

Inbound tourism influenced by social media: An Indian case study

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Abstract

In 2014, the Union Government of India has set a target to achieve 1% share in global tourism arrivals in India, as expressed by the then Union Minister State for Tourism. In this regard, the role played by Social Media to influence the foreign tourist was significant. To analyze the causality between India, as a tourist destination and its presence on social media platform, a research study has been done which was fully funded by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. The main objective was to study all the foreign tourists visiting India duly influenced by the social media. Due to the nature of the study, the technique of the focus - group interview has applied and then structured questionnaire has prepared to achieve the six objectives of the study. With a total sample size of 2,351 inbound tourists, collected in four phases during peak inbound tourist seasons from 2015 to 2016. The sample had consisted of the respondents from 93 nationalities and influenced by social media to visit India. The major outcomes were that majority of the inbound tourists came to know about India as a tourist destination through social media and then they explored more information specifically tourists attractions, to plan their trips to India. The majority of the tourists got influenced by Tripadvisor and Facebook platforms and reasonably satisfied with the information generated by the other social media sources. The results and conclusions have accepted by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and utilized appropriately to gain the competitive advantage.

Keywords: *Social Media Inbound tourists, Indian inbound tourism, Social media influence the inbound tourist, Social media and Inbound tourism, Social Media channels*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Tourism and social media

Tourism is an information-intensive industry (Sheldon, 1997; Werthner & Klein, 1999); therefore, it is critical to understand changes in technologies and consumer behavior that impact the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information. With the enormous amount of information potentially available to travelers, the Internet constitutes an important platform for information exchange between the consumer and industry suppliers (e.g., hotels, transportation sectors, attractions), intermediaries (e.g., travel agents), controllers (e.g., governments and administrative bodies), as well as many non-profit organizations such as destination marketing organizations (Werthner & Klein, 1999). Different technological interfaces, such as search engines, online travel booking sites, and Web sites of destination marketing organizations facilitate the information exchange between online travelers and the so-called “online tourism domain” (Xiang et al., 2008).

Particularly, it has been argued that understanding the nature of the online tourism domain, i.e. the composition of online tourism related information potentially available to travelers, provides an important stepping-stone for the development of successful marketing programs and better information systems in tourism (Fesenmaier, Woerber & Werthner, 2006; Xiang et al., 2008). In present time, social media is playing an increasingly important role as information sources for travelers and potential tourists. Henceforth, social media facilitates the interactions between online consumers have emerged as an important component of the online tourism domain.

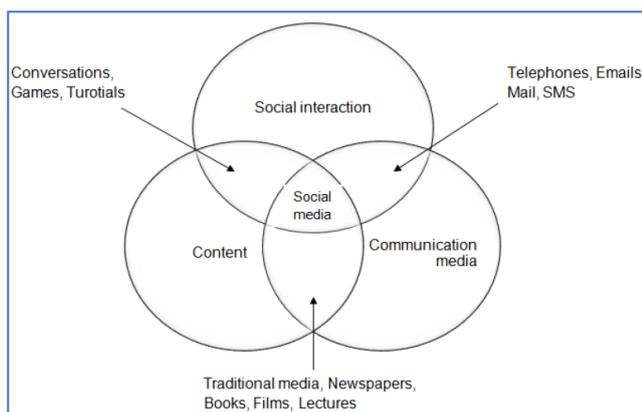


Fig. 1. Social media components

According to Blackshaw (2006), “social media” can be generally understood as Internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses “media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers”. Social media includes a variety of applications in the technical sense which allow consumers to “post”, “tag”, “digg”, or “blog”, and so forth, on the Internet. The contents generated by these social media include a variety of new and emerging sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers with the intent of educating each other about products, brands, services and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). The importance of social media is identified and investigated by Xiang & Gretzel (2010) and concluded that the extent to which social media appear in search engine results in the context of travel-related searches. Their analysis showed that social media constitute a substantial part of the search results, indicating that search engines linked the travelers directly to social media sites. Since more and more travelers seem to tap into this “collective intelligence” available on the Web (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008), this will challenge the established marketing practices of many tourism businesses and destinations. There are different characteristics to social media; nonetheless the supplementary and interrelated key elements are communication media, social interaction and content. Dann & Dann (2011) explained that each of these three factors has to be present in order to place a functional social media structure online. The relation between social interaction, communication media and content can provide various supplementary advantages from a perspective of end-user behavior as correct positioning of social media can form quite a new experience set (refer Fig. 1).

However, social media is more convenient and efficient way of spreading information compared to traditional media and thus, more and more companies are utilizing it as a marketing channel. They are integrating social media into marketing activities as it is growing popularity at an increasing extent. Furthermore, through media visibility companies are able to create more approachable image, and possibly

bring awareness among new customers as well as retain existing consumer relationships.

1.2 Social Media – Indian and International Scenario

In order to encourage and enable Indian government agencies to make use of this dynamic medium of interaction, a Framework and Guidelines for use of Social Media by Department of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Government of India has been formulated in 2012. These guidelines will enable the various agencies to create and implement their own strategy for the use of social media.

