EVALUATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING STRATEGIES OF MAHARASHTRA TOURISM DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (INDIA) FROM THE TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Maharashtra is an important tourism state in India. With the increasing importance of social media marketing, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation, the destination marketing organisation of the state, is taking serious efforts to utilize this unique medium for successful promotion of tourism on international level. Here, the paper aims to evaluate the social media marketing strategies of MTDC through user judgment approach. After extensive review of literature, the researcher has proposed the instrument to measure the performance of the social media marketing strategies for destination promotion from tourists' perspective. The developed instrument measured the performance on the basis of 3 critical success factors: Variety of contents and Quality of contents. Reliability and validity tests applied, confirmed the usefulness of the instrument. Tourist ratings (collected from 300 respondents) have made the researcher to understand the preferred attributes for social media marketing. "t test" was used for data analysis. The findings revealed that there is a huge gap (significant difference) between the importance and performance of various identified attributes. Therefore, constructive suggestions were given for improvement of the identified critical success factors. The findings are helpful for DMO to acknowledge online information preferences and E-consumer behavior.

Keywords: Social media marketing strategies, DMO, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), India.

1. Introduction

Maharashtra State, which came into existence in the year 1960, is one of the most progressive states in India. Along with agriculture, it is known as industrial state and its capital, Mumbai is the economic capital of the country. It is a leading tourism state of India, which ranked second in foreign tourist arrivals and sixth in domestic tourist arrivals in the country (MoT GoI, 2016). The state is blessed with numerous tourist products, including 5 world heritage sites (Ajanta cave, Ellora cave, Elephanta caves, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus and Western ghats), 720 km of coastal line, well-known tiger reserves, Lonar crater (third largest crater in the world) and many other cultural and natural tourism products.

Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) is the official Destination marketing organisation (DMO) for promotion of Maharashtra tourism in the world. Established in the year 1975, the agency is utilizing diverse marketing tools, ranging from traditional media to modern marketing channels like internet. Nevertheless earlier research have highlighted 'lack of information availability' and 'ineffectiveness of marketing strategies' as the impediments in satisfactory tourism marketing of the state (Joshi, 2014; Thadani & Roy, 2017; *Tourism*, 2014). Further no visible research literature is found related to internet marketing of such crucial tourism state of the country. Thus the present research is a sincere attempt to fill the research gap by evaluating social media strategies of Maharashtra state.

To achieve the research goal, the researchers have measured the gap between importance and performance of various critical factors related to social media marketing by using developed instrument. The output of the study successfully provided the insights on online consumer behavior and discussed the suggestions for improvement of online marketing of Maharashtra.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Evaluation of Social media strategies:

In recent years, internet has become the most prominent source of information among the tourists (Celik & Caylak, 2015; Tanrisevdi & Duran, 2011; UNWTO, 2008) because of ease of use, interactivity, (disintermediation) no-need of intermediary, and flexibility offered by web-based interfaces (Ayeh, Leung, Au, & Law, 2012; Bronner & Hoog, 2016; Eduardo Parra-López Desiderio Gutiérrez-Taño, Bulchand-Gidumal, & Ricardo J. Díaz-Armas Jacques, 2016; Li, Robinson, & Oriade, 2017). Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs), the organisations responsible for the marketing of destinations (ETC & UNWTO, 2003; Elbe, Hallén, & Axelsson Björn, 2009; Pike, 2004), have turned to online channels to cope up with rising new behaviors among users (Ruelnovabos, Matias, & Mena, 2015).

With the emergence of web 2.0, the earlier world of static web 1.0 (Mariani, Di Felice, & Mura, 2016; Mistilis & Buhalis, 2012), switched to dynamic and interactive world of internet. The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 (O'Connor, Wang, & Li, 2011b). It revolutionized the use of Internet (Crespo, Martín, & Mogollón, 2015) by offering a wide range of electronic applications, which enabled user to participate and co-create the web contents. It is people-centric phenomenon which facilitates interactions among users and companies about products and services by using different platforms like consumer review sites, blogs and social networking sites etc. (Crespo et al., 2015; Kerkhof & Beukeboom, 2015). Social media blurred the line between the content creator and content audience. It resulted into the development of new two way media channel for marketers i.e. "social media".

