



## HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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### ABSTRACT:

Over the past few years, social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter have revolutionized not only how people interact with each other but also how businesses interact with consumers. So many businesses within the hospitality industry rely on word of mouth and good reviews from loyal customers that social media is a natural marketing tool. The use of social internet outlets has become widespread, and travellers consistently use the media to brag about their great experiences as well as express displeasure with poor ones. Social media are playing an increasingly important role as information sources for travellers. Tourism is an information-intense therefore, it is critical to understand changes in technologies and consumer behaviour that impact the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information. Social media has recently been adopted by a small group of organizations' integrated marketing plans. There by infusing a mix of advertisement, public relations, their sales promotion to produce a customer focused message. Since social media is available to anyone with an internet connection, it should be a platform that can be recommended to the hospitality industry to increase their brand awareness and facilitate direct feedback from their customers. Hotels and companies within the hospitality industry must have a keen understanding of how to deliver their messages via social media websites if they are to compete in today's business environment. Whether it is used intentionally or inadvertently, the organizations within the hospitality industry cannot ignore the impact of the new internet phenomenon on their businesses. It's time for hospitality companies to harness the power of social media by assessing the suitability of various channels for their ability to increase customer engagement, enhance customer satisfaction and improve retention rates. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects of social media and discuss the various ways for the Tourism industry to harness the power of social media.

**KEYWORDS:** social media, hospitality industry, impact, marketing, travel and tourism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

**Social media:** Social media are computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). The use of social media involves the use of the internet to connect users, with their friends, family and acquaintances. The most well-known social media sites are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Whatsapp etc. Social media has been defined as the group of applications based on internet, allowing the creation and change of the content developed by the user and based on the technological and ideological foundations of internet (Kaplan, 2010). Social media is a wide term defining writings on blogs and forums, photographs, audio records, videos, links, profile pages on social



networking sites and all different content forming many other social networks (Eley & Tiley, 2009).

Opportunities provided by the internet help executing the efforts on marketing communication and creating a comparative distinction (Babacan, 2010). Social networking sites have an important efficiency as marketing tools and assume many functions. Social networking sites are important tools, where the consumers can get information regarding the goods and services, raise the awareness, have communication of word of mouth online in their opinions, behaviours, purchasing decisions, after purchase assessments and for the establishments they are the tools, where they can market their productions, strengthen their brands and use in their customer relations (Amersdorffer, 2012)

**Tourism:** Tourism can be described as travel for recreational, leisure or business purposes with the journey and the place being outside the usual environment as well as the nature of the travel being temporary (Cooper, 2008). The industry of tourism has been growing constantly during the past decades becoming one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Tourism is considered to be one of the key players in international commerce representing the major income for many countries. Consequently, the success of tourism industry has spiked up the competition and diversification of the destinations (wikipedia). Tourism now a day is one of the most popular ways of spending free time.

## 2. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURISM

Social media is playing an important role in tourism industry which is increasing each day. It plays role in many aspects of tourism especially in information search and decision making behaviours, promotion of tourism focusing on the best practices for interacting with the customers. Today social media is a trending phenomenon and a huge part of people's everyday lives and at the same time gradually gaining more momentum in the business world. Media communications technologies can bring sweeping changes of attitudes and behaviour among the key actors in local national and global for sustainable development (Xiang, Zheng, & Gretzel, 2010). Many countries regard social media as an important tool to promote their tourism industries. *For example:* Tourism Australia is encouraging the Australian tourism industry to positively embrace social media in promoting their business. Australian operators are being offered the chance to promote their tourism business or region using Tourism Australia's record breaking fan base by listing themselves in a 'things to do' section on its Face book page (F, 2010).

There have been challenges in using social media in tourism. Different countries and businesses have different realities regarding the social media used for tourism management. On one hand, the importance of online marketing has not been fully recognized in tourism management (Zeng B. a., 2014). The powerful effects of media communications can bring sweeping changes of attitudes and behaviour among the key actors in local, national and global tourism for peace, security and sustainable development. The social, cultural, economic, political and environmental benefits of tourism would usher in monumental and historic changes in the country. As the verdict goes, the media has a social responsibility to enhance the blending of local, national and international cultural values for enriched politics, society and economy (Cooper, 2008). Public communications strategy based on access to quality information and knowledge will drive the new global tourism through partnership initiatives such as: peace and security, conflict resolutions for eco tourism, quality tourism, Joint ventures, technology transfer, etc. The relationship between tourism and the media is vital and complex. Tourism is highly dependent on media reporting because the vast majority of travel decisions are made by people who have never seen the destination first hand for themselves.