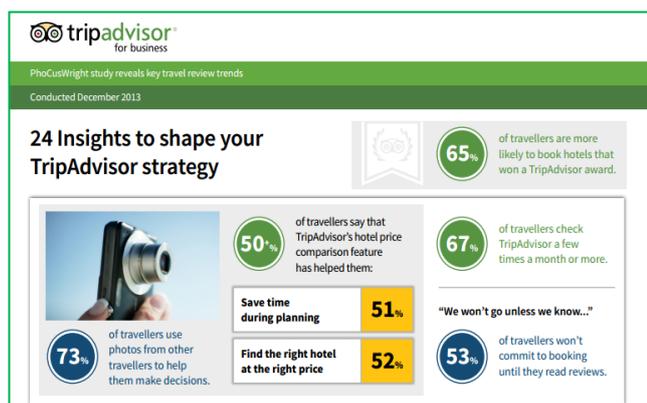


Fig. 2. TripAdvisor Survey Infographic

On the similar note, one of the popular travel social media site Expedia Media Solutions partnered with ComScore during the summer of 2013, surveying over 1,000 US Adults who had traveled in the previous past 6 months, and owned a desktop/laptop, tablet or smartphone. The report *Understanding the role of content in the travel purchase path* sheds some insightful details of how travelers consume and share content prior to, during and after a trip. Some major findings are Online content consumption is growing at a rapid pace, as consumers are spending 93% more time with online content than they did three years ago. Online travel spending was up 8% YoY (year-over-year), reaching \$58 Billion through the first half of 2013. Total mobile travel minutes have increased by 45% YoY while PC travel minutes have only increased by 2% YoY. Another interesting point was that content is available and being accessed by consumers across more platforms and channels than ever before. Not surprisingly coming from an Expedia Solutions study, online travel agencies were found to be an important source across all platforms and throughout all stages of the booking process. In this report, also sheds some key

insights on the role of social media (Facebook) before, during and after the trip, and what types of content work best, i.e. organic vs paid (Fig. 3).

During the booking process, 26% of travel buyers were exposed to travel related content on Facebook, with 23% exposed to paid content and 9% exposed to organic. Total 28% of total travel minutes are consumed on mobile devices and 24% of travelers access travel content exclusively on mobile devices. Online travel agencies (OTAs) are visited by 80% of travelers during the booking process and the average number of OTA visits during each phase exceeds that of any other category.

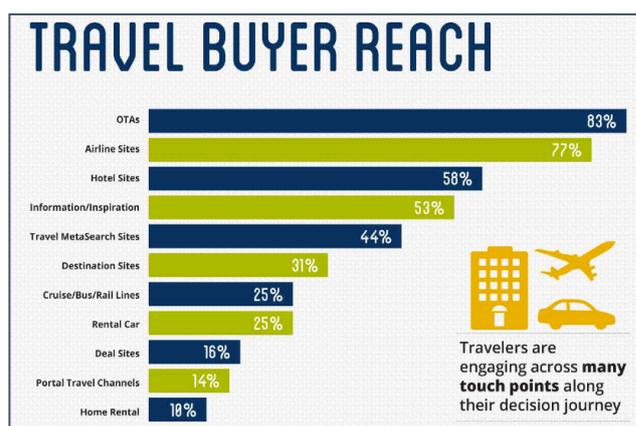


Fig. 3. Travel buyer reach

Different types of content resonate with and will be shared by consumers at specific points and on specific platforms throughout the content journey. 55% of travelers seek hotel and accommodation information, and it is the most commonly sought content across all decision stages when taking PC and mobile consumption into account. Weather and climate information, followed by restaurant reviews, are most likely to be accessed on mobile, at 46% and 44%, respectively. Image content is used 37% of the time during the travel decision process, which is more than twice as much as videos, at only 18%. Upon return, 45% of travelers will post travel-related content on social media or write reviews. At 64%, social media photos are most likely to be published from a laptop, followed by smartphones at 45% and tablets at 16%. It's no wonder destinations, airlines, hotels and most travel marketers are embracing social networks such as Pinterest, but also photo / video applications such as Instagram and Vine, as part of their storytelling toolkit, reaching out to growing crowds of travelers. Expect more photos and videos coming your way from your favorite destination or travel brand in 2014 (Fig. 4).

By the above discussion, it is proved that the impact of social media, the destination feedback by the tourist and availability of online contents are important parameters to influence the potential tourist for their subsequent destination choices. Hence, the present area of study is the need of the hour for destination promotion in a rapid pace through the channel of social media. To improve the services and to gain the competitive advantage, the destination management organizations and decision makers should analyze the need of the potential tourist when they are analyzing the online travel contents and feedbacks. There is also a need to analyze the various sources of social media, which are influencing the foreign tourist for their travel decision. This study is framed as per the need of the present time where the impact of social media is increasing day by day to motivate the foreign nationals to visit India for tourism purposes. The insights from the present study will guide the policy makers to analyze the opportunities provided by the social media to generate the curiosity among the foreign tourist to visit the country having incredible tourism resources.

2. Objectives of the study

The followings were the objectives of the study:

1. The extent to which social media is used to collect information for planning visits to India.
2. What are the important social media sources used along with their magnitude in the decision making of the traveler?
3. What has been the experience with information generated through social media?
4. Are multiple sources used to get varied information?
5. What is the level of confidence in official platforms provided for interaction?
6. Analyze the influence of social media on tourist by assessing the effect on “individual” as well as “overall levels”.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research Plan

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a field oriented and applied research is often used non-probability samples which are purposive in nature. In the purposive samples, the participants or respondents are selected according to predetermined criteria relevant to a particular research objective. As the area of the present research was confined to those

respondents influenced by social media directly or indirectly, for travelling to India for tourism purposes, hence the initial filtering was required. The research technique of *focus group interview* was apt for this purpose.

The studies by Prince & Davies (2001) and Marczak & Sewell (2007) has concluded that the focus group technique is a type of qualitative research methodology. They further defined it as a structured and focused discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator (moderator) or using a moderating team to produce qualitative data through a set of open-ended questions. Moreover, the term *focus* has an important meaning – it emphasizes that the group will discuss a precise topic of interest rather than broad generalities (Boddy, 2005).

Being a qualitative research tool, the focus group interview approach has provided the information of influence of social media on their choices of tourist destinations, which covered the following areas:

- How groups of people think or feel about the influence of social media on tour choice
- Give greater insight into why certain opinions are held for the social media
- Help to improve the planning and design of new programs related to social media
- Provide a means of evaluating existing social media channels or programs to influence them for tour choices
- Produce insights for developing strategies for outreach, social media programs

Similarly, based on terms of references / objectives of the study and considerate the nature of the research sample, the focus group interview approach was applied for the sampling purposes, where one focus group has included 20 to 25 respondents.

