

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURIST DESTINATION SEARCH AND SELECTION

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ABSTRACT

The number of tourists has been increasing around the globe in recent times **Brondoni (2016)**, it is increasingly important to know how their selection of tourist destination is done in today's internet era. With the growth of internet and information technology, social media platforms are playing increasingly important role as information sources for tourists and travelers. However, based on review of literature the research on role of social media in destination search and selection by tourists is still sparse in India. The current study focus on the impact of social media associated with tourism industry. In this work, researcher propose to study the extent to which tourists are utilizing the multi-source social media contents for destination search and selection. To achieve the above- mentioned objective, primary data was collected by using judgmental sampling technique and 5 point Likert type scales through structured questionnaire. A sample of 309 respondents who had visited Udaipur as tourist during the period of early October 2017 to end of March 2018 was surveyed. The methodology used for the analysis consists of descriptive statistics, t- test, ANOVA.

The study reveals that tourists who are using social media platforms generally read reviews and comments on various social sites and travel sites before making choice as to which place to visit. It also exhibits that they consider social media as helpful and reliable source to get information about travel. However, the most reliable and trustworthy source is still the word of mouth suggestion which they received from their friends and relative whether on social sites or personally.

Based on the findings, the study recommends e-WOM (Electronic Word Of Mouth) communication through social media sites is a good source to gather information about destination, therefore Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) should use social media as a tool for direct interaction with the prospective travelers to promote destination.

Keywords: Social Media, Destination, DMO, e- WOM.

1. INTRODUCTION

Travel planning is a challenging task for individual visiting unfamiliar destinations. Tourists in an effort to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety derive from the travel decisions collect more and more indispensable information in connection with the travel.

Now days, social media is changing the way travelers plan their trips; as searching for the travel related information online has become the easiest & cheapest way. The strategic role played by social media as promotional tool through consumer and marketers generated contents is influencing the decision making process in tourism sector across the globe has been catching the attention of researchers to fully explore this segment. Researchers like **Jacobsen, Munar (2013)** studied the impact of the web.2.0 on tourists information search process. This work aim at presenting an idea and overview of the role played by social media in destination search and selection.

1.1 Social Media:

There are great numbers of platforms where Internet users can interact and share information along with other users. The popularity of social media has grown year by year, people has viewed social media as a tool for communication and share their experience with each other online. **Kaplan & Haenlien (2010)** defines social media as "A group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Social media, as one of strongest online networking tools, has been disintegrated into a part of social as well as economic life in the real world. Some popular social media tool and platforms are: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Flickr, Instagram, Blogs, LinkedIn

1.2 Travel and Tourism:

Tourism being the vital industry contributing in the economic growth of countries, the marketers involved in this industry should try to use integrated marketing practices with technology and strategic orientation. In order to promote destination globally nations are having strategic orientation on how to promote and influence the decision of prospective travelers. The main challenge before any travel destination is to, retain its own identity and yet adopt modernization. The opportunity can be avail only if the new approach to tourism development is adopted. The usage of Internet along with other information communication technologies leads to a new era of the tourism economy.

Annual report of tourism department state the rise of foreign tourists in India and this is the seventh year for Udaipur that foreign tourist numbers were seen going high. In 2017 3,47,542 foreign tourists visited Udaipur making the city stand at second rank after Jaipur in the list of number of foreign tourists arrived in Rajasthan. (**UdaipurTimes.com dated june 15, 2018**).

Udaipur was ranked as world's 3rd best city in 2018 by travel & leisure plus magazine. It is the only city in India to make it to the Top -15 list. (**Udaipur Times.com dated july18, 2018**). Again in 2018 travellers around the world have chosen Udaipur as one of their favorite holiday destination making the city stands at 6th in the list of travellers choice ranking 2018 in India's top ten destinations in a survey conducted by Trip Advisor (**Udaipur Times.com dated july 3, 2018**). Due to huge potential of Udaipur as tourist destination the present study is undertaken here.

