

Social Media Influences Holiday Travel Decisions : A Rationale for Profound Analysis

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Abstract

Social media is emerging as an informative tool for business and India is witnessing an exceptional growth in the number of users on social media. Travellers use various information sources to plan their holidays and social media is actively used by them in different stages of holiday travel. Research studies have indicated that social media has an impact on holiday travel decisions, although it varies across the geographical boundaries. Few studies have indicated that social media is used during the planning stage of a holiday, while a few indicated that it is used after a holiday. This research attempted to find or explore the role and impact of social media on consumers' travel decision making process. It discussed the approach used by certain authors - whether it was social media application specific or specific to one aspect of travel decision, that is, a destination or hotel. This paper also attempted to explore the studies which indicated that there was a correlation between social media's level of influence and the travel decision making process at different travel stages, that is, before, during, and after the consumption of a holiday.

Keywords : social media, holiday travel stage, travel decisions

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Social media not only acts to connect people from different geographical locations, but also serves as an effective channel for information sharing. In other words, it acts as a “personal Google machine” source of unorganized and informal information, which is very crucial in real time. Technology advancement and Internet penetration is high. Therefore, everybody is using Internet enabled devices to interact with the world either formally or informally, and nobody seems to be left out and untouched. This manifestation of technology advancement has touched almost every life and thus, is the easiest channel of communication available.

India is witnessing a phenomenal change in the number of Internet users. According to IMAI Icube Internet report, there are more than 300 million Internet users in India, and this mark is expected to cross half a billion in 2018 as per the BCG report on India @Digital Bharat. A substantial growth is also seen in the number of mobile Internet users as 75% of the users are engaged actively on social networking sites. Ecommerce is also estimated to rise in India with the Internet playing a major role in providing information and influencing Indian consumers. According to a McKinsey 2012 report (McKinsey & Company, 2012), E-commerce has witnessed online travel growing at more than 25% per year, which is driven by various online players. India's travel market which includes both offline and online travel market was projected to reach at \$23.2 billion at 18% growth rate by 2013.

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According to Srivastava (2014), and it is expected to grow at CAGR of 10.2% by 2020.

According to Google Ipsos media report (Google, 2012), 83% of the travellers use the Internet to plan their travel ; whereas, 65% start their online research before they decide to travel. The world is observing a change in the travel trends, and companies are trying to differentiate themselves through their products or services as revealed by the World Travel Market (2013) report. America's PANK's (Professional Aunts, No Kids) has emerged as a new demographic faction. Child-friendly safaris are rising in Africa. Chinese cruise companies are becoming popular in China. Social media is effectively used by online travel companies in India with an intention to target young urban consumers, and mobile concierge has prompted travel companies to use mobile channels in order to satisfy needs of the customers which can be before the purchase, during the purchase, or after the purchase. According to Statista (2016), the number of social network users by 2018 is expected to be 283 million. By 2017, 75% of the Indian Internet users were expected to be active on social media. With such a huge growth in the number of users on social media, it is even forecasted that retail sales of online travel will see a 19% CAGR from 2012 and in 2017, the figures were pegged at at US\$14.7 billion. The Indian Tourism Ministry is promoting tourism sites using social media. According to TripBarometer by TripAdvisor (2012/2013), social media is used to research and plan a trip where the source of information can be photos, videos, and comments, which in turn influences the travel planning. Travellers not only read reviews while planning, but they actively return after their tour to post reviews and their personal experiences.

