism, potentially influencing visitor expectations and behaviours. This contributes to our theoretical understanding of how destination images are formed and shaped in the context of social media and sustainable tourism.

6.2.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several significant practical implications for DMOs, tourism marketers, and policymakers. One of the key insights is the importance of strategic platform selection and tailored content creation. The study shows that DMOs should focus on visual platforms such as Instagram for showcasing natural beauty and eco-friendly experiences, while utilising X for real-time updates and engagement with travellers. For example, Instagram's Stories and Reels features can be used to create immersive, behind-the-scenes content about sustainable tourism initiatives, while X is

ideal for quick updates on conservation efforts or sustainable events. This strategic approach ensures that the strengths of each platform are maximised for effective sustainable tourism promotion.

Balancing promotional and educational content emerged as another crucial factor in effective sustainable tourism marketing. The findings suggest that DMOs should strive to create content that is both appealing and informative, striking a delicate balance between promoting attractive destination features and educating visitors about responsible travel practices. By maintaining this balance, DMOs can attract visitors while simultaneously fostering a culture of responsible tourism.

The study also revealed significant opportunities for DMOs to leverage on user-generated content that aligns with sustainability messages. This approach can increase authenticity and engagement while promoting responsible tourism behaviours. DMOs could create specific hashtags for sustainable tourism experiences and feature the best user-generated content on their official accounts, thereby fostering a community of responsible travellers. This would not only provide social proof of sustainable practices, but also encourage visitors to actively participate in and promote responsible tourism.

Highlighting community involvement emerged as a critical aspect of sustainable tourism promotion. This study demonstrates the importance of promoting community engagement and empowerment initiatives. DMOs should therefore prioritise content that demonstrates how tourism benefits local communities and preserves cultural heritage. This could include featuring stories of local artisans, community-based tourism projects, or cultural preservation efforts. Such efforts would illustrate the positive impacts of tourism on local communities, enhancing the destination's appeal to socially conscious travellers.

Consistency in sustainability messaging across all social media platforms was identified as a key factor in reinforcing a destination's commitment to responsible tourism. The findings suggest that DMOs should develop a coherent sustainability narrative that is reflected across all their social media channels. This could involve creating a sustainability brand guide that outlines key messages, visual elements, and even tone of voice for use all platforms. Such consistency helps in building a strong, recognisable brand identity associated with sustainable tourism.

The study also highlights the effectiveness of aligning sustainability messages with seasonal attractions and cultural events. DMOs should develop comprehensive content calendars that capitalise on these opportunities to promote sustainable tourism practices. For example, during peak wildlife viewing seasons, content could focus on responsible wildlife tourism practices. This approach would allow DMOs to tap into natural cycles and cultural rhythms, making their sustainability messaging more relevant and time-appropriate.

Collaboration with local stakeholders emerged as a valuable strategy for creating authentic sustainability-focused content. The findings demonstrate the importance of partnering with local communities, artisans, and environmental organisations, to enrich social media offerings. This could involve regular features focusing on local sustainability champions or co-created content with conservation organisations. Such collaborations would not only provide diverse and authentic content, but also strengthen relationships with local stakeholders.

While this study focused primarily on content analysis, it also revealed the need for DMOs to develop robust metrics for measuring the impacts of their sustainability-focused social media efforts. This could be achieved by tracking engagement rates, conducting sentiment analyses, or monitoring conversion rates for sustainable tourism offerings. DMOs should invest in social media analytics tools and regularly review and adjust their strategies based on performance data. This data-driven approach would facilitate continuous improvement and the optimisation of social media strategies.

The importance of digital marketing skills in promoting sustainable tourism cannot be overstated. The findings of this study highlight the need for DMOs to invest in training and capacity building to enhance their ability to utilise social media effectively. This could involve organising workshops on content creation, social media strategy, and sustainability communication for DMO staff. By enhancing these skills, DMOs would ensure that they remained at the forefront of digital marketing trends and could effectively communicate their sustainability messages.

Finally, the study emphasises the need to align social media content and broader sustainable tourism policies and initiatives. Policymakers should consider how digital platforms can be integrated into overall sustainable tourism strategies. This could involve

developing guidelines for social media use in promoting sustainable tourism or incorporating social media metrics into broader tourism impact assessments. By ensuring this alignment, destinations would be able to create a cohesive and powerful narrative around their commitment to sustainable tourism practices.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provided valuable insights into the use of social media for sustainable tourism promotion by Kerala DMOs, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations. The focus on a single destination, Kerala, limited the generalisability of findings to other destinations. While this allowed for an in-depth examination of the specific context, it may not have captured the diversity of approaches used in other regions or countries. Future research could adopt a comparative approach, examining the social media strategies of DMOs across multiple destinations or countries. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different cultural, economic, and environmental contexts influence social media strategies for sustainable tourism promotion.