1.3 Social Media & Travel :

Social media have become an integral part of promoting tourism these days. It plays an important role in various aspects of the travel industry, especially in searching information and decision making. Consumer generated content (CGC) such as blogs, reviews, experiences, opinions, posts, pictures and videos etc on social sites provide information and help users searching information related to destination and choosing destination to visit. Social media play a still increasing, necessary role in travel planning as information sources for potential travelers **Xiang and Gretzel (2010)**. As stated by **Chung and Buhalis (2008)** tourism information sources have been identified as a key factor which influence destination choice, consequently it can be seen how important is the purpose of travel information and the central role it plays in the travel planning process. Once traveling to unfamiliar destinations, travel blogs were found to provide better recommendation and advice than friends and relatives **Tan and Chen (2012)**. Several tourists got to obtain confirmation of different users that they need to be planned the best trip. An opinion or recommendations from an exponent or friend have a large impact on the tourists' travel deciding process (**Sigala, 2007**).

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2, include some studies related to use of social media for travel purpose. Section 3 states the detail regarding objectives and methodology used. Section 4, give details about findings and results of the study. Section 5, draws some conclusion, limitations, suggestion and states directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Abou-shouk and Hewedi (2016) measure the perceptions of tourist and travel agent on the antecedents and consequences of social media adoption in travel planning and marketing tourism service. Researcher concluded that both tourists and travel agents perceived social media as a useful marketing tool.

Characteristics of social media consisting a sense of belonging and following to an online travel community were analyzed by **Kavoura and Stavrianea (2014)** with the help of descriptive study. Researchers studied on 301 foreign tourists in Athens, Greece. Stratified sampling technique based on nationality and gender was used by researchers for the purpose of the study. Researchers concluded that there is a significant difference between men and women regarding online travel information search. It was further found in the study that respondents trust other people's comments and feel engaged and closed with other members of the online community.

According to **Nezakati et al. (2015)** social media promote knowledge sharing process social media play a significant role in pre-trip planning and decision making. Researcher identifies that social media is an important tool in tactic knowledge sharing. The rapid growth of information technology promoted social media for knowledge sharing in the tourism industry.

Duguay et al. (2015) focused their study on the impact of Web 2.0 technologies in trip planning against word of mouth persuasion of family and friends. Researchers conducted a survey of 653 student respondents who had undertaken the trip in the last three year. It was found by the researcher in the study that opinion and posted contents of family and friends attributable to the high level of creditability and influence whether it comes through the directly or through a social media networks such as facebook than any other resources.

Social media are playing an increasingly important role in online travel related information search. **Xiang and Gretzel (2010)** performed an exploratory study to investigate the extent to which social media appear in search engines result in the context of travel information search. Google was chosen as the search engine by researchers to enter keywords and obtain the search result. It was found in the study that search engine, directly and indirectly, promote social media in traveler's information search. The study further reveals that traditional marketers are facing challenges from social media websites such as trip advisors, virtual tourists, and IgoUgo. Researchers concluded that social media constitute a substantial part of online tourism domain and play an important role in travel planning using a search engine.

Empirical assessment of 219 foreign tourists traveled to Tunisia was performed by **Zarrad and Debabi (2015)** to examine a relationship between e-WOM and tourist attitude towards destination and travel intention. The survey result found that online communication significantly affects other traveler attitude and travel intention to revisit a destination. The researcher concluded that online user-generated reviews are the powerful marketing tool and can provide a competitive advantage due to its possible impact on travelers decision-making process.

Dina and Sabou (2012) performs research on Romanian 123 young people to identify the influence of social media while choosing tourist destinations. It was identified by the researcher that Romanian young people trust online information. Social media is a powerful tool and intensively used before planning a trip.

Consumer generated contents are used by travelers for travel-related decisions. **Gretzel and Yoo (2008)** investigated how and when online travel reviews are used in travel planning process. Researchers found that large percentage of travelers read other travelers review in the process of trip planning. But there is a difference in use of reviews during different trip planning stages. The gender difference was found for perceived impact of reviews females reaping greater benefits from reviews than mail.

Travelers are influenced by consumer generated content. **Faria and Elliot (2012)** studied the role of social media in the context of destination marketing. The researcher concluded that the opinion of other travelers on social media plays a vital role in destination marketing. There is a shift from content search to social interaction through online communities.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives of Study

1. To identify the role of social media platform in destination search.
2. To analyze the impact of social media on traveler destination selection.
3. To compare the reliability of social media sites with other sources of travel information.
4. To identify the preference of social media usage for travel purpose in different age categories.
5. To analyze the usage of social media for travel purpose with respect to gender and nationality.

Hypothesis:

H₀: There is no significant role of social media in travel destination search and selection in present era.

