

Social Media and Destination Branding: Promoting Sikkim as an Ecotourism Destination using Facebook

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Abstract

Sikkim; a north-eastern Himalayan state of India was recognized by Lonely Planet as the top region to visit in the year 2014. In the Sikkim's Tourism Policy 2015, it was recognized by the Government of Sikkim to create a strong online presence for Sikkim Tourism through websites, mobile applications and social media with well researched and up to date information. A total of 21 pages and 12 groups which correspond to Sikkim were found in Facebook when searched with the keyword "Sikkim Tourism" or Sikkim Ecotourism" as of June 16, 2016. The findings of the study underscore the wide diversity of groups in range of videos, photos and members. The results suggest that neither "Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation" nor "Sikkim Government Official Tourism Website" had a link for social network, in order to promote their brand. The Official Government Tourism Website didn't maximize the utility of Facebook as an important marketing tool. Implications of the findings are discussed and directions for future research are provided. In this context, this paper aims to provide valuable insights regarding brand building elements in tourism destination management through Facebook groups and pages. This paper will also evaluate the possibilities to maximize the utility of Facebook groups and pages related to tourism as potent marketing tools.

Keywords: Social Media, Facebook, Destination Branding, Sikkim Tourism, Sikkim Ecotourism

Introduction:

The fast-paced technological development of Online-Social-Mobile has brought powerful and sustainable changes to how we think and act. A user no longer simply acts as an information-taker rather each user is also an information-provider. Communication no longer takes place unidirectional but multi directionally. This is particularly important as the social media and especially Facebook has gained billions of users around the world. It is interesting to know that if we take into account total number of active users of Facebook then it would be world's largest country leaving China and India behind. As of the first quarter of 2016, Facebook had **1.65 billion** monthly active users. At the same time the number of outbound trips worldwide increased by 4.5% in 2015 with more than 1.2 billion international tourist arrivals worldwide. The proliferation of Internet has absolutely changed the way we travel. The five key stages of travelling are:

1. Inspiration
2. Information
3. Booking
4. Travel
5. Post Experience

There are social media reference points which connect the every phase of travel with actual travel itself. Each journey requires an initial impulse, a primary idea, which tells a traveler

where he or she could go. This inspiration begins with a need, a dream of seeing other places, getting to know different cultures and taking a break from mundane life. The source of this idea could be anything like a friend's travel story, a film, a photo, a blog/webpage, social media etc. With the increasing consumption of media this is where a large portion of determination is made.

Once travelers have an initial idea about a destination, they then start to gather information. The process of information gathering usually begins with search engine which produces results like wikis, web sites, blogs, and user generated content sites like YouTube. Once the preliminary information is gathered from these sources the user starts to look for specific information where someone can answer their queries related to their choice of destination. Here comes the role of review sites like "Trip Advisor" and social networks like "Facebook". In Facebook, specific questions about experiences are asked and answered. The reason is pretty simple "People trust the information from people they know more than the travel catalogue". Therefore, fundamental importance of social media also in the information phase is clearly evident.

1. Booking – The amount of travel booked online is growing each year. Advantages are a cheaper price, transparency, best-price guarantees, speed etc.
2. Travel – The smart phone is a constant and essential companion when we travel. Smart phones and internet services are often used more intensively on vacation than in daily life.

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The list of digital services while travelling is practically unlimited. We use it:

- To take, edit and share photos and videos
 - To stay in contact with our loved ones
 - To navigate through the vacation destination
 - To read evaluations of pubs and restaurants etc.
3. Post Experience – Traveler use social media to share photos, videos and texts with friends and family. Besides they review accommodations, attractions and services. Each of these can thereby become the start of a new trip, an initial idea, which has potential of a new Journey.

Review of Literature

To set up the proper context of this research work the available literature was divided into several theoretical areas which need to be established one by one. At first, the study describes the new online trends (like web 2.0 and Social media) and then determined their significance in travel industry. This was followed by an understanding of consumer demand for new technologies which made it compulsory for travel industry to embrace it. Finally the literature was used to establish how business is using the new technologies for destination branding and personalized services to customers.

Social Media

“Social Media are a variety of digital media and technologies which enable users to exchange information, network and create digital content, both individually and collectively.” Social media is based on the principle of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 could be described as the phenomenon of the Internet’s further development into a platform with participation possibilities, whereas Social Media could be described as the sum of all of the communication platforms. In the Web 2.0 the role of a user has changed from a passive information receiver to active information provider. It has been developed as a collaborative platform which is continuously growing to accommodate the participants as well the technological innovations.