The concept of Social media is defined by many scholars in different manner indicating that it is a group of internet-based application that utilize web 2.0 as its development platform, allowing users to create, share, participate and exchange ideas, thoughts, experiences and information and enable dissemination of this user generated contents (Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014; Chung & Koo, 2015; Constantinides, 2014; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2012; Roque & Raposo, 2016). Roque & Raposo (2016) illustrated that social media has transformed the customer from passive receivers of company's messages to active creators who easily contribute their creations to internet. Therefore, now, in tourism industry, not only destination marketers but also tourists can paint the real picture of the destination. These empowered customers look to web to obtain a wide variety of information on holiday travel, use the experiences shared by others, share their own experiences, buy travel – related services etc, by using variety of devices like PC, Smartphone, tablets etc.(Eduardo Parra-López Desiderio Gutiérrez-Taño et al., 2016; Roque & Raposo, 2016). Numerous studies have supported the significance of social media in tourism and hotel sector (Yoo & Lee, 2015). Thus ultimately social media has forced companies to switch to co-creative marketing strategies from earlier push marketing (Constantinides, 2009; Hays et al., 2012; O'Connor, Wang, & Li, 2011). As a result, the widespread use of Web 2.0 applications generated radical changes in tourism destination promotion (Roque & Raposo, 2016) by broadening marketing horizon (O'Connor et al., 2011b).

In tourism industry, the ultimate goal of DMO is to develop and promote the destination through the coordination and management of essential activities, such as financing, strategic planning, marketing, decision-making, and destination product development (UNWTO, 2010). Adding to the point, many studies annotated 'cost effectiveness and global reach of the social media with limited resources' is highly important benefit of social media to DMOs at a time when public sector cuts in their funding in the marketing budgets (Chung & Koo, 2015; Hays et al., 2012; Mariani et al., 2016; Yoo & Lee, 2015). This state of affairs has pushed many DMOs to turn to social media as a marketing tool. Accordingly, nowadays, it is an unavoidable element of marketing strategy of these destination marketing agencies.

As the revolution has just started, tourism organizations are still experimenting with creative as well as basic use of social media as a marketing tool (Uşaklı, Koç, & Sönmez, 2017). To get clear picture of benefit (i.e. Return on Investment) of this media over traditional media there is a vital need to monitor, evaluate and benchmark the marketing performance against agreed objective, KPIs and targets(Constantinides, 2009; Id, Type, Annual, & Anzmac, 2009). Alan Stevenson and Jim Hamill (2012) elucidated that there are over 200 different Social media monitoring tools available, ranging from very sophisticated but expensive solutions to no or very low cost tools which can often provide a 'good enough' service for small tourism and hospitality businesses. Thus there is a dire call for changing the untailored mindset of DMOs towards social media (Hamill et al., 2016).

Therein ,the literature brings to the notice that the topic is under-investigated and hence there is need of comprehensive understanding of use and efficacy of social media by DMOs (Alizadeh & Isa, 2015; Ayeh et al., 2012; Mariani et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2011b; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Generally research areas related to social media includes its use by tourism organization, impact on decision making (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013). But earlier literature has highlighted the gap related to use of social media by DMO. Moreover, there is no visible literature related to study of perceptions of tourists about social media strategies of DMOs.

Further, the research study on social media usage among DMOs of Asian region is very scant (Shao, Davila Rodriguez, & Gretzel, 2016) except a study conducted by Roque & Raposo (2016) analysed Facebook usage of Malaysian DMO. Over and above, very limited research is done on the area of Indian tourism industry. Few research studies analysed the use of social media by tourists in tour planning phase. The study conducted by Ministry of Tourism & Government of India (2017) found that 89.30% potential tourists had explored social media to get more information related to India while planning their trips. Another study on the similar line was conducted by Kumar & Abraham (2014) to understand how tourists accessed information about India. Regrettably it was found that neither India's destination gets properly advertised on social media nor does the government leverage social media tools to attract more footfalls. Therefore, these studies recommended enhancing the presence of India as a tourist destination on social media platforms which will facilitate the online explorers. However, there is no noticeable research study found on the topic related to use of social media by DMOs of India.

