

Determinants of the Social Media Influence on the Consumers' Travel Decision Making Process

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Purpose – The purpose of this study is to ascertain how customers use social media for travel-related decision making at their three stages of the travel namely, pre-travel, during the travel and the post travel decision making.

Design/Methodology/Approach – After analyzing the relevant literature, a quantitative investigation was carried out using structured questionnaire. A questionnaire with identified items in the three stages was used to gather the primary data from the consumers who have used social media for their travel related decision making, and a statistical package was used to analyze the findings.

Findings – A theoretical framework was developed and the developed model was validated by determining the elements influencing social media use for travel-related reasons at the three stages of decision making.

Research Limitations/Implications – The respondents were chosen solely from the state of West Bengal, and the sample was not chosen at random. The study might have a difficulty with generalization, particularly when it comes to marketplaces with significantly distinct cultural traits.

Practical Implications – The study's conclusions might help researchers and industry professionals comprehend social media and Web 2.0 technologies and how they affect customers in their travel related decision making.

Originality/Value – Social media use is one of the main factors influencing consumer behavior and travel marketing in recent years. Understanding these trends and how they affect consumer behavior is crucial because they could affect how travel-related information is distributed and made accessible.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Tourism, Social Media, Travel Stages, Decision Making, India

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1. Introduction

Human beings today reside in a new age – an age where the horizons between the 'real' and 'virtual' have converged to an extent that human beings have had to rethink the entire idea of the world they live, thrive and prosper. One very important space of these changing imaginations has been the new space of society that has come up – the social media. The emergence of social media has led to a shift in the paradigm throughout the world with communication channels allowing users to monitor, engage and share information in an unprecedented scale and scope. Although social media is being perceived today in terms of a metaphor of a new society, a scientific enquiry has to accept that at the end of the day, the advent of social media is a technological development initiating a new milieu, having variety of effects across different sectors, awaiting explorations. This work motivates itself from tracing one such effect in a particular sector – Tourism. But before that it seems essential to foreground a nuanced understanding of the social media in the current conjecture. Why is this renewed importance being catered to the social media?

The term "social media" refers to a collection of online applications, which form a part of Web 2.0's revolution. Today's popularization of social media has made radical changes in the culture[1] of common people. The purpose of life somewhere has become contained in the social image people want to keep on their social media profiles, starting with what they're wearing, what they're eating, wherever they're going. One might understand social media in that sense, as a space of showing off and receiving validation, promoting strong cases of snob and bandwagon effects. The evolution of web technologies and Internet developments since Web 1.0 to now Web 2.0 has primarily contributed to this paradigm shift in human culture. However, scholars have also sought to see these changes as method of democratization via technology, so that users are empowered to express their views and ideas through the creation of user-generated content, which can be viewed as an enabling factor. The transition has also been referred to as a social movement. Such is the extant of world views around social media, advocating its importance.

The spread and extant of social media does not just remain constrained in the discursive domains.

Rigorous empirical insights present the extensive use and dependence on social media aiding various forms of decision-makings ranging from which political party to support to which product to buy, in turns making its importance foregrounded in the terrains of marketing and consumer behaviour. According to Duggan et al. (2015), 74 % of Internet users around the world were active on social networking sites by January 2014, with adults accounting for more than half. The vast number of users in their daily lives can be seen on the social media platforms as Okazaki (2009) points out. Worldwide, 50 percent of social media users monitor products on social media, 29 percent monitor movements and find product assessments and material, whereas 20 percent observe to review products (Gallup, 2014). Consumers in these varied ways prefer social media to find out the necessary information about favorite brands through the best values. Social media has become an integral part of the customers and any dissociation with it cannot be imagined.

Having foregrounded the importance of social media in determining the behaviour of the consumers, we now would seek to narrow down to the sector of our concern – tourism. It is already been elaborately posed that social media gives consumers a voice and allows them to connect and share their views and ideas with any consumer in the world (Kozinets et al., 2010) in case of varied sectors, and tourism is no exception. Tourism is one of the largest revenue-generating industries for several countries, reflecting shining prospects. For example, Spain, has been the highest country in the world in terms of tourist arrivals in the last 10 years (UNWTO, 2019). India has also shown enormous prospects in terms of tourism industry. Tourism in India contributes approximately 4.6% to the nation's GDP, as per the Ministry of Tourism. Despite not being prioritized by the government, the sector plays a vital role in job creation, supporting over 32 million jobs in 2021. The World Travel and Tourism Council reported that in 2021, tourism generated ₹13.2 lakh crore (US\$170 billion), accounting for 5.8% of India's GDP. And expansion of the scope of this business must project a positive stride in the age of this digital capitalism with improved transmission of information. Yet, there is a lack of knowledge about the different types of content, which are shared in Social Media Platforms in relation to tourism, such as Tourism Managers' Content, Tourist Generated Content, etc.

