The Role and Impact of Digital Marketing on Tourism in India

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Abstract

Over the last few years, a new form of marketing has emerged, which is today popularly called Digital Marketing. It is a form of online marketing which makes use of Internet in terms of social media as well as electronic devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones, cellphones, digital billboards, and game consoles to engage with consumers and other business partners. At the same time there been an evolution in the tourism industry of India which has been largely influenced by the political and socio-economic fluctuations happening locally and globally. In this burgeoning digital world where we now constantly need to make connections more than impressions – while communicating with clients, friends, family and colleagues online –through digital platforms are changing the way we do business and forever altering how we attract through advertisements and retain a loyal customer base. The tourism industry in India has witnessed radical changes in travel expectations and preferences. The challenge for the emerging tourism industry in India – is now to communicate about regular travel packages or niches ones to a local and global audience. Digital marketing in this regards provides the tools and methodologies to tour operators and agents for bridging this emerging and lucrative segment. Hence, this paper will aim to understand the role of digital marketing in India and what challenges lie ahead. The paper will attempt to study issues through primary data - which consumers experience when using digital platforms to plan or book their tours.

1. Introduction

1.1 The online travel Scenario

'Getting information off the Internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant' *-Mitchell Kapor*

These days, anyone with a credit card and Internet access can visit an online travel portal and take off for a trip to any part of India or even better overseas. Sitting at home in front of their PC, laptop or smartphone - they can scout for an affordable hotel room, get reviews about the place, book a rental car, pinpoint sights they wish to see, and secure a window seat left on a flight-all just one day before leaving. Online booking has travelers who might not even own a personal computer using the Internet to book air and rail tickets. The convenience of booking trips and locating travel information online continues to appeal to many users, especially among India's young Internet population. But the real achievement lies with the Internet tourism or companies that make online travel services available to the Indian public and this is what this research paper is all about.

1.2 The online Advertising Market

The online advertising market in India has been steadily growing and advertisers are relying on engaging and interacting with viewers and potential customers in the online space, although Smart TVs have just been launched early this year. If we step back two years ago - India's e-commerce pie was worth Rs.47,000 crore a year and online travel takes Rs. 37,890 crores out of it (Comscore, 2011). With over 122 million internet users last year in 2012, the online advertising market has now emerged as one of the fastest growing segments in the Indian Media with more and more brands migrating from the traditional media to digital platforms such as websites, Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as well as gaming networks. Out of the $5 billion Indian advertising industry, $900 million go to digital marketing. The share of digital is poised to grow larger every year & slated to touch 30% of the total market by 2015 in India.

1.3 Online Travel in India

"The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land." **– G. K. Chesterton**

Sectors such as Travel, BFSI (Banking, Financial Services and Insurance) and Automotive companies ranked as the largest online spenders with the three verticals cumulatively contributing INR 483 Crores or 45% of the overall Indian Online advertising market (INR 1070 Crores) in FY2011. This combined share is expected to increase slightly to 46% in FY2012 i.e. about INR 573 Crores in FY2012. Another study by Comscore (2011) two years ago, found that the no. of visitors to Travel websites increased 32% in the past year to 18.5 million visitors as more Indians turned to the Internet for their travel needs. While 76 per cent of this market was captured by the online travel industry, about eight per cent was contributed by financial services transactions and e-retailing each. Advertisers in India are now spending 5-10 per cent of their advertising budgets on the Internet. For instance, Deep Kalra, CEO, MakeMyTrip said the major highlight in the digital space for 2012 has been the growth in the Mobile Internet and Apps. Elaborating on the same, he said *"In my opinion, the take-off of Mobile internet and Apps, especially for browsing, searching etc was the major highlight. MakeMyTrip has Apps on all popular OS (iOS, Android, Blackberry and Windows 8), besides a mobile website. Our traffic, searches and transactions coming through the Mobile channel are booming"* (India Digital Review, 2012).

