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Are small travel agencies ready for digital marketing? Views of travel agency managers

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology provides new communication and distribution channel for both consumers and suppliers of travel services. Internet enables the travel agencies to adopt digital marketing to attract, inform and serve the travellers. However, in developing countries, the adoption of internet and digital marketing is slow. This study therefore finds it imperative to explore the triggering factors and perceived challenges of digital marketing by travel agencies - an entity whose perspectives do not find much place in the published academic literature. The qualitative study reveals the popular and trusted digital platforms used by the travel agencies. It also presents the factors that inhibit or assist the use of digital marketing by travel service managers.

1. Introduction

Digital technology has been transforming tourism globally. It is generating a new paradigm-shift in the marketing strategy (Happ & Ivancso-Horvath, 2018), transforming the tourism industry structure and developing a whole range of opportunities and threats (Gratzer, Werthner, & Winiwarter, 2004). Literature posits that digitalisation is associated with the growth of businesses and is important for their performance in the market (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Tourism industry is highly receptive to the benefits of digital technologies due to their fragmented and information-oriented nature (Andreu, Aldás, Bigné & Mattila, 2010; Buhalis & Deimezi, 2004). Travel service providers use digital tools such as websites, mobile applications, and social media for attracting new consumers (Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi, & Vitouladiti, 2014), improving customer service, enhancing operational efficiency and consequently increasing revenue (Amaro & Duarte, 2015; Law, Buhalis, & Cobanoglu, 2014), but these capabilities are still underutilized (Martins, Salazar, & Inversini, 2015). Hence, despite the possible benefits of digital channels, there are also barriers for adoption, such as management's attitude and the firm's financial situation (Law et al., 2014; Mehrtens, Cragg, & Mills, 2001), perceived risks and technological issues etc. These barriers are more prominent among small and medium-sized enterprises (Abou-Shouk, Lim, & Megicks, 2013). The small travel agencies constitute a big chunk of the total service providers (Karanasios & Burgess, 2008). These small retail agencies or travel intermediaries with physical presence employing less than or equal 20 members (Barnett & Standing, 2001), once flourished but are presently in doldrums (Buhalis & Licata, 2002) as the online wholesale travel agencies are taking away their market share (Barnett & Standing, 2001; Buhalis & Licata, 2002). In these volatile times (Reichstein & Harting, 2018), with the fall of giants such as Thomas Cook, rise of wholesale travel agencies such as Goibibo etc., and easy access to internet, it becomes imperative to study the perceptions of small travel agents on the adoption of digital marketing (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Rambe, 2017). The study aims to explore the current use of digital tools by small travel agencies and their perceived motivations and challenges.

The paper is structured in three sections. The first section reviews the past work done in digital marketing in the context of tourism and identifies research objectives. The second section details the methodology adopted to achieve the research objectives and the rationale. The last section presents the findings followed by discussions and implications.

2. Literature review and research objectives

2.1. Digital technology an overview

Digital technology is used in marketing the tourism offerings to make it competitive and to meet the expectations of the digital consumers (Happ & Ivancso-Horvath, 2018). Communicating about products and services to customers and making the interaction smooth between suppliers and customers through digital media is the main purpose of digital

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marketing (Yasmin, Tasneem, & Fatema, 2015). Digital marketing may be seen as activities, institutions and processes facilitated by digital technologies for creating, communicating and delivering value for customers and other stake-holders (www.ama.org). Digital marketing enables the travel suppliers to carry out customized marketing, sell tailor made products and provide information to the customers directly through their websites (Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004) and other digital tools (Reino & Hay, 2016). The use of digital marketing has transformed the distribution mechanisms and consumption patterns of travel offerings (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). It has created new opportunities and challenges for all organizations involved in the tourism system (Chiappa, 2013) and has thus, elicited the interest of the researchers.

The growing stream of research in tourism, on the adoption of digital marketing tools mostly focuses on consumers' perspectives (Escobar-Rodríguez, Grávalos-Gastaminza, & Pérez-Calañas, 2017; Munar, 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). Consumers are empowered and prefer web to seek information (Reino & Hay, 2016) and online purchases of travel services (Werthner & Ricci, 2004) over traditional travel networks (Lang, 2000). Consumers are inclined towards the internet as they get benefits of easy booking and comparative pricing (Malik & Sharma, 2019). Leung et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of social media as a digital tool. In the new era of digital tourism, consumers use digital tools and contribute in the marketing processes (Happ & Ivancso-Horvath, 2018).

Studies conducted from supplier's/marketer's perspective deals with digital promotion and management (Leung et al., 2013) of travel services. The tourism companies have recognized that including digital tools into the marketing strategy is inevitable (Happ & Ivancso-Horvath, 2018), however they are still underutilized (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015) in particular by small travel agencies (Abou-Shouk et al., 2013). Digital tools like social media (Leung et al., 2013), website, email (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015) etc. are very important for suppliers to sell their offerings globally to potential travellers (Law et al., 2004).

2.2. Small travel agencies

The tourism industry is diversified with plethora of different suppliers. Primary suppliers (business to consumers) such as hotels and airlines supplying their offerings directly to the consumers (Barnett & Standing, 2001), large online whole sale travel companies (Barnett & Standing, 2001) such as goibibo.com and small fragmented travel agencies. These small fragmented travel agencies have physical premise and limited digital presence (Barnett & Standing, 2001; Law et al., 2004). They serve as intermediary between hotels, airlines, wholesale travel companies and consumers. These small travel agencies employ less than 20 people (Gammack, Amaya Molinar, Chu, & Chanpayom, 2004) and have limited adoption of digital marketing (Abou-Shouk et al., 2013). Small retail travel agencies enjoy various advantages, such as increased profitability via reduced costs and more extensive reach, while simultaneously offering better services to clients (Ainin, Parveen, Moghavvemi, Jaafar & Mohd Shuib, 2015; Caniëls, Lenaerts, & Gelderman, 2015). Hence, digital marketing is gaining increasing importance for small travel agencies (Leung et al., 2013) which has lead to stream of research in understanding of adoption of digital marketing tools and the challenges faced by these small enterprises (Rambe, 2017).

