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The Role of Social Media in Destination Marketing: A Case Study of Galiyat Region in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Social media can play a significant role both on the demand and the supply side of tourism, allowing destinations to interact directly with visitors via various internet platforms and monitor and act on visitors' opinions and evaluations of services. The aim of this study is to explore how social media inspires tourist in motivation, planning, and sharing experiences of tourist destinations in Galiyat region of Abbottabad, Pakistan. The study uses questionnaires of tourists and selected reports to examine the usage and impact of social media marketing strategies.

Keywords: Destination Marketing – eWOM - Internet and Communication Technologies - Consumer Generated Content - User Generated Content – GDA – TCKP - Tourism 4.0.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become the norm of the 21st century. It allows for the sharing and posting of content based on personal knowledge and experience and opinions of the users via pictures, audio and video as well as text (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012 [7]; Campbell, 2010; Brake and Safko, 2009; Mangold and Faulds, 2009) [3]. With the emergence of social media, consumers can now actively utilize different platforms like consumer review sites, blogs and social networking sites, among others, to create online content and share experiences about products and services. This allows for potential consumers to make wiser decisions about their choices and may ultimately be responsible for the repute and success of different products and services [14].

The use of social media within the tourism industry has revolutionized the ability of consumers to make decisions based on their personalized requirements and has become the largest group of services sold through the internet [1]. Travelers and tourists have a diverse range of expectations from the destinations that they visit. Using social media platforms helps tourists to gain an insight into realistic expectations based on experiences from other travelers, rendering a decision about the destination or service more likely to be in line with the personalized needs of the traveler [15]. This is especially important for newer destinations or services, where a general reputation or 'word of mouth' may not exist. The availability of social media means that tourists are able to share a wide variety of experiences, emotions, knowledge and information [6, 11] which all impact the industry at large and the potential customers of destinations and services.

A. The use of Social Media in Destination Marketing

The tourism system mainly relies on information and communication technologies for promotional activities, sales and when developing management relationships with customers. From the perspective of destinations and service providers of these destinations, social media enables easy access to a wider range and variety of potential visitors at a relatively low cost, thus increasing the efficiency of their marketing strategies [15]. Social media has enabled less frequented destinations to be showcased amongst a wide range of tourists and hobbyist travelers. Destinations that had not garnered much interest in the past are now regularly featured on various social applications on the web. This has created a thriving tourism industry in developing regions such as East Africa, Central America and South East Asia (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019) [24, 25], with more and more exotic places being offered on the tourism market [2].

Social media is used by tourists for various activities such as planning of the trip, selection of destinations, booking of services etc. This information is not only used in the planning phase but also during the trip for activities that were not planned in advance [5]. On the other hand, packaged holidays sold by tour operators are growing in popularity and there is a constant upward trend of tourists independently booking holidays and services online [8]. Previous studies confirm that up to 50% of travelers are likely to read and use material available on the social web before going on their planned vacations.

B. Trust and Reliance on Social Media

Not all content on social media can be considered reliable and trustworthy. Social media influence from other travelers' experiences is deemed most trustworthy, when backed by information from official websites, agents and advertising [6, 8, 9]. Otherwise, in many cases user generated content may not be as reliable or credible [17]. Due to the widespread use of social media however, in some cases social media content and reviews and now considered to be more trustworthy than content shared by traditional marketers [7, 9, 26]. This shows that both user generated content and officially shared material are both important in influencing the decision-making process of prospective travelers and tourists. The increase in the use of social media for decision making in relation to tourism pose both a challenge and also opportunities, especially for the overall destination market and the whole tourisms industry [21, 26]. On the opportunity side social media can be used for promotion of destinations and services, however only destinations that are able to keep up with the fast flow of information and make use of the competitive advantage this information offers are able to take advantage of the opportunity it offers [21, 15]. The

challenging part for destination marketers is to keep a check on the user generated content available on social media platforms and act accordingly. This is extremely important as many travelers decide on services and locations based on positive social media reviews, making online customer service a crucial part of building a positive brand reputation. The action of service providers in this regard also helps build trust on the online reviews and contents, which may be an extremely important factor when deciding for tourism related services.