2. Objectives

With the steady growth in digital marketing, the Indian travel industry is seeing a transformation where consumers wish to use the online medium to plan their long distance trips in and out of the country. Hence, keeping the above in mind, the research objectives of this paper are:

1) **To know the awareness about Digital Tourism within chosen sample**
2) **To determine if tourists within India would prefer booking through an online website/portal rather than a travel agent.**
3) **To understand how social media is also affecting digital tourism**

3. Research Hypothesis

Keeping the objectives of the paper in mind, the research hypothesis will be of two types and will be as follows:

Set 1 - To examine the significance of digital marketing in tourism

H_0: *Digital Marketing does not play an important role in tourism.*

H_1: *Digital Marketing has an important role in tourism.*

Set 2 - To determine whether Indians prefer a travel agent over an online travel portal/ website

H_0: *Travel agents are approached to make final booking and arrangements for holidays in India.*

H_1: *Websites are visited to make final booking and arrangements for holidays in India.*

Set 3 - **To determine the significance of social media in Digital Marketing for tourism**

H_0: *Social media does not play an important role in Digital Marketing for tourism*

H_1: *Social media has an important role in Digital Marketing for tourism*

4. Literature Review

This section of the paper will give the reader an overview of the literature available in different mediums about Digital Marketing, social media and online tourism.

Advertising viewed or consumed on mobile phones and tablets is increasingly an inherent component of online marketing today. It is therefore necessary to encompass these forms of advertising together under a category which is called Digital Advertising (Levy P, 2010). A report by IAMAI (2012) explains that Digital marketing which includes Digital Advertising provides the critical bridge between customer digital touch points and digital conversation interfaces which firms use to provide relevant content to the customer.

Other authors such as Deighton (1996) write that Digital marketing includes both direct marketing, which treats customers as individuals and defines them not only by their individual characteristics but also by how they behave, and interactive marketing, which has the ability to address an individual and the ability to gather and remember the response of that individual. Whereas authors such as Chaffey (2010) define the finer technical aspects to Digital marketing which involve applying digital technologies, such as internet, e-mail, databases, mobile/wireless, and digital TV, to support interactive and non-interactive marketing activities aimed at achieving profitable acquisition and retention of customers within a multichannel buying process and customer lifecycle.

Since the Internet is only one technology and marketing is increasingly using other digital forms to serve customers, the term digital marketing seems to be more appropriate with most publications and independent authors than the more limited term defined earlier, Internet marketing. Authors such as Alkhateeb *et al* (2008) point out that a key difference between digital marketing and traditional marketing is that the former uses digital technologies that are fundamentally measurable, permit conversations to be targeted, and facilitate the creation of relationships between customers and firms, whereas traditional is much more mass communication oriented.

When it comes to the Tourism industry, from a consumer's perspective, the internet has evolved from a technological curiosity to a place that millions of people around the world stop every day for various travel-related activities (Qualman, 2009). Research has also indicated that Internet users progress from initially asocial information gathering to increasingly social activities as their involvement in the virtual environments increases (Walther 1995).

Koufaris et al. (2002) argued that consumers' prior experience with a product has an effect on the content of online search information. Since repeat customers have already experienced a product at least once, their intentions to search for information would be different from that of new customers. For new customers, the novelty of the website could be very important, but for repeat customers this may not be the case. Other factors, such as more detailed service, product availability and more experiential information, are more important to repeat customers. There is very limited literature concerning product knowledge and online information needs and content preferences. Conceptually, however, Chaffey (2010) believes there are reasons to believe that a novice traveller will seek out different content and forms of information from a more experienced traveller familiar with a particular destination. Other effects can be explained by differences in travellers' goals and objectives. The pattern of relationships developed in virtual travel communities of consumption is one in which consumption knowledge is developed in concert with social relations. Consequently, the mode of interaction may evolve from informational to relational, then recreational, and finally transformational (Kozinets 1999).

Social media on the Internet reflects a mix of different types of ICT tools, including Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, wikis, podcasts, messaging applications, or blogs (Stillman and McGrath, 2008). The main characteristic of this new Internet is that it enhances the collaboration and sharing of information online, and it is built around social software, which makes it possible for individuals to communicate and form communities using their computers (Cooke and Buckley, 2008; Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011). This development is often coined Web 2.0 to signify the progression from earlier Internet applications.