H₀: There is no significant difference regarding the preference to use social media for travel purpose among travelers of different age groups.

H₀: There is no significant difference between male and female opinion towards the usage of social media for travel purpose.

H₀: There is no significant difference among Indian and foreign travelers with respect to usage of social media for travel search and selection.

Data Collection – The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data of individual respondent's were collected through well framed questionnaire comprises of the measurements of 5-point likert type scales, dichotomous questions and respondents profile. Data was collected from tourist who had visited Udaipur during the period of early October 2017 to end of March 2018. The secondary data is obtained through newspapers, magazines, books, websites, internet articles, journals, various research sites.

Sample size- The sample consisted of 364 individual tourist as a respondent, out of which 309 respondent came up with filled questionnaire hence sample size is 309 for the study.

Sampling Technique- The research is based on non probability sampling technique. Where the sampling method followed was the judgmental sampling.

Statistical Methods for Analysis-

Primary data collected from travelers were tabulated. The data was analyzed with the help of descriptive statistical tools and hypothesis was tested by applying t-test, ANOVA.

4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to age

Age	N	%
16 - 25 yrs	54	17.48
26 - 35 yrs	119	38.51
36 - 45 yrs	40	12.94
46 - 55 yrs	38	12.30
56 - 65 yrs	35	11.33
Above 65 yrs	23	7.44
Total	309	100.00

Table 1 shows distribution of traveler respondents according to age. The maximum numbers of traveler were youngsters below the age of 35 years. The cumulative percentage of the age category show that 55.99 percentage respondents were below the age of 35 years.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to gender

Gender	N	%
Male	150	48.54
Female	159	51.46
Total	309	100.00

Table 2 shows distribution of travelers according to gender. There was almost equal proportion of respondents from male and female group.

Table 3: Response of online search for holiday destinations

Response	N	%
Yes	262	84.79
No	47	15.21
Total	309	100.00

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondent's choice to search holiday destination online. Majority of respondents respond that they use online sources to search destination.

Table 4: Distribution showing usage of social media sites to get information about travel

Response	N	%
Yes	236	76.38
No	73	23.62
Total	309	100.00

Table 4 shows majority of travelers use social media platform to get information about travel. Out of Total 309 respondents 236 respondents use social media sites to get information about travel.

Table 5: Sources through which travelers came to know about travel destination

Media	N	%	Rank
1. Newspaper/Magazine/ Travel Magazines	56	18.12	8
2. Advertisement on Radio	11	3.56	14
3. Suggested by friend/relative (Word of Mouth)	176	56.96	1
4. Through Net Surfing / Internet Searching	91	29.45	4
5. Through Social Media (Like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Google+ etc.)	102	33.01	3
6. Through Travel Blogs	71	22.98	6
7. Travel websites like Trip advisor, Travelocity, Make My Trip, Expedia etc.	109	35.28	2
8. Advertisement on Television / Internet	23	7.44	11
9. Advertisement on social media	39	12.62	9
10. Travel Guide Book	79	25.57	5
11. Tour Operator / Agency websites	61	19.74	7
12. e-Mails	15	4.85	13
13. Travel Programs on Television / Internet	33	10.68	10
14. Government / Official Websites	7	2.27	15
15. Others	17	5.50	12

Table 5 above shows sources through which travelers came to know about tourist destination. The top five sources through which travelers came to know about tourist destination are – Word of mouth publicity i.e. suggested by friends or relatives (56.96%), second source is travel websites like MakeMyTrip.com, Travelocity etc. (35.28%). Third comes social media sites like facebook, twitter etc. (33.01%). On fourth position (29.45%) people get information about travel destination through net or internet searching and on fifth position comes travel guide book (25.57%). To all the other sources people are using them below 25%. Thus still word of mouth publicity from friends and relatives is most preferred media or prevailing media of getting information about destination to travel.

