

Vol. 5, No. 2, August, 2015

Bi- Annual

ISSN No. 2278-8379

TOURISM INNOVATIONS

An International Journal of Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress (ITHC)

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Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress

www.indiantourismcongress.org

Tourism Innovations: An International Journal of Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress (ITHC)

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ISSN : 2278-8379

VOLUME : 5

NUMBER : 2

Publication Schedule:

Twice a year : February-August

Disclaimer:

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Published by: Bharti Publications in association with Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress (ITHC)

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Managing Editor

Tourism Innovations

Bharti Publications

4819/24, 3rd Floor, Mathur Lane

Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002

Email: journal.itc@gmail.com, bhartipublications@gmail.com

Website: www.indiantourismcongress.org, www.bhartipublications.com

Social Media Influence on Holiday Decision Making Process

Joby Thomas, Ponny Thomas

ABSTRACT

Social media is enabling people to express and share ideas and thoughts with others, it also enables them to connect with others. Social networking has made it simple to create relations irrespective of age, culture and geographical differences. Social media strongly influence the consumer decision process. In tourism, social media plays an important role in obtaining information especially in the pre-trip stage of one's travel and it influences the travel decision. Consumer's access to internet and other social media technologies are opening opportunities for new and diverse sources of information concerning traveler behavior. Consumers use social media during travel planning process in three stages i.e., pre trip, during trip and post trip. The decision making process is usually considered a complex process involving different stages. Online travel reviews have a significant influence on the purchase decisions of travellers. The study is undertaken with the objective to identify the role and relevance of social media communication in travel decision making process. A survey is undertaken for the study and the sample population consists of respondents from Bangalore. The term social media in this study refers to sites where one can upload and exchange information with other users which includes discussion forums, facebook pages, review sites and twitter.

Keywords; Social Media, Holiday Travel, Decision Making.

Introduction

Tourism is an extremely information-intensive sector. The rapid development of information technologies facilitates the speed and efficiency with which the industry's information is processed, stored, retrieved, distributed and otherwise manipulated. It is not a computer or telephone or video brochure or teleconferencing that is being used by the industry, but a whole system of computer and communication technologies. These include: computerized reservation

systems, electronic funds transfer, digital telephone networks, smart cards, satellite printers, mobile communications and more. All players will have to become users of information technology, in order to ensure their own survival and competitiveness. Information technology will leave no player in the travel and tourism sector untouched and escape from its impacts.

Technology has advanced so rapidly that it is not only possible for visitors to find out the price, availability and location of

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their future vacation spot but the technology is already available on systems such as Sabre Vision to allow clients to take a visual tour of the hotels they will stay at, to pre-view the beds they will sleep in and to visit the rain forest they will walk in, before departure. The development in information technology has changed the way people behave and interact with each other.

Social media is enabling people to express and share ideas and thoughts with others, it is also enabling them to connect with others. Social networking has made it simple to create relations irrespective of age, culture and geographical differences. Social media strongly influence the consumer decision process. In tourism sector, social media plays an important role in getting information especially in the search and decision-making stages. Consumer's access to internet and other social media technologies is opening opportunities for new and diverse sources of information concerning traveler behavior. Consumer's use social media during travel planning process in three stages i.e., pre trip, during trip and post trip. The decision making process is usually considered a complex process involving different stages. Online travel reviews have a significant influence on the purchase decisions of the consumers. The process of purchasing a tourism product is usually considered as a complex process as the decision making involves a variety of activities and also deals with intangible products.

Tourists need high level of reliable information in the purchase decision of tourism products in order to minimize the risk factor caused by the complexity of the product. The main stages involved in decision making process are need recognition, information search, search for alternatives, analyze the authenticity

of information and post purchase evaluation of experience. Depending on the type of tourism and the selection of destination the need for information also varies.

Need is the perceived gap between the existing and the desired state of a person. The felt or perceived gap creates a feeling of discomfort and the tourist begins to act on it to remove the dissonance (Chaudhary,2010). Once the need is felt, efforts begin to fill the gap. As a result, tourists start looking for information that suits them best. During information search, the customer will get a number of options available in market. The next stage is to select the best choice. Each alternative is evaluated and the one which gives the best result is selected by the customer. Customers go for final decision making only after confirming that the product they are about to purchase is real and genuine. For this purpose it is necessary to analyze the authenticity of information they have collected. During post-purchase evaluation of experience stage the tourist will experience the product and will be able to differentiate the gap between the promises and the actual outcome. The tourists compare their experiences with expectations. The final judgment of the product occurs at this stage.

