

The Changing Facets of Marketing: Exploring the Social Media Effect on Tourist

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Abstract

Social media has taken over almost every sphere of a man's world; ranging from socialisation, to business, to networking, to marketing and the like. No industry has remained untouched by the influence of social media. In today's fast pacing world, tourism offers recluse to the modern man looking for relaxation and unwinding stress. Tourism which has been an ever-dynamic industry has witnessed transformation by the advent of social media due to the very nature of it being 'information intensive'. In the present time and era, people are tech savvy and well informed, social media offers great opportunities to both tourists and travel firms for a meaningful exchange. Comparatively cheaper, interactive and less complex mechanisms of social media marketing have made it a favourite amongst the tourism sector. This paper aims to explore how an Indian tourist feels about social media marketing activities taken by the various Tourism and Hospitality players in terms of engagement and building a relationship with the Tourism brands, the paper seeks theoretical support of the Social Exchange Theory in building a conceptual framework and testing it amongst Indian tourists. With cut throat competition from well-established travel firms to newer start-ups, marketing has become a vital component for survival, keeping consumers engaged is the best way to thrive.

Keywords: Tourist, user generated content (UGC), engagement, social media

INTRODUCTION

“Social Media is about sociology and psychology more than technology.”

– by **Brain Solis**

Social media is the mega trend surfacing around the world. Every industry is targeting social media as a marketing tool to advance their sector. Due to its global reach, and digital form this kind of marketing has worked wonders to transform industries. Not lagging behind is the tourism industry which has gained immensely by the power of social media marketing. The user generated content has given rise to newer forms of tourism, better engagement to the tourists and greater revenues to the travel companies. The study on Consumer engagement has been researched in the field of marketing only a decade and half, thus not a very old concept (Brodie et al., 2011), also its study is done in different ways for different industries (Tsai & Men, 2017).

With the advent of SM, consumer engagement is usually noted in terms of the followers, subscribers, likes, posts etc. where higher the reach, higher is popularity and engagement. (Jayasingh 2019). The marketing approach today is not just receiving but co-contributing (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Llic, 2011). Various firms are now moving to co creation of marketing such as Vail Resorts and Kimpton Weddings discussed in later sections in details. The increase of ICT channels helps these strategies in improved individual and organizational performance. (Moncrief, Marshall, & Rudd, 2015; Teigland & Wasko, 2003)

This study tries to examine an important question raised time and over about the mutual benefits reaped from social media marketing to both tourist and marketer. A predominant issue was raised by Schultz and Peltier (2013) in “Social Media's Slippery Slope” of “whether or

how social media can be used to leverage consumer engagement into highly profitable relationships for both parties". In this study, we try to explore how social media through the use of electronic word of mouth and social media customer care can be instrumental in ensuring building a relationship management amongst the Indian tourists in a twin benefitting relationship of customer care and consumer engagement with Tourism brands.

Social media by nature is interactive and co-creative, its important to study its use on consumer engagement and its antecedent relationship management through the use of electronic word of mouth in terms of ratings, comments etc. (Barger and Labrecque, 2013) as the very fundamental framework on which social media marketing exists on is electronic word of mouth.

Rationale

Social media marketing is still a comparatively new framework of marketing thus how engagement can be created, measured and tracked is still in its infancy (Barger and Labrecque, 2013, Schivinski et al., 2016). It has multiple mediums that make it a fragmented medium for its applicability everywhere (King et al., 2014, Straker et al., 2015). The effects of Social Media marketing on Tourism industry is an under researched area of research, and requires greater attention from researchers and academicians, especially after being hit by the global pandemic SARS-COV which seems to be pushing Tourism industry as a one of the most affected industries. Study of CE has attracted more conceptual limelight by researchers and is supported by very empirical studies Azar, Machado, Vacas-de Carvalho, & Mendes, 2016; Zhang & Mao, 2016). With the effects of social media marketing being anticipated to go up multiple folds as social media is assumed to be the silver bullet that may revive the hard hit tourism industry an attempt has been made to fill the literature gap by providing empirical evidence from the

Indian Tourism Industry.