The case of the Galiyat region poses an interesting case in relation to the usage of social media for destination marketing and promotion of tourism related activities and services. Firstly because, many of the smaller hotels and services are offered by the locals of the area. In most cases the locals are generally not computer literate and do not use social media platforms. On the other hand, the larger hotels and service providers actively use and rely on social media marketing of their destinations. Secondly, the tourists that visit the Galiyat region are from a diverse socio-economic background and are consumers of a variety of broad levels of services. Most tourists coming to the Galiyat region from other parts of the country, are generally well aware of the use of social media and commonly use such platform. This study therefore attempts to understand the current level of usage of social media in relation to tourism among tourists visiting the Galiyat region and to analyze the role of social media in the travel planning process.

II. METHODOLOGY

Galiyat Region is strategically located between the Northern Areas, Azad Kashmir, Punjab and the rest of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Abbottabad binds this region on the western side, Murree on the south-eastern side, District Mansehra towards the north and District Haripur towards the east. The region is characterized by high mountain peaks, varying from 7,500 to 9,500 feet above sea level along with hill ranges that run-in north-southern and south-eastern directions. The tract, which is normally considered to be Galiyat, is situated within 33°-29' and 34°-32' north latitude and 72°-33' and 73°-30' land latitude, forming part of Abbottabad Tehsil of Abbottabad district. In addition, the entire area of the tract forms the watershed of Jhelum, Haro, Kunhar and Dor rivers. The Galiyat region is frequented by tourists during the summer months. Most tourists originate from the Southern planes of the country, owing to the cool weather and a scenic landscape offered by this mountainous destination. During the winter season many of the access roads are blocked due to heavy snowfall, leaving the area with a relatively short tourist season of a few summer months.

Questionnaires were administered in the peak tourist season of June and July in the Galliyat region. Respondents were selected on the basis of the following criteria: one that they were tourists in the region and two, that they use the internet and social media applications in general.In the case of the second criterion, their use of social media in relation to destination marketing was not known-the criteria only related to their general use of social media platforms for any purpose- so all tourist respondents were users of social media platforms. A sample of 60 tourists was selected based on random sampling of respondents that fit the criteria of selection. Questionnaires were selected as the main research tool as this allowed for the maximum data to be collected in the minimum amount of time, as during the pretest phase it was observed that most tourists did not want to commit much of their time with long interviews. Questionnaires consisting of open and close ended questions were administered to the respondents in the study area. The data was collected from the tourists visiting Galiyat during the moths of June and July. The sample of 60 visitors was selected and were further classified into two groups i.e. residing and non-residing tourists, depending on their length of stay in the region. Residing tourists are the tourists which spend more than a day in the area and book hotels or cottages for their stay. Non-residing tourists are the tourists that visit the region for a day only or enroute to another destination.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The majority of tourists (53%) in the Galiyat region visit the region for the weather. Due to the elevation of the Galiyagt region (7,500 feet above sea level and above), the towns in the area offer a far more pleasant climate as compared to the southern plains of the countries (with peak temperatures of up to 50 degrees Celsius). Most of the tourists were in the region on vacation, with a small percentage of the tourists visiting for business (13%).

A. The use of Social Media in Relation to Travel Budget and Number of Visits

The use of social media may vary according to the budget of the tourists. In the case of Galliyat region it was seen that most budget travelers used social media to find cheaper deals and better 'value for money' offers. According to the travelers on the lowest budgets, the web and social media applications could enhance their experiences despite being on a tight budget. This would be possible through finding different deals and by reading about other traveler's experiences, opinions, and recommendations of budget deals and good value for money offers. As the budget of the trip increased, the usage of social media to plan and choose services related to the destination decreased to the extent that only 2% tourists use social media within the highest budget range of Rs.50,001-70,000 (312-436 $USD). In most cases, the respondents with the larger budgets were often of an older age group. Although the use of social media was a criteria for selection of the respondents, there is a possibility the tourists with higher budgets belonging to an older age group were not well aware of the possibilities of researching the destination and related services on different social media applications. In many instances the tourists in the highest budget range were well aware of the best hotels in the area and therefore did not feel the need to consult social media for the planning stage of the trip.

