USEFULNESS OF ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITIES

Indu
Research Scholar, Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management
MaharshiDayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Bindu
Research Scholar, Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management
MaharshiDayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Dr Ranbir Singh
Assistant Professor, Institute of Hotel and Tourism Management
MaharshiDayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Abstract

Online travel communities are the platform enabling people share information, search, find, gather and consume information. Travel forums, blog, wiki communities etc are utilized by consumers to post their views, comments, suggestions or recommendations which work as electronic word of mouth marketing tool for the suppliers. These communities are influential in bringing the behavioral changes regarding knowledge sharing and knowledge adoption. The success of communities significantly depends on participation of members in generating posts and content. The objective of this study is-1) to explore the significance of online travel community (OTC) for tourism stakeholders and 2) to identify the factors effecting consumer intention to participate in online travel communities. Some applied strategies are suggested for effective utility through development for the online travel communities. It was found that perceived ease of use, usefulness of community, interactivity, design service quality, trust in online travel community, issue involvement are the major factors effecting consumer intention to participate in online travel communities. The OTC websites need to improve the technical features which should be more interactive for users to use OTC as a single podium for varying purposes. The OTC should encourage all the concerned parties to be more interactive, share ideas, information more frequently and connect for undertaking diverse product oriented discussions.

Keywords: Online Travel Community, Factors, Determinants, Utility

Introduction

Information retrieval scenario has been replaced by information sharing among users (Aschoff 2012). Technological advancements in internet have renovated the use of web based information systems. In the last few years, the adoption and diffusion of internet technology have changed the setting of tourism industry (Buhalis and Law 2008). The tourists use various information search engines and social media sites for their various needs. Now they can get a variety of information about any destination, attraction, hotel or other tourism services from any part of the world. Not only information reclamation is possible through these mediums but they can share, pass on or enrich the available content. These developments have significantly influenced the tourism management techniques (Shuckert et al. 2015). Online Travel Community is a field in online communities where people with same interest e.g. tourism motivation, needs and choices come together on an online platform to interact with each other, generate and share information and experiences and fulfill other psychological and hedonic benefits. Online Travel Communities (OTC) can be described as "groups of people trying to achieve goals, with similar interests, and interested in building relationships, making transactions, and engaging in fantasy, governed by rules and using new information technology as the means" (Wu, Xiao & Wu, 2016, p.2).

Travel forums, wiki communities, message boards, blog communities, face book groups etc are some example of online communities which enables its users and members to interact here. By joining these communities the members can seek answers to their problems, suggestions and organize their tours efficiently. These communities consist the members' posting which can be used by fellow members in order to resolve the queries. India Travel Forum, Indiamike.com, BCM Tourism India Travel Forum, Lonely Planet, Thorn Tree, India Travel Blog, Trip advisor etc are the major travel communities for travelers to join and plan travel. Due to the diminutive participation of travel members to the travel communities, (i.e. only 10 % to 20 % of members in point of fact participate in online communities), the growth of online communities is not promising (N.L.Chan & Guillet, 2011, Hsu, Ju, Yen & Chang,2007). The community members have varied activity level in these communities, which ranges from individual's single post a day by a member to 20 posts a day which affect the internal quality. Woo Gon Kim (2012) found that travel involvement influences the relationship building among users and they share information more frequently in community. So this study is a modest effort to explore the significance of online travel community for

tourism stakeholders and identify the factors effecting consumer intention to participate in online travel communities. Finally the paper is concluded suggesting applied strategies for effective utility development for the online travel communities will be provided.

Importance of Online Travel communities

Web 2.0 applications (i.e., blogs, wikis or online communities) and social media advancements in tourism and hospitality have transformed the communication patterns. Virtual travel communities or online travel communities are the platform enabling people share all the concerned information, search, find, read, gather, share, or consume information, (Sigala, 2008, Qualman, 2013). OTCs are used world widely by tourists, residents at the destination, tour operators or other service providers, destination management organizations or marketing companies etc. However, it is difficult to identify the benefits of OTC because of the multiplicity of member's characteristics.