OBJECTIVES

The following are the research objectives of this study:

1. To gain a theoretical understanding of how marketing has evolved over the years
2. To understand how Social Media Marketing is used in Tourism Industry through famous examples from tourism brands
3. To empirically test if Social Media Marketing can lead to consumer engagement in the Tourism Industry through select variables.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study aims to empirically test how social media marketing can lead to consumer engagement in the Tourism and Hospitality industry. For this, both primary and secondary data has been collected. While the secondary data has been used for building the theoretical framework thus using a descriptive research design, primary data has been used to empirically test the hypothesised relationships thus using an exploratory research design.

Sample and Data

Primary data has been collected through an online questionnaire distributed to varied groups of people of Indian origin who have travelled in the last one year. The aim is to understand if they felt that the social media marketing practices used by the leading Hospitality and Tourism players made them feel more engaged and helped them building a relationship with the Tourism Product (transportation, accommodation and restaurants etc.).

A total of 300 Indian internet users who travelled in the past one year were reached through Google forms distributed online, amongst which 210

responded with a response rate of 70%. The data was coded and checked for any outliers and missing values. To avoid any biases, incomplete forms were not counted and after data cleaning, 204 respondents were found to be appropriate with all the responses. Thus, the sample size for the study is 204.

Scales of measurement

The study operationalizes the use of e-WOM, consumer engagement, Social Media Customer and Relationship management as reflective measure, where the variables were measured using a Likert scale, from 0 (totally disagree) To 5 (strongly agree). The questions were self-constructed through an in-depth literature analysis and thus taking into account research gaps and appropriate for Tourism Industry. A 16 item scale was developed items each, but only those items that have valid reliability and validity have been taken in the final model.

Statistical techniques

Demographic analysis was done through SPSS 22. Structural Equation Modelling was used to study structural relationships between the variables. There is dearth of studies focusing on PLS SEM in the Tourism and Hospitality sphere (Ali, 2018). Hence, technique used and found to be appropriate was PLS-SEM. Path Modelling using Path coefficients has been used to test the hypothesised relationships. SmartPLS software 3.3.2 has been used for data analysis (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015)

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Tourism and social media are both concepts that have diverse definitions, hence for the purpose of this study we shall be assuming the following as the definition of the both as shown in the table 1.

Table 1: Definitions for the study

Concept	Definition	Source
Tourism	"Tourism comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes."	UNWTO, 2017
Social Media	...activities, practises and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios."	Safko & Brake, 2009

Social Media

'Social media is the media people use to be social'.

-Safko (2010)

User generated content, web 2.0 and social media have often been used interchangeably, but there is difference amongst them. While web 2.0 paved way for social media, user generated content is the actual data that social media uses. Social media can thus be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

With the emerging trends in networking and technology and the ever-rising application-based platforms, social media as a means of communication does not have an exhaustive list. But various authors have collaboratively categorised social media into various channels such as Blogs, Micro Blogs, Social Networking Sites and discussion portals.

Social Media Marketing

Barefoot and Szabo have defined social media marketing in a crisp manner as a combination of those channels that are used for company's promotion and not just the products. Social media marketing focuses on co creation ideology where the marketing content is consumed and produced both by the

audience. (Evans, 2008). Social media marketing thus works on a long-term relationship building premise. (Barefoot & Szabo, 2010).

Social media is the new era marketing strategy. Various studies have proved that it is now more preferred than the traditional marketing. This claim is further supported in a study conducted by Safco in 2010, where it was found that social media has been more effective and beneficial than the conventional form of marketing in terms of its reach over the last 6000 years.

The Paradigm shift of Marketing

“The aim of marketing is to know and understand the consumer so well the product or service fits him and sells itself.”