Information communication technologies have greatly influenced the consumer behavior in tourism (Buhalis, 1998 ; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012 ; Poon, 1993), and social media has significantly revolutionized the way consumers communicate, plan their trips, access information, consume travel, and share experiences (Buhalis & Law, 2008 ; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011 ; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013). The way in which information is created and disseminated has been changed completely (Buhalis & Law, 2008 ; Hays et al., 2013 ; Senecal & Nantel, 2004 ; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Technology has enabled users to generate their content and present it in the manner they want. Social media allows user generated content like reviews, photos, videos, blogs to be communicated and published (Boyd & Ellison, 2007 ; Hays et al., 2013) through mediums like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Youtube, etc. Rising popularity of social media and increase in user generated content is giving more authority to users (Hays et al., 2013 ; Thevenot, 2007). Marketers and travel institutions now do not have control on the product or service offering (Hays et al., 2013). Consumer generated content facilitates users to use them in different stages of travel planning. They can obtain information to decide the destination, hotel, itinerary, and attractions during their travel planning process (Hays et al. , 2013, Thevenot, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) through social media, but its usage is not restricted to only this, in fact, it is much more beyond this. Travel experiences are intangible (Hays et al., 2013) and are capable of creating a major impact on the consumer, this

Table 1. Theme Related Number of Papers Reviewed

Theme	No. of Papers Reviewed					
	Upto 2005		2006 - 2010		2011-2016	
	International	National	International	National	International	National
Social Media	5		11		3	2
Classification of Social Media			6		1	
Social Media's Impact on Consumer Decision Making Process	2		9	1	4	
Holiday Decision Making Process	5		7		6	
Social Media Impact on Holiday Decision Making Process			9		8	3
Total Papers	12		42	1	22	5

means that consumer's advice and recommendation can influence the decision (Buhalis, 1998 ; Hays et al., 2013 ; Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Other traveller's advice is considered to be more reliable than the information given by the guidebooks and advertisements (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2010 ; Hays et al., 2013). Social media gives that platform to the consumers where they can create, share, and disseminate their travel experiences and only those companies can survive which can use this platform.

This research attempts to find or explore the role and impact of social media on consumers' travel decision making process. It discusses the approach used by certain authors whether it is social media application specific or specific to one aspect of travel decision, that is, the destination or hotel. The Table 1 gives a break up of the papers reviewed.

Social Media

Social media is a social software (Richter & Koch, 2007) or a social website (Akehurst, 2009). It is a user-generated media (McConnel & Huba, 2007; Shao, 2009) ; a consumer - generated media (Gretzel, Kang, & Lee, 2008; Jeong & Jeon, 2008) ; user - generated content websites (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009 ; Dotan & Zaphiris, 2010) ; Internet - based social spaces (Manjunatha, 2013) ; it is 'participatory,' 'conversational,' and 'fluid' online communities (Hays et al., 2013 ; Qualman, 2009; Tuten, 2008). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media is Web 2.0 (Constantinides, 2009). It should not be associated with social networking sites (Fotis et al., 2011) which are referred to as online systems that enable users to become members, create a profile, build a personal network, which connects them with other users to exchange information, preference, skills, knowledge, and talent (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Social media creates communities where people can gather and share views, information, and knowledge (Fotis et al., 2011; Safko & Brake, 2009). It even builds, alters, shares opinions, insights, contents, perspective, connections, and relationships (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Social media is a recent and continuously growing phenomenon connecting consumer generated content shared online (Stankov, Lazic, & Dragicevic, 2010).

Classification of Social Media

Further literature also evidences the different types of social media. The Table 2 depicts the classification of it given by various authors.

Social Media's Impact on Consumer Decision Making Process

The consumer decision-making process is a five-stage process which comprises of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post purchase. The information search stage is crucial for decision making and plays a significant role to identify the right choice (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). The Internet has already emerged as an important source of information search; it is a repository of information and is referred to by people before they take decisions. Recent past research indicates that social media has emerged as an Internet based application where people create, transform, share their opinions, perspectives, insights, and experiences (Pearce & Butler, 1993). It has become an important source for information search, which affects consumer decision making.