Social media sites offer new tools that contribute to a larger complexity of sociotechnical systems. These platforms can be placed on a continuum (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). At one extreme are sites that promote self-biographical expressions and focus on the making of virtual identities and personal profiles (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn) and on the opposite pole are those that enhance a communitarian effort and a dilution of individuality in the ''commons'' focusing on a product or the content of the site *(e.g. Wikipedia)* (Munar, 2010).

On the other hand, literature points out that User Generated Content (UGC) can be defined as the aggregation and leveraging of users' content on the Internet. It is related to the digital transformation of objects: written text, sounds, and images (Poster, 2005). Content is neither the graphical user interface nor the commands and text given by the administrators of the site. Rather, it is now created and uploaded by users of the platform, and users can be either organizations or individuals. UGC is the foundation of social media and knowledge related to posts in the form of who, why, where, and what is increasingly relevant to tourism firms (Bronner and De Hoog, 2011).

For understanding this better, many researchers (Chaffey & Smith, 2008) studied Airline websites and it was found that airline use of UGC platforms is heavily advertising focused. Nearly half of the content on Facebook lies within this category, whereas Twitter, on the other hand, shows greater disparity. Advertising is frequently in the form of static content; messages are often merely statements regarding new products or destinations. This type of advertisement fails to exploit the interactivity and development with customers, as evident by the authoritative characteristic of command-and-control rather than customer interactivity (Shih, 2009). It also fails to promote engagement, social affirmation, affection, or emotional attachment among users (Baym, 2010).

The final piece of Literature which would be important for the reader is that in April 2011, 18.5 million online users age 15 or older visited a Travel site from a home or work location, an increase of 32 percent from the previous year. Each of the top 10 properties in the category experienced strong growth in the past year. See Table 4.1 sourced from ComScore (2011) below:

Top Sites in the Travel Category by Unique Visitors April 2011 vs. April 2010 Total India – Age 15+ Home or Work Locations Source: comScore Media Matrix			
	Total Unique Visitors (000)		
	Apr-2010	Apr-2011	% Change
Total Internet : Total Audience	38,399	43,269	13
Travel	13,982	18,517	32

Indian Railways	7,749	8,399	8
MakeMyTrip	2,377	3,864	63
Yatra Online	1,933	3,520	82
ClearTrip.com	1,194	2,147	80
Expedia Inc	1,640	1,832	12
TravelAdNetwork	817	1,456	78
Mustseeindia.com	442	1,049	138
Indiarailinfo.com	647	922	42
Redbus.in	405	807	99
HolidayIQ.com	452	725	60

**Excludes visitation from public computers such as Internet cafes or access from mobile phones or PDAs.*

5. Methodology

The secondary data has been collected from physical hard-copies of books, academic text, magazines and academic journals. Many books and articles have not been quoted in the paper but served as a source of inspiration and have been mentioned in the bibliography. Many academic journals and corporate reports were available through online sources such as Sage. A few journalistic websites have also been browsed and referred but blogs have only been used as a reference point and avoided in terms of sourcing as they do not have any academic validity.

Keeping in mind the research context of this paper, a quantitative research has been undertaken and the sample size has been limited to 65 respondents only. The initial target was 80 but fifteen respondents did not answer the questionnaire correctly and were biased in their opinions and hence their responses had to be eliminated. The primary data was acquired through e-mail via an online survey using selective random sampling method. As long as the respondent was having a valid e-mail id and general idea about online travel, they were selected and e-mailed the questionnaire which was promptly sent back within 3-4 days. The respondents were assured that their personal details will not be divulged at any point of time and hence name in the questionnaire was kept optional. The questionnaire format was quickly briefed upon in the e-mail and telephonic assistance was provided whenever necessary.