Review of literature

Advancement in technology has changed consumer behavior and consumers collect as much as information about the product before purchasing it. Because of the unique characteristics of tourism products like intangibility, perishability, seasonality, interdependence etc, tourists have special behavior in decision making process. The decision to purchase a tourism product takes a long period of planning and also involves emotional significance. A holiday

or travel is considered as an important event in a person's life and so while purchasing the product one should be careful in order to reduce the risk. Due to the nature of the tourism product the information is not collected at a single stage but it is an ongoing process. According to the study tourists use social media as the primary source of information while travelling (Rodriguez, 2009).

Social media is an important marketing channel which helps tourism enterprisers and destination marketers to reach the potential visitors. Internet is a major platform for exchange of information between the suppliers and customers and also it serves various other purposes. Travel information search contains three main components or travel information search process which includes the interaction of online tourism domain, online traveler and the search engine. The findings of the study shows the growing importance of online travel information search and also the role of search engines in promoting social media directly or indirectly to the travel information searchers (Xiang, & Gretzel, 2009).

Tourism products require a large quantity of information in all the stages of buying behavior. Because of the modern technological advancements in communication to a large extent, tourist as a consumer has been influenced by new media and also new media has evolved as an important interactive tool. The influence of new media is not only confined to information search alone but also is used in the entire decision making process. The study reveals that information search is very crucial in decision making process. The study also focuses on the role played by new media in need identification, information search, in choosing right travel option, in giving feedback and sharing

the experiences (Dileep, Sindhu, & Ismail, 2013).

The technological advancements has changed the social and economic life, the way people communicate, conduct business and work. According to the study there are three phases in travel experience formation process i.e., (a) pre-experience based on other peoples travel stories, (b) experience during travel or stay and (c) post-experience which includes comments and evaluation. Credibility of the information available online and overload of information are some of the issues concerning social media communication. Because of the increasing popularity of travel information sites, tourism marketers cannot ignore the role of social media in distributing travel related information (Milano, Baggio, & Piattelli, 2011).

The service industry depends on social media to reach the customers and also social media is a strong marketing tool that encourages communication between consumers and suppliers. Social media has enabled customers to react and express their views and it acts as a channel that allows interaction between the suppliers and customers (Seth, 2012).

Need for the study

Social media have been widely used by travelers to search, organize, and share travel experiences. Consumer's use social media during travel planning process in three stages i.e., pre trip, during trip and post trip. Travel reviews have a significant influence on the purchase decisions of the consumers. Information gained from social media has a higher influence in choosing and finalizing a destination.

Scope of the study

The respondents covered under the scope

were limited to Bangalore and were from the age group of 11 to 50 years. Active internet users with an account in any of the social networking sites such as facebook pages, discussion forums, review sites and twitter were the participants of the sample survey.

Objectives

- 1) To study the influence of social media in selecting a travel destination.
- 2) To study how social media is used throughout the decision making process of holiday travel cycle.
- 3) To study the use of social media communications in analyzing the authenticity of expected travel experience.

Hypothesis

H1: There is no significant difference in the decision making process of holiday travel based on gender.

Research methodology

Sources of data collection

Sources of data include both primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by administering structured questionnaires. The secondary data was collected from journals, publications, newspapers, websites of tour operating companies and social networking sites.

Method of data collection

The data was collected with the help of structured questionnaires distributed to the respondents in Bangalore. The first section of the questionnaire was designed in such a way to get the profile of the respondents including their usage level of social media and the main information

sources used while planning a holiday travel.

The main stages involved in travel decision making process were focused while framing the questionnaire with a 5 point Likert scale to measure the degree of agreement or disagreement to the variables.

Sample size

A sample size of 100 respondents has been taken for the present study.

Techniques used in Data Analysis

A pilot study was conducted using a sample size of 30 respondents selected at random and the data collected was put through a reliability test to validate the questionnaire. A Cronbach Alpha score of 0 .833 was obtained.

Independent samples t- test has been used to study the decision making process based on gender.

Findings of the study

Out of 100 respondents approached for the survey, 54% were males and the remaining 46% were females. Regarding the age group of the population, 7% were between 11 to 20 years, 59% were between the age group 21 and 30, 27% were between the age group 31 to 40 and the remaining 7% were of the age group 41 to 50 years. It was also found that 54% of the sample population was married and the remaining 46% were unmarried. Majority of the respondents were in the age group 21 to 30 years. Most of the respondents of the study were married.