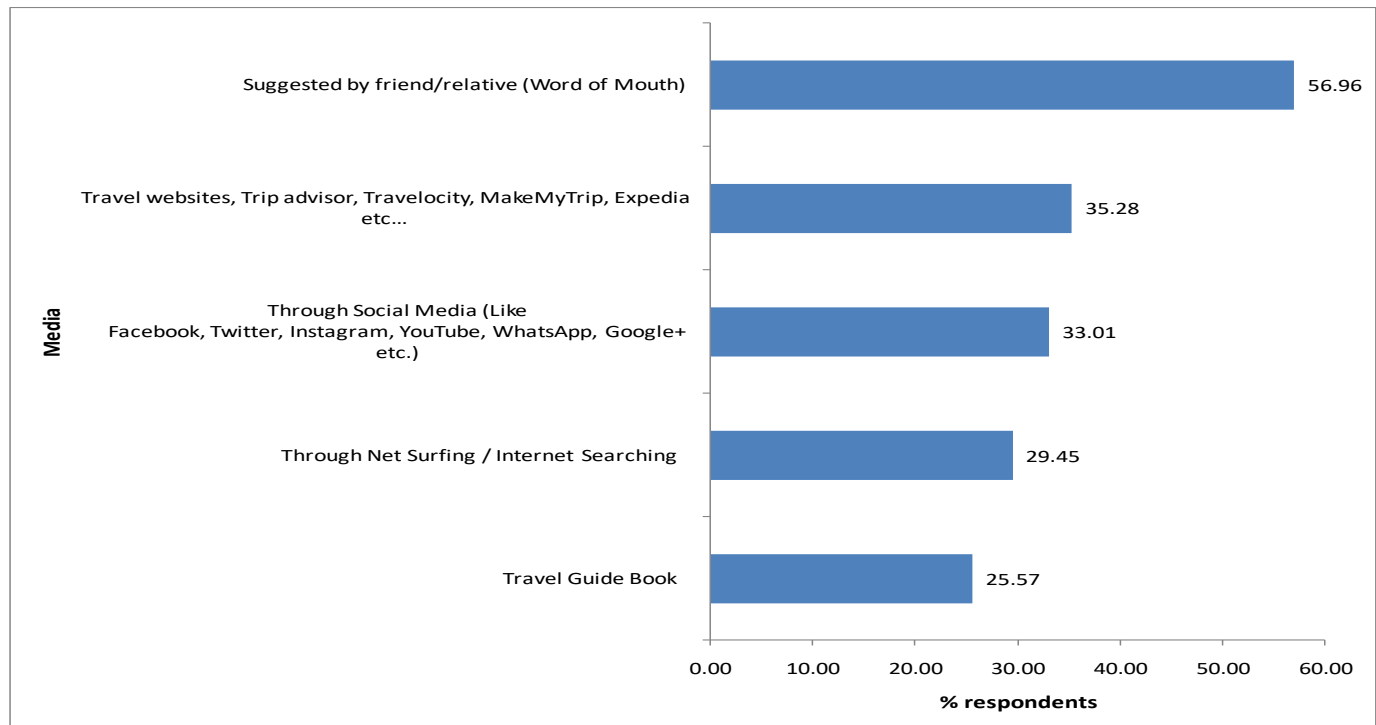


Fig. 1: Top five sources of getting information about tourist destination

Table 6: Reliable Source of Getting Information about Travel destination

Source	Mean	Rank
1. Suggested by friend/relative (Word of Mouth)	3.99	1
2. Net Surfing / Internet Searching	3.93	2
3. Travel websites like Trip advisor, Travelocity, MakeMyTrip, etc...	3.56	3
4. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp etc.)	3.24	4
5. Advertisement on Television	3.18	5
6. Travel Guide Book	3.00	6
7. Travel Blogs	2.93	7
8. Newspaper/Magazine/ Travel Magazines	2.81	8
9. Tour Operator / Agency websites	2.71	9
10. e-Mails	2.69	10
11. Advertisement on social media	2.55	11
12. Travel Programs on Television / Internet	2.43	12
13. Government / Official Websites	2.03	13
14. Advertisement on Radio	1.75	14
15. Others	1.44	15

Table 6 depicts reliable sources of getting information about travel destination. Top five reliable sources according to weighted given by respondent travelers are – Suggestions by others (Word of Mouth), second net surfing or internet searching, third travel web sites, fourth social media and fifth advertisements about tourist destinations on television. Hence, as far as reliability of tourist destination is concerned word of mouth is still the most reliable source of getting information about tourist place.

