The Impact of Social Media Communication on Indian Consumers Travel Decisions

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In today's digital era, social media communications have a significant impact on the consumer decision-making process. This new age phenomenon also impacts the tourism industry in India. Indian consumers (*here* travelers) surf through multiple social media platforms for finding travel related information before making a destination choice. Hence, a deeper understanding of the dimensions of social media communication and its impact on the consumer (traveler's) behavior needs to be developed from an emerging market perspective. Here, the researchers observe the comparative effect of user-generated content; the firm generated content and social media advertising on consumers' message involvement, the formation of an attitude towards the travel destination, and finally the destination choice. The descriptive research design was used to conduct the study. Responses were collected from 208 respondents using a well-designed survey instrument. Statistical tools like Cronbach's alpha, factor analysis, and regression were conducted to arrive at empirical results. The results established the importance of user-generated content towards creating consumer involvement, further resulting in the formation of a positive attitude towards the travel destination and finally leading to destination choice. The mediating role of message process involvement and attitude is also evident between the independent variables and destination choice.

Keywords: User-generated content, firm generated content, social media advertisements, message process involvement, attitude towards the destination, destination choice

India's travel industry is worth US$ 71.53 billion in value (Indian Brand equity foundation report, 2017). Like all other industries, the travel industry is also being disrupted by the digital revolution occurring across the globe. In India also, Internet penetration and data speed are growing at a rapid rate (e-Marketer, 2016). Searching travel information online has become an essential practice in destination choice (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012), which has, in turn, influenced the entire tourism ecosystem (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In this study, the researchers have observed the impact of social media communications on Indian traveler's message involvement, attitude towards the destination, and destination choice. Once the dimension which influences consumer behavior the most is unraveled, marketers' may want to channelize dollars accordingly.

Traditionally, the marketing communications of the tourism products were dominated by traditional media platforms like TV, Newspapers, and Radio to name a few (Johnson & Kaye, 2016). Although these mediums delivered the desired results, they continue

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The flow of the report is as follows: literature review helped draw the independent and dependent variables from the related theoretical concepts. These variables were projected in a proposed model reflecting the research objectives. The section on methodology draws out the research design implemented. It also highlights the statistical tools and software used for the data analysis. The data analysis section exhibits the tests for the hypothesis and compares the results with extant literature. The contribution to theory and practice highlights the proposed addition to the knowledge in the area. Future scope and limitations pave the way for additional research in this area.

Literature Review

Literature review, encompassing the extant research from the area of social media communications, advertising value, message process involvement, and the theory of reasoned action, was done to design a proposed model reflecting the research objectives and propose the hypothesis.

Social Media Communications (SMC)

Internet plays a significant role in shaping people's travel plans and consumption (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Volo, 2010). Online search and social media websites (sites) are two major forces that have emerged on the internet disrupting traditional travel practices (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Barnes et al. (2012) explained social networking sites as an online location where the users can create their profiles and establish a peer-to-peer connections, thus creating their network. Hence a two-way online communication was made possible due to web 2.0. This interactivity enabled peer to peer and consumer to the company (known as user-generated content) along with company to consumer (known as firm- generated content) interaction which was not possible with web 1.0.

Organization for economic development and cooperation (2007) defined user-generated content as "content that is publicly available over the internet reflecting a certain amount of creative input and created outside the professional routines and practices." Berthon et al. (2008) added to this by positing that consumers contribute to content creation owing to their motivation to change other users' perception, self – promotion, and also due to the enjoyment. Godes and Mayzlin (2009) explained firm generated content as a "fusion between traditional advertising and consumer word of mouth, characterized as firm initiated but consumer implemented." Todi (2008) suggested that as social media is a high involvement platform for the user, marketers leverage its wide reach, cost efficiency, and targeted advertising to communicate marketing messages to their consumers using this platform. Ducoffe (1995) explored the factors creating value for advertising among consumers. The results opined that informativeness and entertainment exhibit a positive and significant influence on consumers' perceived value. Entertainment was defined as "enjoyment associated with the message." Informativeness was explained as "the ability of the advertisements to inform consumers' of the product proposition so that the purchase can get the utmost satisfaction." The impact of entertaining and informative advertising on the creation of advertising value has been empirically established over a period of time (Rotzoll et al., 1989; Ducoffe, 1995; Tsang et al., 2004; Palka et al., 2009; Blanco et al., 2010; Trivedi 2017). An important contribution to this area of research was made by Pavlou et al. (2000) as they added credibility as a key dimension influencing value. Credibility was defined as "consumers' perception about the truthfulness of the ads." Various research outputs have then supported credibility as an antecedent of value (Choy et al. 2008; Trivedi, 2015).

social media advertisements helped travel companies cut marketing costs owing to its broad but targeted reach at lower costs compared to traditional media platforms. The ads on social media proved useful over traditional platforms and helped the travel organization achieve desired results. Chernova, Tretyakova, and Vlasov (2018) established the importance of UGC on social media platforms as one of its key strengths. The research established that since the users get an opportunity to discuss their thoughts and experience about a particular product with their peer group, it leads to an increase in credibility and visibility for the brand.