2.2. Social media marketing strategies of Maharashtra tourism:

Being an important tourism state in the country, Maharashtra receives 20% of foreign tourists visiting India. In this vein, the State tourism policy 2016 of Government of Maharashtra aims to promote the state as 'Numero Uno' destination wherein the state will offer vast experiences on global, regional, and local best practices and standards. The research studies conducted on

the marketing strategies of Maharashtra tourism highlighted the weaknesses of lack of visibility in marketing campaign ("Maharashtra Tourism SWOT Analysis , USP & Competitors," 2017). It also lacks in proactive information strategy to attract tourists at decision making point due to the ignorance towards the study of consumer behavior related to online information search and purchase of products (*Tourism*, 2014).

The present State tourism policy of Government of Maharashtra (2016) aims to develop an integrated 360 degree marketing plan targeting new audience through social and digital media. Accordingly, the interview of officials conducted by the researchers on 23rd February 2016 revealed that Website and social media marketing have been prioritized by MTDC. Presently MTDC is emphasizing on the use of social networking sites like facebook, twitter, instagram etc. for promotion of Maharashtra.

Table 1: Social Networking sites used by MTDC

Sr. NO	Platforms	Date of Joining	Username / Account name
1.	facebook	2012	Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation Ltd (MTDC)
2.	Twitter	2011	Maharashtra Tourism
3.	Youtube	2014	MTDC
4.	Instagram	NA	MTDC_official

Unfortunately, review of literature, interview of official and researcher's observations revealed that till date the effectiveness of these strategies was not evaluated through the online / offline survey of the tourists / users. Further absence of specialized manpower and standard procedure for social media marketing are the weaknesses of the organizations. Furthermore, no study has been conducted on evaluation of the social media strategies of the state. As a response, the present research study is a genuine attempt to fill the research gap by investigating the perceptions of tourists about the importance and performance of different contents of social media marketing of Maharashtra state. The developed framework measures its performance from user's perspective which will be helpful in understanding user satisfaction and perception.

3. Research Methodology

The objective of this research paper was to evaluate the social media strategies of Maharashtra state from the perspectives of the tourists. For that, following null hypothesis have been proposed:

H_0: There is no significant difference between the mean value of importance of the attributes of social media marketing and the mean value of performance of these attributes.

Primary data have been collected from the tourists visiting the state. Three world heritage sites located in the Maharashtra state, namely Ajanta caves (Aurangabad), Ellora caves (Aurangabad) and Elephanta caves (Mumbai), were selected purposively as sample destinations. From each site 100 respondents were selected by using simple random sampling, forming sample size of 300 tourists.

3.1 Design of Instrument

In this vein, the first step while developing the tool was to generate an all-inclusive list of important attributes related to social media marketing by digging into the main body of the relevant literature. These items were later grouped together to represent two different

categories. Thus the researchers have attempted to propose the comprehensive tool that uses a combination of attributes identified by prior studies as important attributes or critical success factors for social media or for quality of destination information. The observation of the researcher, discussion with experts and earlier literature highlighted variety of contents that could be posted. These are as follows:

Table 2: The list of factors and contents

Sr. No	Factor	Contents
1	Type of the Content	Text, photos, videos, links, events, announcements
2	Quality of the Content	Accuracy , Timely and up-to-date information, Easily understandable information, Creative or attractive contents, Interactive contents, Informative contents, Engaging contents, entertaining contents, Active presence/ consistency, Promptness in responses to online queries / comments

3.5 Measuring the Performance

Here, the proposed scale is based on user judgment that means the ratings are taken from tourist for each attribute on two 5- point Likert scales : Scale of Importance (1- Not at all important, 2- somewhat important, 3 - important, 4- very important, 5 – most important) and Scale of Performance (1- Poor, 2- fair, 3- good, 4- very good, 5- excellent). Thus User ratings have made the researcher understand the important factors of social media. This understanding helps researchers to measure the performance gap. The gap is measured statistically by comparing the difference between the mean value of importance of attribute and mean value of performance of attribute by using Paired 't' test.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Verifying instrument validity

