

# Effect of Digital Marketing Strategies on Destination Choice of Domestic Travelers during Post COVID 19 Waves: Special Reference to Ella, Sri Lanka

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#### ABSTRACT

COVID 19 has halted the world's operations physically and has made the world virtual and penetrating. Including the tourism industry, all most all the industries in the world have collapsed. Digital Media came onto the stage becoming a decisive factor in deciding the survival of businesses. Digital Marketing strategies, being the causal factor in Post COVID 19 waves has created a massive need for all industries operating in the world. consideration of the above, this study primarily aims, to investigate the effect of digital marketing strategies on the destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves with special reference to Ella, Sri Lanka. A sample of 100 domestic travelers who visit Ella was taken as the sample employing a purposive sampling technique. A self-administered questionnaire was the data collection tool and respondents were contacted through an online survey, while multiple linear regression was used to generate the results. It revealed that digital marketing strategies: SMM, e-mail marketing, SEO, website design, and paid advertising, have a significant effect on the destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves in Sri Lanka. Moreover, email marketing is the most influential variable, and website design is the least Influential variable to the destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves. This study emphasizes that digital marketing strategies are acting as a rescuer in pandemic situations due to the uninterrupted services offered. Further studies on social media on destination rebranding can be conducted in the future.

*Keywords:* destination choice, digital marketing strategies, domestic travelers, post COVID 19 waves

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# 1. Introduction

Naval Corona outbreak or COVID 19 has spread all over the world influencing billions of people globally (World Health Organization, WHO 2020). The tourism and hospitality sector is vulnerable to both man-made and natural calamities. Due to the pandemic, the tourism sector was brought to a halt. Thus, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector is struggling to organize itself. The post-epidemic process requires tourism businesses to keep up with new procedures to attract customers and they can stand out in the competition only through adapting to the needs and requests of new customer preferences and producing goods and services in line with these preferences. Since tourism is one of the biggest and fastest-growing industries universally, it is anticipated to play a critical part in recapturing the socio-economic steadiness after the COVID-19 pandemic and its waves. It could be a key supporter of the island economies and one of the foremost vital industries that create much required foreign earnings in the Sri Lankan economy (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). Dudzinski & Hoisington, (2020) declared, during the post-COVID-19 waves, the industry is particularly vulnerable to diminished tourism and travel in conjunction with a slowdown in economic activity. Hence, the industry needs to address changes in customer demand after the startling COVID-19 waves and reestablish travelers' confidence. Though with fewer restrictions and a high standard of hygiene and safety measures, life turns to normalcy, customers still fear to travel to destinations. In the current context, international travel restrictions and stay home procedures are causing the most critical disruption of the global economy (Goslin, Scott & Hall, 2020). The circumstance should be strategically addressed with appropriate proactive and receptive measures considering the current circumstances and to overcome future threats to ensure the economic, and socio-economic prosperity of all people keeping space for expanded travel and tourism. In order to attract travelers, the context of digital marketing has been placed with the use of technology. Digital Marketing strategies play a vital role to inform the market of business and to entice travelers to choose and visit destinations. According to Luo and Zhong, 2015 nowadays, social networks are the most significant source of getting travel information and e-word-of-mouth for traveler's purchase decisions. Especially online marketing and sales have been the popular medium to reach the travelers during the covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it is essential to stay at the top of the mind of the target audience to attract travllers to the destinations via digital marketing platforms effectively. Considering the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on Sri Lankan tourism, it can be noted that Sri Lanka has gained a better reputation than the other nations within the world for controlling COVID-19 pandemic, course of action of quarantine facilities and medical facilities needed for foreigners, application of personal defensive equipment in handling airline/sea line travelers at particular ports, the continuation of the supply of fundamental human needs, the extension of visas for foreigners securing them with accessible offices and effective digital marketing strategies, etc. Consequently, this situation would be favorable in flourishing Sri Lankan Tourism in the future, in spite of the fact that it gains losses nowadays (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). This favorable situation can be promoted through digital marketing to attract domestic and international travelers.