2.3. Adoption models

Small travel companies are facing many challenges in the adoption of digital marketing tools (Reichstein & Harting, 2018). Adoption of digital tools for use or intention to use have been investigated through models such as the TAM (technology acceptance model), TPB (the theory of planned behaviour), or IDT i.e. Innovation diffusion theory (Malik, Suresh & Sharma, 2019). There are two significant streams that focus on technology acceptance, adoption, and usage. The first stream determines users' adoption and usage of technology from the diffusion of technology (DOI) perspective, while the other stream uses intention-based models and mainly includes Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Theory of reasoned action (TRA), and technology acceptance model (TAM). However, these studies focus on an individuals' perspective (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989).

Marketers are not completely embracing the revolution of internet and digital marketing tools as online commerce are not reliable in the eyes of many consumers (Martins et al., 2015) and not many users buy the services online (Datta, Sajnani, & Thomas, 2018) in developing countries. Small travel agencies are struggling to assimilate and include social media technologies into their business strategy (Rambe, 2017). Fereidouni and Kawa (2019) in their study identified threats of digitalisation as user privacy, ethical concern, digital discrimination and regulatory challenges.

The literature on travel and tourism remains dominated by the work done in the western context (Winter 2007), and from the perspective of the consumers' (Amaro & Duarte, 2015; Chen & Law, 2016; Escobar-Rodríguez et al., 2017; Munar, 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Rajaobelina, 2018).

Lee, Lowry and Delconte in 2015, cited that top tourism journals focused on consumers' or travellers' perspectives (74.2%) rather than suppliers' perspectives (22.6%). Research on small travel agencies is scanty as the overall economic impact of small and medium enterprise remains overshadowed by the big market players in the tourism due to their domination and larger stake (Rahayu & Day, 2017). More so the adoption of internet and digital marketing in developing countries is slow (Datta et al., 2018; Rahayu & Day, 2017).

In this context, it becomes imperative to explore the extent of adoption, the triggering factors and perceived challenges of digital marketing by small travel agencies - an entity whose perspectives do not find much place in the published academic literature (Lee, Lowry, & Delconte, 2015). The study addresses this gap and lays down the following objectives:

1) To explore the popular digital marketing tools used by travel agencies.
2) To study the motivations of travel agencies to market their offering digitally and challenges faced there in.
3) And lastly to study the perceived effectiveness of digital marketing by travel agencies.

3. Methodology

This is an exploratory study aimed to capture the viewpoints of travel agencies. The epistemology and ontology adopted for the study is constructivism and interpretivism. The purpose of the study was to provide in-depth and rich explorations and understandings of the motivations and challenges of small travel service agencies. Qualitative research designs are applied by limited researchers and to foster deeper understanding qualitative study is required in this area of research (Zarezadeh, Rastegar, & Gretzel, 2018). To explore the objectives, semi-structured interviews with "how" and "what" were put forward to the travel agencies (Decrop, 1999). These types of interview questions assisted in giving a descriptive and an exploratory interpretation of the phenomena being studied through the experiences of the small travel agencies who indulge in online marketing of their offerings (Reichstein & Harting, 2018). The focus of qualitative research is to explore the characteristics such as values, meanings, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and experiences (Halcomb & Andrew, 2005) thus realistic interpretations can be accessed directly through interviews missed in quantitative approach.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The appointments with the prospective respondents were sought in advance and the general structure of the main questions to be asked was drafted in advance by the interviewer (Drever, 1995). The aim of the formulation of the guideline was to carry out the

conversation in a certain course of action (Reichstein & Harting, 2018). The sequence of the questions was not mandatory in order to provide flexibility and openness to the interviewee. Each interview lasted for about 30–45 min.

Purposive sampling method was used (Bryman, 2008) to select participants for the study. Small travel agencies having less than 20 employees are selected as the target population for the study (Gammack et al., 2004). In terms of number, small tourism enterprises are the dominant form of tourism companies and are considered as the backbone of many tourist places or destinations particularly in the developing countries of the world (Karanasios & Burgess, 2008). Seventy-six small and medium travel agencies were contacted for the interviews. The interview process resulted in twenty-five completed interviews which includes three pre-test interviews (Table 1). The interviews with the managers/senior executives were conducted in their premises. These travel agencies were mostly located in National capital region (NCR) of Delhi. Sample was chosen from Delhi NCR region as it is a microcosm of India (Dutta, 2015). The tourism industry of India is expected to grow at a faster pace as India is one of the fastest growing economies of Asia (Ohlan, 2017). The fast penetration of mobile and Internet further provides a conducive ecosystem for digital marketing thus making the study relevant. The audios of the interviews were digitally recorded. Data analysis was carried out in the 4 phases.

In first phase the recorded interviews were heard and written down in a notebook. The interviews were conducted in English as well as in Hindi (local language). All the interviews were translated in English language while writing them in the notebook. Care was taken to ensure that the implied meaning was not lost in translation.

In the second phase of data analysis, the written interviews were read and re read many times to explore some commonality. It was found that some common attributes were resonated by the senior executives/managers during the interview. The data (written interviews) were analysed through the application of open coding techniques, or line-by-line analysis (looking for words and sentences in the text that have meaning), which may help to explain the concept and identify provisional themes. The coding process followed Van Kaam (1959), whereby the sentences or paragraphs were examined to identify basic concepts; these concepts were then labelled based on the meanings indicated by the informant and/or concepts found in the literature. These provisional labels were subsequently compared with other transcripts in order to ensure consistency and also to identify negative cases.