Tourists are especially interested in searching, organizing, sharing travel information and knowledge and interpreting their travel experience, (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The series of questions and answers being shared in these communities are exploited for the various problems and issues faced by the tourists which provide valuable suggestions or solutions. Theses OTCs are considered to be more apparent and influencing in bringing the behavioral changes regarding knowledge sharing as well as knowledge adoption. Agag & El-Masry (2016) advocated that the consumer's intention to participate in online community would influence the behavior intention of consumer to purchase travel product online as well as to recommend it. In comparison of contents generated by other travelers had a greater effect on travel decisions than those generated by professionals. 84% of travel review users stated significant influence of reviews on their purchase decisions (comScore, 2007). The information and recommendations provided by other fellow travelers help the vulnerable travelers in forming their expectations regarding the tourism products and plan accordingly. The intention to follow the advice provided by an online travel community depends on the trust in the online travel community, consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence and perceived usefulness of the advice. So the travel agencies and the tourism marketers should keep an eye on the information traffic from various community members in the OTC. (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu 2011)

Y. Wang & Fesenmaier, (2004) described a detailed framework based on four fundamental benefits of online communities its members. They look for functional benefits for fulfilling their specific needs as exchange of required information and knowledge. Establishing relations, providing support and helping others are related to Social benefit. Psychological benefits fulfill the member's need of developing a sense of belongingness and affiliation. Beside the above mentioned benefits online communities are the platform for enjoyment, recreation and entertainment which are regarded Hedonic benefits.

OTCs now a day have socio-economic relevance in terms of information exchange and opportunity to socialize with other members of community. For bringing affectivity in distribution channels and marketing, the role of OTC has become imperative. Online communities are basically supplementary to the traditional Customer Relationship Management (CRM) by providing platform for customers to interact with each other. By following these OTCs they can make out the needs and potential behavior of the travelers. Travel forums, blog, wiki communities, review sites etc are utilized by consumers to post their views, comments, suggestions or recommendations which work as electronic word of mouth marketing for the suppliers. These interactions help the company in attracting and retaining customers and reduce costs (Y. Wang & Fesenmaier,2004). Thus the advertisement costs and efforts can be transferred to another business activities. (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu 2011)

Beside these the travelers' experiences, satisfaction or dissatisfaction can be easily analyzed from the thread postings in various communities. The tourism destinations and products can be developed and managed according to the demands of the travelers. The service providers can plan their strategies and develop consequently. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), and tourism suppliers are utilizing these communities to reach, persuade, and attract potential tourists, and to arbitrate and shape tourists' experiences (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). In fact, community stakeholders use social media sites to convey tourism services and encourage tourists to learn and to get hold of various tourism products (Wong, 2014).

Factors Effecting Consumer Intention to Participate in Online Travel Communities

1) Perceived enjoyment

Now the networking sites of User Generated Content (UGC) are not only utilized to gather information but these also fulfill other needs of the users pertaining to their enjoyment, fun

and other hedonic benefits. The travel consumers are motivated to use the CGM for travel planning which tend to be enjoyable (J.K. Ayeh et al 2013) If using the VTC is a pleasing experience for the users they are likely to use it more frequently and influence their satisfaction level. In an online survey of 145 OTC members Statia Elliot et al (2016) tested a model of OTC community beliefs, attitude and behaviors. Beliefs comprise of quality of online community system, information and service provided by the community. Attitude is measured by the satisfaction of members using the community, trust and the brand attitude. Finally the relationship and influence of these two on the users' behavior is anticipated. The behavior is determined by the estimating the stickiness of the members to the community along with their interaction to transaction. The study affirmed that quality of the community considerably effected member satisfaction and trust. Though, trust does not manipulate community stickiness or intention to transact.

2) **Issue Involvement**

Issue involvement can be defines as "Individual's perception regarding the relevance of issues discussed in an online community" (de Graaf et al 2015). Travelers are likely to be involved in communities which discuss the travelling related issues and which are more probably offering the content or services as needed or perceived by the users. Apart from that the members involved in travelling activities will be using the OTC more regularly and be committed to these in comparison to others (Kusumasondjaja**, 2017).** The travelers seeking information in OTC read numerous threads to get the desired answers from the existing posts or they have to wait for the replies from other members for a long time. So, the communities which function in the interest area of the member would be influential in decisions regarding community participation.