While exchange of tourist experience is well established within academia, we still feel a scorching need to find out more about them. Over the last decade, User Generated Content platforms such as Face book, Twitter, Instagram etc. have increased exponentially and are today becoming a valuable source of information that enable tourism trends to be analyzed (e.g. Leelawat, 2022). From the perspective of tourists who share their experiences, UCG has been used in a number of marketing and consumer research studies (e.g., Berezina (2016), Garner (2022), Narangajava Kaosiri (2019), Timoshenko (2019), Ballester (2021), etc.).

That is the particular juncture, where this study seeks to bulge in, situating its motivating space one hand from the lack emerging from the prior engagements, and on the other from the new exclusivity of the post-COVID conditions. The motivation of this study is to ascertain through review of literature on the social media (YouTube, Blogs, Google, etc.) and Social Networks (Face book, Google, Linked In, Twitter, etc.) how these platforms influence the consumer purchasing decision across different products. The particular focus of this study is to understand the same for tourism products, i.e., travelling. In this avenue, the paper examines the role of Social media in the marketing strategy through multiple ways, including a revival of the word of mouth (WOM) communications with the consumers. The study, in that sense also opens gateways for understanding how a company can extract benefit from the social media in building a different brand and impact on consumers, as far as tourism industry is concerned. The study according to us emerges as an important intervention in this field, aiming to address the criterion of decision making of consumers while buying tourism products in the three stages of travel planning process using social media. We firmly believe that a rigorous analysis of the same will not only address the academic discursive gaps existing in the prior studies, but would also indicate towards insights regarding macro ideas from the perspectives of companies seeking to design digital marketing strategies and governments seeking to design tourism policies.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: section two offers a literature review to present the research gap, theoretical background and the research objectives;

section three is devoted to the methodology and the findings are presented in section four. Section five concludes the paper with a discussion of the findings, followed by conclusions, implications and suggested avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

This section seeks to dig deep into the rich scholarly efforts to gauge the impact of social media marketing on purchasing behaviour. The purpose of the chapter is to trace the gaps in these rich discursive engagements, which require further scholarly investigation. Various issues related to social media and Marketing have been identified by scholars and professionals over the past decade. Consumer behaviour, approach to social media sites, and impacts on the marketing industry have been identified vividly by scholars across various spatiotemporal contexts (Chung and Austin, 2010; Hensel and Deis, 2010; Kyle and Michael, 2010; Diffy and Kearns, 2011). One can locate an extensive review of the same in Alves et al. (2016). Our objective in this paper is to focus specifically on the interface between the social media sites and the tourism industry, which has evolved as an important phenomenon in the current conjecture, propelling varied discursive interactions. The role of social media in the tourism industry has been located primarily in two strands, one from the side of the consumers (as in the people who are trying to consume tourism products), and the other from the side of the suppliers (the people who are supplying the tourism products). The literature provides varied responses from both these strands. As far as the side of the consumers are concerned, the literature primarily revolves around the decision-making process of the tour at different junctures, and the effect of social media on it.

The first among them is the role of social media in the decision-making process of the consumer during the pre-trip phase of the consumer's travel planning process. These studies involve discussions relating to the use and effect of information available on social media in the pre-trip stage. How social media mediates the recognition of the need of a particular travel, or the access to the information regarding a particular travel is the objective of these strands of literature (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2011; Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Huang, Basu, & Hsu, 2010; Lee, 2011;

Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Xiang, 2010; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The second important strand locates the importance of the social media at the during-trip stage of decision making in the travel process of the consumer, involving studies related to the important attributes in which social media contributes during the trip like evaluation of alternatives during the trip, purchasing decisions during the trip, etc. (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Lee, 2011; Lee, Xiong, & Hu, 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011). The final important strand from the consumer's side deals with the impact of social media on the consumers' decision making during the post-trip process, in the post-purchase behaviour (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009); Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2011; Huang, Basu, & Hsu, 2010; Lee, 2011; Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011; Scott & Orlikowski, 2012; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011). All these three phases of consumers' decision making during travelling and the impact of social media in the same stands of extreme importance for our pursuit in this paper.