Literature indicates a number of studies which have explored to identify the role and social media's influence on decision making processes and consumer behavior. According to De Valck, Van Bruggen, and Wierenga (2009),

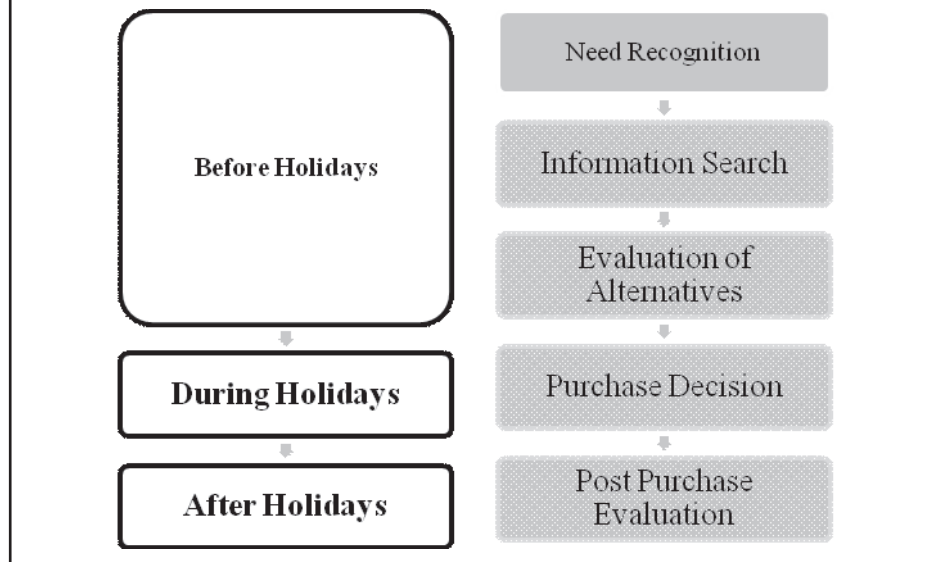
Table 2. Types of Social Media

S.No.	Types of Social Media	References
1	Social networks, blogs, content communities, forums / bulletin boards, and content aggregators.	Constantinides (2009)
2	Virtual community sites, consumer review sites, personal blogs and blog aggregators, social networking sites, and media sharing sites.	Xiang & Gretzel (2010)
3	Social networking, professional networking, blogs, microblogging, picture sharing, video sharing, social bookmarking, and user forums.	Fischer & Reuber (2011)
4	Social networking sites, creativity works sharing sites, user-sponsored blogs, company-sponsored websites/blogs, company-sponsored cause/help sites, invitation-only social networks, business networking sites, collaborative websites, virtual worlds, commerce communities, podcasts, news delivery sites, educational materials sharing, open source software communities, social bookmarking sites.	Mangold & Faulds (2009)
5	Social networking sites and social media sites.	Kim, Jeong, & Lee (2010)
6	They are defined on the basis of two key elements of social media, that is, media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure). Broad classification is given under the applications like collaborative projects, blogs, social networking sites, content communities, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds.	Kaplan & Haenlein (2009)
7	Social networking sites, virtual worlds, social news website, microblogs, blogs, collaborative projects, content communities, commerce communities.	Markos - Kujbus & Gati (2012)

social media's virtual communities act as reference groups, which take control because of heterogeneous members influencing the different stages of decision making. Dhar and Chang (2009) evidenced that music sales were correlated with Twitter data and served as an important way to predict sales figures of an album. The rate at which tweets are created on Twitter after release of cinema movies can forecast box-office revenues (Asur & Huberman, 2010). According to Forbes and Vespoli (2013), consumers buy expensive or inexpensive items irrespective of their cost if those products are recommended by their contacts or friends on social media. On a similar vein, Senecal and Nantel (2004) showed that choice of consumers' products was less affected by traditional sources than by online recommendations. A study which measured consumers' influence from Facebook's pages substantiated that consumers - those who became a fan of a page - visited the store more often and generated positive word of mouth in comparison to non-fans (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). Electronic word of mouth positively influenced purchase behaviours of two online book stores (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Social media played a critical role in influencing Internet users to successfully execute a vaccination campaign run by the Dutch Health authorities. People respond more on social media in comparison to the news media (Lehmann, Ruiters, & Kok, 2013). According to Sema (2013), usage of social media while planning a travel positively influenced actual travel experience.

