

Trustworthiness of Inbound Tourists on Social Media Platforms towards Destination Choice

Jeet Dogra^A, Venkata Rohan Sharma Karri^B

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Abstract

Given the relative proliferation of social media users and the significance of information collection in a consumer's decision journey, this study tried to identify the most widely used social media platforms for India's travel information. To evaluate the general trustworthiness of inbound tourists on social media platforms, focus group interviews were conducted across 12 Indian states in which 300 foreign tourists from 85 countries took part. Tripadvisor and Facebook were the two social media platforms with the greatest number of users seeking India's travel information. The findings of the study conclude the use of multiple social media platforms for varied information and destination choice.

Keywords: Social media; consumer-generated media; destination choice; inbound tourism; trustworthiness of social media; travel portals

Introduction

In the 21st century, consumer-generated media (CGM) has become an important and trustworthy source of information (Yoo et al., 2009). Consumer-generated media (CGM) empowers people to procure and proffer information that affects other people's opinions regarding brands, products, services, and destinations (Dina, Sabou, 2012). According to the statistics published by Tjepkema (2019), 3.5 billion people were using social media in the year 2019. The substantial presence of people on social media has created a network whereby there is an exchange of information amongst people of different countries and cultures. The emergence of social media has given the world a more sophisticated view of consumers' behaviour with brands (Hudson, Thal, 2013). The experiences of a person can highly influence the decision-making process of another person. In the context of tourism, consumer-generated media (CGM) con-

^A Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Tourism & Travel Management (An Autonomous Body under Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India), Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India – 474011; Corresponding author: jeetdogra@live.com

^B Undergraduate Student, Indian Institute of Tourism & Travel Management (An Autonomous Body under Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India), Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India – 474011

tributes to the tourists' image formation process (Fakeye, Crompton, 1991). The way in which information is interpreted depends upon the person seeking it. Though it has been established that tourists seek information from consumer-generated media (Blackshaw, Nazzaro, 2004; Decrop, Snelders, 2005), the platforms they visit concerning India as a destination are yet to be identified. The primary objective of this study was to identify the social media platforms used by foreign tourists to visit destinations in India. The study also tries to assess tourists' general trustworthiness on social media platforms towards destination choice, in the case of India.

Literature Review

Social Media and its Application in Tourism

Social media or "consumer-generated media (CGM) describes a variety of new and emerging sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues" (Blackshaw, Nazzaro, 2004, p. 2). In other words, it is the provision of "internet access for sharing, collaborating and updating web content" (Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012, p. 195). Based on the dynamic platform that the social media provides, Miguéns et al. (2008) describe these websites as "the epitome of the phenomenon known as Web 2.0" (p. 1). Being a 'mega trend', social media has been "widely adopted by travellers to search, organize, share, and annotate their travel stories and experiences" (Leung et al., 2013, p. 4). It has resulted in an unprecedented increase in human interaction (Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012). Social media includes online word of mouth forums, blogs, moblogs (sites consisting of digital images and movies), consumer service rating websites, consumer to consumer emails, public internet discussion boards and other social networking sites (Blackshaw, Nazzaro, 2004; Mangold, Faulds, 2009). The information exchanged on social media has "become a major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour including awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, and post-purchase communication and evaluation" (Mangold, Faulds, 2009, 358). Invigorating this, studies (Fotis et al., 2012; Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012; Manhas, Dogra, 2019; Tussyadiah, Fesenmaier, 2009) have demonstrated social media to have an impact on destination awareness and choice.

"Social media plays a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search and decision-making behaviours, tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting with consumers" (Zeng, Gerritsen, 2014, p. 27). People can consume, search, sell, connect and share their travel experiences on various social media platforms (de Almeida et al., 2020). According to Narangajavana et al. (2017), users tend to create expectations about destinations based on the user-generated content (UGC) they receive. Pacheco and Moreira (2020) found guest opinions and reviews on various platforms to constitute a source of quality segmentation resulting in the positioning of hotels. The relative growth of social media in the tourism industry has influenced many firms to adopt social media as a tool for interacting with tourists (Chilembwe, Gondwe, 2020). Consumer engagement technology (CET) gave rise to 'SoLoMo' applications (social-, location-, and mobile-based applications) which simplified the booking process by facilitating consumers with effortless access to information, thereby enabling them to take spontaneous actions (Thakran, Verma, 2013; Lei et al., 2019; Chilembwe, Gondwe, 2020).