As per the nature of the study, following parameters had included for designing the survey instrument:

- Most data requirements had fulfilled through primary sources to get the first-hand responses.
- Similar studies had also been consulted and referred for understanding the various research dynamisms during focus group interview methods.

- The primary and secondary constructs had helped to develop a set of valid and reliable survey instrument in the form of certain related questions based on the terms of reference / objectives of the study.

- These had carried by the interviewer and used as a tool to ask the questions one by one to know the responses during the focus group interviews.

The research methodology has included the designing of a survey instrument for a focus group interview, then based on the responses gathered, a structured questionnaire was developed. Then the structured questionnaire was tested with a pilot survey and as per the responses, after the minor changes, final questionnaire was developed which included the two sections viz. Demographic Profile and Survey Questions, for the purpose of data collection.

3.2 Schedule for data collection

To an addition, the research methodology for this study was based on identification of foreign nationals / foreign tourists on the major places where their presence is expected, in order to gather their responses

for the study. The research plan is given as follows which was followed for the study:

- *In the first phase*, field trips had organized between February to April 2015, with a “focus-group approach” on each destination and their outcomes had contributed towards designing a structured questionnaire (refer Table 2).

- While *in the second phase*, as a pilot survey, the data had collected through “structured questionnaire” from August to October, 2015 (refer Table 2).

- By knowing the lean and peak seasons of Indian inbound tourism, the survey was conducted during the peak-seasons to collect the maximum responses.

- Based on the outcomes which had analyzed after the pilot survey, there had several changes inculcated in the “structured questionnaire”.

- Then, the final data collection was carried in two phases, i.e. *phase three* (November to December, 2015) and *phase four* (February to April, 2016) respectively.

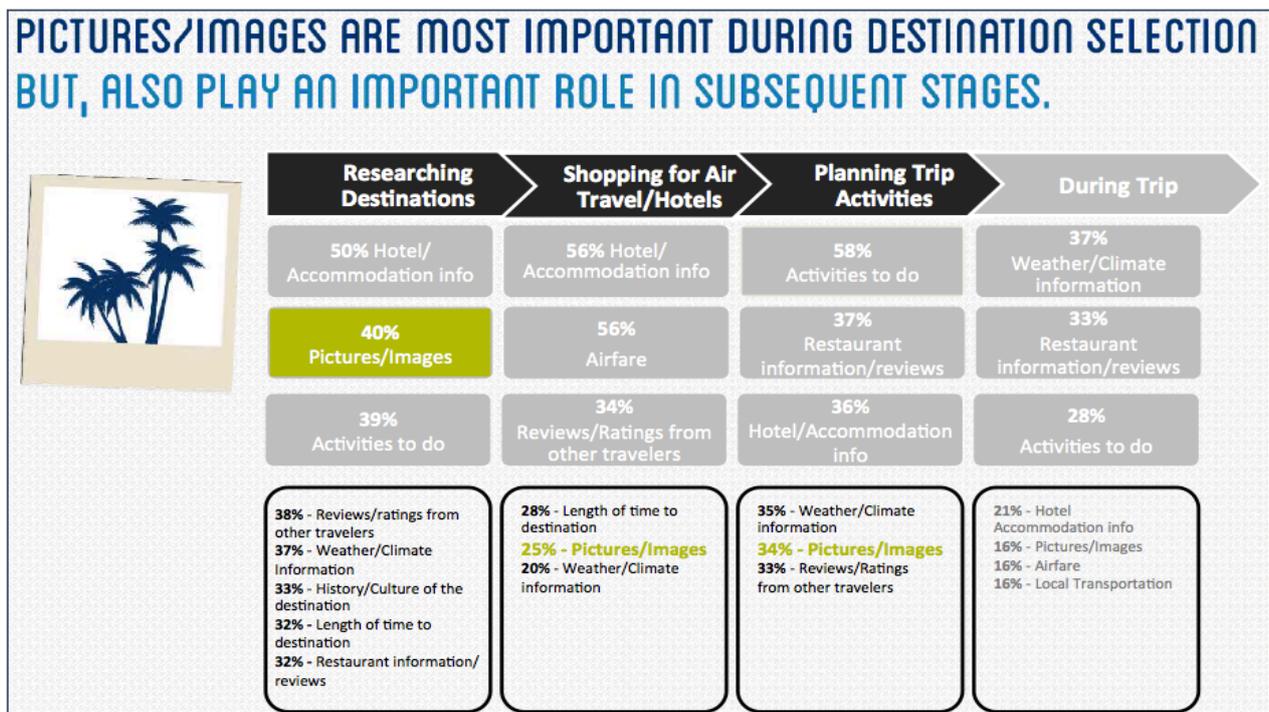


Fig. 4. Important travel contents preferred online by the tourist

Table 1. Structured Questionnaire for the survey as per Terms of Reference (ToR)