#### 1.1. Research problem

Considering the Sri Lankan context, it is important to use digital marketing strategies effectively to re-establish the tourism industry since tourism as a part of the service sector contributes to the GDP of the country mostly. There are reserach studies and scholarly articles related to the effect of digital marketing strategies on the revisit decision, customer retention, destination marketing of travelers, but they are limited to the normal environment, are not related to post-COVID 19 waves. The use of information technology and especially

social media has revolutionized finding and sharing information among millennials (Kumaret al., 2018). In this era, online social interactions have become a new habit for travelers and they generate a significant impact on the behavior and experience of travelers (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). According to Kusumaningrum and Wachyuni, 2020 due to the short distance and travel time, local travel is considered less risky. So it will be the biggest investment in the tourism industry in near future. So digital marketing can play a vital role to develop domestic tourism during post-Covid 19 waves. After the epidemic, the local/domestic tourism industry became the choice of tourists/travelers. The unavailability of research related to the effect of digital marketing strategies on destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves has created an exact empirical knowledge gap, nationally and internationally. Therefore, this study aims to bridge that gap effectively and sufficiently.

## 1.2. Research questions

Based on the identified background and problem statement of the study, the following research questions were developed.

*RQ 01:* What is the effect of digital marketing strategies on the destination choice of domestic travelers' during post-COVID 19 pandemic waves?

RQ 02: What is the most and least influential variable of digital marketing strategies on destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves?

## 1.3. Research objectives

The research objectives of the study were derived from the research questions.

RQ 01: To investigate the effect of digital marketing strategies on the destination choice of domestic travelers' during post-COVID 19 pandemic waves.

RQ 02: To identify the most and least influential variable of digital marketing strategies on destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves.

#### 2. Review of the literature

Contradictory and similar points, under-revealed areas correlated with COVID 19 and tourism, digital marketing strategies, destination choice of domestic travelers will be elaborated with previous empirical and theoretical findings.

#### 2.1. Post-COVID 19 and tourism

Kim & Lee (2020) noted that the tourism industry has been widely acknowledged as a driving force in the country. Unfortunately, the tourism sector is vulnerable to the increasing frequency, and severity of natural disasters and pandemics, which often result in substantial financial losses (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). According to Dudzinski, Hoisington, Brown, et al (2020), there were fears that given the demands for social distancing, the tourism industry would be one of the worst affected industries by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Brodeur and Brodeur (2020), the impact of COVID-19 was going to be uneven in both space and time. As such, there is a need for each destination, tourism sector, and subsector to have customized measures aimed at conducting business under the new normal.

In accordance with the research of Dudzinski et al., (2020), the coming of the next new lifestyle of the post-COVID 19 era could be characterized as the "urgency of the moment" era. Thus, the competency here is about the capacity of not losing sight of the action that might be needed for tomorrow. Kim and Lee (2020) mentioned, that the next "New Normal"

or the post-COVID 19 era would not similar to the new normal that we experiencing now. The pandemic would touch the main issues of life, what we believe in, how we think, how we visualize our role in life, our next generation essentials. The tourism industry has been identified as one of the most influenced sectors in the world, but there are optimistic expectations as tourists still have a strong desire to travel (Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020). Therefore, we need a new way of establishing and managing the survival of industries in this challenging era.

## 2.2. Digital Marketing Strategies (DMS)

#### 2.2.1. Social media marketing

Social media marketing helps to boost brand awareness. Social media marketing is used to promote brand image by continuously sending out positive images of the company on social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and so forth. In essence, social media marketing should not be regarded as simply an add-on to search engine marketing, but it should be a form of powerful marketing tool that could potentially reach millions of audiences across the globe through a close-knit network (Park & Oh, 2012). The impact and usage of social media marketing strategies are very crucial for satisfying tourist demand in the global world (Jashi, 2013). Research conducted by Taiminen and Karjaluoto, (2015) found that social media marketing is important and that organizations use these channels to communicate and manage consumer relationships. Social media has essentially altered the process of customer decision-making, and a more advanced perspective on how customers interact with brands has emerged over the past decade; for instance, in the travel industry sector, it has clarified how the participation of social media benefits intelligent tourism marketers (Riyadi et al., 2019). There is no doubt that social media has a huge impact on lifestyle and decision making, especially in generation Y. (Kumar et al., 2018). They make decisions very quickly and they are technologically very advanced. So, there are options to find out more. Relevant bodies can use this technique very easily to increase demand for destination choice.