The questionnaire consists of approximately 17 closed-ended questions without ranking so as to be specific. The questionnaire ends with only 1 open-ended question has been asked to name a travel website or portal that came first to their mind. This was done to check awareness and recall of any travel website they have heard or visited. In order to reinforce certain points and make sure that bias does not occur, certain questions have been repeated with a slight difference - the objective being the significance of booking online. Also two follow-up questions based on their choice have also been there to specify reasons for the same.

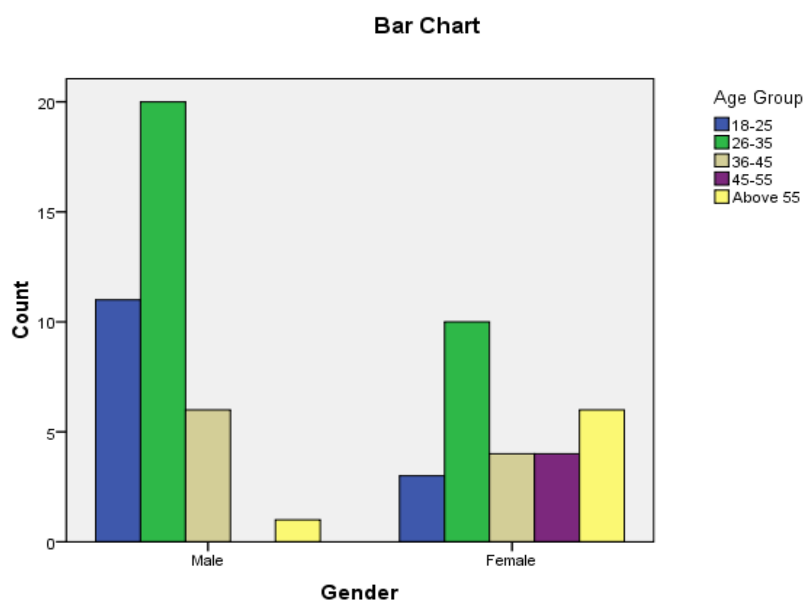
Once the data was collected, it was entered into Microsoft Excel and then it was exported to SPSS where the data was neatly organized by each variable. The analysis was done through SPSS and keeping in mind the objective of the paper – descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and cross-tabulations have been used. The data has been interpreted though explanation supported by graphs which will reflect in the findings.

6. Interpretation & Findings

Since it was selective random sampling method – only people having a valid e-mail id and general idea of travel websites were chosen in order to save time on educating respondent about the same. The majority of findings are based on the interpretations of various cross-tabulations and analysis carried out:

6.1 Demographics:

The questionnaire was initially emailed to 40 males and 40 females. But due to bias responses, 18 respondents were eliminated giving a final total of **65 respondents** comprising of 38 males and 27 females. Maximum no. of respondents were from the 26-35 age group (30 respondents) followed by 18-25 age (14 respondents) group. See Chart 6.1 below:



6.2 Gender and Internet Usage:

With regards to a cross-tab between gender, internet usage and time spent surfing (Q.1, Q.3 & Q.4) – only 43 respondents (23 male and 20 female) access the internet through their smartphone, followed by 15 respondents at home. Furthermore, 78% respondents access the internet everyday out of which 35 respondents surf through their mobiles. This shows that there is great scope in advertising to consumers through mobile phones which supports **H_1 in set 1 of the hypothesis**. (See tabulation below)

Gender * Where do you Internet mainly from? * How often do you surf on the Internet? Crosstabulation

Count

How often do you surf on the Internet?			Where do you Internet mainly from?				Total
			Home	Work	College	All the time (mobile)	
Everyday	Gender	Male	11		0	19	30
		Female	3		2	16	21
	Total		14		2	35	51
Once in a week	Gender	Male	0			1	1
		Female	1			0	1
	Total		1			1	2
Only at work	Gender	Male		4		3	7
		Female		1		4	5
	Total			5		7	12

6.3 Social Media & Internet :

For checking the primary purpose of surfing in Q.5 – 38 respondents that is 58% use Internet mainly for accessing social media, followed by Leisure which 22 respondents and finally work which was 5 respondents. When a cross-tab was done with internet usage (Q.3), it was discovered that 32 respondents which is approx. 50% of respondents use their mobile phones to access social media which support **H_1 in set 1 and 3 of the hypothesis.**