Terms of Reference (ToR)	Survey Questions	
Objective 1	8. Did you ever get a chance to know about India as a tourism destination through social media? 1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Mostly 5. Always	
	9. Did you try to explore more information about it and then plan for the visit? 1. Yes 2. No	
	10. Out of the following, which one or more options were explored through social media? 1. Accessibility 2. Accommodation 3. Attraction 4. Others, if any _____	
	11. While making a decision on your travel to India, which of the following social media sources you considered: 1. Facebook 2. Twitter 3. LinkedIn 4. Tripadvisor 5. Pinterest 6. You tube 7. Others, if any _____	
	12. How many times you had visited to the following sources to make your travel decision: 1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Mostly 5. Always	
Objective 3	13. For what extent the information generated through social media sources is worth taking into consideration for your travel? 1. None 2. Slight 3. Reasonable 4. Good 5. Very	
	14. Do you consider a particular source of social media to get the varied information? 1. Yes 2. No	
	15. If No, then how many other sources you used to get the information? 1. Print media 2. Listen to your friends or relatives 3. Any other source _____	
	16. Which platform you feel was more useful for planning of your trip? 1. Official Social media pages 2. Social media pages of Local freelancers 3. Both (1) & (2) 4. Any other platform	
	17. Are official social media sites providing satisfactory information? 1. Yes 2. No	
Objective 5	18. What are your criteria for choosing any travel portal through social media? 1. Browse on your own 2. Recommendations from social networking friends 3. Any other _____	
	19. Have you consider any review blogs like travelogue etc.? 1. Yes 2. No	
	20. Is it worth to take advice from official online customer service platforms? 1. Yes 2. No	
	21. Have you get driven by customer loyalty programs launched by travel companies through social media? 1. Yes 2. No	
	22. If yes, then how? 1. Being the member 2. Participating in contest 3. Acting as a guest 4. Sharing among your friends	
	23. From the planning process to finalizing your visit to India, how much you got influenced by social media? 1. Far too little 2. Too little 3. About right 4. Too much 5. Far too much	
	* Objective 6	

*included all the questions from 8 to 23 to fulfill this ToR

3.3 Sample design

As per the report published by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India titled, "India Tourism Statistics 2012", the top 10 Indian States / Union Territories received the maximum number of foreign tourists are given in Table 2. Additionally, on a special case, it also included the North Eastern state of Assam as compared to other North Eastern states having the highest number of tourists visited and the state of Jammu and Kashmir, in the study.

To identify the maximum availability of foreign tourists in the states / UTs shortlisted for data collection (refer Table 2), the past trends as well as expert opinion had considered. And the cities / circles for data collection had finalized, as given in Table 3.

Table 2. Top 10 State / UTs (plus North Eastern state and J&K) wise Foreign Tourist Visits in 2012

S.No.	Name of the State / UT	Region	Foreign Tourist Arrivals	
			(in numbers)	(in percentage)
1	Maharashtra	West	51,20,287	24.7
2	Tamil Nadu	South	35,61,740	17.2
3	Delhi	North	23,45,980	11.3
4	Uttar Pradesh	North	19,94,495	9.6
5	Rajasthan	West	14,51,370	7.0
6	West Bengal	East	12,19,610	6.0
7	Bihar	East	10,96,933	5.3
8	Kerala	South	7,93,696	4.0
9	Karnataka	South	5,95,359	2.9
10	Himachal Pradesh	North	5,00,284	2.0
11	Assam	North East	17,543	0.08
12	Jammu and Kashmir	North	78,802	0.38

(Source: Indian Tourism Statistics 2012, pp. 87-104)

As per the Table 3, the sample area has included the followings:

- All ten States / UTs of the country along with Assam and J&K which comprised of all the five regions of the country viz. North, South, East, West and North East.
- The study has included all the major cities / tourism-circles for the sampling.
- In order to receive the maximum responses, major coverage areas have also included like historical monuments, heritage sites, tourist specific areas like tourist village, national parks, shopping areas etc.

- In the meantime, major hotels and other accommodation sites has also included to access the international tourists for gathering their responses.

Table 3. Cities / circles for data collection

S. No.	Name of the State / UT	Region	Cities / Circles
1	Maharashtra	West	i. Aurangabad ii. Mumbai
2	Tamil Nadu	South	i. Chennai ii. Kanyakumari
3	Delhi	North	i. Delhi
4	Uttar Pradesh	North	i. Agra ii. Lucknow
5	Rajasthan	West	i. Jaipur ii. Jodhpur
6	West Bengal	East	i. Kolkata ii. Sundarbans
7	Bihar	East	i. Patna ii. Bodh Gaya
8	Kerala	South	i. Munnar ii. Thrissur
9	Karnataka	South	i. Bengaluru ii. Dharwad
10	Himachal Pradesh	North	i. Shimla ii. Manali
11	Assam	North East	i. Guwahati ii. Tezpur
12	Jammu and Kashmir	North	i. Leh / Srinagar ii. Jammu

3.4 Sampling Size

- As mentioned under sample design, the sampling area has included all the five regions and twelve States / UTs of the country.
- The total valid responses had collected as a sample size per city / circle is given in Table 4.

In total, 2,351 valid responses had gathered after the data collection from the sampling area.

Table 4. Sample Size of the survey

S.No.	Name of the State/ UT	Region	Cities / Circles	Valid responses
1	Maharashtra	West	i. Aurangabad ii. Mumbai	101 101
2	Tamil Nadu	South	i. Chennai ii. Kanyakumari	105 105
3	Delhi	North	i. Delhi	202
4	Uttar Pradesh	North	i. Agra ii. Lucknow	111 101
5	Rajasthan	West	i. Jaipur ii. Jodhpur	100 100
6	West Bengal	East	i. Kolkata ii. Sundarbans	105 105
7	Bihar	East	i. Patna ii. Bodh Gaya	45 45
8	Kerala	South	i. Munnar ii. Thrissur	100 100
9	Karnataka	South	i. Bengaluru ii. Dhanbad	101 101
10	Himachal Pradesh	North	i. Shimla ii. Manali	100 100
11	Assam	North East	i. Guwahati ii. Tezpur	115 110
12	Jammu and Kashmir	North	i. Leh / Srinagar ii. Jammu	150 50
Total				2351

4. Data analysis

4.1 Demographic Profile of the respondents

Out of the total 2351 respondents, 1315 (55.93%) were males and 1036 (44.07%) were females. Under the age distribution, 141 (6%) respondents were below the age of 20, 715 (30.41%) were between 20 to 30 years of age, 649 (27.61%) were lying between 30 to 40 years, 450 (19.14) were belongs to 40 to 50 and 396 (16.84%) were above the age of 50 years.

