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From Scroll to Soul: How Social Media Builds Travel Brands

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Abstract

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This study aims to examine the impact of social media networks' interactivity, benefits, and incentives on the brand image of Nepal's tourism industry. This study used a quantitative research design to gather data through a standardized questionnaire. This questionnaire was distributed among a carefully selected sample of 384 respondents, each chosen based on their potential to provide relevant and specific insights related to the research objectives.

Correlation and regression methodologies were utilized to investigate the connections between the variables. The findings show the interactivity of social media, the benefits of social media, and the incentives of social media all substantially impact the image of a company in the Nepalese setting. These findings highlight the critical role that social media engagement initiatives

play in changing perceptions of brands in the tourism industry. By providing empirical evidence on the impact of social media components on brand image, the study contributes to the current body of literature. It also offers significant insights for tourist marketers and stakeholders looking to promote brand equity using digital platforms.

1. Introduction

The digital age has made social media a vital tool for influencing customer behavior and shaping brand impressions (Ali et al., 2024; Praja et al., 2023). This tendency is particularly evident in the tourism sector, where companies increasingly rely on social media channels to engage with potential customers and enhance their brand image (Azhar et al., 2023; Keelson et al., 2024). Given Nepal's rich cultural heritage and breathtaking natural surroundings, the importance of social media in travel marketing has become increasingly apparent (Afren, 2024).

The impressions and connections people form with a brand help define their attitudes and actions toward that brand (Keelson et al., 2024). A strong brand image in tourism can lead to increased tourist interest, higher visitor numbers, and significant economic benefits for the local community. Thanks to their broad audience and interactive tools, social media outlets offer unique opportunities for locations to create and promote their brand identities.

Tourism locations frequently implement social media incentives to enhance follower engagement and cultivate community among their audiences. These strategies may include contests, offering prizes, and providing exclusive content (Keelson et al., 2024). Such initiatives stimulate interaction and strengthen the relationship between the tourism destination and its audience, promoting a more engaged and invested community. Besides increasing user involvement, these incentives help build a positive brand image. Social media interactions, particularly those incorporating incentives, clearly impact brand views and emotional attachment, according to Barreda et al. (2020). Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2023) further emphasized the importance of the quality of material posted on social media in raising brand awareness and, consequently, influencing the perception of a place.

Nepal's tourism industry has increasingly adopted social media as a strategic marketing tool (García-Haro et al., 2024; Keelson et al., 2024). The Nepal Tourism Board and other private sector companies extensively market central locations, including the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, and the Annapurna Circuit, via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Sharafuddin et al., 2024). These platforms not only enhance the brand image of the location but also serve as the primary vehicles for distributing striking photos, testimonials, and details on cultural events (Hussain & Wang, 2024).

In Nepal's tourism sector, social media incentives are critical in shaping consumers' impressions of a place's brand. Given the varied cultural settings throughout the nation and the increasing competitiveness among different areas, these incentives help build a competitive edge. Offering rewards for participation helps tourism companies raise brand awareness, foster goodwill, and cultivate devoted followings through engagement. Although social media is essential for developing a brand image, empirical research on the effects of social media on Nepal's travel

industry is scarce. Examining how social media incentives affect brand image in Nepalese tourism helps this paper close this void. The results will give legislators and marketers critical new insights to create plans appealing to domestic and international visitors.

These elements demonstrate how strongly customers perceive brands in the tourism sector, influenced by social media incentives. Understanding the effects of these incentives helps Nepal, a nation where tourism is a significant economic driver, create marketing plans that enhance the site's attractiveness and encourage ongoing visitor engagement.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

Social Media Interactivity and Brand Image

Studies show that social media interactivity—including direct contact, sharing, and commentary—significantly improves brand image (Satar et al., 2024; Samarah et al., 2022; Hutter et al., 2013). For example, Samarah et al. (2022) revealed that customer brand engagement favorably correlates with perceived brand interaction, promoting brand trust and loyalty. Comparably, Hutter et al. (2013) showed how user interactions on a brand's Facebook page increase brand awareness and purchase intention. Moreover, Satar et al. (2024) underlined the need for brand interactivity in forming brand perceptions since it moderates the link between social media involvement and customer-brand engagement. Therefore, it can be hypothesized as:

H1: Social Media Interactivity has a significant impact on Brand Image.

Social Media Benefits and Brand Image

Studies show that social media interactivity—including direct interaction, sharing, and comments—much improves brand image (Samarah et al., 2022; Hutter et al., 2013; Satar et al., 2024). For example, Samarah et al. (2022) showed that customer brand engagement positively corresponds with perceived brand interaction, hence building brand trust and loyalty. Hutter et al. (2013) similarly discovered that user interactions on a brand's Facebook page raise brand awareness and purchase intention. Moreover, Satar et al. (2024) underlined the need for brand interactivity in forming brand impressions since it helps to control the link between social media participation and customer-brand interaction.