Recorded audios of each respondent were once again heard along with the documented interviews of those respondents in this phase. Efforts were made to ensure that no data is lost in translation and documentation. Also, this iteration was the final check to ensure that all information was categorized and coded and no additional information was found in the data.

In the last phase the provisional labels identified were sieved by further iteration (Spiggle, 1994). Recurrent meaningful themes were clustered to identify the core themes. Several broad themes emerged from this iterative process. In order to recheck and confirm the emerging themes, the audios were heard again and then themes were rechecked with the transcribed interviews. The iteration process was completed when the new themes stopped emerging. The data duly documented was then categorized into the following: 1) the popular digital marking tools used by the suppliers, 2) the motivations for adopting digital marketing tools, 3) the problems/challenges that the travel agencies face on adopting digital marketing tools, and 4) their perceived effectiveness.

4. Findings

This section provides the findings from the in-depth interviews. The key findings from data are discussed as study themes under each of the three objectives of the study.

4.1. Popular digital marketing tools and platforms used by travel agencies

If consumers are increasingly using digital media, then firms should engage as well. For this a digital strategy is needed. Travel agencies were probed on the various digital marketing tools they use. From the 25 respondents interviewed 8 claimed that they prefer traditional marketing over digital marketing (Table 1). The whopping thirty two percent did not adopt digital marketing tools as they got repeat business from loyal travellers (Tia Tours and Travels) and found word of mouth as most effective way of getting business (Table 1). Majority of the respondents indulged in both traditional and digital marketing. Most of the suppliers responded that a website is a must. However, e-mails and various social media platforms were also largely used by the travel agencies (Table 2). Social media platforms which were found to be highly popular are:

4.1.1. Website

Basic or static websites are used by the travel companies for the authentication of the company and for creating their presence in the online market. Findings revealed that website is not only for communicating with consumers but is also a tool for authentication. The website assures that the travel suppliers are genuine and is not fly by night kind of company. Booking portal websites are more convenient for the consumers as they can directly book through them and are helpful for generating revenue by the travel companies.

> Sudhir thinks that, *"A website is must for creating presence in the market. All other social media platforms help the customer to reach the website of the company as customers ultimately check website for authenticity" (Travel Namaste India).*

However, website alone may not help as the travellers visit the website only once they know about the supplier through online advertising. Mixed reactions were found about Google advertising. Some travel agencies believe that Google advertisements are beneficial for improving the rating of the company and attract the consumers to visit their website. While others feel that these are costly as compared to other digital platforms. Some agencies experienced that Google advertisements are very good for the generation of business while others think that there is hardly any business that could be generated from these advertisements.

> As per the experience of Akshay, *"Google promotions are the most effective digital media platform these days" (Sunrise Aviation).*

> According to Siddharth, *"Pay per click is the least effective method of digital promotion. It is very costly and you will hardly get any response from the customers. It is good for Google ranking but not for lead generation and productivity" (Ghumne Chalo Tour and Travels).*

However, it was universally accepted that websites (Table 2) as a digital tool becomes effective only once their company name is popular. The customers visit the company's website only if they have heard of the company from some other online or offline source. As Neha puts it:

> *"It takes lot of efforts for somebody to reach somebody's website until unless those are really popular" (Neha, Potter Travel Services).*

4.1.2. E-mail

Despite of being less trendy these days, e-mail is considered as the primary and most important platform for communication. This economical and cost-effective tool assists in communication with the vendors and customers and also assists in creating a strong data base.

> *" ….e-mail is the most effective digital communication platform for our company" (Tanya, Tiya Tours and Travels).* Vidit *(Trailblazer Vacations),* Jagjeet *(The Travel Masters)* and Divay *(Indo World Tourism)* agreed with the same feelings.