However, there also lies another vivid trajectory of literature which seeks to understand the impact of social media on travelling industry through the lens of the supplier of tourism products. The first and foremost important trajectory in this literature strand is that of the role of social media in promotion of products. This strand of literature illustrates the role of social media in ensuring a global dissemination of information and promotional materials through its transnational space, in turn strengthening the marketing forces of the supplier company (Akehurst, 2009; Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011; Dippelreiter et al., 2008; Fuchs, Scholochov, & Höpken, 2009; Huang, 2011; Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011; Inversini & Cantoni, 2011; Inversini, Cantoni, & Buhalis, 2009; Kasavana, Nusair, & Teodosic, 2010; Leung, Law, & Lee, 2011; Lew, 2008; Munar, 2010; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Wood, 2009). Then comes the studies relating to suppliers' application of social media for facilitating online bookings and distributing products and services, which illustrate the role of social media in product distribution

(Akehurst, 2009; Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011; Fuchs, Scholochov, & Höpken, 2009; Noone, McGuire, & Rohlf, 2011; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Social media also aids the suppliers in facilitating an efficient communication channel between the suppliers and consumers, which has been pointed out in the literature (Akehurst, 2009; Chan & Denizci Guillet, 2011) and also the broader arena of management, which elaborates the role of social media in managing training and professional development, financial management, internal communication, and other internal functions like research and development (Akehurst, 2009; Dippelreiter et al., 2008; Fuchs, Scholochov, & Höpken (2009); Huang, 2011; Inversini & Cantoni, 2011; Inversini, Cantoni, & Buhalis, 2009; Isacson & Gretzel, 2011; Lee & Wicks, 2010; Leung, Law, & Lee, 2011; Li & Wang, 2011).

3. Research Gaps

As we see, the literature on this topic covers dense and diverse areas, but the spatiotemporal context of the studies demands constant re-examinations. Majority of the studies in this domain has evolved over the pre-COVID period and not majorly focused on the Indian conditions. It is our strong conjecture that after the digitalization boom post the pandemic, the conditions for research in the interface of social media and tourism and travel has radically changed. Under such a conjecture, we believe that our dig into the literature chalks out the following gaps which demand immediate addressal:

1. Gap in understanding of the *antecedents* of the influencing role of the social media in the decision-making process in the context of tourism sector
2. Gap in understanding the consumers' decision-making process influenced by the social media
3. Absence of any comprehensive model for the influencing role of the social media in the different stages of the decision-making process of the consumers in the context of tourism sector
4. Gap in understanding of the formulation of the communication/promotional strategy in the tourism sector and the transition from traditional marketing communication strategy to social media marketing strategy

The aforementioned gaps open the gateway for the analysis pursued in this paper, which has been detailed in the subsequent sections.

4. Research Objectives

In the present study, an attempt has been made to understand the influence of the social media in the consumer’s decision making process at the three stages, namely, pre-travel, during the travel and post travel, and also the impact of the emerged factors from the three stages of the consumers’ decision making on the consumers’ final travel related decisions.

The objectives of the present research are as follows:

1. To identify the observable variables to define the three stages of decision making process emerged from identified parameters for the development of the theoretical framework
2. To explore the factors that influence the consumer decision making process by the social media at the three stages of the decision making , separately, for the formulation of the social media strategy in the perspective of the tourism sector

5. Development of the Theoretical Framework of the Research

Table 1: Research Streams and Publications of Tourism and Hospitality Studies on Social Media in the consumer related decision making perspectives

Research Streams	Description
Consumer Decision making process Pre-trip stage	Role of social media in the pre-trip stage of the travelers’ travel planning process Studies relating to the use and impact of information on social media in the pre-trip stage (i.e., need recognition, information search) of the travelers’ travel planning process
Consumer Decision making process During -trip stage	Role of social media in the during-trip stage of the travelers’ travel planning process Studies relating to the use and impact of information on social media in the during-trip stage (i.e., evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision) of the travelers’ travel planning process
Consumer Decision making process Post -trip stage	Role of social media in the post-trip stage of the travelers’ travel planning process Studies relating to the use and impact of information on social media in the post-trip stage (i.e., post-purchase behavior) of the travelers’ travel planning process

Prior to the analysis, a framework with three research streams from the consumers’ perspective were first developed for classifying and analyzing the studies. Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) noted that the travelers’ travel planning process would be increasingly influenced by electronic word-of mouth from social media. Hence, the use and determinants of social media in the three phases of the traveler’s travel planning process—which are pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip—were highlighted as the consumer-related research streams.