Under the nationality, the top five countries from where the respondents belong were France 279 (11.87%) respondents, UK 247 (10.51%), Germany 229 (9.74%), USA 226 (9.61%) and Australia 121 (5.15%) respectively (refer Annexure I). In total, of 2531 respondents, 391 (17%) respondents were undergraduates, 1011 (43%) were graduates, 837 (35%) were postgraduates and 112 (5%) were opted any other educational category.

Out of the total respondents 2531, 1153 (45.56%) were employed, 536 (21.18%) were unemployed and 658 (26%) were belong to any other category. Out of the total 2531 respondents, 483 (19.08%) respondents has below 600 US \$ monthly household income while 467 (18.45%) has 600 to 900, 544 (21.50%) has 900 to 1200 and 856 (33.82%) has more than 1200 US \$ income per month. Under the marital status, out of 2531 respondents, 1172 were married, 1018 were unmarried and 169 were chosen any other category.

Objective 1: The extent to which social media is used to collect information for planning visits to India.

To achieve the first objective, the three questions i.e. Q. No. 8, 9 and 10 had finalized and included in the structured questionnaire. The following had the responses:

Q. No. 8: Did you ever get a chance to know about India as a tourism destination through social media?

The responses of 2351 respondents based on a five-point Likert scale are given in the table 5:

Table 5. To know about India as a Tourism Destination through Social Media

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Mostly	Always
0 (0%)	604 (25.70%)	1000 (42.50%)	555 (23.60%)	192 (8.20%)

As per the responses listed in Table 5, there were 1000 (42.50%) respondents have “sometimes” while 555 (23.60%) respondents have “mostly” got the opportunity to know about India as a tourist destination through social media.

Q. No. 9: Did you try to explore more information about it and then plan for the visit?

This question was a closed one having the option of either “Yes” or “No”. Where, the responses to this statement concluded that 2099 (89.30%) respondents had tried to explore more information related to India through social media for tourism purposes and 252 (10.70%) respondents has not been tried for this purpose.

Q. No. 10: Out of the following, which one or more options were explored through social media?

1. Accessibility
2. Accommodation
3. Attraction
4. Others, if any _____

The responses are given in the table 6:

Table 6. Options had explored through Social Media*

1	2	3	4
Accessibility	Accommodation	Attraction	Others, if any
16.64%	31.88%	44.54%	6.95%

*Note: The respondents had opted the multiple options, therefore, the results were calculated on the basis of percentage distribution because the responses were exceeding the total number of respondents.

As per the table, 44.54% respondents had explored the tourist attractions through social media while 31.88% respondents had explored the accommodation option through social media. In the other category, the respondents have written the keywords "Climate", "Guide", "Adventure", "Culture", "Lakes", "Nature" and "Wildlife"(refer Appendix XI for the percentage distribution of these keywords).

Objective 2: What are the important social media sources used along with their magnitude in the decision making of the traveler?

To achieve the objective 2, two questions i.e. Q. No. 11 and 12 were asked to know the responses.

Q. No. 11: While making a decision on your travel to India, which of the following social media sources you considered are given in table 7:

Table 7 Social Media sources considered for making a travel decision to India*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Facebook	Twitter	LinkedIn	Tripadvisor	Pinterest	You Tube	Others, if any
26.66%	11.41%	5.57%	32.41%	3.65%	13.09%	7.19%

*Note: The respondents had opted the multiple options, therefore, the results were calculated on the basis of percentage distribution because the responses were exceeding the total number of respondents.

As per the responses, 32.41% respondents had referred the Tripadvisor and 26.66% had chosen the Facebook social media platforms while making their decision to travel in India. In the "others, if any," category, the respondents had written the keywords "Baidu.com", "Booking.com", "Google Blogs",

"Indostan.in", "Instagram", "Lonely Planet", "Whatsapp", "Triposo" and "Tumblr" (refer Appendix XI for the percentage distribution of these keywords).

Q. No. 12: How many times you had visited to the following sources to make your travel decision?

To know the magnitude or amount during the decision making of the traveler, the responses has been asked on a 5 point Likert scale. The responses are given in table 8:

Table 8. Frequency of visiting the Social Media sources for making a travel decision

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Mostly	Always
0 (0.00%)	407 (17.30%)	1108 (47.10%)	691 (29.40%)	145 (6.20%)

Out of the total 2351 respondents, 1108 (47.10%) respondents were chosen "Sometimes" and 691 (29.40%) were opted "Mostly", for all the social media platforms listed under Q. No. 11.

Objective 3: What has been the experience with information generated through social media?

The terms of reference 3 was included to know the tangible aspect, i.e. satisfaction, when the travelers were explored the information through online / social media platforms. To achieve this objective, three questions viz. Q. No. 13, 14 and 15 were asked from the respondents. The following is the responses related to these questions along with their response rate:

Q. No. 13: For what extent the information generated through social media sources is worth taking into consideration for your travel are given in table 9:

Table 9. Information generated through social media sources for travel consideration

1	2	3	4	5
None	Slight	Reasonable	Good	Very
0 (0.00%)	478 (20.30%)	1062 (45.20%)	679 (28.90%)	132 (5.60%)

The responses for this question has yielded that 1062 (45.20%) respondents has opted "Reasonable" while 679 (28.90%) respondents has given "Good", as far as the information generated through social media sources is concerned.

Q. No. 14: Do you consider a particular source of social media to get the varied information?

This question was asked to know the specific choice or preference of the respondents, where 1114 (47.40%) respondents had chosen the option “Yes” and 1237 (52.60%) of the respondents had marked “No”.