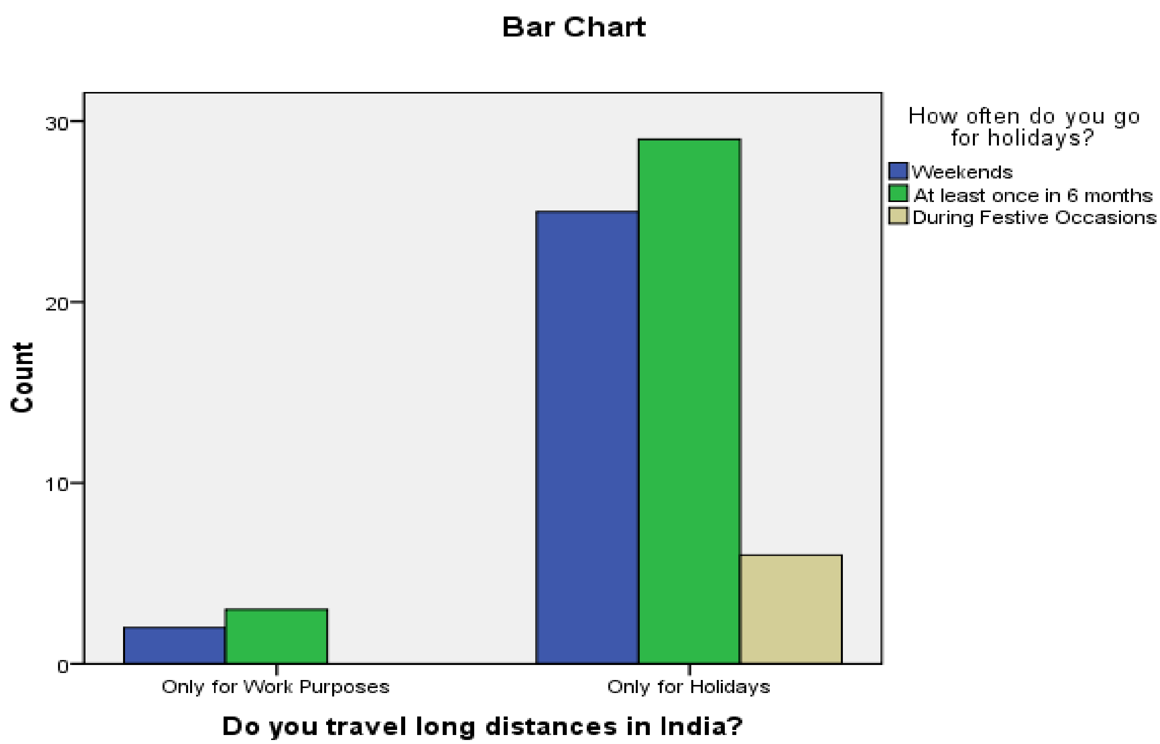
Where do you use Internet mainly from? * What do you use Internet primarily for? Crosstabulation

Count

		What do you use Internet primarily for?			Total
		Social Media	Work	Leisure	
Where do you use Internet mainly from?	Home	4	0	11	15
	Work	0	0	5	5
	College	2	0	0	2
	All the time (mobile)	32	5	6	43
	Total	38	5	22	65