The face validity of the construct was performed with the help of eight experts (researchers from tourism fraternity). They were asked for their opinions on the suitability of the questions. To resolve the ambiguity raised by experts about few sentences and words, some of them were replaced and for few of them explanations were provided. Thus the face validity of the construct was deemed acceptable. Further, Reliability test and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were performed to ensure the reliability and uni- dimensionality of the scale. Reliability is defined as 'the extent to which an individual answers the same question in the same way each time', which is assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Uni-dimensionality refers to 'the extent to which indicators are strongly associated with each other and represent a single construct' (Ruelnovabos et al., 2015). The pilot survey was performed at one of the sample destination i.e. at Ajanta caves, Aurangabad with the sample of 100 respondents. The result of the Chronbach test produced the alpha value of 0.955 (> 0.7) which indicates very strong reliability of the scale and confirms that there was no need to remove any item. Next, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was done to reaffirm the uni-dimensionality of the scale. PCA explores the underlying dimensions of each item in order to reduce the number of items into related clusters (Ruelnovabos et al., 2015). According to Kaiser (1974), Kaiser-Meyer- Olkin (KMO) value exceeding the cut-off value of 0.50, indicates a desirable sampling (cited in Pan, Zhang, Gursoy, & Lu, 2017). Here, the (KMO) value was 0.823, indicating a desirable sampling. The Bartlett's test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating sufficient correlations among selected variables.

First, the Kaiser criterion for factor extraction was used. According to the criterion, factors with eigenvalues less than 1.0 are rejected. Based on the analysis, only two factors had eigenvalues greater than 1.0. These factors explained 78.12% of the variance in the data, which is also a good sign. Next, a scree plot was generated and examined. As a rule of thumb, factors to the left of the inflection point or elbow are accepted. In the scree plot, the inflection point was seen on the third factor, hence only the first three factors were accepted and retained.

The factor loadings are shown in Table 3. It confirms the groupings showing that Factor 1 is Quality of Contents, comprises Accuracy, Timely and up-to-date information, Easily understandable information, Creative or attractive contents, Interactive contents, Informative contents, Engaging/ entertaining contents, Active presence/ consistency and Promptness in responses to online queries / comments and Factor 2 i.e. Type of Content which is explained by Textual information of tourism products, Photos of tourism products, Videos of tourism products, Links of the related contents/ blogs of tourism products, Reviews / experiences / feedback by actual tourists and Official announcement/ news of the organisation.

Table 3: Result of Factor analysis

SN	Items	Factor 1 Quality of contents	Factor 2 Type of Content
1.	Textual information of tourism products		.760
2.	Photos of tourism products		.870
3.	Videos of tourism products		.817
4.	Links of the related contents/ blogs of tourism products		.637
5.	Reviews / experiences / feedback by actual tourists on		.834
6.	Official announcement/ news of the organisation		.773
7.	Accuracy	.640	
8.	Timely and up-to-date information	.889	
9.	Easily understandable information	.915	
10.	Creative or attractive contents	.933	
11.	Interactive contents	.916	
12.	Informative contents	.807	
13.	Engaging/ entertaining contents	.886	
14.	Active presence/ consistency	.846	
15.	Promptness in responses to online queries / comments	.901	
	Eigen value	9.436	2.282
	Variance	46.814	31.307
	α	0.968	0.904

While conducting the survey, tourists who have visited the official social media pages of MTDC were asked to rate the importance and performance of listed attributes. Regrettably, it was a tiresome task as a very less number of tourists have visited these pages and it was a major hurdle to achieve the target sample size. After extensive survey, 289 usable questionnaires were found.