Table 1

Travel agency name	Year of ESTD.	Respondent name and designation	Prefer	Using DM from	Digital media platforms they are active on	Most effective DM	Least effective DM
1. Tiya tours and travels pvt. Ltd. (www.tiyatravel.com)	2011	Ms. Tanya (Sales Manager)	Traditional Marketing	2011	Website, email	Email	SMS
2. Tripojee India pvt. Ltd. (www.tripojee.com)	2017	Mr. Rohit (Booking Manager)	Digital Marketing	2017	Website, email, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp	LinkedIn	SMS
3. Trekkers Hub (www.trekkershub.in)	2017	Mr. Ashutosh (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2017	website, email, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp	Facebook	SMS
4. Kuldeep travels (www.kuldeeptravels.com)	2009	Mr. Deep (Senior Executive)	Traditional Marketing/WOM	2013	Website, email, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp	WhatsApp	SMS
5. Mech Journeys (www.mechjourneys.com)	2013	Mr. Jaswinder (Marketing Manager)	Both	2013	Website, email, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp	Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter	SMS
6. Trailblazer Vacations Pvt. Ltd. (www.trailblazervacations.com)	2009	Mr. Vidit (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2012	Website, email, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn	Email	Twitter
7. Holiday RahiPvt. Ltd. (www.holidayrahi.com)	2011	Mr. Sunil (Senior Executive	Digital Marketing	2011	website, email, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp	Facebook	SMS
8. Potter Events and Travel Services (www.potterevents.in)	2009	Ms. Neha (Booking Manager)	Digital Marketing	2009	Website under construction, email, WhatsApp, Facebook	WhatsApp and social media	email and SMS
9. Kapoor Travels Unlimited (www.tourandtravels.com)	2005	Mr. Jatin (Sales Manager)	Digital Marketing	2005	Website, email, SMS, Facebook, WhatsApp	WhatsApp	Website
10. Hamara Holiday Pvt. Ltd. (www.hamaraholiday.com)	2005	Mr. Vivek (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2005	website, email, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp	WhatsApp, Facebook, website	LinkedIn and SMS
11. Concord Travels and Tours (www.concordtravels.com)	1995	Ms. Monika (Senior Executive)	For branding- Digital Marketing, For sales-WOM	2005	Website, Blogs, email, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube	Online portal websites and Blogs	Twitter, LinkedIn, static websites
12. Travel Namaste India (www.travelnamaste.com)	2010	Mr. Sudhir (Marketing Manager)	Digital Marketing	2012	Website, email, SMS, Facebook, YouTube	website, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, email, YouTube	SMS
13. Royal India Holidays Pvt. Ltd. (www.royalindiaholiday.com)	2001	Mr. Danish (Sales Manager)	Digital Marketing	2011	website, blog, email, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn	Facebook	LinkedIn and SMS
14. Dee Holidays Pvt. Ltd. (www.deeholidays.com)	2009	Mr. Bhushan (Sales Manager)	Traditional Marketing, WOM	2009	website, email, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp	Cannot tell	Cannot tell
15. My Value Travel (www.myvaluetravel.com)	1998	Mr. Mohit (Senior Executive)	Traditional Marketing	2005	email, WhatsApp	Cannot tell	Cannot tell
16. Holiday matrix Pvt. Ltd. (www.holidaymatrix.co.in)	2008	Mr. Ankit (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2008	Website, google AdWords, Facebook	Facebook	Instagram
17. New Airways Travels Pvt. Ltd. (www.newairways.in)	1971	Mr. Tarun (Senior Executive)	Traditional Marketing	2009	Website, email, Facebook, WhatsApp	Facebook, WhatsApp	Blogs
18. Vedi's International Tours and travels (www.veditours.com)	2002	Mr. Anil (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2002	Website, email, Facebook	Website	Blogs
19. SAGA world travels (www.sagaworldtravels.in)	1982	Mr. Atul (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2011	Website, email	Cannot tell	Cannot tell
20. Star Trip (www.startrip.in)	2016	Mr. Sameer (Marketing Manager)	Digital marketing	2016	Website, WhatsApp, Facebook, email, LinkedIn, google AdWords	Website (Google AdWords)	LinkedIn
21. The Travel Masters (Website: Under upgradation)	2012	Mr. Jagjeet (Sales Manager)	Traditional Marketing	2012	Website under upgradation, email	WhatsApp, email	Cannot tell
22. Holidays 2 Cherish (www.holidays2cherish.com)	2012	Ms. Bhavna (Booking Manager)	Digital Marketing	2012	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Website, email	Instagram	Twitter
23. GhumneChalo Tour and Travels (www.ghumnechalo.co.in)	2014	Mr. Siddharth (Senior Executive)	Digital Marketing	2014	Website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, email	Facebook	Pay per click
24. Sunrise Aviation (www.sunriseholiday.in)	2003	Mr. Akshay (Booking Manager)	Traditional Marketing	2012	website, email, WhatsApp, SMS, Facebook, Instagram	Google AdWords	Instagram
25. Indo World Tourism Services (www.indoworldtour.in)	2000	Mr. Divay (Senior Executive)	Traditional Marketing	2000	website, email, Facebook	Email	Cannot tell

Table-2
Popularity of Diverse Digital Platforms used by Travel Agencies.

Digital Platforms	Percentage of Travel Agencies Using Them
Website and email	100%
Facebook	84%
WhatsApp	60%
Instagram	40%
Twitter	28%
LinkedIn	20%
SMS	12%
YouTube	8%
Blogs	4%

However, it was also discovered that it is not a preferred platform for digital marketing because the chances of opening of a promotional email is only 4–5%. As Siddharth puts it:

"Ratio of opening mail is only 4–5%" (Siddharth, Ghumne Chalo Tours and Travels).

"E-mail is not a preferred option, people just trash it, spam it but may not read it" (Neha, Potter Travel Services). Sunil *(Holiday Rahi)* felt the same.

4.1.3. SMS and blogs

SMS has been considered as the least popular by the travel agencies as they do not get to know whether the person has read it or not. Blogs too are not very effective in the eyes of respondents. Most of the suppliers interviewed believed that consumer do not read blogs as it is time taking and found blogs as least effective among other digital tools. They seem to lose interactivity and entertainment to readers (Ho & Lee, 2015).

"People read blogs very rarely these days" (Anil, Vedi's international). Tarun *(New Airways Travels)* felt the same.

Though Blogs are considered as integral part of digital marketing (HubSpot, 2017), however the interviews revealed that the small travel agents perceive blogs as ineffective when compared to traditional word-of-mouth. This finding finds support in literature (Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008).

4.1.4. Social media platforms

Innovations in web technology and smart phones have evolved social media usage (Coulter, Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schafer, 2012). Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram are the most attractive platforms in the eyes of most of the respondents as customers use them very frequently (Thelwall & Vis, 2017). Out of these, Facebook is considered as vital tool for customer engagement (Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2013) and for the generation of queries and leads. Small travel companies use these less expensive platforms for the generation of leads and to create digital presence in the market (Dehghani & Tumer, 2015). They receive feedback in the form of likes/shares/comments on their posts.

Sunil experienced, "For lead generation Facebook is the best platform" (Sunil, Holiday Rahi). Siddharth (Ghumne Chalo Tour and Travels), Vivek (Hamara Holiday) and Ashutosh (Trekkers Hub) think the same about the Facebook.