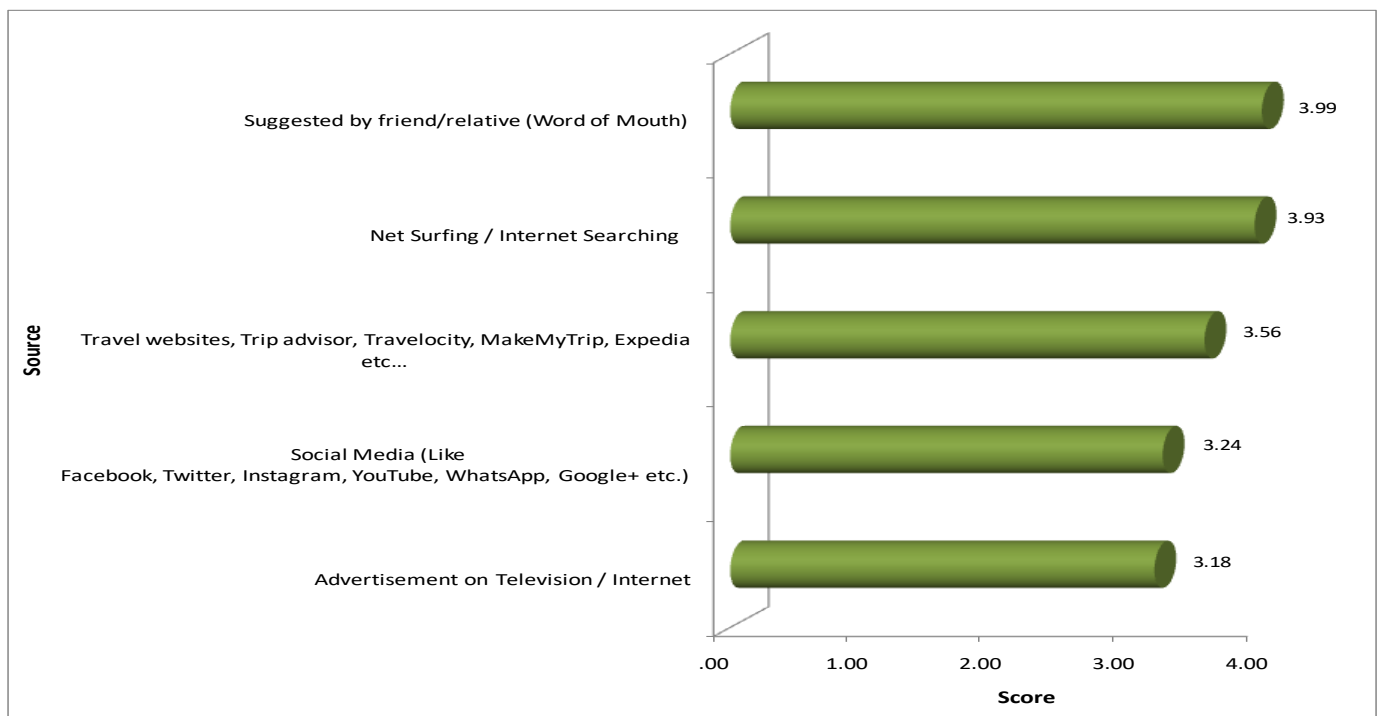


Fig. 2: Top five reliable sources of getting information about tourist destination.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the relevance of social media as compared to other media in getting information about travel destination. For this sources of getting information about travel destination were categorized into two categories: first one is Other media including traditional media like travel guide book, word of mouth suggestions and modern media like net surfing, websites etc. and the other category was social media including social networking sites likes facebook, twitter, etc., travel blogs on social media and travel social sites like trip advisor were compared. The test results are given below.

Test Results

Table7: Sources of getting travel information

Source Information	of	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Result
Other media		309	0.179	0.147	-6.48	308	***
Social Media		309	0.280	0.291			

Test results given above shows highly significant difference in getting information about travel destination through social media and other media (t = 6.48, p<0.001). The mean score for social media was significantly high above other media which means on an average social media is more used as compared to other media for travel destination search and the use is significantly high as compared to other media.

Thus null hypothesis that – “There is no significant role of social media in travel destination search and selection in present era” is rejected.