The present researchers has identified the parameters associated with the consumer decision making process in the three research streams e.g. pre-trip, during the trip and post trip stages.

Table 2: Identification of parameters in the consumer related decision making perspectives

Sl No	Parameter Coding	Description of the Parameters
1	BP1	Credibility of Information Search
2	BP2	Effective platform for information search
3	BP3	Convenience of Information Search
4	BP4	Review of Friends comments
5	BP5	Review of Strangers comments
6	BP6	Trustworthiness of Friends
7	BP7	Level of Interactions with the strangers
8	BP8	Trustworthiness of the brands
9	BP9	Positive reviews of Friends induce buying
10	BP10	Positive Reviews of Strangers induce buying
11	BP11	Negative Views from friends dissuade Buying
12	BP12	Negative views from stranger dissuade buying
13	BP13	Social media becomes more influential than traditional in present day decision making
14	BP14	Review write up after purchasing the product/ service
15	BP15	Opinion sharing based on his satisfaction/dissatisfaction

6. Methodology

Design, Sample and Data Collection

The study adopts a combination of exploratory and descriptive research design. A thorough review of literature has helped laying theoretical foundation and building the conceptual model (stated in objective 1), which is in turn empirically tested.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire was administered for primary data collection. The first section of the questionnaire contains the demographic and psychographic information of the respondent.

The demographic information includes gender, educational level, profession and annual income. Today's lifestyle of consumers are completely based on social media and their intensity of using the social media are becoming influencers of changing attitudes, values and lifestyles. The intensity of using social media is also considered as moderating variables. The psychographic information includes beliefs, values, lifestyle, social status, activities, interests and opinions. In the 2nd section, social media use was measured across three stages of travel, i.e. pre-travel, during travel and post-travel. This was done with the help of 12-item scale in the pre-travel (searching stage), 17-item scale during the decision making process and 7-item scale in the post purchase behavior. In the 3rd section, number of tours already made by the influence of the social media has been captured and the response of this section has been taken as decision box.

Purposive sampling method was used that allowed to tap only those respondents that had travelled in the last two years, were social media users and had used social media in their last travel. These respondents were then requested to answer the questions keeping in mind their last travel.

To gather responses for the study, the research was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, a pilot survey was conducted. For this purpose, a sample of 100 respondents was selected conveniently. The initial sample included those respondents who were willing to participate and devote quality time with the researchers to undergo the interview process. In the second phase, the final data was collected from 300 domestic tourist respondents who were residents of West Bengal visiting within and outside the country.

Therefore, a structured questionnaire was prepared and the survey was conducted in-person, and mostly at the premises where the subjects are employed. Questionnaires were self-administered to the participants; most of which filled and returned them instantly, while others were returned later. It is pertinent to note that before circulation the questionnaire was pretested and modified to ensure validity.

The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale, one point for "Strongly disagree," two points for "Moderately Disagree," three points for "Agree," four points for "Moderately Agree" and five points for "Strongly agree."

Out of the 371 questionnaires that were distributed a total of 300 usable responses could be retrieved. Therefore, the valid sample size for the study was considered as 300. A pilot survey of 100 respondents was conducted to attain the content validity and also, internal consistency reliability estimates were checked. None of the items were dropped, and the full instrument was carried for final data collection.

Method

Exploratory factor analysis(EFA) was used to extract the factors that characterize the decision making behavior of the consumers' in the pre-travel, during the travel and post-travel stages. Multiple regression analysis has been performed to find out the relationship of the emerged factors of each of the three stages of decision making with the frequencies of the travelers decision making using social media.

7. Results and Discussion

Theoretical framework was developed considering all the parameters influencing the consumer decision making process in the three stages of travel related decision making and now, EFA is used to identify latent determinants at the Pre-travel Stage, During the Travel and Post Travel Stage. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify factors that explain the correlations among a set of variables (Malhotra and Dash, 2011). The EFA was executed on pre-travel stage, during the travel stage and post travel stage.