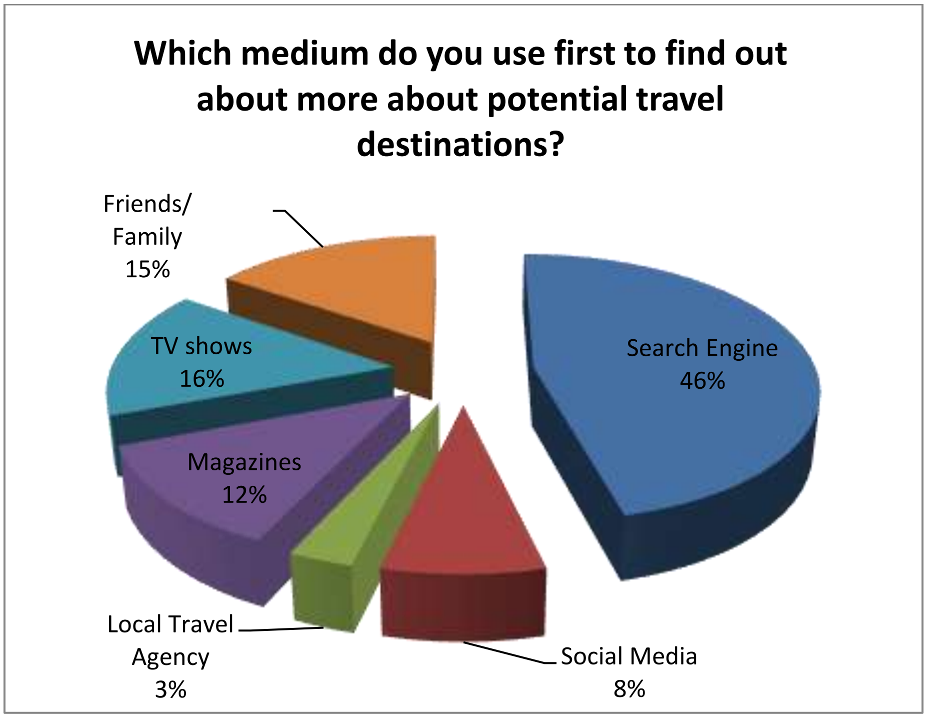
6.4 Long Distance Holiday frequency in India:

For studying holiday frequency in India among sample size and its purpose, a cross-tab was done between Q.6 & Q.7 respectively – which revealed that 60 respondents travel long distances only for holiday purposes out of which 25 travel on weekends and 29 go once in at least six months while 6 only travel long distances on festive occasions. The remaining 5 respondents only travel long distance for work purposes. This only proved that sheer majority of sample size likes to travel whenever they have the time as well as make time once in 6 months proving that local tourism is popular within India. See Chart 6.3 below:



6.5 Medium used the most to find out about potential travel destinations:

The result surprisingly were dominated firstly by Search Engine (46% respondents), followed with a tie of 10 respondents for TV shows and Friends/family (approx. 15.5% each). This was followed by magazines (8 respondents) then social media having only 5 respondents and the lowest of 2 respondents was Local Travel Agency. This point supported **H_1 in Set 1 but in H_0 in sets 2 & 3.** See Chart 6.5 below.