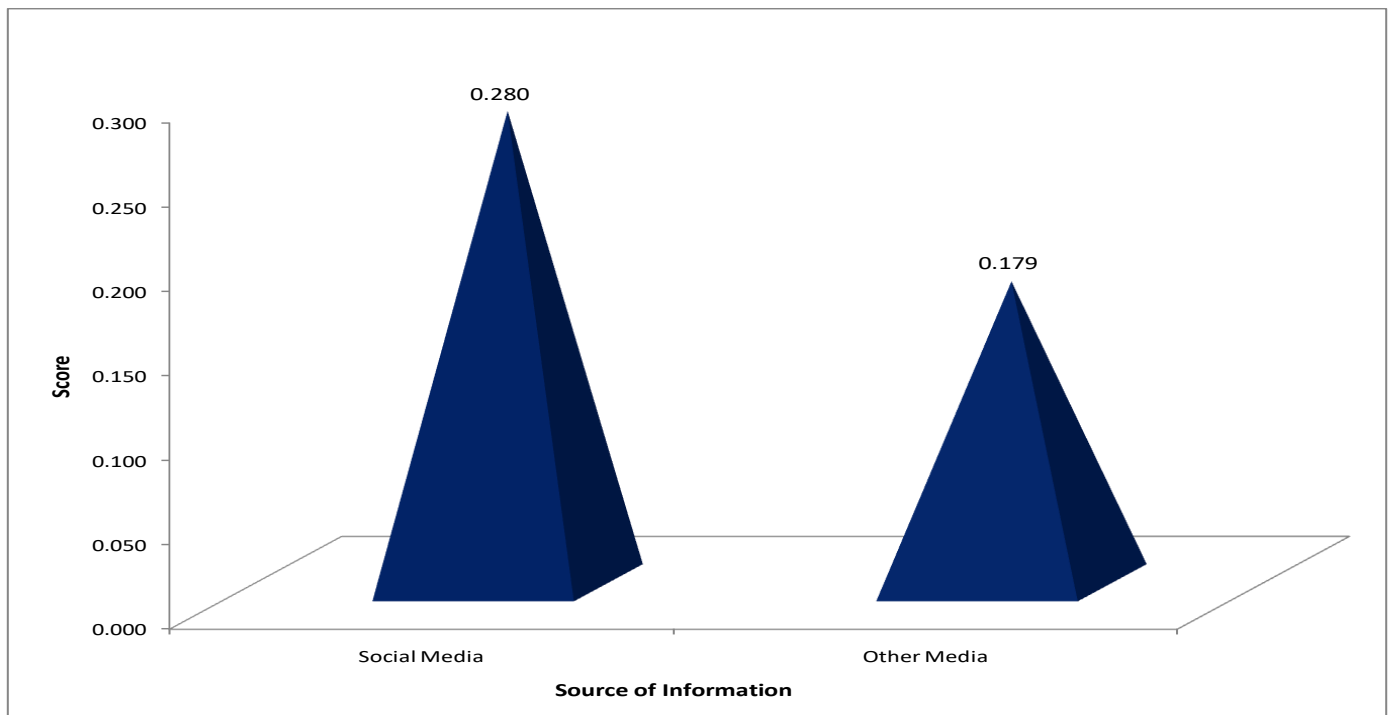


Fig. 3: Comparative use of social media and other media for destination search and selection.

Relationship between use of social media and age, gender and nationality

Table 8: Use of social media in different age category

Age	N	Mean	SD	F	Df	Result
Up to 25 yrs	54	0.25	0.27	4.04	5, 301	significant
26 - 35 yrs	119	0.32	0.31			
36 - 45 yrs	40	0.29	0.28			
46 - 55 yrs	36/38	0.26	0.27			
56 - 65 yrs	35	0.13	0.23			
Above 65 yrs	23	0.12	0.15			