- **Peter Drucker**

Over the years, marketing has transformed immensely. These changes have been witnessed from the classical marketing era, to the 21st century marketing and finally the breakthrough social media marketing. Birch in 2011, conducted a study on the marketing paradigm shift as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Paradigm shift of marketing

<i>Classic marketing</i>	<i>21st century marketing</i>	<i>Social Media Marketing</i>
Product	Experience	Relationship
Price	Exchange	Return on engagement
Place	Everyplace	Reach based relevance
Promotion	Evangelism	Reputation

Source: Author's own, adapted from Birch (2011)

It can be seen that from the traditional 4 P's by McCarthy, the shift has moved to 4 R's of social media marketing. From traditional marketing, the trends is now moving towards social media marketing, that offers various opportunities to the brand in form of durability and strength to the brands to compete and survive the market with greater returns (Dholakia and Durham, 2010) and lessor

investment from traditional PR and Promotion activities.

Tourism marketers engage in social media marketing primarily for consumer engagement with their actual and potential consumers i.e. tourists through their journey of decision making. (Hudson and Thal, 2013). Being intangible in nature and information intensive, effective communication acts as medium to promote tourism. Innovation can be reinforced with the help of valuable insights that can be gained through user generated content of social media which can act as a meaningful tool for brand innovation and enhancement. (Hudson and Thal, 2013).

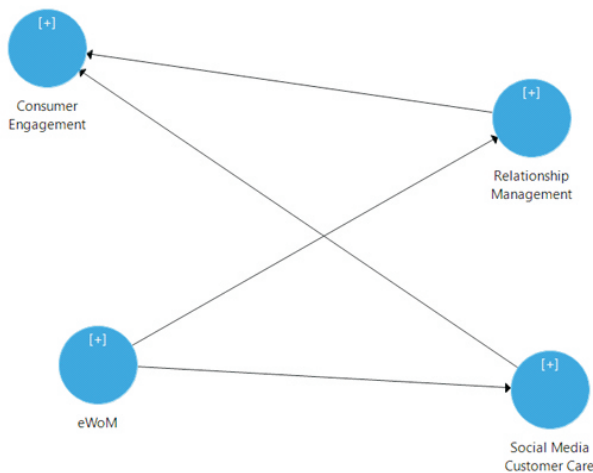
Consumer engagement for tourists is a 'sociological standpoint' as these are not their regular engagements and thus are highly anticipated (Cohen 1979 and MacCannell 1989). It becomes essential to thus tap the engagement aspect of tourists to stand out in the marketplace (Cetin & Dincer, 2014).

Social Exchange theory

This theory discusses the exchanges involving buyers and sellers from different organizations (e.g., Griffith, Harvey, & Lusch, 2006; Pulles, Schiele, Veldman, & Hüttinger, 2016) and supports that the social relationship is established between any two parties due to reciprocal benefits arising, thus any sort of relational behaviour is displayed through reciprocity. The more is the reward the more will be the participation in terms of repetition and frequency (Cook et al., 2013) and shall be followed with an obligatory “appropriate attitudinal and behavioral responses” (Griffith et al., 2006.).

Keeping in mind principles of Social media gratification and social exchange, the following model is proposed and empirically tested.

The conceptual model for this study can be seen in the Figure 1.

Fig 1: Conceptual Model

Consumer Engagement (CE)

Consumer engagement is an effort of the brand to keep itself away and distinguished from the competitors. It is the brand's strategy to get its consumers to engage not just with its product offering but also the brand as a whole. Consumer engagement can be defined as “a psychological state that occurs by the virtue of interactive, co-creative consumer engagement with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al. 2011). The focus of CE is beyond the firm and purchase but also on building a motivational driver such as emotional connect (Doorn et al. 2010). It can be said as a relational construct that has an umbrella of marketing concepts such as brand loyalty, relationship marketing, CRM, and social networks (Schultz and Peltier, 2013). This study focuses on the relationship management and social networks aspect.