A fundamental principle of social media is linking and a quick, simple exchange of information. This basic nature of social media has revolutionized the tourism industry like never before. Worldwide a large number of people are connecting to each other to share a vast pool of information which is becoming a key factor before making any travel decisions. In this context two key areas are predicted by tourism industry to utilize tourism technology. First area is the marketing of tourism destination or, destination

branding through multiple online platforms like search engine marketing, social media marketing, mobile and location based marketing etc. and secondly the information management system to understand the unique need of the customers and delivering the personalized solutions to them. (UNWTO, 2011)

Since 2008, the growth rate for social media marketing spending has surpassed other marketing strategies like search engine marketing, display marketing, email marketing and even television marketing. This change is largely due to the shifting preference of consumer behavior. According to the 2013 Portrait of American Travelers study, 82% of travelers trust recommendations from friends and family, 74% of US travelers have a Facebook profile and one out of three travelers’ reference social media as a main source of travel ideas and inspiration. A large number of travelers are communicating, reviewing and recommending products and experiences to their friends and family through social media which leads to referrals, and bookings. (Patterson, 2013)

Why People Share

The New York Times customer insight group published a study to understand the psychology of sharing on social media. The study covered few important drive behind sharing like; primary motivation for sharing, sharing personas, cycle of sharing, impact of sharing on information management etc. among others. There is nothing new in sharing; people are always sharing since the beginning of humanity. It is just that with the social media at disposal we share more. We share more content – from more sources – with more people – more often – more quickly. From the NYT study the key fact that came out is; *sharing is all about relationship*. People share:

1. To bring valuable and entertaining content to others to enrich their lives
2. To define themselves to others
3. To grow and nourish relationship
4. To let others know about things they care (nytmarketing)

Destination Branding

The term Brand can be defined as “..distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods from those of competitors”. (Aaker, 1991) Branding was also identified as ‘the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers’ due to

“increasing product parity, substitutability and competition”. (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002)

The concept of branding does not only apply to consumer products: it can also be applied to services and more recently, destinations. Tourists perceive a destination as if it was a product and they evaluate its attributes on both a cognitive and an affective basis. However, branding a destination is quite different than branding a consumer product. A tourist destination is much more multi-dimensional and a composite of many different products than a consumer good. (Schaar, 2013) Generally, the place has been around for generations and is defined by its history, culture, topography, way of life, built and natural environment, and people. So it would not be appropriate to claim that a destination brand can be created. Destination branding is about identifying the destination’s strongest and most competitively appealing assets in the eyes of its prospective visitors, building a story from these that makes the destination stand out above its competitors, and running this narrative consistently through all marketing communications. (Observer, 2015) What persuades tourists to visit one similar place over another is the emotional connection they feel towards the destination. Destination brands give visitors an assurance of quality experiences, reduce visitor search costs and offer a way for destinations to establish a unique selling proposition (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

Facebook: The best-known and most significant Social Network

Facebook is the world’s largest Social Network. It provides branding opportunity to an individual and an organization alike. Following Facebook related statistics says all about it:

1. Worldwide, there are over 1.65 billion monthly active Facebook users as of May 2016 which is a 15 percent increase year over year.
2. Approximately 1.09 billion People log onto Facebook daily as of March 2016, which represents a 16% increase year over year
3. Age 25 to 34, at 29.7% of users, is the most common age demographic
4. Five new profiles are created every second
5. Facebook users are 76% female and 66% male
6. Photo uploads total 300 million per day
7. Average time spent per Facebook visit is 20 minutes
8. 4.75 billion Pieces of content shared daily as of May 2013

9. 16 Million Local business pages have been created as of May 2013 which is a 100 percent increase from 8 million in June 2012 (Zephoria, 2016)

In 2012, Facebook reviewed that 42% of stories shared to users Facebook timelines were travel experiences, more than anything else. Tourism marketers are eyeing into this consumer behavior to generate awareness, inspiration and visitation. This makes Facebook one of the most powerful social media channel for travel marketers because of the platform’s purchasing process.

Facebook Overview

Facebook offers a variety of solutions for online presence of an individual or an organization. It includes Personal Profile, Page, Page for Events, Automatically compiled Community Page based on popular topic of interest, Groups, Apps and Game for developer with specific page, Share Button, Like Button etc.