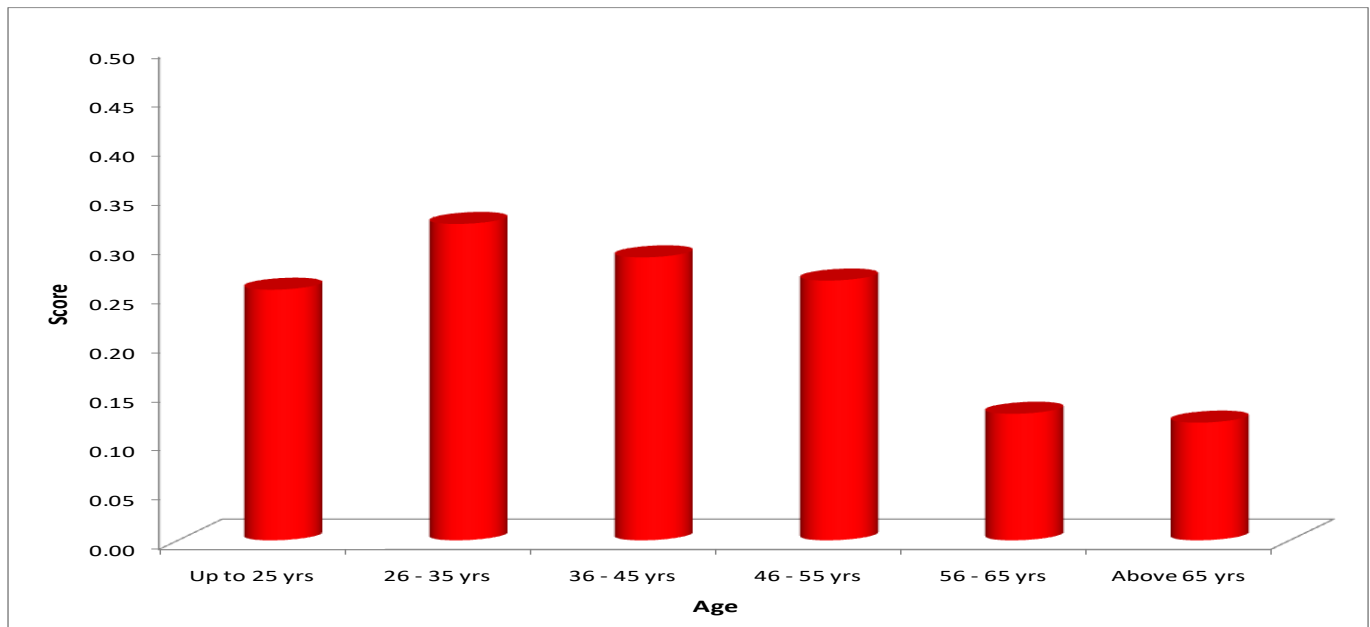


Fig. 4: Usage of social media in different age category

Test result given above shows that use of social media for travel purpose differs with age. Test results shows highly significant difference in the use of social media for different age group ($F = 4.04, p < 0.01$). From the table it can be observed that social media for travel purpose was used most by the age group of 26-35 years and near to this age group was age group of 36-45 years. Social media for travel purpose is used least by older age group i.e. from 56 and above.

Thus null hypothesis that “There is no significant difference regarding the preference to use social media for travel purpose among travelers of different age groups” is rejected.

Table 9: Use of social media and gender

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Result
Male	150	0.292	0.291	0.725	307	Not significant
Female	159	0.268	0.292			



Fig. 5: Gender wise usage of social media

As far as gender is concerned non-significant difference in the use of social media for the purpose of travel is used ($t = 0.725$, $p > 0.05$). From the table it can be observed that use of social media for travel purpose is used to a same extent for travel purpose.

Thus null hypothesis that “There is no significant difference between male and female opinion towards the usage of social media for travel purpose” is accepted.

Table 10: Use of social media according to Nationality

Nationality	N	Mean	SD	t	Df	Result
Indian	160	0.347	0.310	4.323	307	significant
Foreigner	149	0.207	0.252			