As part of the hybrid era, Thakran and Verma (2013) suggest that the tourism industry is moving towards a disintermediation phase where OTAs and travel agents have a significantly

lesser role to play. This is because consumers are increasingly becoming dependent on online searches for travel-related decisions. According to Carnoy (2017), 89% of the millennials book their travel based on the information exchanged on social media. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) discuss the ‘ubiquitous’ presence of social media websites across all online tourism domains, thereby confirming its proliferating significance in tourism. As propounded by Huang et al. (2010), the primary motivation for travellers’ use of social media is the acquisition of travel information. In addition to this, Leung et al. (2013) posited that “through searching the content on social media, consumers cannot only collect travel information from friends and relatives who are within their social network, but also acquire more extensive information from internet users around the world” (p. 8). For various reasons, studies (Fotis et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013) have shed light upon the use of social media before, during, and after the traveller’s trip planning process. Apart from the consumers, social media also helps tourism organizations in marketing and networking (Zeng, Gerritsen, 2014).

Destination Choice

Destination choice has often been regarded as the process of decision making, whereby tourists choose a destination among other competing destinations based on various factors (Decrop, Snelders, 2005; Mansfeld, 1992). “Vacation decision making is often triggered off incidentally through information collection or opportunities” (Decrop, Snelders, 2005, p. 125). In the models proposed by Mansfeld (1992) and Um and Crompton (1990), tourist motivations and information collection have been identified as the initial phases of tourists’ decision-making process. Decision making variables in the contextual factors identified by Decrop and Snelders (2005) include ‘information search’ that results in daydreaming and prolonged involvement

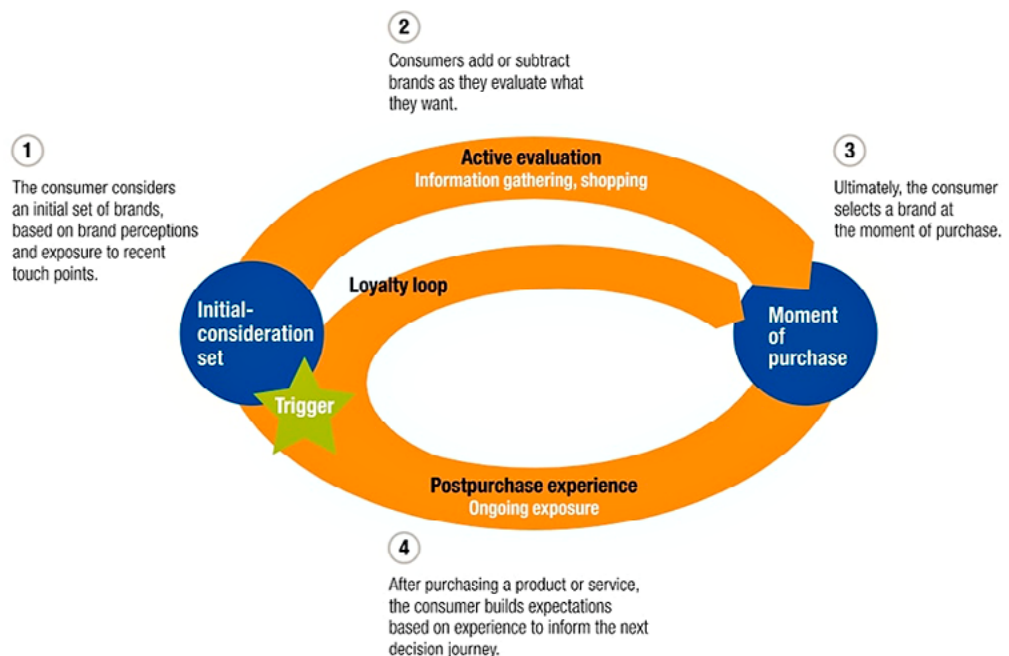


Figure 1. The consumer decision journey (Court et al., 2009)

of tourists. Information sources contribute to the formation of destination image and therefore help the tourists in decision making (Gartner, 1994; Goodrich, 1978; Pearce, 1982). Court et al. (2009) developed an approach for understanding the consumer decision journey by studying the purchase decisions of almost 20,000 consumers across five industries and three continents. Their study showed the proliferating influence of media on product marketing. They further asserted that the decision-making process is a circular journey that includes four phases i.e. initial consideration, active evaluation, a moment of purchase, and post-purchase experience (Figure 1).