Over the years tourism have relied heavily on the power of word of mouth marketing; it used to be our friends and family who inspired and helped in planning our travels often guided by tourism guides, magazines, and travel agencies. However, today with the emergence of the digital technologies, the word of mouth information has extended beyond a limited group to the entire world. Social Media as a part of the digital technology revolution now connects travellers to the opinions and recommendations of millions of people, including friends in their social network and like-minded travellers they have never even met. Tourism organizations have taken advantage of this amazing technology by increasing their promotions of destinations and products on Social Media with the sole aim of reaching out to the masses. Travellers

develop an image about a tourism destination and set their expectations based on previous experience, word of mouth, press reports, advertising, and common beliefs, before actually visiting a destination (Baloglu, 1997). The powerful effects of media communications can bring sweeping changes of attitudes and behaviour among the key actors in local, national and global tourism for peace, security and sustainable development. *Three factors should be considered while using social media in tourism* (Leungh) :

- Customer Influence Effect, which measures the influence a social media user has on other users in the network;
- Customer Influence Value, which helps measure the monetary gain or loss realized by a company in social marketing campaigns by accounting for an individual's influence on purchases by other customers and prospects
- Stickiness Index, which helps identify social media users who actively discuss the company's product or service category.

### 3. ROLE OF MEDIA IN INDIAN TOURISM

In a country like India the travel journalists, media experts on travel, leading attractive, popular and branded newspapers mainly published from Indian Metro cities, and electronics media are always highlighting the clients about the places of tourist interest, tourism, tourist season (peak and lean), image, scope of shopping, resources, hospitalities, peoples, culture and heritage to cater to the needs of prospective and actual tourists. One of the prestigious newspapers of India, Economic Times, published from Chennai, brought out a report on 28-03-2002 regarding the promotion of Indian tourism in Australia, 'Sir Edmund Hillary, who along with Tenzing Norgay first conquered the Mount Everest, has volunteered to promote Indian tourism in the Australia region by doing a television commercial free of cost. The first of three such 30-second commercials hit the Australia small screens on 24th March and was aired during one of the highest rated channels nine current affairs programmes'. Tourism earns revenue through foreign exchange. This foreign exchange is necessary for the government for reducing its deficit and media are responsible for creating awareness about tourist destinations available in India to the overseas travellers. Media industry works with hotels, travel agencies, tour operators, airlines and the various government agencies to bring revenue to the country by promoting tourism. Without the assistance of media and its support many places would have remained unexplored as the awareness about the place is very minimal to the foreigners. For e.g.: Chennai has the second longest coastline in the world. This information would not be available to outside world without the support and patronage of media. Even social networking sites like face book and twitter are also promoting tourism. The Tirunelveli Halwa became popular only after media started promoting it and it caught the people's attention towards the mouth-watering and Irrutu Kadai Halwa became an instant success. The fish curry of Malabar and Goan fish curries which are popular in the European countries attribute their success to the vigorous campaign by the media and hospitality sectors of India.

### 4. IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING TOURISM INDUSTRY

Social media is affecting the travel and tourism industry in a very positive manner. Exquisite destinations are now made famous by friends and family, giving tourism agencies more clients owing to free advertisement of these unexplored destinations (The Impact of Social Media on Travel and Tourism).

Moreover, a recent study showed that more than half (52 percent) of respondents changed their travel plans after researching their trip using social media. A heady 85 percent of travellers use their smart phones whilst abroad, and 52 percent of Facebook users said that their friends' holiday photos had inspired their vacation choice (Bennett, 2012).

The role of social media in tourism has been increasingly noted and researched as an emerging topic. Social media plays an increasingly important role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search and decision-making behaviours and tourism promotion focusing on best practices for interacting with consumers via social media channels (social sharing of holiday experiences).