For example, the social media campaign success of #MyEpicPass by Vail Resorts, it launched an interesting social media campaign to capture its EPIC pass guest memories. They made an attempt to display all of the activities and amenities offered at all twelve of its iconic resorts worldwide by taking inputs from the consumers itself. The brand featured the collected content in a shop like social gallery on their own website to extend the campaign's reach. This way they have

encouraged guests to keep submitting valuable content. Ultimately, the goal of the campaign was to encourage browsers to pre-purchase next season's EPIC pass and thus continuing to maintain association with the brand.

Thus, it can be seen that tourists feel more a part of the company's part and thus gets engaged further with the tourism brand and is lines with Social Exchange theory. (Griffith et al., 2006) Relationship Management (RM)

Social media has made it easy to build, maintain and retain relationships. These relationships may or may not be long lasting, but through continuous campaigns on social media, an attempt is made to make them as long and deep impact on the consumer.

For example, Room key is a famous case in Hospitality Industry. This hotel booking Engine was launched in 2012 by Choice Hotels, Hilton, Hyatt, InterContinental, Marriott, and Wyndham. These are leading service providers of hospitality sector services. Room Key provided varied services such as price comparisons, hotel bookings feature and display ratings of past consumers. There was a scheme launched for its consumers by the name of 'rewards points'. These reward points could be earned only in case of direct bookings on the Room Key website. There are different loyalty schemes-redeem points from Room Key partnership Hotels. The objective of this booking engine is to maintain direct relationship with travellers through a specific focus on service personalization and rewarding schemes.

H1: Relationship Management positively influences Consumer Engagement

Social Media Consumer Care (SMC)

Kang and Schuett in their study conducted in 2013 discussed how tourism companies take social media as a tool to boost their services and in turn performance, this also helps brands in

reinforcing their brands to the consumers through consumer insights. In a study by Sprout social it was found that failing to respond complaints on social media can lead to a 43% decline in customer advocacy and replying can rather increase the advocacy by 20% (<https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-customer-care/>)

For example, @southwestair is an active customer care Twitter handle, any form of discomfort, complaint or query relating to Southwest Airlines can easily be taken on social media through its twitter handle i.e. @southwestair. It provides consumers with a hassle-free mechanism to get their complaint heard, and redressed. They also launched a program #FeesDontFlywhere they rewarded consumers with \$50 and free travel tickets to those who posted horror stories with a competing carrier in an attempt to improve their own customer experience. This helps them to avoid bad experiences offered by their competing carrier companies and enhance their own brand image and services.

H2: Social Media Customer care positively influences Consumer Engagement

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WoM)

Social media has transformed the information exchange and creation (Hays et al. 2013) it has made interaction with the brand much quicker and convenient (Luliana, 2013). Along with this, users also feel more powerful as they feel they have greater bargaining powers (Leung et al. 2013) since they are both creator and users of the date available online. eWoM is the steadily replacing the traditional Word of Mouth publicity. Hence making users feel liberated to post both positive and negative comments online and share with their virtual communities. Social media also aims to capitalise these reviews and rating through various promotional efforts such as referrals. It is believed that eWoM “non-commercial, authentic, and experiential detailed

information” that help tourists with various insights on tourism such as destinations, itinerary etc. (Buttle 1998). For example, Trip advisor is the world's most famous travel app having more than 136000 destination registered. This website provides a complete range of travel services related information through social media such ratings and reviews, destination images, itinerary suggestions, price comparisons etc. This helps the travellers to make the right choice at the right time and at the right price. It allows user to sort ratings in terms of popularity and reviews, provides itineraries from engagement travellers that also shares a pros and cons list of a service or a destination both. A study quoted that 96% of Americans preferred posting ratings and reviews and about 74% Americans felt uncomfortable travelling without referring to reviews or ratings.

H3: Electronic Word of Mouth positively influences Relationship Management

H4: Electronic Word of Mouth positively influences Social Media Customer care

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Demographics of the sample

Male respondents are 64.7% in the sample and females are 35.3%, thus evidently male population is in dominance. Majority of the population is between 18 and 29 (49%), followed by 30 to 45 (26.47%). Minority respondents are below 18 and 45 above with 12.22 % each. 74.3% respondents are 'highly active' on social media while only 25.7% are 'not so active'.