Culture represents how other's opinion and group responses are valued. National culture is an important factor which even influences adoption and use of social media (Cardon, Marshall, Jeongil, El-Shinnaway, North, & Svensson, 2009). Gretzel et al. (2008) suggested that users of U.S. mainly looked for consumer generated reviews and videos ; whereas, Chinese were keenly interested in consumer generated content. India is a collectivist culture, and Indians value other's opinions. This enables formation of communities, discussions, and high social interaction. Social media support serves as a platform for such communication and this could be one of the reasons for such a high number of social media users in India.

Figure 1. Holiday Travel Stages and Consumer's Decision Making Process



The Holiday Decision Making Process

Tourism related decision making process is quite similar to the purchase of any other product or service. Planning a holiday follows the decision making model of a consumer which is composed of five stages (Cox et al., 2009; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999). The Figure 1 shows different stages of holiday travel at different levels of consumer decision making process.

Holiday decision making firstly involves intensive search exercise of information before determining and finalizing a specific holiday package (Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2011). Such decisions are also high at risks because of their experimental characteristics (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005) and ,therefore, demand for those mediums which are capable of filtering the information and helps in reducing the risk. Many studies have confirmed that consumers use various online sources of information (Choi, Lehto, & O' Leary, 2007 ; Cox et al., 2009 ; Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007) to gain insight related to destination, attraction, transportation, hotels, and restaurants. The important online development which has restructured the traditional methods used in tourism business is user generated content and Web 2.0. Social media is emerging as one such medium which has primarily changed the information search behavior and travel decision making of tourists (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The intangible nature of travel products allows a prospective traveler to embrace the information provided by other travelers through social networking sites (Cox et al., 2009; Ricci & Wietsma, 2006 ; Saranow, 2004). Social media is relevant in the tourism industry as it an 'information-intensive industry' (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002).

Consumers acquire information to help in the travel-planning process and to take decisions related to destinations, hotels, restaurants, and attractions. Tourism products are intangible. Therefore, their experiences cannot be evaluated before consumption; personal recommendations given online are considered as it is given by a friend or family and ,therefore, are very influential (Buhalis, 1998; Gretzel et al., 2000; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Other traveller's advice becomes important for travellers as they rely on it in comparison to guidebooks and standard print advertisements (Casalo et al., 2010). According to R  thonyi (2013), social media sites create huge impact on tourists in terms of organizing, creating, and sharing tourism experiences. The World Travel Market industry report (2013) illustrated that travel plans were altered by more than 50% respondents who used social media, and social media influenced them to change their accommodation. Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, and Law (2011) found that about 45% of the pleasure travellers who took photographs during their trip

posted them online. Analogous to this, Kiraly (2011) found that social media impacted travelling attitude where half of the respondents chose their next holiday destination from the holiday photos of their friends. Most often, used information source is the traveller's opinion given on online travel review sites (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007).

People use this media to interact freely, share their experiences, and exchange information to reduce the risk involved (Fotis et al., 2012; Yoo, Lee, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009). Social media even performs post holiday travel when users use it for the act of storytelling which serves to become as an important source of information for other travelers. Such sources are perceived quite similar to recommendation given by family, friends, or "like-minded souls" (Fotis et. al, 2011 ; Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Wang et al., 2002) and ,therefore, today, tourists consider social media as an imperative source before finalizing their purchase (travel) decision.

Tourism Australia (2013) in their research found that Indian tourists looked for two sources of information to plan their holidays, which is online and travel agents. For long distanced destinations, they booked with trusted travel agents ; whereas, for familiar and short distanced destinations, bookings were made online. They found that even if purchase was done with travel agents, Indian consumers still went online to search and verify the information given by their travel agents. To identify the factors which influenced travel decision making among Indian tourists, it was found that the Internet acted as a main source of travel specific information in order to get ideas and recommendations; also, it was found that social networking sites like Facebook were consulted to gather information and it influenced the choice of destination. This certainly implies that even for Indians, tourist information search stage plays a critical role for taking holiday decisions.