Social media provides several different advantages that influence several spheres. It makes social connectivity easier so people can keep distance ties (Okonkwo & Awad, 2023). It provides a quick way to share information, improving news and knowledge availability (Cataldo et al., 2021). In business, social media has changed consumer involvement, brand recognition, and marketing plans (Yu, 2023). From an educational standpoint, it offers forums for information sharing and online learning (Simangunsong & Handoko, 2020). Social media also enables people to express themselves and participate in societal debate, promoting both personal development and social transformation (Romero-Hall, 2021). Thus, it can be hypothesized as follow:

H2: Social Media Benefits has a significant impact on Brand Image.

Social Media Rewards and Brand Image

Empirical research shows that brand image is much improved by incentives presented through social media participation (Barreda et al., 2020; Raji et al., 2019; Rehnen et al., 2017). For example, Barreda et al. (2020) found that social media rewards and benefits influence consumers' brand commitment, enhancing brand image. In line with this, Raji et al. (2019) underlined the part rewards play in forming brand impressions by reporting that hedonic and functional brand images moderate the link between social media advertising and behavioral intentions. Moreover, Rehnen et al. (2017) underlined how favorably rewarded consumer participation in loyalty programs promotes attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, stressing its influence on brand image. Thus, it can be hypothesized as follow:

H3: Social Media Rewards has a significant impact on Brand Image.

3. Methodology

This research utilized a quantitative methodology to investigate the influence of social media incentives on brand perception. A purposive sampling method was employed to identify 384 participants who actively engage with social media sites and possess familiarity with brand-related rewards. A standardized questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" was created to evaluate participants' perceptions of social media rewards and their impact on brand image. The questionnaire underwent pre-testing to guarantee clarity and reliability.

The data analysis entailed computing descriptive statistics, such as the mean and standard deviation, to encapsulate the responses. Pearson's correlation analysis was utilized to examine the correlations among variables, while multiple regression analysis was executed to assess the predictive influence of social media incentives on brand image. The reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were evaluated to verify the robustness of the findings. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 signifying satisfactory internal consistency. Construct validity was assessed via component analysis, validating that the questions accurately measured the desired constructs.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study, guaranteeing informed consent, confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw at any moment. The findings elucidate the influence of social media rewards on brand image and provide insights for marketers seeking to improve brand perceptions via strategic online engagement.

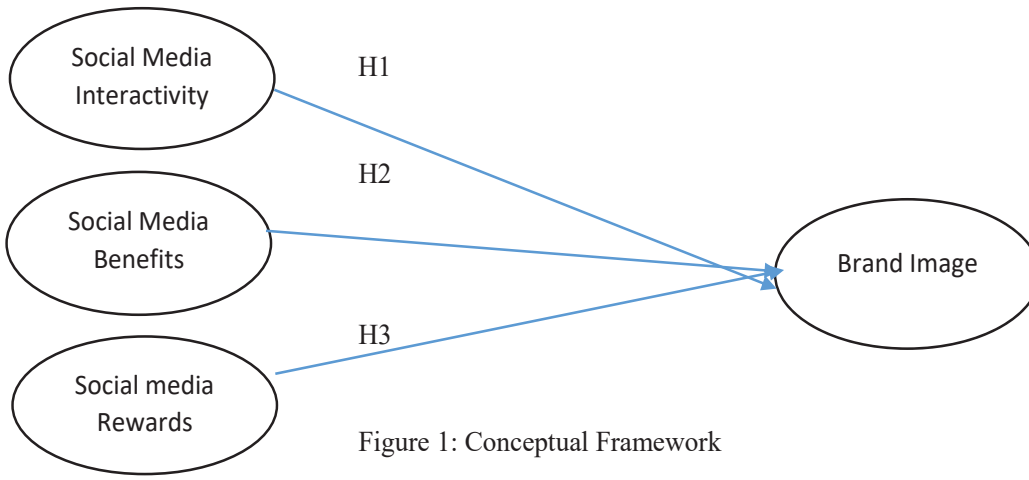

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

4. Analysis and results

Table 1: Mean, SD, and Correlations Coefficient

Constructs	Mean	SD	SBI	SBM	SMR	BI
SBI	3.94	0.95	1			
SBM	3.94	0.95	.625**	1		
SMR	4.38	1.13	0.39*	.145*	1	
BI	4.02	1.35	.556**	.613**	.747**	1

Note: ** = p < 0.01. *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). SBI = Social media interactivity, SBM = Social media benefits, SMR = Social media rewards, BI = Brand image*

The descriptive data for the primary constructs of the study—Social Media Interactivity (SBI), Social Media Benefits (SBM), Social Media Rewards (SMR), and Brand Image (BI)—are shown in Table 1. With identical mean scores (M = 3.94, SD = 0.95), SBI and SBM indicate modest degrees of perceived engagement and advantages among respondents. With a mean score (M = 4.38, SD = 1.13), SMR shows that participants see incentives more favorably. With a mean score of 4.02 (SD = 1.35), BI reflects a good view of brand image. The standard deviations illustrate variations in response variability among the constructs; BI has the highest dispersion. These results highlight the need for social media components to form brand impressions in Nepal's travel industry.