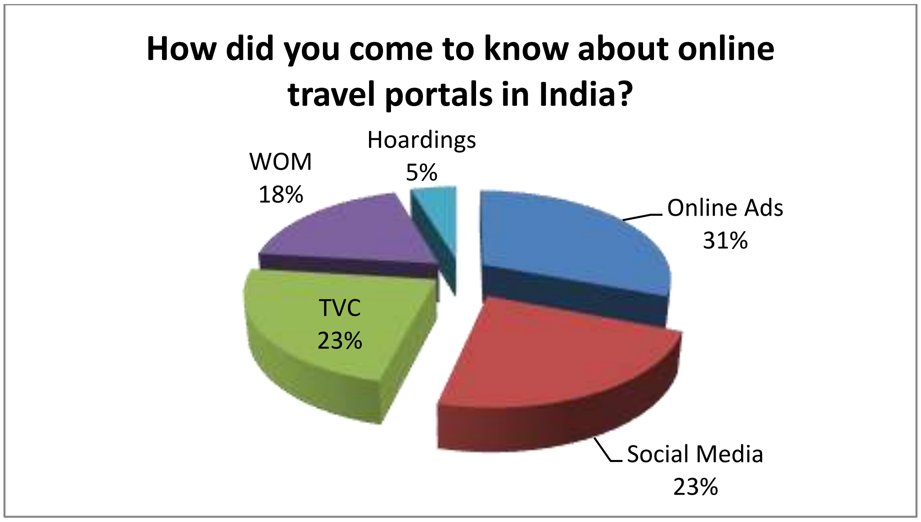


6.6 Medium of enquiry:

However, a cross-tabulation of medium for enquiry with which arrangements to look for (Q.8 and Q.9) was done which revealed that 50 respondents were interested in knowing travel and stay arrangements and only 15 wanted to know about travel (itinerary and schedule) whereas no respondent wanted to only check stay arrangements (accommodation). Out of 65 respondents, 28 did a general internet search for both travel and stay arrangements, followed by 15 respondents who used an online travel website/portal followed by others going to travel agencies or local bus/train stations. A further cross-tab of the same with age revealed that respondents who were in age group of 55+ visited Local travel agencies and train/bus stations most and only 2 respondents did a general internet search. This finding serves as a precursor to the next ones.

6.7 Awareness of Travel Portals in India:

A frequency was taken for Q.11 to find which source they came to know of online travel portals in India. The highest response of 20 respondents was Online Ads (banners, flash ads) followed by a tie of 15 respondents between Social Media and TVC (Television Commercials) respectively. This was followed by WOM having 12 respondents and finally hoardings. This finding supports **H_1 in set 1 and 3 of the hypothesis.** See Chart 6.7 below



6.8 Usage of Travel Portals for Final Booking:

It was found that only 5 respondents always use online travel portals and 10 have rarely used it to make final bookings. The majority of 50 respondents said they never went ahead with an online final booking. Hence, a cross-tab was done to find the reason and the results were that out of 50 respondents – majority were worried about refunds (20 respondents), followed by online transaction security concerns (15 respondents), followed by complicated process (10 respondents) and 5 respondents said that it lacked a personal touch. However, all of this supports **H_0 in set 2 of the hypothesis.**

If no to Q.12, why did you not make your final booking through website? * How often do you use online portals to make final bookings? Crosstabulation

Count

		How often do you use online portals to make final bookings?			
		Always	Rarely	No,not till date	Total
If no to Q.12, why did you not make your final booking through website?		5	9	1	15
	Security Issue	0	1	14	15
	Complicated process	0	0	10	10
	Refund or Cancellation	0	0	20	20
	No personal Touch	0	0	5	5
Total		5	10	50	65

6.9 Reason of Preference of Online Travel Portals/websites:

A total of 30 respondents agreed that they still prefer online travel portals because they offer Instant Bookings, last minute deals, user reviews and variety of options (choices in order of highest to lowest). But 15 respondents said that they would prefer online depending on the urgency and hence they did not specify any reason for the same. This supports **H_1 in set 1 & 2 of the hypothesis.**

If yes to Q.15, what makes Online Travel Portals better than local Travel Agencies? * Do you still prefer Online travel portals (virtual) to travel agents (physical)? If no, go to Q.17 Crosstabulation