This finding is also aligned with the findings of Singapore Tourism Board (2013 a, b) with respect to the Indian market. They also identified the information sources which Indian tourists referred to in three stages of travel. In the before travel stage, the important information sources were family & friends and travel agents. Recommendations coming from family and friends were perceived as personalized and Indian tourists value word of mouth, which can be given through traditional methods or online. Information source during the travel stage for Indian tourists was travel guides and blogs like Lonely Planet. The after travel stage was mainly used to become an information source for other travellers. Travellers are highly active on social networking sites and post instant updates about them. One of the important findings of a focus group study of Singapore Tourism Board was that travellers put up pictures on Facebook so that friends and acquaintances could know where they had travelled.

Social Media's Impact on The Holiday Decision Making Process

Social media has emerged as a significant tool in tourism to reduce ambiguity and increase exchange efficacy (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary, 2006 ; Litvin et al., 2008 ; Yoo et al., 2009) and serves as a critical information source to prospective tourists (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). It has become an uncontrollable and complex component in consumer behaviour offering challenging role to organizations, marketers, and academicians (Nigam & Vyas, 2014). This challenge is inflated by the fact that the social media presence has caused suspicion for the traditional marketing tactics as well as a withdrawing result of mass media (De Valck et al., 2009).

According to Noti (2013), web 2.0 influences the tourism sector. The study mentioned that consumers have more control over decisions related to travel and tourism because of social media, which is becoming an important communication tool as it directly influences tourism decisions. The study even found that weblogs are considered as word of mouth marketing and people who read experiences on these weblogs are more likely to visit the same destination or hotels.

A plethora of studies have employed various approaches which attempted to identify the role and impact of social media. Some studies were social media application specific (i.e. Facebook) while some focused on specific type of social media (i.e. consumer reviews), few studies even focused on specific stage of consumer decision

Table 3. Studies Indicating Social Media's Impact on Travel Decisions

Author/ Date	Topic/Questions/ Objectives	Paradigm/ Method	Findings	Context/ Sample	Limitations/Gaps/ Future Research
Mack, Blose, & Pan (2008)	To determine the credibility of online word-of-mouth in comparison with traditional word-of-mouth.	ANCOVA	Traditional word of mouth was considered to be more credible than the blogs. Bloggers who posted actively were equated with the traditional word of mouth with one dimension, that is, authoritativeness of credibility.	Web based Survey ; 221 surveys were collected, 193 were complete and usable.	Future research needs to focus on the usefulness of blogs at different points in the decision making hierarchy. A study can explore the position of a blog with respect to other methods of communication.
Vermeulen & Seegers (2009)	Exposure to online hotel reviews increases hotel awareness. Exposure to online hotel reviews increases hotel awareness more for lesser-known hotels than for well-known hotels. Exposure to online hotel reviews affects hotel attitude: Positive reviews yield positive attitude changes ; whereas, negative reviews yield negative attitude changes. Exposure to online hotel reviews increases hotel consideration.	ANOVA	Positive and negative online reviews increased awareness about the reviewed hotel. Online reviews of familiar hotels did not create any effect on the consumers. However, it created awareness for lesser known for lesser known hotels. Positive online reviews yielded positive change in attitude ; whereas, negative reviews yielded negative attitude change. Positive and negative reaction towards lesser-known hotels was stronger than in case of the well-known hotels. Positive reviews had a positive impact on consideration ; whereas, negative reviews had no significant impact. Also, consideration of well-known hotels was less susceptible to change than consideration of lesser-known hotels.	168 respondents	Future research can be done to find the impact of online reviews on consumer behavior specifically with respect to expert online travel reviews.
Cox et al. (2009)	What role do UGC (user-generated content) travel sites have in the consumers' travel planning process? How trustworthy do consumers consider UGC compared to more traditional sources of travel information? Third party travel sites are considered more trustworthy than pure weblogs or social networking sites.	Bar Chart Analysis <i>t</i> - tests	UGC were used during the information search stage and during the evaluation of alternatives phase and very few relied on it during and after travel. Non-UGC sources were more trusted by prospective travellers than UGC sources. Third party sites were more trusted than weblogs or social networking sites.	Online Survey : An e-mail invitation was sent through Tourism New South Wales's database of 110,000 e-mail subscribers ; 13,281 people responded, and the number of complete responses was 12,544.	The limitation of the study arose from the fact that sample consisted of prospective travellers who were already registered on an official tourism website. Therefore, the sample had an inclination towards the official websites. This study can be replicated in an international context as an Australian

based sample is also representative of consumers from other countries.