According to (Satyadhama, 2013) over the years media have contributed towards shaping tourism into a responsible industry by promoting the following good practices:

- a) It protects the environment and minimizes the negative social impact of tourism.
- b) It generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities.
- c) It makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and promotes the world's diversity.
- d) It provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people.
- e) It helps to understand the local cultural, social and environmental issues.

Social media has fundamentally changed the way that many companies communicate with and market to their target demographics. For the travel and hospitality sector, in particular, the rise of the Internet and the increased popularity of social channels has altered travel marketing. From the way that travellers' research potential destinations to the activities that they participate in once they arrive, the new ways that consumers use social media to make purchasing decisions has influenced tourism marketing from start to finish. There are five ways how social media has transformed tourism marketing.

### **How Social Media has Transformed Travel Research**

The most profound effect that social media has had on the tourism industry to date is the democratization of online reviews. Today's travellers go online to research their future travel destinations and accommodations. When booking travel, 89% of millennial plan travel activities based on content posted by their peers online.

From social sharing sites such as Instagram to crowd-sourced review sites such as Trip Advisor, people are browsing the Internet for travel inspiration and validation from their peers. There, they can easily find other travellers' photos, check-ins, ratings and more. This easy-to-attain, real guest feedback serves to preview the in-person experience that the destination has to offer from a viewpoint other than that of the brand.

### **How Social Media has Facilitated Social Sharing**

People have always loved sharing photos and videos taken of their travels. What social media has done is to facilitate and expand people's ability to share travel experiences with a wider audience than ever before. Over 97% of millennial share photos and videos of their travels online, building an influential web of peer-to-peer content that serves to inspire potential guests.

This trend hasn't gone unnoticed. Many hotels and resorts have turned to running social contests and campaigns to ensure that they get some credit for their guests' social activity. Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants used guests' wedding photos instead of staged, professional photographs to market their wedding venues. The campaign encouraged guests to take photos, tag them with the hashtag #KimptonWeddings – and ultimately to create user-generated content for the brand that was free, authentic, and repurposed across its marketing channels.

### **How Social Media has Enhanced Customer Service**

Customer service and satisfaction have also been transformed as a result of social media. The vast majority of brands have a social media presence that is being used to become aware of and, when necessary, to provide help to unsatisfied or confused customers. The companies that respond to complaints in a sincere and genuine manner develop a strong reputation among current and potential customers. American Airlines and JetBlue are particularly adept at addressing flight issues and providing a human touch to otherwise frustrating experiences.

When Twitter users contact a brand, more than half expect a response. If they are reaching out with a complaint, that number rises to almost 75%. Responding to complaints and questions helps to humanize your brand and to indicate to current and future customers that they are valued.

Additionally, customer success representatives should be intentional with their company's social media interactions. Social media can serve as a social listening tool to find out information about your guests. Are they visiting for an anniversary or a special occasion? Listening to customers through social media can help your brand create an exceptional experience that is sure to delight your guests.

### How Social Media has Affected Travel Agencies

Social media has also had a major impact on the travel agency model. The availability of information and ease of self-service booking have forced travel agencies to adapt from a brick-and-mortar model to a more digital one. Travel agencies are not obsolete—they are still responsible for 55% of all airline bookings, 77% of cruise bookings, and 73% of package bookings. But many agencies have shifted their focus from in-person to online experiences as they adapt to new technology and market trends.

### How Social Media has Changed Loyalty Programmes

As most marketers know, acquiring new customers is far more expensive than retaining existing ones. Loyalty programs have become a core piece of the travel business model, and social media has had a massive impact on how hotel loyalty programs are constructed. Many customers understand that the opinions that they share with their individual networks have tremendous influence. As a result, these guests feel entitled to compensation for the positive word-of-mouth marketing that they are doing for a brand. More than 25% of millennials that participate in loyalty programs are very likely to post about a brand in exchange for loyalty points.

With the availability of technologies that allow mention and hashtag tracking across social media channels, it is easier than ever for hotels to discover passionate guests and to reward them accordingly. Integrating social media sharing and posting can be worked into existing tier loyalty programs to encourage brand promotion across social media platforms. When loyal guests share the easy to redeem perks and benefits offered by a brand's loyalty programs on social media, other guests see that the benefits are attainable -- and desirable -- and they will be more incentivized to participate.