63.7% of the respondents were group travellers and 36.3% were found to be solo travellers or bag packers. There was no significant different found between the groups on the basis of demographics, social media usage and travel habits in the chi square values obtained.

Structural Equation Modelling

Following the two-step approach (Anderson and Gerbing ,1988) for PLS

SEM, the results of the structural equation modelling are:

Measurement Model Results

The assessment of measurement model was done through calculation of loadings, AVE, CR, rho_A, and Cronbach's alpha. These were calculated through PLS Algorithm and checked with threshold limits (Hair et al., 2011, Chin, 2010; Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2017).

Indicator loadings can be seen from table 3.

Table 3: Final indicator loadings

Indicator	Construct	CE	EWOM	RM	SMC
C1	Consumer	0.888			
C2	Engagement	0.894			
EWOM1	Electronic		0.575		
EWOM2	word of		0.844		
EWOM3	mouth		0.856		
EWOM4	(e-WOM)		0.409		
RM2				0.942	
RM3	Relationship			0.906	
RM4	Management			0.887	
SMC1	Social Media				0.862
SMC2	Consumer				0.913
SMC3	Care				0.809
SMC4					0.722

Source: Author's own

Loadings less than 0.4 are not good (Salkind 2004) for exploratory research and hence were eliminated (refer Table 3). Thus, item C3, C4 and RM1 were eliminated. Composite Reliability above 0.7 is preferred (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Chin, 2010; Henseler et al., 2009; Vinzi et al., 2010) and AVE above 0.5 (refer Table 4).

Table 4: Internal Consistency Reliability & Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CE	0.74	0.741	0.885	0.794
EWOM	0.633	0.785	0.781	0.51
RM	0.899	0.901	0.937	0.832
SMC	0.845	0.844	0.897	0.688

Source: Author's own

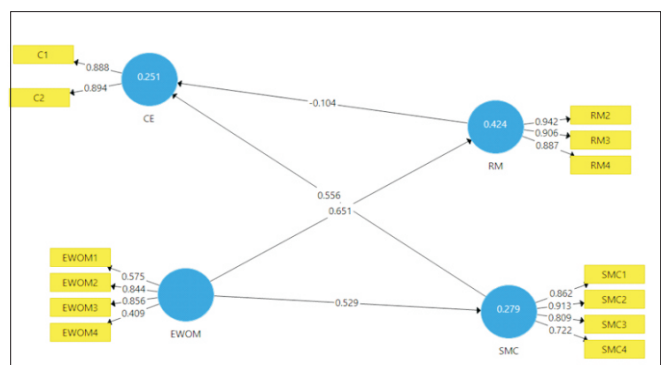
To discriminate the constructs, it's important to check discriminant validity. In PLS SEM the best method is found to be HTMT which is calculated through Bootstrapping 5000 sample Bias corrected and accelerated (Bca) 95% significance level. The values should be below 1 (Henseler 2015) and can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Discriminant Validity assessment HTMT

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	2.50%	97.50%
EWOM -> CE	0.532	0.559	0.479	0.65
RM -> CE	0.3	0.309	0.199	0.456
RM -> EWOM	0.762	0.758	0.669	0.839
SMC -> CE	0.624	0.625	0.532	0.719
SMC -> EWOM	0.718	0.716	0.549	0.898
SMC -> RM	0.707	0.717	0.66	0.805

Source: Author's own

Fig 2: Measurement and Structural model results



Source: Author's own

Notes: within the constructs-R2, outer model-loadings, inner model-path coefficients