In their study, Hudson and Thal (2013) explained the social media approach developed by Court et al. (2015) in the context of tourism. The increasing number of social media campaigns, online reviewing platforms, e-commerce transactions, and online customer services contribute to the four stages enlisted in the consumer decision approach.

Social Media as a Preferable Medium for Destination Marketing

Social media being the course of action for the 21st century (Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012) requires tourism businesses to explore new mediums apart from the traditional media for marketing (Leung et al., 2013). Of late, many studies have propounded social media as an effective marketing tool for tourism (Chan, Guillet, 2011; Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012; Munar, 2011; Xiang, Gretzel, 2010). Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) postulated a high degree of trust among travellers on the information gathered through social media. In a study conducted by Forrester (as cited in Blackshaw, Nazzaro, 2004) about trustworthiness, consumer-generated media (CGM) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) platforms outranked traditional tools of marketing while being identified as the most trusted forms of advertising. The increasing global growth rate of social media users provides DMOs an opportunity to socially and authentically influence the tourist decision-making process (Lange-Faria, Elliot, 2012). By discussing the applications of social media in destination marketing, Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) implies that “DMOs can collaborate and streamline their information, adding value for consumers, while building their brand through direct interaction with the consumer, and immediate response to consumer queries and concerns” (p. 204). Given the trustworthiness of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) platforms, Leung et al. (2011) exhibit that monitoring travel blogs and other eWOM platforms may help destination marketing organizations in identifying unsuspected features and experiences. While illustrating social media as a preferred medium for marketing, Chan and Guillet (2011) investigated the performance of 67 hotels on social media. The findings of their study indicate Twitter and Facebook as the most widely used social media platforms for marketing. The State of Social report by Buffer (2019) discloses 89.3% of marketers to have considered social media as an important tool for marketing. It was also observed that 73% of the marketers believed social media marketing to be effective for their business. The study by Chan and Guillet (2011) along with the State of Social report (Buffer, 2019) reflects upon the relevance of social media in the field of marketing.

Trustworthiness in Social Media Platforms

Trustworthiness in consumer-generated media is a central aspect that is required for gaining, retaining, and in some cases retrieving the users (Gefen, 2002). It has lately become an emergent aspect for the users in terms of content acceptance. Concerning the online consumer trust, Gefen (2002) proposed a three-dimensional scale of trustworthiness constituting integ-

rity, benevolence, and ability. “Integrity is the belief that the trusted party adheres to accepted rules of conduct, such as honesty and keeping promises. Ability is beliefs about the skills and competence of the trusted party” (Gefen, 2002, p. 40). Benevolence, on the other hand, is “the belief that the information provider wants to help the customer” (Dickinger, 2011, p. 380). Dickinger (2011) extended the three-dimensional concept of trustworthiness by adding another component called informativeness. It is the belief that the information provided is informative enough. As suggested by Gefen and Heart (2006), integrity is effective with the consumption of a product. “Whereas ability is effective when just inquiring about a product” (Dickinger, 2011, p. 380). Trust in consumer-generated media is based on the beliefs in the trustworthiness of the user, which comprises of integrity, ability, benevolence (Gefen et al., 2008), and informativeness. Magno and Cassia (2018) found that users adopt travel suggestions from bloggers depending upon their trustworthiness and information quality. However, in the context of different tourism or travel-related platforms, different dimensions of trustworthiness are effective in the initiation of overall trust (Dickinger, 2011).

Methodology

Based on the nature of the study, focus group interviews were conducted across twelve Indian states viz. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Kerala, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Assam. Lederman (as cited in Rabiee, 2004) defined focus group interviews as “a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative sampling of a specific population, this group being ‘focused’ on a given topic” (p. 655). As part of a comparative study by Aldag and Tinsley (1994), it was found that focus groups were cost-effective and elicited more information in almost half the time of an in-depth interview. Participants for the focus group interviews were selected through a filter question whereby they were asked about the influence of social media on their decision-making process. Only the participants who were influenced by social media in their travel-related decisions were selected. A total of 300 tourists from 85 countries were grouped into 30 focus groups for data collection. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of participants in the focus groups while Table 2 shows the countries of participants in the focus groups. The questioning route for the focus groups included 23 questions. Each focus group consisted of 10 participants (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Rabiee, 2004) and lasted for approximately 30 minutes. Translators accompanied the moderator in translating the interviews of non-English speaking tourists. Observational and summary notes were taken before, during, and after the focus group interviews.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants in focus groups