Social media has altered the landscape of marketing in the leisure and hospitality industry. Most travellers determine their travel plans based on reviews and social media shares, making online customer service a crucial part of building a positive brand reputation. The prevalence of social media has disrupted traditional customer service models – for hotels and travel agencies alike. By curating positive reviews and encouraging social shares, hospitality brands can leverage social media to build positive brand awareness, increase brand loyalty, and display just how much their accommodations and activities have to offer. (<http://hospitalitytechnology.edgl.com>, 2016)

## 5. SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR TOURISM

Social media is an important tool for the analysis of tourists' attitudes and this is consumed by the increased purchases and recommendations to other users. Building successful service-based brand in tourism means that each other should be a unique value proposition based on the customer experience. Tourists need to know by means of reliable sources how their experience is going to be like in order to reduce uncertainty and create some expectations of what they are going to earned at a destination (Zeithaml, 2006). Due to the uncertainty of tourist services, a traveller should obtain the necessary information in order to make the right decision concerning the travel. Modern tourists have more trust in other travellers' opinions using social media rather than crucial marketing advices. As social media becomes increasingly expressive, consumers are able to increasingly influence other consumers with their own opinions and experiences (Kumar, 2011). Since social media is low-cost and bias-free, it represents an advantage for marketing communications (Litvin, 2008).

Social media continues to impact communication either positively or negatively depending on the subjects under study and the type of communication (Edwards, 2014). Social media requires all marketing activities integration and uses persuasive advertising to provide a competitive product/service experience. The electronic word of mouth is important for marketers to understand this new platform for communication and support customer relationship in the best way (Buhalis D. , 1998). The electronic Word of Mouth can enhance visitor satisfaction due to product or service improvement. At the same time, eWOM can solve problems and doubts during the travel and it can help discover what tourists think and say about their experience (Buhalis D. , 1998).

Social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are very popular websites with a big influence on the world but out of all three, Facebook is the winner. Because these websites are very popular, there is a huge influence on Travel and Tourism industry. The travel and tourism agencies are able to make announcements about their offers and travelling destinations with ease. The new trend in today's society is blogging. Another thing that is very popular today is writing reviews. A lot of people write reviews about the place they went to. You can find reviews about locations, the hotel, activities, restaurants and a lot more. A study showed that over 74% of travellers write reviews because they want to share with other people the travelling experience they had. Also 98% find Trip Advisor reviews to be the most accurate and the most helpful. 53% of travellers, will not book a hotel that doesn't have any review. Written reviews are infact very popular and very influential. A lot of people decide where to go simply by reading reviews online. If a person wrote a review about a bad experience, a lot of people will not want to go to that place or they can reconsider that destination. Over 70% of global consumers say that online reviews are the second most trusted form of advertising (2014).

Professionals working in the tourism industry should pay special attention to the 5 main trends in the social media landscape, identified by The Dunloe Hotel: online reputation management (ORM), social media as a customer service channel, inbound marketing, search engine optimization (SEO) and mobile apps. *Online reputation management.* ORM is used to refer to managing search results for brand queries and negative reviews on social media. With the advance of social media platforms, the power has shifted from businesses to customers, which has made reputation management particularly difficult for the companies. The variegated nature of comments and negative feedback complicate the issue of damage control. A major step in online media reputation management is knowing what is being said about your brand, company or services online.

*Social media as a customer service channel.* People are using social media before, during and after they travel to share their experiences, pose questions and expect instant responses. Social customer service is becoming a new and critical channel to drive positive feedback and satisfaction. As such, social media allow tourism companies to display customer service while listening and engaging with what customers are saying.

*Inbound marketing is attracting travellers.* In our digital world, the key point of marketing is to be found by customers. In order to be found, you will need to develop a compelling content strategy that would encourage and facilitate the sharing of reviews, comments, stories and photos from users. This can be achieved through blogs, podcasts, videos, e-newsletters and other forms of content marketing. Of course, you should strive to create your own original content that would retain the existing customers and attract new ones.