#### 2.2.2. Email marketing

E-mail marketing is one of the digital marketing techniques initially used, and it involves providing customized or targeted messages to specific individuals at the proper time. With e-mails, businesses can send e-mails that meet the user's needs. (Scharl et al., 2005). According to Reviews, (2019) digital marketing delivers messages to an audience through electronic mails. E-mail marketing is a kind of direct marketing that utilizes e-mail as a means of communication or fund-promoting messages to link the viewers. In its broadest logic, e-mail marketing can take into account every single e-mail sent to a probable or existing customer. This is a great way to stay in touch with customers, as well as to give them an in-depth description of your products or services. It's a great way to promote specialties and get customer feedback. It can turn a prospect into a salesman and a salesman into a loyal customer and can help to take destination choice.

#### 2.2.3. Search engine optimization (SEO)

According to Google's Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide (2010), SEO is a series of modifications and techniques, which make it easier for search engines to crawl, index, and understand the content of a website. Consumers tend to trust organic links more, advertisers often try to increase their visibility in the organic list by climbing the search engine's ranking algorithm using techniques collectively known as search engine optimization(Berman & Katona, 2013). Research done by Veglis, (2020) states that there is a visible moderate impact of search engine optimization on online advertisements in Jordanian companies utilizing e-

marketing. It is essential for companies to choose the website's title, meta description, headings, and page contents that search engines can recognize better than others, carefully. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a long-term strategy, which should lead to a higher ranking on the search results page and, subsequently, bring higher traffic to a website. Although the result of the optimization is not guaranteed, the right mix of off-page and on-page optimization techniques is extremely vital (Veglis & Giomelakis, 2020). The process can be time-consuming and complex but it is an easier way to make travel decisions very effectively.

# 2.2.4. Web site design

Web sites often provide the first impression of an organization. For many organizations, websites are crucial to ensure sales or to procure services within. This is a very attractive idea to change the travel or destination choice of the travelers. When a person opens a website, the first impression is probably made in a few seconds, and the user will either stay or move on to the next site based on many factors (Scharl et al., 2005). A company's website can be described as the home of the brand in the online environment (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). According to William C. McDowell (2016), consumers linger in a company's website longer if they feel immersed, without mental interruption in the content.

## 2.2.5. Paid advertising

Paid advertising is any kind of advertising that is paid for, versus owned or earned advertising. With paid advertising, marketers pay the owner of ad space in exchange for use of that space. The price paid for that ad space is often settled through a bidding process between marketers and the ad space owners. An online advertising system whereby the advertiser pays for clicks on their advert (Reddy, 2016). In contrast to earned and owned ads, online paid advertising requires the purchase of ad spots to attract internet traffic. The featured ads show up on designated websites, and advertisers or businesses bid against their competition for keywords that pertain to their services or products. There is a fixed price for impressions or the bid is based on a certain number of responses (Berman & Katona, 2013).

#### 2.3. Destination choice

Destination choice is a tourist's decision of which destination to travel from multiple alternatives. Destination choice is the process by which a potential traveler chooses a destination, for the purpose of fulfilling their current travel-related needs. Aktaş, Aksu, and Çizel (2007) claimed that in the context of tourism, tourists' destination choice is also a sorting out process, which contains a series of steps, including obtaining passive information, initial choice considering situational constraints, evaluation of an evoked set, active information searching, and the final destination selection. Seo, Yun, and Kim (2017) predicted that the sorting out process could be influenced by a number of internal (motivations, attitudes, needs, etc.) and external factors (information, price, spare time, etc.) Destination choice arises from the tourists 'evaluation of destination attributes and their perceived utility values. Jordan (2012) agreed that numerous studies have also supported that "tourists travel to those destinations that have established a reputation as a place to experiment with quality local products".

## 2.4. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

H1: There is a significant direct effect of social medial marketing on destination choice

H2: There is a significant direct effect of email marketing on destination choice

H3: There is a significant direct effect of search engine optimization on destination choice

H4: There is a significant direct effect of website design on destination choice

H<sub>5</sub>: There is a significant direct effect of paid advertising on destination choice

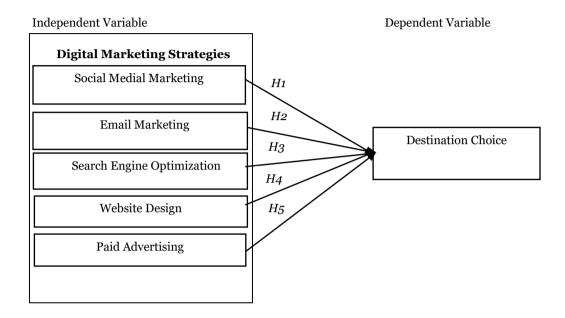


Figure: 1 Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the researcher based on previous literature.