White (2010)	To find whether travel photos on Facebook influence the travel plans of friends.	Content Analysis and Semiotics.	Three people received interest from friends on the travel photos posted. Images with human objects attracted more comments than the images without human objects in it.	Sample size was 10 respondents.	Images generated on other social media and not only Facebook with a larger sample size and more in depth analysis can be done. How the photos influence others can also be studied.
Xiang & Gretzel (2010)	To what extent does the social media constitute the online tourism domain represented by Google? To find association between social media and search queries.	Descriptive analysis	11% of the search results represented social media. Consumer review sites, social networking sites, and media sharing sites attained 27%, 9%, and 7% of the share, respectively ; whereas, virtual communities topped the share with 40%. For 10 predefined keywords, "nightlife" and "restaurant" generated the most social media-related results (21.5% and 14.3%, respectively). Virtual communities played an important role in the sharing of travellers' experiences related to tourism activities. Social networking, media sharing, and personal blog sites provided space for travellers to share their experiences of nightlife and events and thus, allowing many others to plan for these types of experiences. Consumer review sites are closely related to keywords such as "shopping" and "restaurants" as well as "hotels".	Exploratory study	Limitation of the study arose from the fact that they considered limited number of keywords and the destination selected was restricted to tourist places in U.S. They took into consideration only the snapshot of search results generated by a search engine which does not clearly define the role of social media in tourism. It only explored that tourism related keywords were associated with social media and not empirically proved it.
Fotis et al. (2011)	To measure the exposure and role of social media before, during, and after the holiday trip. To measure social media's level of influence on holiday plans.	Chi Square Test Pearson correlation test	It was seen that social media websites were mainly used after the trip for the purpose of sharing experiences and photos with friends and / or other travellers. Changes were made in holiday plans with respect to destination and accommodation due to social media influence.	A structured online questionnaire was sent to 900 panel members; 368 were completed 22 were incomplete, and the total number of responses used was 346.	The present study found that there was a strong correlation between social media level of influence and changes made in holiday plans. However, it did not find the degree of association. National markets depicted difference in social media adoption and use and

further indicated difference in level of trust on it. Therefore, there is a need to study India as a separate National market.

Ráthonyi (2013)	To find information sources of travel planning and social media's influence on holiday plans.	Descriptive statistics	The study found that social media sites were least important source of travel planning. Very few respondents were influenced by social media during the travel planning process as majority of them did not make any change in destination and accommodation choice.	Random sampling with 240 students as respondents.	The limitation of the research arose from the fact that respondents were aged from 18 to 25 years, were not earning, and did not have much experience in travel planning. The respondents for the study should be experienced and active in the decision making process of holiday planning.
Nigam & Vyas (2014)	To find out the influence of social media on social media users in deciding leisure travel; to study and evaluate use and extent of social media throughout the holiday travel cycle.	Chi Square test	It was found by the research that age played an important role in influencing users especially with respect to destination and accommodation. The authors mentioned that the study identified the role and impact of social media throughout the holiday travel cycle which will be valuable to the industry.	100 respondents of Baroda city of Gujarat.	Sample was restricted only to one particular city of India. The authors mentioned the role of social media in before, during, and after travel; stages but empirical evidence could not be established.
Shreekala & Hemamalini (2013)	To identify in which stage social media is used. To analyze the eWOM in the social media. To identify the age and usage of social media in creating an impact on travel decisions.	Percentage Analysis Chi Square Chi Square	Around 50% of the respondents mentioned that they used social media before travel to search for information related to travel. It was found that eWOM had a significant impact on social media because people trust experiences and reviews shared online. It was found that people aged less than 30 years responded more on travel blogs and social networking sites.	50 respondents from Chennai.	The sample size was very small. Therefore, the research cannot be generalized for India. Also, lack of empirical evidence to identify the stage of travel influenced by social media was another limitation.