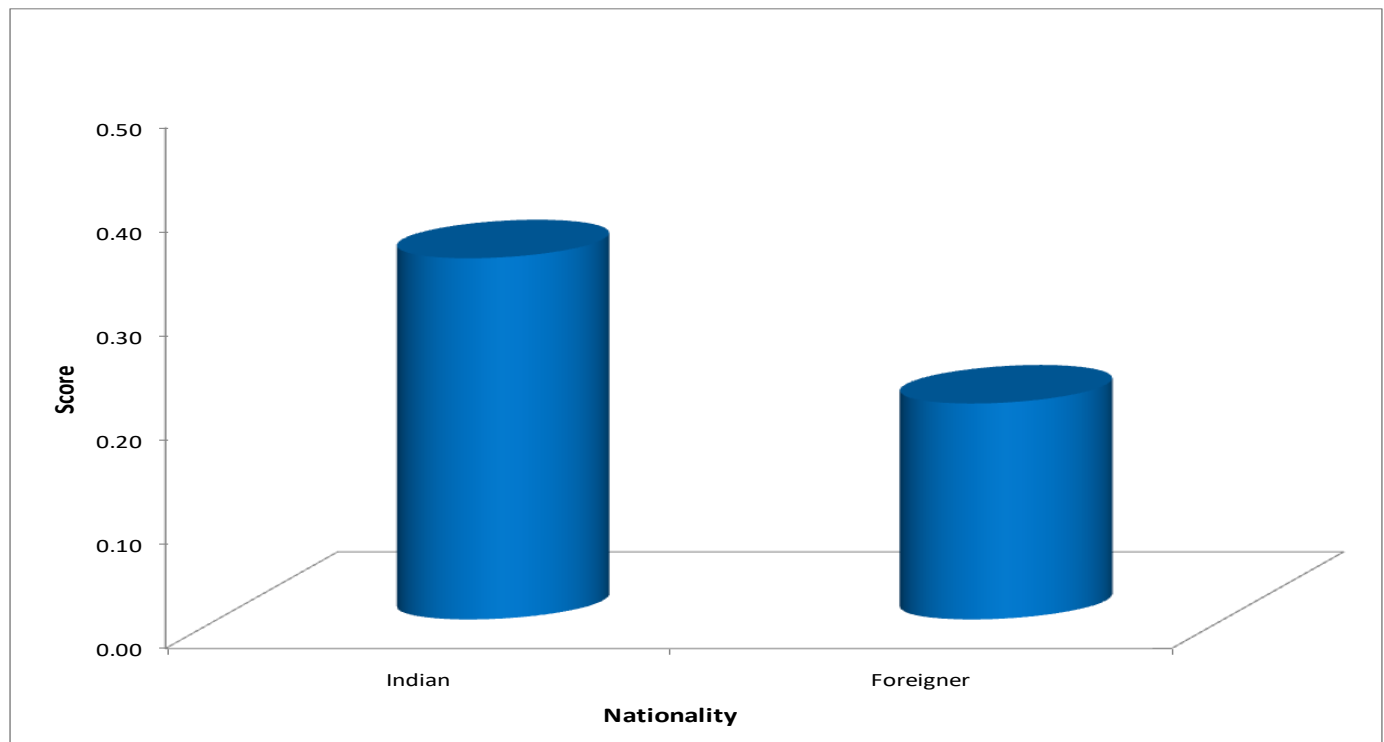


Fig.6: Social media usage according to Nationality

To see whether use of social media for travel purpose differ significantly among Indian and foreign travelers test for difference of means was applied ($t = 4.323$, $p < 0.001$). From the data it can be observed that use of social media among Indian travelers is more prevalent as compared to foreign travelers.

Results show that null hypothesis that “There is no significant difference among Indian and foreign travelers with respect to usage of social media for travel search and selection” is rejected.

5. CONCLUSION, SUGGESTION, LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

The rise of social media has particularly significant implications to the travel and tourism industry. Social networking is bringing changes to search and selection patterns of travelers. WOM, suggestion and advice from friends and relatives often ranks as the most influential and reliable source of selecting destination to visit, however the immediacy of interaction with travel bloggers and others through social media platform is being recognized as a powerful force in recent years. Traveler and tourist read reviews of people who visited a particular place for travel on social media sites especially travel social media sites like Trip advisor, Travleocity, Expedia etc. before selecting destination to visit. Results of this research study offers further evidences in support of earlier research conducted by **Duguay et al. (2015)** that opinions and posted contents of friends and family remain the most influential element of travel planning and booking. Similarly **Mack et al. (2008)** stated in their research that credibility of blog is less than that of traditional word of mouth. However, the importances of social media for destination selection cannot be denied as travelers are using social sites for reading reviews, blogs, comments, rating by other travelers and e-wom suggestions are becoming popular among the younger generation.

In order for tourism destinations and businesses to remain competitive in the new digital era of e- WOM recommendations, it is important that (i) Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) should use social media as a tool for direct interaction with the prospective travelers to promote destination. (ii) try to build successful and profitable relationships with the bloggers and travel influencers. (iii) keep eye on negative comments and reviews to mitigate the damage. (iv) modernize their marketing strategies and follow customers online and try to respond quickly to their queries through social Media sites.

The limitations of the present study are (i) the study focus on specific geographical area so the results cannot be generalized for other geographical area so there is a need replicate this study in other areas. (ii) data was collected from tourist who were on social media so does not provide picture of overall tourist search and selection process .

Future opportunities exist for conducting research to examine the impact of social media during all stages of travel process i.e pre travel phase, during travel, post travel phase.

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