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between various independent variables and the dependent variable, brand image (BI). Brand Image (BI) shows a Pearson correlation of 0.556 with Social Media Interactivity (SMI), indicating a moderate positive relationship. It suggests that higher levels of social media interactivity are associated with a better perception of brand image. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (r = 0.556, p = 000 < 0.01).

Regarding social media benefits (SMB), BI has a strong Pearson correlation of 0. 613, which is significant at the 0.01 level. It suggests that perceived benefits from social media usage have a substantial positive impact on the brand image. Social media rewards (SMR) exhibit a weak Pearson correlation of 0. 613 with BI, indicating a significant relationship between social media rewards and brand image. While social media rewards may provide value, they influence how users perceive the brand. Thus, a substantial and positive relationship exists between social media benefits and brand image ($r = 0.613$, $p = 000 < 0.01$).

Social media rewards (SMR) have a correlation coefficient of 0.747 with a brand image (BI), indicating a strong positive relationship. Its p-value was recorded to be 0.000, which is less than 0.01. Thus, it can be concluded that a positive and significant relationship exists between social media rewards and brand image ($r = 0.747$, $p = 000 < 0.01$). A favorable perception of social media rewards is significantly associated with a higher brand image.

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.014	.205		4.956	0.001
	SMI	0.286	0.071	0.207	4.035	0.000
	SMB	0.384	0.092	0.193	4.177	0.000
	SMR	0.323	.067	.328	4.794	0.001

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Image (BI)

Table 2 deals with multiple regression analysis. The result reveals that social media interactivity (SMI) has a significant influence on brand image in tourism ($\beta = 0.286$, $t = 4.035$; $p = 0.001 < 0.01$). Likewise, social media benefits significantly influenced brand image ($\beta = 0.384$, $t = 4.177$; $p = 0.001 < 0.01$). Furthermore, social media rewards significantly impact brand image ($\beta = 0.323$, $t = 4.794$; $p = 0.001 < 0.01$). Overall, these findings highlight the critical role of social media in brand image among consumers.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study underscore the importance of social media interactivity (SMI), social media benefits, and rewards in shaping a brand image within the tourism industry. The findings reveal strong connections between these elements and brand image. Social media interactivity fosters direct interaction and engagement between tourism companies and their consumers. Developing a strong brand image is intricately linked to creating a sense of community and trust, which this interaction helps foster. Barreda et al. (2020) highlight that this interaction increases brand commitment and emotional attachment, enhancing brand impression. Stojanovic et al. (2018) also found that user-generated content on social media increases brand awareness, promoting brand image and loyalty.

The advantages of social media—access to unique content and tailored experiences—help further enhance a positive brand image. This 'unique content' can include high-quality photos and videos

of tourist destinations, engaging stories from other travelers, and informative posts about local culture and customs. These advantages complement the results of Barreda et al. (2020), who found that social media rewards and benefits influence consumers' brand commitment, boosting the brand image. Furthermore, Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2023) emphasized the need for excellent content to increase brand awareness and shape impressions of a place.

Social media rewards, such as contests where users can win free trips or special offers like discounted hotel stays, help motivate user involvement and content development. These benefits improve emotional brand attachment and interactivity. Research by Barreda et al. (2020) supports this idea, showing that compensated consumer involvement in loyalty programs favorably promotes attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, hence underlining its impact on brand image.

The framework of Nepal's travel sector emphasizes even more these characteristics. To promote locations, including the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara, and the Annapurna Circuit, the Nepal Tourism Board and business partners aggressively use social media channels, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These sites improve their corporate image and provide primary means for showcasing arresting images, quotes, and specifics on cultural events (Sharafuddin et al., 2024). Such projects increase contact and improve the relationship between the tourism location and its audience, encouraging a more involved and committed community. ,

Finally, the research confirms that in the travel industry, brand image is significantly influenced by social media involvement, benefits, and rewards. These components not only enhance user involvement and emotional attachment but also profoundly impact brand image. These social media strategies can potentially transform tourism destinations, especially in developing nations like Nepal, by attracting more visitors, boosting the local economy, and generating significant interest. Future studies should explore the long-term consequences of these social media activities on brand image and analyze the role of other elements like cultural influences and technical developments in shaping brand impressions.

6. Implications

The significant impact of social media interactivity, perks, and rewards on the brand image within Nepal's tourism industry highlights the transforming power of digital participation in changing attitudes and promoting closer relationships with possible visitors. Emphasizing the need for interactive elements to improve brand image, Kunwar et al. (2022) show how social media functions affect tourist destinations. Further confirming that social media participation enhances brand impression, Sthapit et al. (2023) demonstrated that marketing favorably influences customer value creation in Nepalese tourist-based eateries. These results imply that Nepal's tourist industry should deliberately use social media channels to promote interactivity, provide concrete advantages, and apply reward-based policies to improve its brand image and draw more visitors.

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