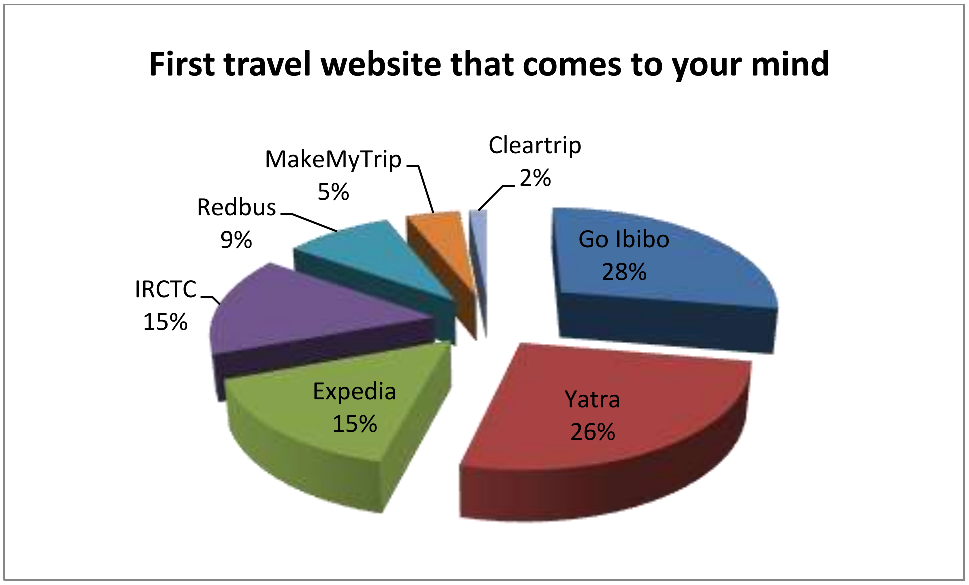
Count

		Do you still prefer Online travel portals (virtual) to travel agents (physical)? If no, go to Q.17			Total
		Yes	No	Depends on Urgency	
If yes to Q.15, what makes Online Travel Portals better than local Travel Agencies?		0	20	15	35
	Last minute Deals	8	0	0	8
	User Reviews	6	0	0	6
	Variety of Options	4	0	0	4
	Instant Booking	12	0	0	12
Total		30	20	15	65

6.10 With reference to cross tabulation of **6.9** above - Out of 20 respondents who said to the above that they would prefer a local travel agency – 12 respondents chose Trip Customization and 8 respondents chose personalized customer service which supports **H_0 in set 2 of the hypothesis.**

6.11 Brand Recall:

The open-ended question to naming the first travel website they could remember was as follows in Chart 6.11 below:



As we can see from all of the above cross- tabulations and graphs, majority of the findings complement with the research hypothesis and objectives.

7. Recommendations & Future Study

7.1 Online Community Integration travel Online – It is recommended that members with a strong interest in certain kinds of travel products and services can gather together online to exchange information and experiences regarding purchasing and consumption. It is then that community members are able to easily access greater amounts of relevant information needed to plan a trip.

7.2 Mobile Advergames: It is recommended that Mobile/ cellphone/smartphone Games be developed especially for a brand with deep integration of the brand into the game. A game is specially built around a brand, aimed to develop association and strong recall for the brand. A brand is placed in a game such that it is an integral part of the game and creates many opportunities for the consumer to interact with it. This would also extend to banner ads on gaming sites and monetized by advertising units sold around the game.

7.3 Smart TVs – A great area for future study would be the new digital services incorporate interactive services facilitating home shopping and providing the opportunity for customers to purchase travel and tourism through their remote control

7.4 Search Engine Marketing – It is a useful area for future research. Overall it must comprise of 3 steps - (1) the pre-search conditions that drive the search process, (2) the actual search process including search strategies and the frames used to evaluate search results, and (3) the evaluation of the overall search process that culminates in attitude formation toward search engines.

8. Limitations of Research

There were certain limitations which must be noted by the reader which were faced by the researcher:

8.1 Not too many Indian publications on Digital Marketing

8.2 Data (figures) on Indian online travel usage was difficult and did not seem accurate and conflicted in different sources

8.3 More time would be required to study and understand dynamics of websites to understand consumer reactions in terms of content

8.4 Sample size was comparatively too small to understand entire Indian scenario

9. Conclusion

Marketers can plan and strategize, but cannot choreograph consumer behavior. This year of 2013 will be the defining year for mobile internet growth in India. As the online travel industry matures it will be important for brands to provide increasing functionality, ease of use and security to its users to effectively compete in this growing market. Marketing with the advent of digital has radically changed in the last few years, perhaps more than any other business role — and this progress will continue as marketers become more focused, swift and single-minded. From the research conducted most respondents were using the internet in some way to make travel enquiries.

Keeping the above in mind, it can be concluded that with over 150 million internet users and 100 million social network user database, India as a market is ripe for a boom in online tourism sales but this form of marketing goes far beyond posting a timely tweet, a status update or even a blog posting. Travel portal brands will have to expand the use of real time social analytics, promote user generated content and make quick decisions around trending relevant topics. It will certainly be a challenge in the current Indian marketing culture but nonetheless Indian consumers will have to eventually embrace this new form of online tourism marketing.

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