Q. No. 15: If No, then how many other sources you used to get the information?

The next question, i.e. Q. No. 15 was related to those respondents who have chosen “No” in the previous question, so that their further choice will be identified.

In this question, two options were listed while the third option was an open-ended to know the various other sources as their preference to get the desired information are given in Table 10.

Table 10. Other sources to get the information*

1	2	3
Print media	Listen to your friends or relatives	Any other source
26.13%	64.21%	9.66%

*Note: The respondents had opted the multiple options, therefore, the results were calculated on the basis of percentage distribution because the responses were exceeding the total number of respondents.

The responses have concluded that 64.21% respondents had listened to their friends or relatives and 26.13% of the respondents had opted print media to get the desired information.

Under the category, “Any Other Source”, which were opted by 9.66% of the respondents. Moreover, they had written the keywords “Travel Books”, “Business Magazines”, “Travel Guides”, “Internet”, “Other travelers”, “Newspaper, TV” and “TV commercials” (refer Appendix XI for the percentage distribution of these keywords).

Objective 4: Are multiple sources used to get varied information?

The main objective of terms of reference 4 has been to identify the multiple sources frequently used by the traveler to access the varied travel related information to India. For this, a question no. 16 was asked and got the following responses:

Q. No. 16:

Which platform you feel was more useful for planning of your trip? The responses are given in table 11.

Table 11. Social Media platform to get the information for planning of the trip*

1	2	3	4
Official Social media pages	Social media pages of local freelancers	Both 1 and 2	Any other platform
12.44%	9.15%	55.21%	23.20%

*Note: The respondents had opted the multiple options, therefore, the results were calculated on the basis of percentage distribution because the responses were exceeding the total number of respondents.

As per the responses, 55.21% of the respondents had used both the platforms, i.e. Official social media pages and Social media pages of local freelancers. Where else, 23.20% of the respondents had chosen any other platforms. In “Any other platform”, the respondents had listed the options like “Lonely Planet (a travel guide book)”, “Tourism Organizations”, “Travel Blogs”, “Trip Advisor” and “Internet” (refer Appendix XI for the percentage distribution of these keywords).

Objective 5: What is the level of confidence in official platforms provided for interaction?

The term, “Level of Confidence” was a central objective under the terms of reference 5 where the objective to identify the confidence level in official social media platforms provided for the interaction. In terms of statistics, the meaning of understanding for Level of Confidence is technical. Like as per the market research expert Devault (2016), a *confidence level* is an expression of *how confident a researcher can be* of the data obtained from a sample. Confidence levels are expressed as a percentage and indicate how frequently that percentage of *the target population* would give an answer that lies within the confidence interval. The most commonly used confidence level is 95%. Here the term, 95% confidence level implies that 95% of the confidence intervals would include the true population parameter.

As per the understanding and meaning of level of confidence, there is a need to establish causality between two or more than two variables. Here the two variables are “Official social media platforms provided for the interaction” and “the travelers exploring the information on these platforms”. By keeping all these parameters, six questions, i.e. Q. No. 17 to 22, were asked, as the explanations are given as follows:

Q. No. 17: Are official social media sites providing satisfactory information?

As per the responses, 1444 (61.40%) respondents had satisfied while 907 (38.60%) respondents had not satisfied with the official social media sites providing the information.

Q. No. 18: What are your criteria for choosing any travel portal through social media? The responses are given in table 12:

Table 12. Criteria for choosing a travel portal through social media*

1	2	3
Browse on your own	Recommendations from social networking friends	Any other
53.79%	43.09%	3.12%

*Note: The respondents had opted the multiple options, therefore, the results were calculated on the basis of percentage distribution because the responses were exceeding the total number of respondents.

This question has generated the responses related to the choosing any travel portal's criteria of the respondents. Here 53.79% of the respondents had browsed on their own while 43.09% had influenced by the recommendations from their social networking friends. Under "Any other", the respondents have not given any keywords.

Q. No. 19: Have you considered any review blogs like travelogue etc.?

For this question, 1375 (58.50%) of the respondents had considered the review blogs while 976 (41.50%) had not opted it.

Q. No. 20: Is it worth to take advice from official online customer service platforms?

1496 (63.60%) respondents had agreed to take advice from official online customer service platforms while 855 (36.40%) had denied it.

Q. No. 21: Have you got driven by customer loyalty programs launched by travel companies through social media?

The majority of the respondents, i.e. 1716 (73%) had not motivated by any customer loyalty programs launched by the travel companies through social media while 635 (27%) had given priority to this service.

Q. No. 22: If yes, then how?

Furthermore, to the previous question, the respondents who has opted the customer loyalty programs launched by travel companies through social media were given their responses listed in the following table 13:

Table 13. Respondents has opted the customer loyalty programs launched by travel companies through Social Media

1	2	3	4
Being the member	Participating in contests	Acting as a guest	Sharing among your friends
189 (8.00%)	170 (7.20%)	129 (5.50%)	136 (5.80%)

As per the responses, 189 (8.00%) of the respondents became the members of customer loyalty programs launched by travel companies through social media while 136 (5.80%) respondents were shared this information among their friends, whereas 8 (0.30%) of the respondents has opted more than two options out of the four options were given to this question.

Objective 6: Analyze the influence of social media on tourist by assessing the effect on "individual" as well as "overall levels".

To address this terms of reference, the responses had considered from all the survey questions, i.e. from Q. No. 8 to Q. No. 22 and an additional question of Q. No. 23.