## 3. Methods

The study has been designed to use a quantitative approach, where the objectives are designed to be achieved through the quantitative method. The research is focused to investigate the effect of digital marketing strategy on destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves: with special reference to Ella, Sri Lanka. The target population of the study is the domestic travelers in Sri Lanka, while the sample was 100 domestic travelers who visited Ella area in Sri Lanka since Ella is the most popular destination with numerous places to visit.

The sample is selected by employing the purposive sample technique because the researcher only considers people who use digital marketing strategies. Primary data will be used and collected through a self-administered questionnaire. Respondents have been contacted through an online survey. Multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the effect of digital marketing strategies on the destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves. SPSS is used as the platform to generate the intended results of the study.

# 4. Data analysis

# 4.1. Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test

	<u> </u>		
Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on	Cronbach's alpha based on	
	Standardized item	Standardized item	
0.804	0.837	18	

Source: Field Survey (2021)

According to table 1, Cronbach's alpha value of 0.804 indicates that the internal reliability and validity of the questionnaire are excellent. This indicates that there is an internal consistency between the items used in the questionnaire. Therefore, these items were combined to create corresponding variables and the questionnaire can be considered as a reliable tool.

### 4.2. Analysis of the first objective

• To investigate the effect of digital marketing strategies on destination choice of domestic travelers' during post-COVID 19 pandemic waves.

## **Regression analysis**

DC =  $\beta_0$ +  $\beta_1$ (SMM)+  $\beta_2$ (EM)+  $\beta_3$ (SEO)+  $\beta_4$ (WD)+  $\beta_5$ (PA)+  $\epsilon_1$ 

DC = 1.922 + 0.434(SMM) + 0.601(EM) + 0.507(SEO) + 0.128(WD) + 0.233(PA) + E1

Where; **DC** = Destination Choice **SMM** = Social Media Marketing

**EM** = Email Marketing **SEO** = Search Engine Optimization **WB** = Website Design

**PA** = Paid Advertising

According to the table, constant ( $\beta$ 0) is 1.922, which indicates that while digital marketing stratergies remain zero, destination choice is 1.922. P - value of constant is 0.0206 and which states that it is statistically insignificant at 0.05 (95% confident level) level of significance (0.0206 > 0.05).

Table 2: Regression Model Summary

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Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.			
	В	Std. Error	Beta	_				
(Constant)	1.922	0.206		3.17	0.000			
SMM	0.434	0.112	0.197	2.279	0.000			
EM	0.601	0.117	0.195	2.056	0.002			
SEO	0.507	0.241	0.038	0.428	0.001			
WD	0.128	0.351	0.301	0.621	0.005			
PA	0.233	0.108	0.038	0.434	0.002			

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Regression analysis was conducted to achieve the first objective of this research. There is a strong positive significant relationship between Digital Marketing Strategies (DMS) and the destination choice of domestic travelers, according to the multiple regression analysis. All the P-values are less than 0.05 level (95% confident level).

Table 3: ANOVA Table

Model	Sum of Squares	df.	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	37.834	7	5.405	15.946	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	29.343	92	.319		
Total	67.177	99			

Source: Field Survey (2021)

According to the ANOVA table result, the p-value of the model is 0.000 (P < 0.05), which represents that the overall model is statistically significant. Hence, the regression model is appropriate, it indicates that the independent variables have jointly influenced the destination choice.

# 4.3. Analysis of the second objective

• To identify the most and least influential variables on digital Marketing Strategies in destination choice of domestic travelers during post-COVID 19 waves.

According to the outcomes generated through multiple regression analysis, Email Marketing (EM) is the most influential variable since its Regression value is 0.601 while website design is the least influential variable with a Regression value of 0.128, which indicates the effect on Digital Marketing Strategies (DMS) on destination choice of the domestic travelers in Ella, Sri Lanka.