Table 4: Result of Paired t test

Factor	Attributes	Mean values		Sig.
		Importance	Performance	
Quality of Information	Accuracy	3.4607	2.5179	0.000
	Timely and up-to-date information	3.6036	2.5321	0.000
	Easily understandable information	3.6536	2.6750	0.000
	Creative or attractive contents	3.5679	2.6857	0.000
	Interactive contents	3.5857	2.6821	0.000
	Informative contents	3.6393	2.6536	0.000
	Engaging/ entertaining contents	4.3679	2.6500	0.000
	Active presence/ consistency	3.6000	2.6893	0.000
	Promptness in responses to online queries / comments	3.5286	2.3714	0.000
Type of Contents	Textual information of tourism products	3.3429	2.7857	0.000
	Photos of tourism products	3.5071	2.8571	0.000
	Videos of tourism products	3.4179	2.7643	0.000
	Links of the related contents/ blogs of tourism products	3.3000	2.5607	0.000
	Reviews / experiences / feedback by actual tourists	3.5679	2.5821	0.000
	Official announcement/ news of the organisation	3.4536	2.6321	0.000

The survey revealed (table 4) that there is a huge gap (significant difference) between the importance and performance of various factors of social media strategies. Hence, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and alternate hypothesis; 'there is significant difference between the importance of various factors of social media strategies and their performance' is accepted. It suggests that MTDC should focus on improvement of their strategies.

5. Conclusion and Scope of Future Research:

Social media is thriving component of internet marketing and it plays crucial role in improving destination competitiveness in the world. Therefore DMOs are exploring their available resources and taking efforts to reap optimum benefits of this promising destination marketing strategy.   Review of literature revealed that there is miniscule research work done on the online marketing initiative of Indian tourism industry. Adding to the point, there is no visible research done on area of performance/ effectiveness measurement of social media marketing strategies of Maharashtra state, a leading tourism state in the country. For measurement, the researchers have come up with the tool, based on exhaustive list of identified critical success factors of social media marketing of tourism destination. The scale measures performance on the basis of 2 critical success factors, namely Quality of information and type of content.

Evaluation of the social media strategies utilized by MTDC, which includes application of social networking sites only, demonstrated under-performance and under-utilization of the medium. There is a huge gap between the expected performance and actual performance of these strategies. The highest importance rating was achieved by 'engaging and entertaining contents'. It illustrated that tourists expect that DMOs should post such kind of contents which will encourage tourist engagement and entertain tourists. The earlier literature has also

supported the similar consumer behavior. DMOs should use social media platforms, especially social networking sites, for competitions, quizzes, gamification of products which will improve user engagement and ultimately contribute towards strengthening destination brand and loyalty. Further tourists expect that the contents should be informative, easy to understand and up-to-date.

Active presence and promptness in response greatly affects effectiveness of social media strategies. Unfortunately, MTDC received the lowest performance ratings for both the qualities. The researcher observed that MTDC generally posts 3-4 posts during the one week which are mainly announcements or news related to the organization rather than destination information. MTDC should identify the motto social media pages, whether it is for promotion of state tourism or for the promotion of organization.

The type of content which is the most important for tourists in tour planning phase is reviews / experiences / feedback by earlier tourists. MTDC received very poor performance rating for the same. In this vein, DMOs should encourage user to generate contents about the destination. Thus, Social media pages should act as platforms for tourists to interact with the DMO or to write and share their photos, videos, experiences, reviews etc. It will lead to improve user engagement. Though earlier MTDC has implemented few such kind of initiatives, like "Selfi at MTDC resort", now they should come up with few innovative and creative ideas like Kerala tourism which come up with online bidding war through their facebook page. It is organized every year. In this manner, MTDC should plan such things periodically.

Other important and attractive contents are photos, videos and official announcement. In a nutshell, there is a dire need to refurbish social media strategies of MTDC. In this rapidly changing technical environment, MTDC should think about innovative and creative online promotional techniques, so that, these social media will act as interaction platform for industry stakeholders including users, tourists, private tourism organizations and local community. Regular online and offline assessment of social media strategies by users and experts must be performed to maintain the destination competitiveness and online destination brand.

At the last, further study of themes of contents published by the organisation could add great insights. Comparing these strategies with other national or international best practices like Kerala or visit England will be helpful in obtaining more diverse and thorough knowledge and ground-breaking ideas for the best possible use. Study of relationship between demographic profile and user ratings can assist destination promoters in understanding the Customer Personas to design personalized and tailored strategies for different markets.

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