Q. No. 23: From the planning process to finalizing your visit to India, how much you got influenced by social media? The responses are given in table 14:

Table 14. Respondents got influenced by Social Media to finalizing their visit to India

1	2	3	4	5
Far too little	Too little	About right	Too much	Far too much
175 (7.40%)	773 (32.90%)	965 (41.00%)	356 (15.10%)	82 (3.50)

As per the responses, 965 (41.00%) respondents had half influenced by the social media while 356 (15.10%) of the respondents had too much and above influenced by the social media to finalize their trips to India.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The objective 1 was related to identify the utilization of social media by the prospective or potential tourist to collect the information of India as a tourist destination for planning their visits. The above three questions were finalized to gather the appropriate responses. In the stage one, out of 2351 foreign nationals, 42.50% persons sometimes got the opportunity to know about India as a tourist destination through social media. It means there is a need to enhance the presence of India as a tourist destination on social media platforms so that this percentage would be increased in the coming time. In the next stage, 89.30% respondents had tried to explore more information related to India through social media for tourism purposes, so that they will plan their trips to India. This percentage is huge which indicates the curiosity among the online explorers to know more technicalities related to either know or finalize their trips to India. This stage is crucial due to the preference of the potential tourist for finalization of their trips. Here the need to put more extensive as well as updated information over the social media networks, for facilitates the online explorers. In case of satisfaction after exploring the information, the potential tourist may suggest or at least discuss the experience among their social groups which will ultimately increase the traffic of first time surfers. And finally, in the third stage, 44.54% respondents had explored tourist attractions through social media, which is higher than 31.88% respondents who had explored the accommodation option through social media. Here it shows the top priority of the explorers which is a tourist attraction. If the apt information will provide over the social media networks, then it will be easy to boost this percentage in threefold or even higher. After analyzing all the three scenarios, one observation is that the importance of social media during the initial time, when the potential tourist is searching for the information. This information will ultimately landed to the next stage where the decision to choose the destination will arrive. During this stage, all the other competitors' tourism destinations of India will also be compared and hence the role of specific information is vital in the travel decision by the explorers.

The objective 2 was based to know the magnitude or amount or level of frequent visits to the most popular social media platforms used by the traveler

visit especially in India for tourism purposes. Under this category, six most popular social media platform shortlisted were Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tripadvisor, Pinterest and You Tube. As Tripadvisor got the maximum responses, i.e. 32.41% and Facebook followed it by gathering 26.66%, it is mandatory to show the aggressive presence on these two platforms because combined they had chosen from 59.07% of the respondents for making their travel decision to India. After the Tripadvisor and Facebook, the other social media platforms, if combined their contribution is also presented a significant level where the second priority would assign to them too. The platforms like Twitter (11.41%), LinkedIn (5.57%), Pinterest (3.65%) and You Tube (13.09%), if combined, comes to 33.73% and presents a significant percentage of the respondents, which needs to be addressed properly. Moreover, the next question was asked to know the frequency of visits to these social media platforms where the respondents had chosen "Mostly" by 29.40% and "Always" by 6.20%, henceforth, combined this percentage comes to 35.60%, which is a significant population of online explorers and need to consider it for any future e-marketing decisions for promoting the India as a tourist destination.

The objective 3 was based to know the "experience with information generated through social media". To achieve this objective, three interlinked questions has asked, which has started from "is the information generated through social media sources is worth taking into consideration for your travel" and then followed by "any particular source of social media to get the varied information" and in case the respondents has chosen "No", then the next question was asked "to know how many other sources to get this information". On the first question, if we combined the responses of top three choices, i.e. "Reasonable + Good + Very", then the combined percentage comes out is 79.70% which is "extensive result" to give the top priority. It means approximately 80 percent of the time, the information generated through social media will largely impact, first the experience of the traveler and then their choice to finalize the trip to India. Here the role of "what to upload and where to upload" is a crucial one because if this information will catch the eye of the traveler then 68 percent chances are that traveler will book a trip to India. Furthermore, to know the answer of "where to upload" the information, the

next two questions had asked, i.e. “do the traveler, consider a particular source for searching the information and if no, then what are the other sources where the traveler is referring”. Rather than confine the traveler’s options to reply to this question, if the traveler will chose “No”, then there will be an opportunity to glue out the responses to question no. 13, which will ultimately help to achieve the objective of “what to upload and where to upload”. And it happened, the majority of the respondents 1237 (52.60%) had chosen the option “No” and further mentioned their other preferable sources to get the information. As per the responses of this “No” category of the respondents, 64.21% of the respondents listened to their friends or relatives and 26.13% of the respondents had opted print media to get the desired information. After analyzing the responses, if the information available on the social media platforms satisfied the traveler, then approximately half of the chances are that the traveler will share it with their friends and relatives. There is an immediate need to continuously revise the information because ultimately from igniting the curiosity of the traveler to share among the peer group and finally choses the trip, all are dependent on the authenticity of the information.

The objective 4 was all about to know the preferable social media platforms which had useful for planning the trips to India. Under this objective, although one question was asked, but with the several parameters to know their responses. Two major choices were given to the traveler, but the third option was combined so that it will be identified whether the traveler referred individual platform or both the platforms simultaneously. Even the responses suggested that 55.21% of the respondents had used both the platforms, i.e. Official social media pages and Social media pages of local freelancers. Additionally, another option was listed as an open end, to know any other platform popular in their native surroundings which utilized by them in planning their trips to India. Where ever, 23.20% respondents were chosen any other platforms like Travel blogs and Trip advisor. The results have shown that the majority of the travelers were chosen the multiple platforms which makes them feel useful in planning their trips to India. It is mandatory to cover 360-degree e-queries arising at the majority of the social media platforms by providing the information because the travelers are not confined to

any particular platform. As per the results, cognitive preferences are pushing them to visit both official platforms as well as unofficial / freelance platforms for either comparing or searching the desired travel related information.