making model ; whereas, some studies tried to understand the impact at different stages of holiday travel. The Table 3 has collated few such studies to understand their purpose and to know whether social media is successful

in creating an impact on travel decisions and their findings and to identify the research gap or future research scope.

The study conducted by White (2010) was social media application specific, that is, Facebook. The author here focused upon the role of travel photos uploaded on the Facebook account of the individual and tried to identify whether such photos influenced the travel plan of their Facebook friends. The study identified that people showed interest in the travel photos and tried to find out more about the destination through such photos, thereby leaving a scope that Facebook photos can be influential while exploring a travel destination. Gretzel et al. (2007) brought out that reviews given by consumers reduced the risk and increased the confidence of travellers and assisted them in selecting the hotels. The study of Mack et al. (2008) was social media type specific in which they focused only on blogs. They found that traditional word of mouth was considered to be more credible than the blogs, but bloggers who posted actively were equated with the traditional word of mouth. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) focused only on one aspect of travel decision, that is, the hotel. They found that online reviews increased or decreased the awareness, changed attitude, and impacted the consideration choice of a hotel, but at the same time, it can also be argued that online reviews can also impact the destination choice. Cox et al. (2009) examined the decision making process stage. They found that user generated content was predominantly used during the information search stage and evaluation of alternatives, that is, before the travel stage. They even found that official tourism sites were more trusted than weblogs and social networking sites, but the limitation arose from the fact that the sample consisted of prospective travellers who were already registered on an official tourism website, therefore, the sample had an inclination towards the official websites. This finding is, however, contrary to the findings of Fotis et al. (2011), who used a broad approach to understand the impact of social media on travel decision making. They identified that social media websites were used in the after travel stage of the trip for the purpose of sharing experience and photos. They also identified that there was a correlation between social media level of influence and changes made in holiday plans.

Research Gap and Research Questions

The academic literature indicates a number of studies that attempted to find or explain the role and impact of social media on consumers' travel decision making process. The approach used by certain authors was either social media application specific, or it was specific to one aspect of travel decision, that is, a destination or hotel. Certain studies discussed only specific type of social media type like blogs or consumer reviews. Few authors tried to explore different stages of holiday travel, but their findings are contrary to each other. Certain studies revealed that there is a correlation between social media level of influence and changes made in holiday plans. However, these did not find the level of association. Another point of difference is that national markets depict difference in social media adoption and use and further indicates difference in level of trust on it. There is a need to study India as a separate national market to address this gap, with the aim to explore the impact of social media on travel decision making process at different travel stages, that is, before, during, and after the consumption of holiday. More specifically, the research studies should empirically address the following questions :

RQ1: In which holiday travel stage is social media used predominantly ?

RQ Ans 1) Social media is used in holiday travel stages. Various studies indicate the usage of social media in different stages. According to Cox et al. (2009), social media is used predominantly during the information search and evaluation of alternative stages. However, it is not used in the during and after travel stages. In contrary to this, Fotis et al. (2011) found that social media is used only after travel to share the holiday experiences ; however, it is not used in the before and after travel stages. These studies are different from each other due to the market and respondent coverage, although they indicate that social media is used in holiday travel stages.

RQ2: Does social media information influence the choice of destination, hotels, and itinerary ?

RQ Ans 2) The literature review indicates various studies which specified that social media influences the choice of a hotel or destination. According to Vermeulen and Seegers (2009), exposure to online hotel reviews yielded changes in attitude. Positive reaction towards lesser known hotels indicates positive change in the attitude ; whereas, negative reaction yields negative change. The study also indicated that positive reviews had a positive impact on consideration of that particular hotel. According to Fotis et al. (2011), social media influences the destination and hotel choice as with the empirical evidence they were able to find a correlation between changes made in destination and hotel choice due to social media influence.