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage*
Gender		
Male	167	56%
Female	133	44%
Age		
< 40 Years	192	64%
> 40 Years	108	36%
Educational Qualification		
Undergraduate	49	16%
Graduate	129	43%
Post Graduate	107	36%
Other	15	5%
Marital Status		
Married	147	49%
Unmarried	153	51%
Monthly Income		
< \$900	120	40%
> \$900	180	60%
Occupation		
Employed	142	47%
Unemployed	67	22%
Other	91	30%

Note: Statistics are based upon N=300 for participants of focus groups

* Percentages may not total to 100 per cent due to rounding off

Out of the 300 participants, 167 were males and 133 were females; 192 were below 40 years of age and 108 were above the age of 40 years; 43% of the participants were graduates while 36% of them were postgraduates; 147 were married and 153 were unmarried; 120 participants had a monthly income of less than 900 US dollars while 180 participants had an income of above 900 US dollars. 47% of the participants were employed and 22% of the participants were unemployed.

Table 2. Countries of participants in focus groups

Regions / Continents	Countries
Africa	Cape Verde Island, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria
Asia & Eurasia	Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Georgia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Yemen
Australia	Australia, New Zealand
Europe	Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Ukraine
North America	Canada, Cuba, Mexico, United States of America
South America	Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, Venezuela

While preparing the data for interpretation, a note-based analytical technique was used for aggregating the observational, debriefing session, and summary notes that were taken before, during, and after the focus group interviews into one format (Beyea, Nicoll, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The note-based analysis may also include the use of audio and videotapes. However, keeping in mind the possible effects of audio and video recordings on the data collected (Al-Yateem, 2012) and to make the participants less reticent (Beyea, Nicoll, 2000), it was decided not to record the focus group interviews. The coherent form of data was then used to conduct an independent content analysis (Beyea, Nicoll, 2000). Categories and themes were identified wherever necessary for some of the questions pertinent to the objectives of this study.

Findings

All the selected participants' trips were to a certain extent influenced by social media. The note-based analysis helped in identifying the most widely used social media platforms for decision making. It was observed that "Tripadvisor" (96) and "Facebook" (81) were the most widely used platforms for travel plans to India. The other social media platforms used by foreign tourists for travelling to India as shown in Table 3 were YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Lonely Planet, Pinterest, Booking.com, Indostan.in, Google Blogs, Whatsapp, Triposo, Tumblr, Baidu.com and LinkedIn.

Table 3. Social media platforms used by India's inbound tourists

Social Media	Frequency	Percentage*
Tripadvisor	96	32
Facebook	81	27
YouTube	39	13
Twitter	33	11
LinkedIn	18	6
Pinterest	12	4
Lonely Planet	7	2.3
Google Blogs	4	1.3
Booking.com	2	0.7
Instagram	2	0.7
WhatsApp	2	0.7
Baidu.com	1	0.3
Indostan.in	1	0.3
Tumblr	1	0.3
Triposo	1	0.3

In line with the findings of GlobalWebIndex (2018), tourists below the age of 40 years predominantly used platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Tripadvisor for information search while tourists above the age of 40 relied on Whatsapp, Lonely Planet and other travel blogging platforms. Tourists were then asked about the number of times they had used these social media platforms for travel-related decisions. Their responses were captured under three categories and are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Reliability of inbound tourists on social media for travel decisions*

Usage	Frequency	Percentage*
Not much frequently	52	17.3
Sometimes	141	47
Almost every time	107	35.6

* Percentages may not total to 100 per cent due to rounding off

When asked about the type of information searched, a notable number (135) of tourists said that they searched for attractions at the destination. Keywords of similar nature were clubbed together to form broader topics. Table 5 shows the topics of information that the tourists searched on social media. Topics of information that India's inbound tourists searched for were similar to that of Oriade and Robinson (2019).

Table 5. *Description of topics searched by inbound tourists on social media*

Topics	Frequency	Percentage*	Typical Keywords Used in Topic
Attractions	135	45	Lakes, wildlife, desert, temples
Accessibility	95	31.6	Flights, trains, taxi, airports
Accommodation	51	17	Hotels, resorts, camping, restaurants
Activities & Environment	19	6.3	Guide, culture, nature, climate

* Percentages may not total to 100 per cent due to rounding off

Tourists' responses regarding the amount of considerable information on travel gathered through social media platforms were clustered into three categories (Table 6). It was found that 135 tourists regarded a reasonable proportion of the information that they had gathered through social media to be worth taking into consideration. On the other hand, 105 tourists considered an even larger proportion of the gathered information to be informative enough.