"Social media platforms are very easily approachable, people tend to check out them at least 10 times in a day" (Neha, Potter Travel Services).

However, it was observed that the powerful and popular social media tools were not universally adopted by the respondents. Some respondents perceived little need to invest resources on social media. These travel agents were largely receiving enough repeat sales from loyal customers, and felt little need to use social media as marketing tools.

"Social media I tried and avoid, I use WhatsApp a little bit but not social media" (Atul, Saga World Travels).

4.2. Motivation to adopt digital marketing

Digitalisation is needed in the tourism industry to make it competitive and to meet the expectations of the digital consumers (Happ & Ivancso-Horvath, 2018). The travel agencies adopt digital tools into their marketing strategy as they have realised the importance of digital marketing. The triggering factors to adopt digital marketing tools can broadly be categorized and explained by three E's. The 3 E's are Ease, Engage and Earn.

4.2.1. Ease

Travel suppliers experienced ease in connecting and communicating digitally with the clients, potential customers and vendors by the use of digital marketing. Digital platforms have wide reach, they are easily accessible by the agencies, customers and vendors and it is convenient for the users (agencies, customers and vendors). The first EASE mentioned by most of the managers/Senior executives was the quick and wide reach of digital marketing. Wide reach to the potential customers is the main reason that triggers the use digital marketing by travel agencies. They can reach to the maximum number of consumers very quickly and easily with the use of digital marketing which was not possible with the traditional marketing. The travel agencies cited that besides the ease of reaching out to the wide array of consumers, digital technologies also serve a convenient and easy tool for communication with new clients, vendors etc.

" …. .Digital marketing has fastened and smoothen the entire marketing communication process" (Sudhir, Travel Namaste India).

Communication with the customers, vendors and other stakeholders is easily possible without even meeting them and thus the marketing communication process has become easy, faster and smoother with the emergence of digital marketing. Digital marketing tools assist the service suppliers to easily have access to the information about the products offered by their fellow suppliers or competitors.

Convenience is the key. The travel agencies besides being wooed by the wide reach of internet, and its ability to give access to two-way communications, what really wins them is the convenience. Reaching out to the consumers and vendors and then communicating with them with absolute ease catalysis the adoption of digital marketing tools.

"It is convenient for people to access you, they can text and you can reply back there and then …. ….People not really look into the newspapers that much, it's all there in your mobile" (Neha, Potter Travel Services).

All of the travel agencies that were interviewed are using digital payment methods for their bookings now. They believe that digital payment methods are fast and convenient and are popular among consumers and suppliers, especially among youth; but the convenience fee on online payments was a deterrent as cited by many. However elderly people still rely on traditional mode of payments.

"Even after closing of banks we can receive payment from the clients as there is no time bound with the digital payments" (Deep, Kuldeep Travels).

"Younger brigade is very comfortable with digital payment methods but some senior persons who are not very used to these methods are not comfortable, they prefer cheque and cash payments over digital payments" (Jaswinder, Mech journeys).

4.2.2. Engage

Consumers, travel agencies and vendors are more engaged, aware and connected in the present scenario. This digital culture helps the

travel agencies, customers and vendors connected and engaged, before, during and after travel. Before travel, customers are engaged digitally with the agencies while they search for different travel agencies online on Google. During travel, agencies provide instructions for to do things, activities etc. and from vendors, agencies collect the information of the running tours, changes in the plans etc. After travel, customers can express their views and experiences in the form of feedbacks, reviews, ratings and comments which can be posted on different digital media platforms.

" ….Digital media platforms help us to keep in touch with the clients" (Monika, Concord Travels and Tours).

The online reviews and feedbacks are vital in the context of engagement with the consumers. Agencies also put efforts in getting more reviews and feedbacks so the customers feel free to provide feedback about the good things and shortcomings of the services provided by the travel agencies.

4.2.3. Earn

Most of the digital marketing methods are considered cost effective and economical as compared to traditional marketing methods like hoardings, print media etc. Relatively low cost and high efficiency makes the digital tools relevant for small companies. Travel agencies adopt digital media platforms into their marketing strategy for the expansion of the existing business, so that they can survive in the market and earn more. Digital marketing methods are economical as compared to the traditional marketing methods as per the experience of most of the travel agencies.

" ….If I am spending one lakh rupees in print media, I will not have that much payback but if I am spending Rs. 50,000/- in digital media, at least I can have business of 1.5 lakh rupees" (Ankit, Holiday Matrix).

" ….Digital media platforms are very cost effective, you only need to initially invest in your website and then it goes with little expenses" (Tarun, New Airways Travels).

Numerous travel agencies believe no business can survive in such a competitive business environment without using digital marketing.

4.3. Digital marketing: challenges faced by travel agencies

The semi structured interviews revealed that travel agencies perceived various challenges posed by the adoption of digital marketing. The concerns or challenges that resonated were: risk, fierce competition, excessive information, lack of personal touch and technical issues.

4.3.1. Risk

Interviews revealed that digital marketing was not a passport to success. The suppliers strongly feel that there is no guarantee of success of business by using digital marketing. There is a lack of reliability and trust among consumers, agencies and vendors due to the fraudulent activities that are prevalent in the digital culture. The consumers cannot rely easily on the persons they contact digitally and there is always an issue regarding the genuineness and authenticity of both suppliers and buyers/consumers. Fraudulent activities in the form of fake companies, fake profiles, fake queries, fake reviews, fake fares etc. have increased and the risk factor also increased for the travel agencies as the genuineness of the customers, vendors, profiles etc. cannot be filtered and identified online.

"Digital media is not a guarantee that you will get business" (Atul, Saga World Travels).