The data collection was conducted over a specific period, which may not have captured long-term trends or seasonal variations in social media content. Tourism is a highly seasonal industry, and social media strategies may vary significantly throughout the year. Longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sustainability messaging evolves over time and how DMOs adapt their strategies to different seasons and events. Such research could reveal patterns and trends that are not visible in shorter term studies.

Another limitation was the focus on specific social media platforms, primarily Instagram, Facebook, and X. As the social media landscape continues to evolve rapidly, with new platforms emerging and existing ones changing their features and algorithms, future research should consider emerging platforms and their potential for sustainable tourism promotion. For example, the rise of TikTok and its impact on tourism marketing could be an interesting avenue for future research. Additionally, studies could explore how DMOs integrate newer features such as Instagram Reels or X Spaces into their sustainability communication strategies.

The study's focus on content analysis, while providing valuable insights into the types of content shared, did not measure the effectiveness of this content in influencing traveller behaviours or perceptions. Future research could incorporate surveys or interviews with travellers to assess the impact of social media content on sustainable tourism choices. This could involve tracking actual travel behaviours or decision-making processes of individuals exposed to sustainability-focused social media content from DMOs. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the real-world impact of social media strategies on sustainable tourism practices.

The study focused on the DMOs' social media activities but did not capture the perspectives of DMO staff or decision-making processes behind content creation. Future research could include interviews with DMO representatives to gain deeper insights into their social media strategies, challenges faced, and the perceived effectiveness of different approaches. This would provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing social media strategies for sustainable tourism promotion.

Furthermore, the study did not examine the broader digital marketing ecosystem, such as website content, email marketing, or search engine optimisation strategies. A more comprehensive analysis of DMOs' digital presence could provide a holistic view of sustainable tourism promotion efforts. Future research could also explore how social media strategies integrate with other digital marketing channels and how this integration affects the overall effectiveness of sustainable tourism promotion.

There is also potential for future research to explore the role of influencers and partnerships in promoting sustainable tourism through social media. Future studies could examine how DMOs collaborate with travel influencers or sustainability advocates to extend their reach and credibility. Additionally, research into the effectiveness of different types of content (e.g., videos, stories, and live streams) in communicating sustainability messages could provide practical insights for DMOs.

Lastly, as technology continues to advance, future research could explore the potential of emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality in promoting sustainable tourism experiences. Research could usefully investigate how these technologies could be integrated into social media strategies to create immersive and engaging content that promotes sustainable tourism practices.

6.4. Closing Remarks

This study has provided valuable insights into the use of social media platforms by destination marketing organisations in Kerala, India, for promoting sustainable tourism practices. The findings reveal the significant potential of social media as a tool for communicating sustainability messages, engaging eco-conscious travellers, and shaping a destination's image in the context of responsible tourism. By leveraging on the visual and interactive nature of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X, DMOs can effectively promote the natural beauty of their destinations, eco-friendly experiences, and community engagement initiatives.

The findings demonstrated that successful sustainable tourism promotion through social media requires a strategic approach, balancing promotional content with educational messages, and maintaining consistency across platforms while adapting to local cultural contexts. They also highlighted the importance of stakeholder collaboration and the integration of user-generated content in creating authentic and engaging sustainability narratives.

As the global tourism industry continues to grapple with the challenges of balancing economic growth with environmental conservation and social responsibility, the role of digital marketing in promoting sustainable practices becomes increasingly critical. This study contributes to both theoretical understandings and practical applications in this crucial area, offering a foundation for future research and providing actionable insights for DMOs and tourism marketers.

While acknowledging the limitations of this research, it is clear that the findings have significant implications for the future of sustainable tourism promotion. As technology evolves and traveller preferences shift towards more responsible forms of tourism, the strategies and insights revealed in this study will become ever more relevant. It is hoped that this research will inspire further explorations into the intersection between social media marketing and sustainable tourism, contributing to the development of more responsible and sustainable tourism practices worldwide.

Ultimately, the effective use of social media for sustainable tourism promotion has the potential to not only enhance destination appeal, but also to educate and inspire travellers

to make more responsible choices. Social media can play a crucial role in preserving natural and cultural heritage, supporting local communities, and ensuring the long-term viability of tourism destinations. As we look to the future, the integration of sustainability messaging into digital marketing strategies will be key to shaping a more responsible and resilient tourism industry.

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