The objective 5 was all about to know the significance as well as qualitative error existed in official social media platforms available for the interaction to the travelers. For that purpose, six questions, i.e. Q. No. 17 to 22, were asked to the respondents. In the Q. No. 17, 61.40% of the respondents had satisfied with the official social media sites providing the information. Here 53.79% of the respondents had browsed on their own while 43.09% had influenced by the recommendations from their social networking friends. While 53.79% respondents had browsed for choosing the travel portal on their own while 43.09% had influenced by the recommendations from their social networking friends and 3.12% of the respondents have chosen both of the options. Furthermore, 58.50% of the respondents had considered the review blogs and 63.60% of the respondents has been taking the advice from official online customer service platforms. Then, 27% had giving priority to any customer loyalty programs launched by travel companies through social media where 8% of the respondents became the members of this service. The variables were considered to know the confidence level provided by the official social media platforms qualitatively, the respondents had partially satisfied. That is why, the respondent has chosen the travel portal either for gathering the information or interaction with their own. The respondents rather than to confine within official platforms, the respondents had referred other mediums like review blogs and taking advice from online support for interaction. A considerable percentage of the respondents had chosen the travel loyalty programs launched by the travel companies through social media. After analyzing the responses, half of the respondents have not satisfied with the information provided on the official social media platform. Here the confidence level has fallen drastically because the majority is considered the recommendations of their friends or relatives so it might hamper the image presented by the information of India as a tourism destination. There is a need to address this issue on a priority basis.

6. Major findings

All the survey questions, has drafted, finalized and then asked to the respondents as a structured questionnaire, in order to identify the “individual” as well as “overall” influence of social media in exploring and finalizing their trips to India.

The followings are some facts concluded from this study, which need to be considered to achieve the overall effectiveness to present India as a competent tourism destination on social media platforms:

- 42.50% of the respondents had “sometimes” while 23.60% respondents had “mostly” got the opportunity to know about India as a tourist destination through social media.

- 89.30% respondents had tried to “explore more information” related to India through social media for tourism purposes.

- 44.54% respondents had explored “tourist attractions” through social media while 31.88% respondents had explored the “accommodation” option through social media.

- 32.41% respondents had referred the “Tripadvisor” and 26.66% had chosen the “Facebook” as social media platforms while making their decision to travel to India.

- 47.10% respondents had “Sometimes” and 29.40% had “Mostly” visited the social media platforms to make their decision to travel to India.

- 45.20% respondents had “Reasonable” while 28.90% respondents had given “Good”, to the travel related information to India has generated through social media sources are concerned.

- 52.60% of the respondents had not “confined to a particular source of social media” to get the varied information related to the travel to India.

- 64.21% of the respondents had “listened to their friends or relatives” to get the desired information on social media platforms for travelling to India.

- 55.21% of the respondents had used both the platforms, i.e. “Official social media pages” and “Social media pages of local freelancers” for planning their trips to India.

- 61.40% respondents had “satisfied with the official social media sites” providing the information related to travelling to India for tourism purposes.

- 53.79% respondents had “browsed on their own” while 43.09% had influenced by the “recommendations from their social networking friends” for selecting any travel portal through social media.

- 58.50% of the respondents had considered the review blogs before planning for the trips to India.

- 63.60% respondents had agreed to “take advice from official online customer service platforms” before travelling to India.

- 27% respondents had driven by “customer loyalty programs launched by the travel companies through social media” whereas 8% of the respondents had become the “member of this service” which motivated them to travel to India.

- 41% respondents had “half-influenced” while 18.60% of the respondents had “too much and above influenced” by the social media to finalize their trips to India.

Based on the above facts, both at “individual levels” as well as “overall levels”, the social media has played its crucial part in terms of generating the curiosities among the potential tourists. Moreover, in traveling to India, all the official e-channels and freelancers e-platforms have contributed significantly to motivating the tourists for visiting India.

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Annexure I. Nationality wise, distribution of the respondents

S.No.	Respondent's Country	No. of Respondents	S.No.	Respondent's Country	No. of Respondents
1	France	279	48	Hungary	7
2	UK	247	49	Pakistan	6
3	German	229	50	Turkey	6
4	USA	226	51	Vietnam	6
5	Australia	121	52	Czech Republic	5
6	Japan	94	53	Egypt	5
7	Spain	83	54	Hong Kong	5
8	Canada	80	55	Ireland	5
9	Russia	79	56	Cambodia	4
10	Italy	64	57	Colombia	4
11	China	63	58	Jordan	4
12	Israel	41	59	Myanmar	4
13	Thailand	38	60	Scotland	4
14	Netherlands	32	61	Slovenia	4
15	Switzerland	32	62	Tibet	4
16	New Zealand	30	63	Chile	3
17	Bangladesh	29	64	Cyprus	3
18	Sweden	29	65	Kenya	3
19	Belgium	27	66	Georgia	2
20	Korea	26	67	Greece	2
21	Denmark	24	68	Luxembourg	2
22	Bhutan	23	69	Maldives	2
23	Malaysia	21	70	Mauritius	2
24	Poland	21	71	Serbia	2
25	Austria	20	72	Tanzania	2
26	Brazil	18	73	Yemen	2
27	Netherlands	18	74	Armenia	1
28	Sri Lanka	18	75	Azerbaijan	1
29	Indonesia	16	76	Bahrain	1
30	Norway	15	77	Belarus	1
31	South Africa	15	78	Cape Verde Island	1
32	UAE	14	79	Cuba	1
33	Ukraine	14	80	Europe	1
34	Mexico	13	81	Iran	1
35	Nigeria	13	82	Iran	1
36	Portugal	13	83	Latvia	1
37	Yugoslavia	13	84	Lebanon	1
38	South Korea	12	85	Lima	1
39	Finland	11	86	Macedonia	1
40	Nepal	11	87	Morocco	1
41	Singapore	11	88	Oman	1
42	Philippines	10	89	Romania	1
43	Not responded	9	90	Tajikistan	1
44	Taiwan	9	91	Uruguay	1
45	North Korea	8	92	Uzbekistan	1
46	Afghanistan	7	93	Venezuela	1
47	Argentina	7		Total	2351