Table 6. *Information gathered through social media worth consideration*

Amount of Information	Frequency	Percentage
Small Proportion	60	20
Reasonable Proportion	135	45
Large Proportion	105	35

The note-based analysis of focus group interviews revealed that most of the tourists assayed the authenticity of information gathered through social media by taking into account the opinions and experiences of friends, relatives, and other travellers. Concerning the official pages of destination marketing organizations in India, tourists (237) verified the experiences promised, by using travel blogs, guide books, and other consumer-generated content (CGC). As part of a discussion about the selection and recommendation of travel portals for travel-related information, tourists' responses were clustered into broader categories as shown in Table 7. While, 162 tourists preferred browsing travel portals on their own, 138 tourists considered the recommendations of their friends and relatives.

Table 7. Tourists' criteria for choosing a travel portal through social media platforms

Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
Self-Browsing	162	54
Recommendations	138	46

The focus group interviews further evinced that satisfied tourists were more likely to recommend the travel portals to their friends and relatives. Therefore, it can be said that the selection and recommendation of travel portals happen in a cyclic pattern.

Conclusion

In line with the objectives of this study, Tripadvisor and Facebook were found to be the most widely used platforms for India's travel information search. To estimate the trustworthiness of inbound tourists on social media towards India as a destination, 300 foreign tourists from 85 countries were interviewed through focus groups. The questions were framed in a way that they captured the essence of all the four trustworthiness dimensions i.e. integrity, benevolence, ability, and informativeness (Gefen, 2002; Dickinger, 2011). Tourists' responses regarding their reliability on social media for travel-related decisions reflect upon the integrity dimension of trustworthiness. To be reliable, social media platforms must keep their promises while adhering to the accepted rules of conduct. 35.6% (107) of the tourists who frequently make use of social media for their travel-related decisions must have had some positive experience in the past and thence might believe that the promises made by the platform would be reliable. Other 47% (141) of the interviewed tourists said that they occasionally use social media for their travel-related decisions. Similar to Oriade and Robinson (2019), the findings of this study suggest that tourists usually search for information related to the components of tourism. While reflecting upon the informativeness dimension, 135 tourists regarded reasonable amounts of travel information gathered through social media to be of high value. In the same vein, 105 tourists regarded large proportions of the information gathered through social media to be worth taking into consideration. Therefore, it could be interpreted that the integrity and informativeness dimensions of tourists' trustworthiness on social media towards India as a destination is effective to a substantial level.

As tourism products involve huge amounts of investments before consumption, tourists seek varied information from multiple platforms. Though tourists from around the world use different social media platforms like Lonely Planet, Indostan.in and Baidu.com for travel information, they usually tend to confirm the information with their friends, relatives, or other travellers on platforms like Facebook, Tripadvisor, and Whatsapp. Based on the findings of this study, it can be noted that the ability aspect of trustworthiness concerning a single social media platform for India's travel information is low. Even in the case of India's official DMO pages and portals, tourists verified the experiences promised, by using other user-generated content. It was further found that the recommendations from friends and relatives played a substantial role in the selection of travel portals through social media platforms. Though 162 tourists said that they preferred choosing travel portals on their own, 138 tourists were found to be dependent on recommendations of friends, relatives, and other users for choosing a particular travel portal. Concerning India as a destination, the findings of this study indicate that the benevolence dimension of trustworthiness to a certain extent is dependent on the recommendations of friends, relatives and other users.

This study successfully identifies the most widely used social media platforms for India's travel information, thereby providing DMOs with important insights regarding the social media platforms used by foreign tourists. As suggested by Pacheco and Moreira (2020, p. 272), "the monitoring of social networks is a source of information of the tourists' opinions and preferences, very valuable for the managers". DMOs in India may target and level up their marketing efforts on the identified social media platforms while trying to work upon the different dimensions of tourists' trustworthiness. The more that the tourism organizations maintain the quality level, further will the tourists' trust in social media increase (Narangajavana et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

Though this study provides new insights regarding the behaviour of India's inbound market, there are certain limitations to the study. First, the study tried to estimate tourists' trustworthiness in social media platforms towards destination choice in a collective manner. As suggested by Dickinger (2011), different dimensions of trustworthiness become effective depending upon the different types of online platforms. Future studies may extend the research by evaluating tourists' trustworthiness on individual social media platforms towards destination choice. Second, the study can be replicated in other regions of the world in order to better understand the tourist behaviour.

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