In comparison of the use of social media for booking and planning by tourist that were visiting the area for the first time as compared to those visiting the area for the second time. The majority of both first time and second time visitors consult social media applications in relation to booking and planning their tourism related activities. Most of the tourists that had previously been to the area at least once (65% of all tourists) still used social media for planning their trips, which indicated the importance given to use social media, even by tourists that were somewhat familiar with the region. Only 27.76% of the tourists visiting the region for the first time did not actively use social media to plan their trips.

B. Sharing Travel Related Content on Social Media

In order for UGC to be available on mainstream social media platforms, the users of these platforms and the tourists that visit tourist destinations need to upload content based on the experiences. Although all the respondents used social media, the extent to which their personalized content was shared on their preferred media platforms was unknown. It was found that the large majority of tourists (68.3%) uploaded content in the form of texts, pictures and videos on social media as compared to the 31.6% that did not share anything on their social media. The majority of the content was uploaded in the picture format followed by videos and then text. However, most of the tourists that upload content to their social media do it for the benefit of a limited audience (friends, followers only) and are not publicly visible to any other user of the app. According to Kang & Schuett, (2013) [13] the people that mostly part take in social media activities, such as sharing content related to their travels and experiences, are the ones who are part of larger communities are mostly socially influenced by the members of these communities. In other words, many people feel obliged to share their experiences and content to social media for recognition from fellow community members. Such social influence exerts a significant pressure on people to share their content to conform to a certain standard set by the norms of social media. The social influence is the extent to which individuals think they must behave in a particular way in order to please those deemed important [22].

The tourists were all of the opinion that smart phones and the availability of mobile data has made it extremely ease to instantly share content on social media, in many cases it was not due to privacy issues. The increase in the use of mobile devices and the advancement of technology have made content sharing and blogging on social media networks much easier for travelers [7, 16]. However, in many cases travelers may feel bound by the existing socio-cultural norms which may prevented them from sharing their pictures on social media networks. Many travelers indicated that they did not feel comfortable sharing their personal pictures and vides on social media because of this reason. Others simple chose not to do so due to privacy issues. In several cases female respondents reported restrictions from family members on the sharing of personal images and videos on social media platforms due to 'purdah'. Purdah can be defined as the physical and virtual segregation of females from men outside of the family [23]. In most cases many female respondents reported that they do not upload content that is visible to the public for their own privacy reasons rather than any religious reason.

C. Trusting Social Media

In order to gain an insight into the use of social media for the planning trips and deciding on activities and services at tourist locations, it was imperative to understand the extend to which tourists actually trust user generated as well as official social media content related to places and the services available.

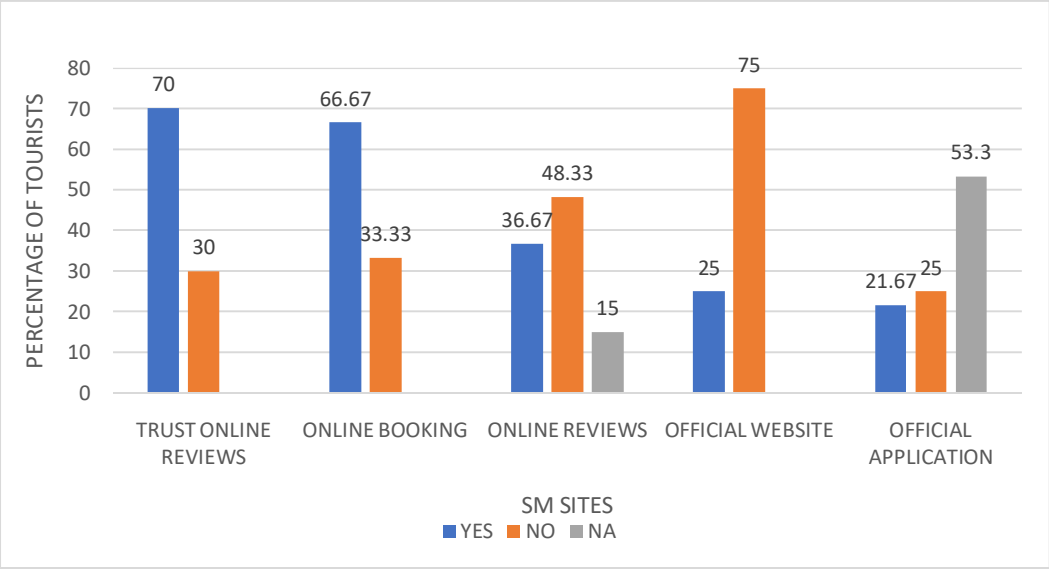

Fig. 1. Trusting Social Media.