3) **Interactivity**

Interactivity refers to the how often the members of the communities come online and have interactions with other members. Interactivity is "Perceived of interacton and communication intensity among members in online information" (Blazevic et al. 2014) In OTC the travelers have a variety of problems or questions to be answered so they can post their question in the OTC seeking for answers. The other members who have the knowledge or the experience regarding the stated issue can answer the post. But passive members are there in OTC who

don't interact with members but seek the required information from the available posts in the community. In the study undertaken by Kusumasondjaja**, (2017).**57% of respondents were passive members as they had posted information to the community only once. The chances to have interactons with other members positively affect members' commitment to the community (Wang et al 2012).

4. Trust in an online travel community

Trust is the subjective belief that the online service provider will meet the terms its transactional responsibilities, since those are implicit by the consumer (Kim, Ferrin et al., 2008; Kim, Lee et al., 2008). Trust is composed of three diverse factors counting honest, competence and benevolence, that make up consumers' perceptions of trust in an online travel community, (Flavian et al. (2006), McKnight et al. (2002), Casalo et al. (2011) .Belief is the confidence in the members to get their promises fulfilled from community. Coulter and Coulter (2002) described competencies as the consumer' perceived skills and knowledge of other community members. Benevolence means support, help and care from other community members (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Consumers' trust in online shopping had a positive consequence on intention to purchase travel online (Wen I (2010). The study of members of C-Trip, a Chinese VTC, point to that the quality of the community appreciably influences member satisfaction and trust. Satisfaction considerably influences community stickiness, while trust influences brand attitude, which in sequence influences intention to transact (S. Elliot et al 2013). In an OTC trust is build up among the strangers who have common goal and interest and share the communities for a number of purposes. The members interacting have believe or expectations from each other to respond to the queries or suggestions promptly and positively. Online communities create social identity and a feeling of responsibility among members and trust is developed simultaneously **(**Edward C. S. Ku **2014).**

4) Perceived Relative Advantage

It is defined as "the degree to which online travel community provides members with benefits e.g. convenience, lower price, time saving and relations with persons who share common interests." (G. Agag, A.A. El-Masry, 2016) Customers perceiving the relative advantages of online travel community, more possibly participate in online travel

community. There is positive relationship between perceived relative advantages and consumer behavior intention and attitudes. In the field of tourism and ecommerce, a significant and positive relationship between perceived relative advantages and consumer behaviour intention is stated (Kamarulzaman, 2007; Lu et al., 2011). Cmpatibility and perceived relative advantages sturdily and positively effect consumers' behaviour intention to participate in OTC (G. Agag, A.A. El-Masry, 2016).

5) Perceived Ease of Use

Davis (1989, p. 320) conceptualized perceived usefulness as ''the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance''. The improved ease of use leads to improved performance, and have a direct effect on perceived usefulness and consumer attitude (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000, Agag & El-Masry, 2016;). Ease of use means the efforts to be taken while searching, using and analyzing the information from various platforms. Information can be extracted from commercial mediums like official websites or from user generated content posted on various social media networking sites. Consumer generated messages websites are considered to be 'accessible', 'saving time', 'user friendly', 'easy to use' etc. (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, and Buultjens 2009). UGC from non-commercial sites is perceived to be objective, credible and trustworthy (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Litvin et al., 2008). Thus the data and content in OTC is always user generated and is supposed to be easy to use and analyze and easily available information in OTC make their decisions quick (Ku, 2011).

6) Website Service Quality

Website service quality refers to the technological features of a website for instance website layout and appearance, navigation etc (Wakelfied et al 2001) For information exploration in decision making, travelers look for a number of options available online and offline. For online information investigation and travel planning there are numerous websites and social media tools such as facebook, twitter, review sites, you tube etc but tourists opt for those which are easy to use, accessible, user friendly, flexible and attractive layout. Theofanas and Mulligan (2004) listed some influencing website design qualities that work as word of mouth information not only for community but destination as well. These qualities are related to community joining features, content display, member's corner, color, clear layout, up-to-dateness, effective navigation etc. For an OTC the website design quality particularly define

the users' intention to use and participate. The customer's attitude, quality of website design, customer satisfaction and trust affect online travel product purchase (Wen I 2009). Any traveler participating in online community not only seek answer to their questions but expect a good quality of services offered by community such as providing useful and prompt information, classifying the questions and answers, amalgamate travel destination knowledge, comparison of travel services and other offers etc and which ultimately affect satisfaction from community (Edward C. S. Ku 2014).