Pre Travel Stage

The present section pertains to the influence of social media on consumer decision making process in the pre-travel stage. The 12 items used to gauge the influence of social media on decision making in the pre-travel stage were all subjected to EFA using principal components method and Varimax rotation.

Scree plot and Eigen values have been used to confirm the number of factors to be extracted. The four-factor solution explained 71.65% of the total variance of the data set and exhibited a KMO measure of sampling adequacy of 0.707 (Table 3). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value should be over 0.60 for sample size to be considered adequate for factor analysis (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Bartlett's test (Table 3) investigates the relationship between items of a construct.

If items of a construct are mutually related to each other, then factor analysis can be conducted. The significance level of Chi-square for Bartlett’s test is less than 0.001 - so null hypothesis of no correlation is rejected and factor analysis is applicable in this case (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Results from EFA are shown in Table 4.

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett’s test for Pre-travel stage

KMO and Bartlett’s Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.707
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1810.235
	df	66
	Sig.	.000

Table 4: Summary of Emerged factors, underlying variables and their loading in the pre-travel decision making process

Factor Name	Factor Definition	Variable Description	Variable in Detail	Factor Loadings
Consumer attitudes towards Social media[F1]	Social medium is increasingly a virtual platform through which consumers’ seek and share information	Interest towards using product and services	Social media acts as stimulus	0.954
		Think about using products and services	Awareness generated by social media	0.919
		Think about more information searching for products and services	Attention creation by social media	0.901
		Happy to search the information	Searching information in social media becoming a passion	0.646
Facilitating Consumers with new travel ideas and growing confidence [F2]	Familiarization with the social media use for travel information search and enriching tourist knowledge	Excessive and ever increasing usage of social media	Habitual user of social media	0.766
		Increasing trust and beliefs on Social media sites	More preference to social media than the friends and relatives	0.763
		Online opinion becoming preferred	Online feedback is preferred over traditional one	0.701
Engaging consumers for comparing across brands [F3]	The comparative information enriches tourist knowledge and helps them to reduce the risk involved in travel decision-making	Excessive and ever increasing usage of social media	Worth full engagement via social media for comparative study	0.883
		Comparative study to reduce the risk	Tourist preference for the comparative study	0.733
		Timely and accurate information, relevant to visitor	Professional way re-engineering the entire process of developing, managing and marketing tourism products	0.591
Trust worthiness and credibility of online consumer reviews[F4]	Perceived usefulness of the social media and its perceived ease of use	Adaptation of social media	Encourage consumers to use ICTs in general and social media in particular	0.823
		Affection towards Social Media	Social media use of the consumers	0.791

Next analysis is the construction of factor matrix based on these four factors. A factor matrix represents the correlations between the variables and the factors. Table 4 shows the factor loadings corresponding to each observable variable. Factor loading is basically the correlation coefficient for the variable and factor.

During the Travel Stage

Here, similar studies have been conducted to find out the factors for during the travel stage. Firstly, KMO and Bartlett’s test, and lastly, factor matrix for the same have been presented to validate the analysis and identify the newly emerged factors.

Table 5: KMO and Bartlett’s test for the during travel stage decision

KMO and Bartlett’s Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.687
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2094.402
	df	136
	Sig.	0.000

Here, KMO measure of sampling adequacy of 0.687 (Table 5) which is more than 0.60. Hence, the sample size can be considered adequate for factor analysis (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Along with this, the significance level of Chi-square for Bartlett’s test is less than 0.001 (Table 13), which also satisfies the criterion of factor analysis.

The six-factor solution explained 72.2% of the total variance of the data set. Six emerged factors with their variable components and loadings are stated in the table 6.

Table 6: Summary of Emerged factors, underlying variables and their loading in the during the travel decision making process