"There is lack of reliability due to fake profiles and fake bookings from both the ends i.e. Customer's end and Service provider's end" (Ashutosh, Trekkers Hub).

" …..you cannot filter the genuine clients from fake clients" (Sameer, Star trip).

Due to lack of reliability and fraudulent activities in the digital market, customers and vendors do not easily rely on the travel companies if they are just having digital presence. The respondents were from organizations which are not very well-known brands, resonated the sentiment of trust issues in the minds of consumers.

"Customers make purchases from the trusted sites like Make My Trip, Goibibo, Yatra but they trust very rarely on unknown sites"(Deep, Kuldeep Travels).

4.3.2. Fierce competition

Lack of entry barriers in this domain has led to fierce competition from both established and new players. New entrants whether genuine or fake, small or big can promote digitally. Big players offer huge discounts creating price competition. Established brands use their prowess by offering low priced packages, which is difficult to compete with for small organizations. Not only this, the tie up with ancillary service providers also allows them to transfer benefits to consumers through coupons. Differentiation in service is also not long lasting because the packages and services being offered by one player are easily known through internet to all the other competitors.

"Now people have a lot of visibility to the fares and they ask why other companies like MMT and Goibibo are offering less fares and we cannot answer that WHY" (Akshay, Sunrise Aviation).

" …..MMT, Cleartrip etc. are offering the coupons, they have tie ups with the banks giving some offers, that hamper us" (Jatin, Kapoor Travels).

" …. .they under quote their packages just to attract customers, not to earn profits, they pre-purchase flight tickets which the small agencies cannot do" (Sudhir, Travel Namaste India).

"Big market players will eat you up if you will not provide competitive packages, they over commit, cutting down their profit margins to capture more and more customers. They are big danger for the small companies" (Monica, Concord Travels and Tours).

4.3.3. Excessive information

There is a lot of information available online, visibility to the prices and agencies have increased. If consumers search online for travel agencies, there are lots of options available and visible to them. Consumers get confused with the lot of information and options and it becomes difficult for them to decide which agency to contact. Small travel agencies can get lost in the whole crowd and become one of the many players in the market. It is very difficult to stand out in the whole crowd as the company may get overlooked by the prospective consumers.

"Lots of people ignore messages on Instagram or on Google AdWords, they wait for the skip button on YouTube, this shows that they are less interested" (Akshay, Sunrise Aviation).

"You lost in the whole crowd as everyone is present on digital media these days. Clients sometimes overlook you in the crowd" (Monica, Concord Travels and Tours).

4.3.4. Lack of personal touch

There is a lack of personal touch if the connection is made with the vendors and customers through digital platforms. Agencies can express customers more if there is a face to face communication. There is lack of personal touch and no scope for modification if the customers are not satisfied with the offers and packages offered online.

"We do visit new clients; we get in touch with the vendors through visits and meetings as there is lack of personal touch in digital marketing" (Tanya, Tiya Tours and Travels).

Some travel agencies also believe that WOM (word of mouth) is more effective as people trust more on the references and therefore don't need aggressive promotions on digital platforms.

"I am running business from 35 to 40 years, the publicity of my company by WOM is that much that I don't need digital platforms for marketing, repeated clients come back to me within every 2–3 years and new clients come to me through references"(Atul, Saga World Travels).

"We have referral client base and we get new clients through references and WOM" (Divay, Indo World Tourism).

4.3.5. Technical issues

Technical issues are faced by almost every travel agency whether in the form of site crash, internet speed, issues with the digital payments or due to the structure of digital marketing. There are some issues which were faced by the respondents due to the technical structure of the digital payments.

"Sometimes, speed of our internet is not very good" (Anil, Vedi's International).

"Sometimes there are some technical issues with the payment gateway like payment released by the customers but not received by us ……In such cases customers may think if we are providing genuine services or not" (Rohit, Tripojee India).

4.4. Effectiveness of digital marketing

Various digital marketing tools are used by travel suppliers to digitally manage and market their offerings. The responses on analysis revealed four broad areas that were affected by digital marketing tools.

4.4.1. Vendor management

Digital marketing platforms are not very effective in terms of connection with the vendors. The suppliers believed that personal visits and face to face contacts are more effective for connecting with the vendors. Business deals are struck only after personal meeting with the vendors. Digital communication here only assists in follow up.

According to Monika, "To have business connection with the vendors, there should be more than just a social media connection, there should be personal meeting with the vendors to have long-term contact with them" (Concord Travels and Tours). Ankit (Holiday Matrix), Anil (Vedi's International), Jaswinder (Mech Journeys) and Divay (Indo World Tourism) further endorsed the same dialogue.

Travel suppliers and vendors prefer face to face meetings over striking a deal on net as they perceive high risks and lack trust. Personal meetings mitigate the risk and build trust among the contracting parties thereby leading to lasting relationships.

"Sometimes these platforms help us in connecting with the vendors but not always because there is an issue of trust and reliability" (Siddharth, Ghumne Chalo Tour and Travels).

"We do not use digital platforms for vendors as we have our own very old contracted vendors" (Tarun, New Airways Travels).

However, digital marketing tools assist in subsequent follow ups and smooth flow of information between travel agencies and vendors. For regular and fast communication with the vendors, some respondents said that agencies are the marketing arm for the vendors and thus the vendors provide competitive rates to the travel companies.

Jatin expressed that …. . "There are many vendors, hoteliers all over the India, we have many travel trades groups for vendors, they keep us updated about the packages which we update to our clients" (Kapoor Travels). Atul (Saga World Travels) and Sunil (Holiday Rahi) also agreed with Jatin's assertion.