## 5. Results and discussions

When considering Social Media Marketing (SMM), the  $\beta$  coefficient of 0.434 implies that when social media marketing increases by one unit while all other independent variables remain constant, destination choice increases by 0.434 units. Moreover, the probability of the SMM is 0.000. Since the P-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, SMM significantly contributes to the regression model. Also when considering Email Marketing (EM), the  $\beta$  coefficient of 0.601 implies that when EM increases by one unit while all other independent variables remain constant, destination choice increases by 0.601 units. Moreover, the probability of the EM is 0.002. Since the P-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, EM significantly contributes to the regression model.

When considering Search Engine Optimization (SEO), the  $\beta$  coefficient of 0.507 implies that when SEO increases by one unit while all other independent variables remain constant, destination choice increases by 0.507 units. The P-value of the SEO is 0.001. Since the P-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, SEO significantly contributes to the regression model. Website Design's (WD)  $\beta$  coefficient of 0.128 implies that when WD increases by one unit while all other independent variables remain constant, destination choice increases by 0.128 units. Moreover, the probability of the WD is 0.005 since the P-

value is less than 0.05 level of significance, WD significantly contributes to the regression model.

When considering Paid Advertising (PA), the  $\beta$  coefficient of 0.233 implies that when PA increases by one unit while all other independent variables remain constant, destination choice increases by 0.233 units. Moreover, the P-value of the PA is 0.002. Since the P-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, PA significantly contributes to the regression model. According to the above results, it can be determined that dimensions of Digital Marketing Strategies (DMS),: SMM, e-mail marketing, SEO, website design, and paid advertising significantly affect the destination choice of domestic travelers during post- COVID 19 waves in Sri Lanka.

#### 6. Conclusion

Global COVID-19 can have long-term effects on panic travel. Effective strategies are needed to boost traveler confidence and help businesses recover from this public health crisis in a timely manner. The resilience and sustainability of the tourism industry can be enhanced by taking action to meet the needs of different clients and turn adversity into opportunities. These efforts are consistent with forecasting trends, such as the demand for environmental services, and the lack of customer contact. Reflecting on changing travel expectations and industry recovery programs, academia can contribute to the development of tourism marketing and management theory to promote positive changes in industry practice in the wake of this epidemic. COVID-19 requires close academic attention to identifying changes in traveler behavior and decision-making management practices. The research paper helps to arrive at the conclusion digital marketing plays an important role in the traveler decision-making process and hopes that the research will address relevant topics of interest and motivate further study.

It is critical to spread positive news through news channels and digital media platforms to make the potential tourists aware. Maintaining advertising campaigns is also a pivotal point in marketing and promoting the Sri Lankan tourism industry. Making awareness, e-mail marketing during the pandemic situation for communication process is a must. A touchless environment free from the spread of COVID 19 can be assured through this. Up to date design of websites including all the necessary guidelines and instructions regarding the pandemic and the way to behave in the destinations minimizing the spread can be updated and boosted.

It is important to market using digital marketing strategies to attract more travelers while sustaining the tourism industry. Service providers and destination management companies within the tourism and hospitality industry must be sufficiently educated and prepared for the recovery to retain and collaborate with guests/ potential travelers appropriately to avoid uncertainties and risks. Destination rebranding, highlighting the positive elements during the outbreak, is very much essential after the situation. This research also provides input for travel entrepreneurs and destination managers to adjust to technology. The use of technology is the main tool in traveling, starting from determining the transportation used, accommodation, to finding location information using the internet. Furthermore, travel entrepreneurs and destination managers need to shift their promotional activities to social media. Since this study is an empirical study, this paper can be used as a theoretical implication for studies.

Even though this study has several contributions, it also has some limitations. The major limitation faced is the lack of respondents to the survey due to the restrictions prevailing in the country due to COVID 19 and lack of awareness about theoretical knowledge. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to repeat this empirical research following the pandemic in a different context. After clear and precise discussions and recommendations based on the findings, it can be concluded that digital marketing strategies affected destination choice very much, especially in post-Covid 19 waves. If the Sri Lankan government, tourists, and service providers can distinguish the need, and provide adequate technical knowledge about marketing strategies, it will help the development of the whole tourism industry within the country.

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