7) Commitment to the OTC

Community Commitment is defined as "Emotional attachment that reflects the degree to which particular online community is strongly rooted to an individual" (Bilgihan et al. 2013) Commitment refers to the intention of the user to uphold the appreciated relationship with community. In OTC the travelers come together for searching information, build social tie-ups, and relations with fellow members to develop a sense of belongingness and for entertainment. OTC commitment to some extent depends on these benefits perceived and fulfilled. Affective commitment is stated by instigate effort to remain in community (Kimura 2013) where as normative commitment is inspired by various benefits from the community (Fullenrton 2014). Thousands of people participate and get membership from various blog sites, forums or chat rooms but online firms fail to inculcate considerable commitment from members (casalo' et.al 2010, Jim et.al 2010). Commitment works as a moderator between trust and behavioral intention to use online community (Kusumasondjaja, 2017). Members' identification with the community, emotional involvement and enjoyment affect the degree of members' commitment towards community (Demiratas, Akdogan 2015). When the topic discussed in the community are of the users' interest or the higher the issue involvement higher will be the commitment and social interactions will positively influence commitment (Kusumasondjaja, 2017).

Some Applied Strategies for Effective Utility Development for OTCs:

From the available literature in online travel communities a number of suggestions and recommendations can be imparted to community operators and tourism organizes. These implications will further not only aid the members to make optimum use from these OTC but will practical propositions to the tourism stakeholders and marketers. The OTC websites need to improve the technical features which should be more interactive enabling the users,

travelers and the suppliers use OTC as a single podium for varying purposes. The OTC should encourage all the concerned parties to be more interactive, share ideas, information more frequently and connect for undertaking diverse product oriented discussions. Web design, online appearance and layout, and the speed of entry loading are considered be the quality of good interactivity in online system (Chen and Yen 2004). Thus the OTCs should keep updating with the technological advancements in the system for providing support to the members and ensuring their maximum participation in the community. Marketing strategies can be expanded involving members for example providing special discounts active members, new members joining programs and more influential members' incentives etc.

Service quality is predominantly influences satisfaction for community members attracting more members to it insuring more time and content contribution. OTC operators should concentrate to the visual appeal, timely service, management of activities, organization and problem solving techniques and offer a live function such as live chat, voice over Internet protocol.

Trust and attitude significantly persuade consumer intention to participate to facilitate more consumer participation in online travel community the managers need to build online trust in order to construct positive attitude toward OTC. Perceived usefulness depends on perceived ease along with selection of the suitable communication policy. Free trail periods can be offered to attract new members to let them understand the uses pattern and system in the OTC. The existing users should be motivated to spread positive and right word of mouth regarding the community benefits to enhance perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. In order to motivate the travelers to join and become member online travel communities, the operators should try to find the gap and obstacles in the service or design quality offered to them and execute appropriate strategies for maximum community participation

Conclusion

Tourists planning for their trips go for information search as the first step of decision making process. For this purpose they have a number of options available to them such as travel agencies, tour operators, reference groups, print media, facebook, travel review sites and other online sources. Tourists are likely to use those information sources which provide them authentic, reliable and comprehensive knowledge. User generated content provided by online travel communities are good source for them. They can access a lot of information from OTC, analyze it and use for travel decisions. Joining an OTC not only depends on the

objective to access information and planning travel but members opt to establish relations with other members, plan travelling together and have fun by posting threads. The satisfaction the members derive from these OTC is to some extent depends on the intention to participate and follow the OTC. Perceived relative advantage, perceived ease of use, usefulness of community, interactivity, design service quality, trust in online travel community, issue involvement are the major factors affecting consumer intention to participate in online travel communities. OTC operators should do research and analyze these factors crucially and develop their strategies accordingly. They should concentrate to the visual appeal, timely service, display layout, content quality, management of activities, organization and problem solving techniques for providing satisfactory experience to the users.

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