***SEO is a powerful tool.*** It is also a critical strategy for all types of businesses that want to gain and grow their companies and services. One of the mistakes travel marketers commit is that they tend to optimize their travel site for search engines and not for people. The trick is not to gain the attention of the search engine but to provide travellers with information they are searching for at every stage of the travel planning process. Search engines regularly update their algorithms to provide results that are more authentic. For example, Google gives priority to sites with innovative, high-quality content, attractive design, relevant inbound links and a strong social media presence. The key point is to focus on the bigger

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**picture and try to optimize your travel site in such a way so as to obtain the maximum targeted traffic through search engines.**

*Mobile apps – embrace the opportunity.* Marketing experts have realized that apps and sites work best together to provide customers a complete mobile experience. It has already been proved that mobile-compatible sites are a necessity for businesses that rely on local traffic. For example, website design frameworks such as Bootstrap and Drupal allow the creation of web pages that dynamically adjust to keep high-quality user experience, no matter if the page is viewed from the desktop, tablet or mobile. Since you want to offer your customers the best experience, create a useful and loyal app that is convenient, user-friendly and personalized (kazak, 2016).

## **6. BENEFITS OF TOURISM INDUSTRY FROM SOCIAL MEDIA ([www.hospitalitynet.org/news/4071855.htm](http://www.hospitalitynet.org/news/4071855.htm), 2014)**

**6.1. Understanding the audience:** In order to reach the audience through the marketing efforts, it is really need to know what the potential customers want and who they are. Different from traditional marketing, social media is a communication tools; one can listen and take part in the conversations taking place around the world. By keeping an eye and ear to those conversations, one can have a deeper understanding of the audience's needs, issues and trends, which in turn can influence the marketing efforts.

**6.2. Checking the competitors:** The tourism industry is a very competitive field. It is always a good idea to keep an eye out to see what the competitors are doing. Social media is a great way of doing this, by visiting their pages and also conducting specific searches based on their keywords. Keeping an eye on the competition is a good way to see what they're doing and to especially see what they're not doing. This can present with great marketing opportunities.

**6.3. Interact with the audience:** Social media is not the place to do hard-selling but the place to interact and engage with the audience. By asking questions, responding to comments and by posting content that adds value to the followers and that creates engagement and interaction.

For example, a tourism business that is promoting a destination can look for people who are leaving or just arrived home after visiting their destination. By interacting with people who are still in vacation mode, one can have a window of opportunity to further build that brand affinity and relationship with the users.

**6.4. Identifying the brand advocates:** Brand advocates are those customers that not only like the products/services, but really go to extra mile; commenting daily, writing articles about the product or services, sharing content and influencing others. Nowadays, consumers promote this on online social media. In the tourism sector, word-of-mouth and getting impartial reviews is the key to any business since more and more people search for a hotel review before they book a room, for example. The brand advocates will then help the tourism sector by creating those impartial reviews and help in marketing and brand awareness efforts.

**6.5. Deliver a great customer services:** A great customer services is at the heart of every successful tourism business. Along with a great product or service, customer services make all the difference in retaining existing customers and gaining new ones.

Social media can be a great way to help deliver that customer service by promptly responding to questions in the social media brand pages, but also by searching for conversations around the brand in other pages and responding to their questions.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The influence of social media on the travel industry cannot be overstated - while it may not have revolutionized the tourism industry, it's certainly made travel companies re-evaluate how they interact with customers, partners, vendors, and others. It's difficult to predict what the future of social media in the travel industry may hold, but with instant messaging and video applications like SnapChat and others, it's not out of the question to imagine a future when travel agencies, tour operators, and others within the travel industry communicate and work with customers or partners through these video and messaging apps.

Perhaps a travel company creates a real-time video advertisement or testimonial and publishes it using an application like SnapChat? Perhaps bookings and reservations will be aided or completed via these services? Whatever the case, it is clear social media and the travel industry will be a lasting relationship (Ostdick, 2016).

Social media plays a very important role in the tourism industry. It increasingly influences on many social and economic aspects. The tourism industry is primed to take advantage of social media outlets, as the industry has long relied largely on destination reputation, consumer opinion, spread of information, and positive word-of-mouth advertising. The leveraging of social media to the tourism products has proved to be a good strategy in improving not only the quality of the business but also the revenues of the tourism industry at large.

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