RQ3: What is the level of influence of social media information and changes done in the original choice of destination, hotels, and itinerary ?

RQ Ans 3) The studies indicated that social media has an influence as far changes in holiday plans are concerned. In fact, the empirical evidences from various studies indicated that consumers make changes with respect to destination and hotel choices, but what is the level of influence was not indicated by any study. The studies attempted to address the level of influence of social media information and changes done in the original choice of destination, hotel, and itinerary.

RQ4: Which information is more reliable - social media or online travel companies' websites ?

RQ Ans 4) The research question attempts to find that for Indian consumers which information is more reliable, that is, information present on social media or information present on online travel companies' websites. More specifically, it tries to compare the correctness and completeness of information present on these sources.

RQ5: Which information is more reliable - social media or Indian government tourism website ?

RQ Ans 5) This research question compares the reliability of information available on Indian government tourism website www.incredibleindia.org vis-à-vis social media. The question aims to empirically validate the trust which Indian consumers have on both the sources.

Managerial Implications

Social media is influencing consumers by increasing awareness, forming opinions, and sharing information. Reviews given on social media affect all types of purchases - expensive or inexpensive. The consumer's decision making is influenced by these social networking sites. Thus, it is crucial for businesses to have a presence on social media. Travel companies need to bypass their traditional PR methods and need to contact their target audience directly. Social media is capable of bringing them on one platform. This study will be useful for all managers who deal in travel related businesses, for example: online travel agents, offline travel agents, government tourism departments, hotels, and restaurants.

If it is validated that social media is used for travel planning, then marketers can use this media effectively to reach out to their target customers.

✎ Companies can ask users to be a part of the brand building process where their valuable experiences can help the organization to provide better services or offerings.

✎ Companies can create a virtual community of people who share similar tastes and lifestyles who can seamlessly recognize a brand as a significant player in the industry. Customers can connect themselves with that

brand. This thus reduces the company's effort to promote its brand.

✧ Social media acts as a platform where customers can share their opinions, views, and personal experiences. Companies can engage with them.

✧ Social media gives a personalized appeal to customers ; thus, companies can leverage these online channels for marketing initiatives.

✧ Companies can create fans.

✧ Companies can create a system where they focus on an early-warning system, thereby reducing the chance of bad (online) word of mouth and creating a better customer service.

Conclusion

The range of social media and the information it carries is expanding rapidly. Indian consumers are highly active on such media, and it is emerging as a popular media to express or share thoughts and views. Holidays are an experience of a lifetime, and every individual wants to cherish this experience lifelong. The decision making process of tourism is absolutely similar to the purchase of any other product or service. Planning a holiday follows involves intensive search exercise of information before determining and finalizing the specific holiday package. In fact, with the emergence of social media, the search exercise continues to be during the holiday, and it ends once the experience or photos are shared. This extensive exercise is well supported by social media. It is well accepted and utilized for holiday travel purpose. People use this media to interact, share, exchange information, and reduce the risk as far as the holiday decision making process is concerned.

The present study has been conducted to prove this concept that social media is influencing different stages of holiday travel. This review highlights various studies done in various markets and these studies confirm the fact that social media is playing a role in the holiday travel decision making process.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The study considers only one social networking site, that is, Facebook ; one media sharing site like Youtube ; a micro blogging site like Twitter ; and consumer generated review site like Trip Advisor. The study does not include popular social media like blogs. It also does not include other popular social media sites like Flickr, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc. Reliability of information available on social media vis-à-vis other online sources includes only official website of Government of India and popular online travel agents sites. Future studies can be conducted with other popular social media sites and can be compared with other online sources. Future research endeavours can empirically analyze whether the impact of social media exists for the Indian consumers, are they really influenced by social media while planning their holidays, or such a concept is irrelevant in the Indian market context.

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