4.4.2. Branding

Digital marketing is helpful in brand building. Digital presence is helpful to boost the brand image of the travel companies. Posts and feeds are beneficial for creating and maintaining brand image of the agency in the eyes of the customers and vendors. People recognize the brand by their digital presence and active participation on the digital platforms these days. If the agency is not present on the digital platforms, it is not present in the market. Posts on different digital media platforms help in building and improving the brand image of the travel agencies.

"Digital platforms are helpful in creating our presence in the market and improving our brand image" (Monika, Concord Travels and Tours).

Posts help travel companies to generate leads and gain popularity. Putting posts related to packages, destinations and offers are effective according to travel suppliers. Many of them believe that the posts not only help them to generate leads or queries but also enhance brand presence among prospective consumers and vendors. Images of the destinations and packages/offers with creative content are the most effective type of posts for the consumers over videos. They believe that the creativity and uniqueness of the posts are most viewed and also generate inquiries. Clients often come back to them for repeat purchases after watching their posts on their social media pages. Recommendations of past customers over these posts help the agencies in the addition of the followers.

Sunil said, "For branding, we post general tourism related posts and for business we post about offers and packages" (Holiday Rahi).Bhavna (Holidays 2 cherish)shared the same emotions.

Online reviews and ratings are very crucial for the brand image and reputation of the company as per the experience of the respondents because prospective consumers check reviews of the company before even contacting them. Positive reviews build a trusting relationship between agencies and customers. High rating of the company is important to boost the brand image of the supplier company.

"Feedbacks and reviews help in branding of the company" (Rohit, Tripojee India).

Neha added, *"Positive reviews are helpful to boost the brand image of the company" (Potter travel services).*

Few believed that new customers tend to avoid the company if they are having bad reviews or lower ratings and thus negative reviews hamper the brand image of the company consequently affecting sales. However, many resonated that some negative reviews are also important as they prove the authenticity of the company because in a service industry, no one can satisfy 100% of the clients. Negative reviews encourage them to improve their service.

"In hospitality industry, you cannot satisfy all the clients so one or two negative reviews are expected and if you remove them, people will think whether they are fake or genuine"(Bhavna, Holidays2Cherish).

4.4.3. Sales/revenue generation

Some travel agencies experienced that revenue generation in digital marketing is more as compared to traditional marketing as promotions and marketing on digital media is cost effective as compared to print media while some others believe that the margins of profit have come down due to competition and their revenue has decreased.

"We are getting 3-4 times revenue over cost by using digital marketing …… 70% of queries through digital platforms are converting into bookings now" (Sudhir, Travel Namaste India).

On the contrary, transparency opens Pandora's Box and creates difficult situation for the small travel suppliers to quote prices offered by various big players.

"Costs are still the same but revenues are little less, clients get competitive quotes for same tour and try to buy the cheapest. They try to push you to give the cheapest price. Margins and profits are less" (Monika, Concord travels and tours). Danish (*Royal India holidays)* endorsed the same dialogue.

Posts are also important for the generation of queries and leads and ultimately these posts help the agencies in generation of more revenue and increased sales.

Talking about the importance of posts, Vidit stated, *"Posts increase our popularity, secondly, new followers get added and thirdly we get potential customers from the followers" (Trailblazer Vacations).*

Reviews and ratings also help in increasing the sales volume of the travel agencies and these are important for the generation of revenue of the agency. In the eyes of some travel agencies, feedbacks and reviews do not affect sales.

According to Atul, "Sales are affected by reviews and feedbacks a lot, if any bad reviews come on my website, 50% of the sales are affected" (Saga world travels).

On the contrary, Divay said, *"We get feedback on email from new clients which not affect sales as such"(Indo world tourism).*

Of the total suppliers interviewed approximately 41%of the travel agencies reported that rate of conversion of queries from digital platforms into bookings is less than 10%only, 16%of the agencies stated that conversion rate of queries into bookings is more than 10%, 16% agencies revealed that their 20–40% queries convert into bookings, and 25% of the agencies mentioned that the rate of conversion is above 40%.

" ….we get queries through digital platforms but the ratio is less as compared to WOM and 10–12% queries through digital platforms convert into bookings"(Tarun, New airways travel).

4.4.4. Customer management

The interviews revealed that travel suppliers believed that relationship with the customers is maintained through digital platforms. The digital platforms allow the customers to know about the offers provided by the suppliers and they stay connected with them. The digital platforms provide opportunity for long term relationship with the customers by providing timely information and providing quick redressal to their complaints ad queries.

"Digital media platforms are necessary for the growth of business in the long run because clients are connected with us by these platforms only, as print media has become obsolete these days"(Monika, Concord travels and tours).

Besides this, digital tools also assist in maintaining database of the existing clients very easily on digital platforms.

*"Social media platforms help in creating the database and target audience for the posts, followers will increase day by day" (*Siddharth, *Ghumnechalo tour and travels).*

On the other hand, some of the travel agencies cited that for the long-term connection with the clients/customers, personal meetings are more effective and cannot be replaced by online communication tools.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The world of digital media has grown at a phenomenal pace. The digital age has impacted travel and tourism industry not only in digitally advanced and developed countries, but also in developing countries (Kartiwi & MacGregor, 2007). Website and e-mail featured as an essential tool of digital marketing (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Website was considered important (Table 2), as it is a tool that serves not only for dissemination of information but also to build trust with customers (Kim, Chung & Lee, 2011) as it is labelled as the face of the brand (Christodoulides, 2009). Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram and are the popular social media tools (Table 2). SMS and travel blogging unlike twitter (micro blogging) are least popular among travel agencies. Travel blogs enhances influence of word of mouth communication (Garcia, 2006) thereby making it an essential tool to have strategic gain over the competitors. However, our study reveals that small travel agencies have not been able to harness it. The findings are supported by Mack et al. (2008).