Factor Name	Factor Definition	Variable Description	Variable in Detail	Factor Loadings
Social media-emerged as an interactive platform [F1]	It features a new degree of interactivity and consumer involvement in advertising applications	Social media acts as commercial medium of advertising	Behavioral responses of the consumers' toward social media advertising	0.913
		Regular interactions with the consumers	Two-way (or multi-way) communication in an online platform	0.879
		Social media emerged as effective IMC tools	Social media characterized by user freedom, control and dialogue.	0.830
Social media –An evaluation platforms for consumer experiences [F2]	the role of social media, enabling customers to talk to one another, is an extension of traditional word-of- mouth (WOM) communication	Familiarity with social media stories	In the new age of social media, he/ she can now potentially influence thousands of Consumers.	0.927
		Tangible touch via social media	Intangible nature of tourism makes pre-purchase trial impossible	0.896
		Preference/ choice Builder	Influencing peer groups to purchase	0.857
Social media –source of making make more reliable decisions by reducing the uncertainty [F3]	The content reliability is important for the sustained growth of social media as the communication media	Customer relationship management systems developed via social media	Effective marketing tool for developing relationship management system	0.907
		Accurate and precise information	Helps tourist to reduce the uncertainty in decision making	0.881
		Shared stories -the ability to encourage audiences to visualize the consumption of a product or service	Narrative reasoning readers possess have substantial impact on the usage of UGC on social media	0.743
Self-identification in the stories of Social media [F4]	Self -identification while reading the travel stories would also lead to consume the product/ service	Trustworthiness of e-WoM	Story sharing in the social media generates the motivation tp proceed	0.849
		Effective review process	Content analysis and its credibility enhance the use of social media	0.849
UGC on social Media – Evaluating the Best alternatives [F5]	UGC on social media was mainly used at the information search stage of travel planning in the evaluation of alternatives	Choice from the alternatives	Variety of UGC on social media are one of the key determinates of affecting the choices	0.804
Perceived expertise and trustworthiness of UGC [F6]	UGC has become an important information source for travelers	Information source, variety and trust of UGC	Exploring the underlying factors for enhancing the trustworthiness of UGC	0.741

Post-Trip Phase

Exploratory factor analysis has also been performed in the third phase to extract the factors. In case of Post-Trip Phase also, KMO & Bartlett’s test and factor matrix have been constructed to understand the emerged factors.

Table 7: KMO and Bartlett’s test for *Post-Trip Phase*

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.687
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	845.964
	df	21
	Sig.	.000

Table 8: Summary of Emerged factors, underlying variables and their loading in the post- travel stages

Factor Name	Factor Definition	Variable Description	Variable in Detail	Factor Loading
Shared evaluating alternatives and decision criterion in the post purchase stage [F1]	UGC on social media helps audiences gain information about a place by recognizing coherence in the story	Enthusiastic of sharing Information	UGC on social media is capable of providing unprecedentedly up-to-date and diversified formats of information to travel consumers	0.914
		Post Travel Review share	Stories have the ability to encourage audiences to visualize the consumption of a product or service	0.893
		Risk assessment based on post travel review share	UGC on social media is capable of providing unprecedentedly up-to-date and diversified formats of information to travel consumers	0.844
Social Media-An Evaluating Platform [F2]	Evaluation the information provided by the social media with the tourist experience	Collaborative and Interactive Platform	Interpersonal (e.g. involving one-to-one interaction between people)	0.767
		Perceived trustworthiness and reliability of UGC	Non-marketers who have responsibility for marketing and other aspects of the business	0.654

Here, KMO measure of sampling adequacy is 0.687 (Table 7) which is more than 0.60. Hence, the sample size can be considered adequate for factor analysis (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Along with this, the significance level of Chi-square for Bartlett’s test is less than 0.001 (Table 16), which also satisfies the criterion of factor analysis. The two-factor solution explained 62.33% of the total variance of the data set. The emerged factors are presented with the loadings of their variable components in the table 8.

8. Discussions

The study aimed to determine the influence of the social media use on the consumers decision making process for travel-related purposes in the three stages of their travel, e.g. pre-travel, during the travel and post travel decision making process. To reach this goal, the study attempted to answer two research questions: “What are the parameters considered in the present body of literatures for the travel-related decision making process?” and “What are the factors behind the use of social media in the three stages for travel-related purposes?”.

To investigate the first research question, existing literatures were extensively used to identify the parameters influencing the consumer decision making process at the three stages of the travel process and a theoretical framework was developed.

The survey instrument was developed based on the items sorted at the three stages of the travel decision making and the response of the travelers,

who were using social media for their travel decision making for the last five years were collected. The responses of the consumers were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis to extract categorically the influencing factors in the three stages to justify the second research question.