The variables were framed in the form of statements with a 5 point likert scale to measure the degree of agreement or disagreement regarding the decision making process of holiday travel. Majority

of the population (87%) agreed that they depend on social media to gather information regarding the products compared to other media.

Majority of population were of the opinion (61%) that social media gives both positive and negative feedbacks about a particular product and this allows customers to have more critical thinking during purchase decisions.

It was also found that the majority of the population (54%) was of the opinion that purchase of tourism products consist of a long term decision process involving high emotional significance. Also the experience shared by others in social media has a positive influence in decision making.

But a major portion of the population (42%) was of the opinion that because of the vast number of reviews available and the difference in opinion regarding the same product, the decision making process has become more complex. This is because of the vast amount of information and opportunities available in social media. It was also found that the more expensive and valuable a product is, the more research is done before buying the product and in tourism products more extensive information search is required due to the nature of the products.

The variables in the study also focused the influence of social media on the different stages involved in the holiday buying decision. From the study it was found that majority of the population used social media in the first stage of holiday buying decision making, i.e., need recognition stage. Travel reviews, travel related blogs, travel websites and online advertisements has a significant influence in the need recognition stage of the decision making process.

In the second stage of holiday buying decision, i.e., the information search for

products, 36% of the respondents agreed and 20% strongly agreed that social media is used mostly at this stage. This shows that internet has become the main source of gathering information during buying decision. Also 52% of the population agreed that social media is used to search for alternatives. Because of the variety of information available, consumers can compare the services available and select the best. Also majority of the respondents were keen in testing the authenticity of the available information. Consumers rely more on others experience while making buying decisions in order to reduce risk. Most of the respondents have social media accounts and they share their happiness, worries, tensions and anxieties with their social media friends. As a result they have a strong feeling that their social media friends will be in a position to help them in finding right product or services and reduce the risk in holiday decision making process.

According to the study there is a significant relationship between information search process through social media and final decision making process. This shows that, the information collected from social media positively affects the decision making process. The final decisions on holiday travel are taken after comparing the products and services offered by different organizations and the final choice is influenced by the information collected from social media at the earlier stages of travel planning.

The study also shows that the final decision on holiday travel is taken only after analyzing the authenticity of information collected from social media. Variations were observed in the reviews of each traveler based on their experiences and verifying the authenticity of social media comments made the final holiday buying decisions too complicated.

Independent samples t- test has been done to test the hypothesis that, there is no significant difference in the decision making process of holiday travel based

on gender.

Table showing the mean and standard deviation for the variable decision making process

Decision making process	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Male	54	4.203	0.5623
	Female	46	3.673	0.9900

Table showing the output of independent samples t-test for the variable decision making process

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Decision making process Equal variances assumed	5.768	.018	3.350	98	.001	0.530	0.216	0.844
Equal variances not assumed			3.214	68.73	.002	0.530	0.201	0.859

From the output table of independent samples t-test it is observed that the p value is 0.001 which is less than 0.05 and is statistically significant. Hence the null hypothesis is rejected. That is there a significant difference in the decision making process of holiday travel based on gender.

From the study, the mean value for decision making process of male population is high as compared to female population. That is, the male population is more dependent on social media communications to make the final decision on holiday travel. It was also observed that men spend more time in collecting information regarding the product than female population. They spend more time and effort to access the

value of their purchase.

Conclusion

Social media communication has taken a major role in our day to day activities. Decision making regarding travel has become more difficult activity involving different stages. The study shows that social media communications are used by almost all age groups which signify the growing importance of social media. Also it was found that even if the number of people using social media has increased, there are differences in its usage level to take final decisions on different stages of holiday travel. As per the study young travelling population depend mainly on internet and social media to gather

information. Social media is also used to compare the alternatives and to evaluate the product features. Online travel reviews influence the purchase decisions of the consumers and also act as a motivational factor for travelling. Even if large number of people are using social media communications in information search and decision making process, at certain stages they are confused. The decision making process has become more complex and people are confused in selecting the products. The credibility of the information available online and

overload of information are some of the major challenges faced by users of social media communications for holiday travel decisions. Many a time the information available on websites are not updated information and people trust the information shared by social media friends than the details provided by holiday travel suppliers. Social media provides greater interaction between customers and service providers. Hence service providers should use social media as a powerful tool in communication mix while marketing their holiday products and services.

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