Small travel agencies find digital marketing as beneficial as it facilitates them by providing convenient (Ease) means to introduce and promote their offerings to the prospective customers (Parise, Guinan, & Kafka, 2016). It also allows them to tailor their offerings on the basis of feedbacks and reviews (Engage). Thus, digital marketing lands up building engaged and loyal clientele (Ashley & Tuten, 2015) in a cost-effective manner (Karjaluoto, Mustonen, & Ulkuniemi, 2015) as methods of digital marketing are more economical in terms of reach and costs than compared to traditional marketing as per the experience of most travel agencies (Earn). However, the sail is not smooth as the interviews with the small travel agencies revealed adoption of digital marketing has its own set of challenges.

Perception of risk, lack of reliability and trust inhibits the success of digital marketing (Alalwan, Dwivedi, Rana, & Williams, 2016; Stone & Grønhaug, 1993). The study revealed that fraudulent activities like fake profiles of agencies, consumers, vendors create trust issues (Carpineto & Romano, 2017, pp. 403–410; Hunt, 2015). The lack of faith and trust on digital media further gets amplified because of the cultural profile of the consumers. The high risk aversive Asian consumers are twice shy without being even bitten once and therefore prefer personal meetings and referrals over mass messages (de Bellis, Hildebrand, Ito, & Herrmann, 2015).

Another challenge is fierce competition from other companies that is faced by travel agencies. Due to weak entry barriers, anyone can promote on digital platforms very easily, economically and in very less time (Reza Kiani, 1998). The small travel suppliers besides facing intense rivalry in the crowded digital space also feel the pressure of predatory pricing (Kim, Nam, & Stimpert, 2004) offered by wholesale travel companies. Consumers compare prices and push travel agencies to quote the cheapest package. The small travel agents thus try to carve a niche clientele build through positive word of mouth.

The study reveals excessive digital information on various offerings leaves the consumer confused and indecisive (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). The study also revealed that due to lack of personal touch during the interaction and lack of face to face communication, up selling and bringing additional sales is difficult for the seller (Buhalis & Licata, 2002).

Travel agencies perceive technical issues as a challenge. Technical issues such as site crash, glitches in digital payment etc. Such cases create doubt in the mind of the customers about the genuineness of the company.

Small travel agencies are in the transitional phase to adopt digital marketing whole heartedly as they get repeat clients and referential clients. However, digital platforms are used as communication tool and for free flow of information and for smooth communication with the existing partners such as vendors, suppliers and existing customers. The study concluded that digital marketing is not perceived very effective by small travel companies in getting deals with new vendors but has

certainly smoothened the flow of communication. But when it comes to reach the customers, majority of respondents cited that digital marketing stretches access to a large number of customers, as well as gives them the opportunity establishing relationship with the customer. This finding is supported by Buhalis and Licata (2002), Buhalis (1998) and Sheldon (1997). Social media applications such as WhatsApp are widely used for communication with the vendors and the existing consumers in terms of daily updates. Digital marketing tools certainly assist in brand building.

6. Implications

The findings of the study offer interesting implications. Firstly, the study provides relevant practical implications for travel agencies and marketing practitioners who design marketing plans of online travel shopping. They should understand that digital marketing often seen as panacea for all hurdles in the marketing ecosystem may not hold true. The digital platforms may provide an easy tool to propagate the offerings and also for follow-up with clients and vendors, but face to face meetings cannot be replaced when it comes to closing a sale (online booking). This is especially true in the context of travel suppliers (SMEs) who are not a brand to reckon with and further amplified due to risk aversive nature of Asian consumers. Therefore, travel suppliers and marketers need to weave a strategic blend of both online and offline presence.

Secondly, the study is relevant for policy makers. Online fraud and fake websites etc. have largely contributed to the lack of trust among online consumers. Government and policy makers need to ensure strict cyber security provisions to be executed to instil fear among wrongdoers and faith and trust among consumers. To boost the growth, it is also imperative to have internet and associated infrastructural facilities to consumers at the bottom of the pyramid. Their inclusion into the digital world with good infrastructural and payment facilities will provides seamless transactional experience, instil trust and stimulate growth.

Last but not the least, the findings of the study contribute to the scarce literature of digital tourism from the perspective of travel suppliers and provide theoretical implications. Thus, the study is also of much importance for the academicians and tourism researchers. While consumer's perspective has been studied somewhat extensively in the past, the specific nuances associated with the adoption and usage of digital marketing channels by the travel agencies have not received sufficient attention by the researchers.

7. Limitations and future scope

The study is not without limitations. The study epitomizes one of the few attempts to explore this important research area from the perspective of travel suppliers. Thus, the study provides a useful roadmap to guide future research. Considering the qualitative nature of the study, further quantitative studies on perspectives of travel suppliers to get deeper insights into the area can be conducted in future. The study is on Indian travel agencies. This limits the generalisability of the study in global context. For future research it might be thought-provoking to get perceptions of the small travel agencies from other countries. The study can also be initiated in a cross-cultural context as this could be a possible extension for future research.

Author contribution

Ankita, Swati and Monica conceived the presented idea. The three authors designed the research frame work and Ankita was instrumental in collecting the data. All authors discussed the data analysis and data interpretation. Ankita and Swati together drafted and finalised the analysis and writing of manuscript. Swati gave critical feed back and sought expert help to shape the final research analysis and the manuscript.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104078.

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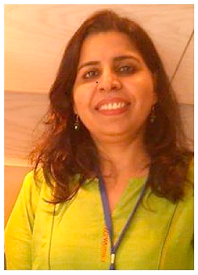

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