Before social media people depended on word of mouth from other tourists, however this was related to known people and thus the trusting or not trusting the word of mouth of the experienced traveler depended on the credibility of the person themselves [4] . Word of mouth, now with the presence of social media is known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The issue of eWOM as compared to word of mouth in general is that there is no connection to the person revieing or recommending services, thus having little information on the credibility of the information shared (ibid.).

Most of the respondents (70%) in the case of this study agreed that they trusted online reviews in general. The number of tourists that booked services was however less than that, with only up to tow thirds of the tourists having booked at least some services online, based on eWOM. However in comparison of trusting online reviews from other tourists versus official websites, most people trust the recommendations and opinions of other tourists much more than the official webpages of the businesses or services. In fact, the mistrust level of official websites was found to be as high as 75%

respondents not trusting official information given on official webpages and sites.

In many cases respondents mentioned their mistrust in the official pages was because of the fact that businesses always tend show their best features of their services and never write about their problems, whereas tourists usually share their unbiased opinion and recommendations based on their experiences, which may be good or bad. In many cases if there was a bad experience the tourists will most likely share it with others on social media platforms to warn others about the shortcomings of the service as well as to force the businesses to rectify the problems they had faced. According to several respondents it is also easy to tell which reviews and unbiased and legitimate, as many people share their experiences- so following the popular opinion is usually the safest way.

D. Role of Social Media in Travel Motivation

"Motivation can be defined as a response that satisfies a deprivation". There are many factors and reasons for tourists and travelers to be motivated to travel to destinations and utilize services offered by the tourist industry in these areas. The various push and pull factors, including escaping routines, relaxation, adventure and discovery and the uniqueness of the place or experience amongst others, that may be responsible to motivate tourists to a certain destination. They also discuss the motivation of tourists in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as tourism can be instrumental in meeting different levels of needs based on the level and experience of the tourist or the potential traveler. This study tries to address the specific role of social media as a motivation factor, which in many cases are based on the push and pull factors discussed or to meet different levels of needs.

The two main aspects of motivation related to social media, discussed in the context of this study, are the influence other's travel content have on the tourists and the ability to share and create content based on one's own experiences. Many of the respondents (more than 40%), claimed that they were directly influenced by social media and was one of the primary reasons for selecting the destination. In most of the cases the respondents that reported to have been influenced by social media content and eWOM, were influenced by content generated by someone known to them- someone within family, close circles of friends or common groups. However, this was not true for all respondents, as many also claimed to be motivated by posts and content of unknown tourists. In the case of motivation itself, it was found that many of the younger tourists admitted wanting to travel to display their travel adventures for their peers to see and to aspire to. For many tourists, social media provides an excellent platform to appear trendier to their online peers and followers by faulting their travel experiences and to gain recognition based on their travel accomplishments [19, 20]. This trend is quite common amongst the younger generation (mostly Millennials) and many people on social media claim to be 'influencers'. Influencers, as the name suggests, influences every aspect of life of the people that follow them on their social media accounts, including their travel destinations and activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social media comprises as an important component for online tourism domain in the context of planning trips through a search engine. Social Media has created a social pressure which is forcing people to visit places. The pressure is mounting day by day as every person on the social media applications aims to get more recognition and appreciation. Similarly, tourists not only visit destinations to enjoy but also travel to express their status symbol by visiting affluent and prestigious areas. They post their pictures on social media to attract their following. Tourists consult social media to explore destinations (weather, recreational areas, hotels and guest houses etc.) which help them in planning their trips. Social media helps retain planning of the trip regarding the number of days, cites to visit, hotels to reside etc. Tourists find social media sites and booking sites easy and worthy to make their reservations and place bookings in comparison to traditional methods as these sites are much cheaper and systematic. While on the other hand, most of the tourists do not go for online bookings because they do not trust online booking services, believe that walk-in clients get more discount as compared to online booking of hotels and some shared their adverse experiences quoting that their bookings were confirmed by the application but booking had not been received by the very hotel.

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