Structural model Results

After getting satisfactory measurement model results (see figure 2), the next step is to check structural mode. To test hypothesis bootstrap of 5000 samples was run on Bias corrected sample (Bca) and the significance of the path coefficients were tested on 95% (t value <1.96). As visible below, H1 is not supported with a p value of 0.211, t value of 1.252 and a negative path coefficient, hence, it can be said that relationship management through social media does not positively impact consumer engagement. H2 is accepted as it has path coefficient of 0.556, t value of 8.414 and p value 0, hence it can be said that social media consumer care positively impacts consumer engagement. H3 is also supported as it has a path coefficient of 0.651, t value of 16.62 and p value 0. Hence it can be said eWOM positively influences relationship management through social media. H4 is also supported as it has path of 0.529, t value 8.392 and p value 0. Hence it can be said the eWOM positively influences Social Media Consumer care.

Predictive Relevance (Goodness of fit)

To check the model fit, the predictive power is checked in PLS SEM (Hair et al., 2017; Chin 2010). Values above 0 are considered relevant for a new or just discovered model. (refer Table 6). R2 values indicate that the endogenous latent constructs can predict moderately the exogenous variables. The blindfolding Q2 show are above 0, hence significantly endogenous latent constructs can predict moderately the exogenous variables.

Table 6: Predictive Power of the Model

Endogenous Latent Construct	R ²	Q ²
CE	0.251	0.196
RM	0.424	0.339
SMC	0.279	0.18

Source: Author's own

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Social media marketing has transformed and revolutionised the marketing mix of any firm. While there are several positive implications such as better relationship building, consumer engagement, massive electronic word of mouth and the fondness of social sharing via storytelling, there are concerns such as trolling, fake content and paid partnerships that question the authenticity of these user generated content.

The empirical data shows that men are more dominant in making tourism-oriented decisions and for following up complaints etc. Hypotheses testing reveal that merely making relationship with the consumer over social media is not enough but Tourism players must follow grievances and queries through social media as it helps to enhance the consumer engagement. It can also be seen that electronic word of mouth has taken over traditional WoM which is a major form of publicity and promotion. Indian tourists take it as a means of building relationship with the company and it also helps them to voice their concern through various official social media accounts of the Tourism and Hospitality firms. These results are similar to Statista's 2019 report of consumers having 47% favourable view towards those brands that offered responses to customer service questions online.

All in all, social media marketing has the ability to reach mass audience with minimal efforts and money. Also, marketing strategies can be adjusted based on such findings on social media. (Milwood et al. 2013). The empirical results show that tourist's behaviour can be understood through Social Exchange Theory as they do end up behaving in the desirable manner as long as they are getting something favourable in return (Griffith et al., 2006). Such as redressal of complaints through online customer care, and are able to build relationship with the company.s

It has been able to transform tourism industry by opening newer avenue. In the light of the present pandemic Covid-19, the global tourism industry highly relies on social media marketing to revive the worst hit sector of hospitality. This study aims to bridge the gap between various countries like Singapore and Italy have already taken the lead to attract tourists by show casing precautionary measures by the Governments and the key hospitality and tourism players. This can be achieved through positive eWOM and Relationship management over social media. Social media marketing seems to be the only hope to recover this hard-hit industry!

LIMITATIONS & SCOPE OF FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is exploratory in nature and the conceptual model has been generated from research gaps found in the literature. The sample size of this study is small (n=204) and thus accuracy for generalisation to the population may not be fully attained. This study aims at studying the behaviour of Indian tourists, and thus the validity of this model for consumer engagement amongst tourists of different ethnicities is yet to be explored. The main of the study was to explore the relationships between the variables through social media and thus demographics have been limited to age, and gender and social media habits have been included as a part of analysis.

Amongst the various aspects suggested by Schultz and Peltier (2013) for consumer engagement, the focus of this study is limited to Consumer engagement and Relationship management through social media. Also, since it an entirely new model, there is no comparison available as a whole and can only be done variable wise.

Future studies can take up the conceptual model proposed for studying tourist behaviour from different countries or continents and take up

comparing any changes on ethnicities. Also, this model can be empirically tested on the engagement of consumers of products.

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