As stated in the literature review, in order to reduce the risk of choices of decision making , travelers typically access and evaluate online travel information early in the decision-making process (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Cox et al., 2009; Fotis et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2013; O’Connor, 2010; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). According to these findings, it is possible to state that social media has become one of the important information sources for tourists to make their travel-related decisions. From the present study it has been revealed that consumer’s attitudes towards social media [F1] and role of social media to facilitate consumers with new travel ideas and growing confidence [F2] has emerged as the significant factors in the pre-travel stage. Consumers also feel that engagements via social media for comparative study across brands are truly worth full and the factor loading of the parameter (0.883) is significantly high. Consistent with the earlier study, Trustworthiness and credibility of online consumer reviews[F4] is critical in consumers’ decision to buy travel related products or take a favorable action toward products advertised on social media.

Consumers' benefit perceptions of social media for their during the travel stage were expressed as: "their familiarity with social media (factor loading 0.927)", "helps to make more reliable decisions by reducing the uncertainty through regular interactions (factor loading 0.881)", "helps them for more appropriate choices by developing relationship management (factor loading -0.907)", and "provides a platform to share their reviews (factor loading 0.849)". The emerged factors during the travel decision making process namely, Social media-emerged as an interactive platform [F1], Social media –An evaluation platforms for consumer experiences [F2], Social media –source of making more reliable decisions by reducing the uncertainty [F3] has established the fact that customers' belief in the accuracy and dependability of social media sharing is one of the most significant aspects influencing its worth.

Shared evaluating alternatives and decision criterion in the post purchase stage [F1] and social media as an evaluating platform[F2] has emerged as significant factors in the post-travel stage. The findings of the study demonstrated that strong emotions on customer satisfaction lead to social media sharing. This result is in line with the body of research on conventional word-of-mouth (WOM), which claims that consumers frequently start a WOM spreading process because of strong emotions related to a product experience, such happiness or dissatisfaction (Burgess et al., 2009).

9. Conclusions and Practical Implications

According to the literature review, social media is one of the quickly evolving ideas that could affect marketing tactics. Even though social media has become widely used by both suppliers and tourists, practitioners and academics are still mostly unaware of effective social media management and manipulation techniques (Leung et al., 2013; Zheng and Gretzel, 2010). Research addressing the dearth of empirical evidence to characterize and elucidate social media's function in the travel and tourism sector may yield useful recommendations, particularly for practitioners looking to create more effective integrated marketing plans. The present study meets the gap by exploring the significant factors in the three stages of travel making e.g. pre, during the travel and post travel.

The study's conclusions show that social media is widely used by consumers for both everyday and travel-related reasons. Social media is utilized more during the pre-travel phase of a trip when there is a greater chance of influencing customers' purchasing decisions but their experience during the travel and building trustworthiness as well as satisfaction has been reflected in the travel period and post travel stages respectively. These results highlight social media's significance from the standpoint of tourism marketing. Travel agencies should take social media sharing seriously and view it as an integral component of their integrated marketing campaigns.

Businesses require comprehensive customer data in order to create effective marketing campaigns. Understanding their consumers' behavior choices, concerns, and determinants requires this information. Because social media is a two-way street, through the media, travel agencies can offer tailored information that caters to each visitor's unique requirements and tastes. In order to better understand their clients and create individualized services that cater to their specific demands, tourism businesses should incorporate data from social media into their systems.

The study also has implications for tourism professionals on the connection between social media and satisfaction perception. The findings of the study demonstrated that strong emotions on customer satisfaction lead to social media sharing. Given these results, travel agencies ought to give special consideration to both extremely happy and dissatisfied customers. As part of their complaint handling process, they might encourage their happy customers to post on social media and take seriously any unfavorable social media posts.

This study has shed more light on how consumers utilize social media in relation to travel at three different stages of decision making, which helps to better understand their actions. The study's conclusions might help practitioners and scholars comprehend Web 2.0 technologies and social media and how they affect customers.

Limitations and Future Research

The respondents were chosen solely from the state of West Bengal, and the sample was not chosen at random. The multinational structure of the tourism business means that even if the entire sample comes from a single state,

the results could yield valuable information for the industry globally.

The use of social media in travel is a relatively recent yet significant topic for practitioners and scholars alike. Therefore, research addressing the dearth of empirical data to characterize and elucidate its function in the travel and tourism sector may help close a gap in the body of literature. Due to the topic's cultural components, changes in time and sample characteristics could have an impact on the results. For this reason, future research that uses consumer samples from nations with diverse cultures and historical periods could advance this subject.

Furthermore, more research analyzing the connections between consumer decision-making and social media use in travel may yield useful data for the tourism sector.

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- [1] By 'culture', we mean production of meanings.

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