However, none of these studies explore the type of ads that have the most significant influence on consumer's involvement nor do they compare the efficacy of UGC, FGC and social media ads on consumers' involvement. This paper studies not only studies the impact of UGC, FGC, and ads on consumer's involvement but also measures the comparative efficacy of these variables on involvement.

The above discussion establishes that social media communication constitutes UGC, FGC, and advertisements on social media. This paper intends to study their comparative efficacy on message process involvement leading to the formation of the below hypothesis:

H1: Firm generated content has a significant influence on the individual's MPI
H2: User-generated content has a significant influence on the individual's MPI
H3: Advertisements on social media has a significant influence on the MPI

Attitude and Purchase Intention

Attitude towards Destination and Travel Destination Choice

Ajzen (1989) described attitude as an individual's positive or negative mental response to stimuli. The theory of reasoned action proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) proposed that behavioral intentions are shaped by an individual's attitude towards the behavior and subjective norms. Attitude plays a very crucial role while studying online user behavior (Cheung & Vogel, 2013; Huang et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2006; Yoon, Duff, & Ryu, 2013). Huang, Hsu, Basu, and Huang (2009) established a significant relationship between attitude and intention regarding travel information search by tourists on social media platforms. In this study, the researchers are looking at behavioral intention as an intent to make a travel destination choice.

Purchase intention is defined as "the likely hood of an individual's choice towards the final purchase decision towards the brand in the future." Such a purchase decision on the internet is the most rapidly growing form of purchase today in the market (Levy & Weitz, 2012). It is essential to study the purchase intention to explore consumer behavior on the internet, as the online travel search intentions can be the predictor of online purchasing intention. It has been argued that information on the internet might be the only functional element to the intent to purchase via interest (Shim, 2011). This leads for the need to understand how various elements of online information search and review influence traveler's behavior (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), especially the readiness to book a hotel room or the willingness to book where a potential consumer forms a view that the hotel can be trusted or not. In this study, the researcher has looked at purchase intentions from the perspective of travel destination choice (TDC). The above literature helps the researchers establish the following hypotheses:

H4: MPI has a significant impact on attitude towards a travel destination

Measures

The measures for the survey questionnaire were adapted from existing scales. The user-generated content, firm generated content and social media ads were the independent variables, while message process involvement, brand attitude, and travel destination choice were the dependent variables. The scale used to measure user-generated content and firm generated content was adapted from Schivinski and Dabrowski (2013). The scale used to measure social media ads was adapted from the work done by Ducoffe (1995). These scales were seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Message process involvement was measured by adapting a scale used earlier by Muehling et al. (1988). Attitude towards the brand was measured by employing a semantic differential scale used earlier by Biehal, Stephens, and Curio (1992). TDC was measured by an existing scale used earlier by Bauer, Reichardt, Barnes, and Neumann (2005). The scale measuring TDC was again a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." SPSS, AMOS, and MS-Excel were the software used for conducting the statistical analysis. Cronbach's alpha, factor analysis, and regression were carried out to test the hypothesis. The mediation effect by MPI and brand attitude was observed by employing the Process method suggested by Hayes (2009).

Data Analysis

Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha was conducted for testing the scale reliability. Cronbach alpha values for each item were above 0.70 and hence appropriate (Nunnally, 1978). KMO and Bartlett's test was conducted to observe the need for conducting factor analysis. The KMO value was 0.923 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at a p-value of 0.000. The KMO and Bartlett test justified the need for conducting factor analysis. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to assess scale validity. The factor loadings for each item of the variables were above 0.60 and hence acceptable (Hair et al., 2006). The results for Cronbach's alpha and factor loading values are exhibited in Table1. To test for multicollinearity among the variables, variance inflation factor values (VIF) were observed. The maximum VIF value observed was 2.27, indicating no issues of multicollinearity.

Common Method Bias (CMB)

The researchers used a structured questionnaire, as the only tool for conducting the research. Hence the researchers intended to ensure the absence of the common method bias. This was done by conducting Harman's single factor test. All items used in the questionnaire were loaded on a single factor without rotation in an exploratory factor analysis. The one factor accounted for 23% of the variance, negating the possibility of CMB.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was carried out to test the hypothesis. The dimensions of social media advertising viz. credibility, entertainment, and informativeness were item-parceled into one factor as social media advertisements (SMADS). Then the first regression was

Contribution to Theory

This research compares the influence of UGC, FGC and social media advertisements on MPI, which further influences attitude towards the brand resulting in the formation of destination choice. Few researchers in India have conducted a similar study for the travel industry. The results establish that UGC has a more significant impact on MPI, as compared to FGC and travel-related advertisements on social media. The result helps establish the importance of UGC among Indian travelers. Adding to the previous research, this study focused on the Gen Y respondents on the two most popular social media platforms, i.e., Facebook and Instagram only. The results, thus help unravel travel related behavior of Indian Gen Y.

Further, the mediating role of MPI and AB was also established. This result establishes the crucial role played by involvement and attitude towards the formation of destination choice. The fact that social media ads, FGC, and UGC did not have a direct influence on TDC, establishes that unless social media communications is not able to involve its audience, it will not have a conative effect in the consumer, i.e., the consumer will not be motivated to take the intended action which here is, to make a travel decision.

Contribution to Practice

The results help travel company marketers understand travel-related consumer behavior on Facebook and Instagram. The results indicate that compared to FGC and social media advertisements, consumers find UGC to be more involving, leading to a positive attitude towards the destination and further destination choice. Hence marketers should focus on motivating travelers to share their experiences. Of course, advertisements and FGC also influence consumers' message involvement, but UGC has a far stronger impact on the involvement. This finding helps marketers channelize their spending on social media accordingly. Some marketers have incentivized their consumers to share their experience on social media platforms. Incentivizing appears to be an appropriate strategy, taking a cue from the results obtained here. It is necessary to invest in advertisements and FGC (like Influencer marketing), but Indian travelers appear to involve more with UGC like peer reviews. Thus drawing from this research, marketers may want to invest in motivating travelers to share their experiences by writing reviews and rating the experience on travel portals.

Limitations and Future Scope: This research has several limitations — the current study involved respondents from the Gen Y cohort, across India. However, as social media usage cuts across age groups, its impact on other age groups calls for further research. Moving further, the difference in consumer perceptions by gender can be observed. This research focused on the two most popular platforms viz. Facebook and Instagram. The impact of other emerging social media platforms like Pinterest, Snapchat, and Foursquare should also be studied separately as they are a different form of social media platform. Only cross-sectional data were collected for this study. The same research can be repeated after some time to observe the long-term impact of social media communications.

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Appendix

Table 1. Cronbach Alpha values and factor loadings

Factor	Cronbach's Alpha value	Factor loading
Trustworthiness	0.794	
I refer to ads on Facebook and Instagram for making my travel-related decisions.		0.911
I trust ads on Facebook and Instagram for making my travel-related decisions		0.911
Informative	0.811	
Travel related ads on Facebook and Instagram keeps me updated.		0.888
Travel related ads on Facebook and Instagram are a timely resource		0.866
Travel related ads on Facebook and Instagram provide quality information		0.803
Entertainment	0.873	
Travel related ads on Facebook and Instagram are enjoyable.		0.906
Travel related ads on Facebook and Instagram are pleasing		0.907
Travel related ads on Facebook and Instagram are entertaining		0.881
Firm Generated Content (FGC)	0.746	
I am satisfied with the communication conducted by various travel and tourism companies on Facebook and Instagram.		0.859
The firm seeded communication about travel and tourism on Facebook and Instagram meets my expectation		0.843
Social media communications on Facebook and Instagram by various tourism company is interesting		0.854
I can differentiate between social media communication of different tourism company		0.890
User Generated Content (UGC)	0.740	
I am satisfied with social media communication conducted by other travelers on Facebook and Instagram.		0.746
I can trust the authenticity of travel-related content generated by other users on Facebook and Instagram		0.670
The type of social media communication via the other travelers meet my expectations		0.690
Message Process Involvement (MPI)	0.936	
I pay attention to travel and tourism communications on Facebook and Instagram.		0.815
I concentrate on travel and tourism communications on Facebook and Instagram		0.901
I think about travel and tourism communication on Facebook and Instagram		0.873
I focus on travel and tourism communications on Facebook and Instagram		0.898
I make an effort looking at travel and tourism communication on Facebook and Instagram		0.884
I carefully read travel and tourism-related content on Facebook and Instagram		0.857
Attitude towards the Destination (AB)- Semantic Differential Scale	0.865	
I tend to develop a liking/dislike towards travel destinations post content exposure on Facebook and Instagram.		0.880
I perceive that visiting a travel destination would be pleasant/unpleasant experience post-exposure to its content on Facebook and Instagram		0.898
I perceive that travel destinations are good/ bad post-exposure to their communication on Facebook and Instagram		0.841
Travel Destination Choice (TDC)	0.712	
I would choose my travel destination post surfing about it on social media channels.		0.849
In the next three months, I will travel to the chosen destination post surfing on social media channels		0.849
Post-exposure to social media communications, I would actively Search for further information about the destinations on the web.		0.821

Source: Author's findings