The News Feed is the starting point of each Facebook user which includes status updates, photos, videos, links, apps, friends’ activities and related pages. In news feed two important categories are Top Stories (a selection from all the entries) and Most Recent (which shows all of the most recent entries). The order of the elements is governed by hundreds of secret factors not completely disclosed by Facebook but mainly depends on following:

1. The interest in the post’s originator (how deep are the social ties, how often do they interact)
2. The performance of the current posting (the number of interactions such as “Likes”, comments and shares)
3. The performance of the author’s previous entries
4. The type of posting (text, video or photo)
5. The posting’s up-to-datedness

Destination related Page and Group

The destination page can have information like nature of the business, contact and operating hours, call now features etc.

Research Methodology

Objective

In order to estimate if and how the Sikkim is being promoted as a prime brand of ecotourism in India and globally through social media, a research has been carried out to study the

Mediterranean tourism destination branding through Facebook groups.

Research Design

The first analysis was made on the content of the Facebook groups/pages, whereas the second analysis tries to examine the link of social media to official websites of Sikkim tourism promoted by the Government. As per the objective of the research total 21 Facebook pages (Table 7: Facebook Page Related to Tourism/Ecotourism on Sikkim) and 12 Facebook groups (

Table 8: Facebook Page Related to Tourism/Ecotourism on Sikkim) were chosen.

Each of them was chosen based on the result which was obtained while doing the Facebook search with the keyword "Sikkim Tourism" or Sikkim Ecotourism". Using these search terms one can assure the availability of adequate data and appropriate discussion on each of these 'groups' and 'pages'. Upon careful examination, several groups and pages which were otherwise related to Sikkim but not related to tourism promotion were not taken into consideration.

Each of 21 Facebook pages and 12 Facebook groups were visited irrespective of the creators

being official tourism body or an individual user. Afterwards, all posts were carefully examined and several points of information were recorded.

By the norm of the Facebook, only a registered user can access any of the Facebook Page or Group. To fulfill the condition, the author carried out the research using his personal login to log into the Facebook Groups or to like the Facebook Page for data collection.

While collecting the data particular attention was paid to those 'groups' and 'pages' which have a significant number of members or likes respectively. After entering each page specific variables, such as the name of the page, category, number of members, photos and videos, were identified. The collected variables were placed in a table so they could be analyzed.

A comparison with external sites has also been made. Total 7 Official websites of the Sikkim tourism (Table 9: Official tourism websites related to Ecotourism in Sikkim) have been found. After describing the general impression of the site, the next step was to determine whether there were links that refer to Facebook. The survey was carried out from May 22, 2016 till June 15, 2016. The data was updated till June 15, 2016.

Table 7: Facebook Page Related to Tourism/Ecotourism on Sikkim

Sl.	Page Name	Managed By	Total Page Like	People Talking About This	URL
1	North Bengal & Sikkim Tourism	Local/Travel website	3729	24	https://web.facebook.com/wbsk.tourism/?ref=br_rs
2	Sikkim Tourism	Wild Films India www.wildfilmsindia.com	2563	32	https://web.facebook.com/Sikkim-Tourism-637123129638595/?ref=br_rs
3	Sikkim Tourism & Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim	http://www.sikkimtourism.gov.in	2028	16	https://web.facebook.com/Sikkim-Tourism-Civil-Aviation-Department-Govt-of-Sikkim-323273257827938/?fref=ts
4	Department of Tourism & Civil Aviation, Government of Sikkim	http://www.sikkimtourism.gov.in/	2010	13	https://web.facebook.com/Department-of-Tourism-Civil-Aviation-Government-of-Sikkim-1507769649478700/?ref=br_rs
5	South Sikkim Maniram Village Tourism	http://www.sstds.com	1902	65	https://web.facebook.com/SouthSikkimManiramVillageTourism/?ref=br_rs
6	North Bengal & Sikkim Village Tourism	http://www.homestayinsikkim.com/	1690	4	https://web.facebook.com/homestayinsikkim/?ref=br_rs

7	Sikkim Visit	Travel Agency	1248	10	https://web.facebook.com/Sikkim-Visit-896567833728041/
8	Sikkim United Tourism Organization	http://www.sikkimunitedtourism.org/	1248	9	https://web.facebook.com/SikkimUnitedTourismOrganization/?ref=br_rs
9	Eco-Tourism & Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS)	Non-Governmental Organization http://www.sikkiminfo.net/ecoss/index.html	1171	8	https://web.facebook.com/ecotourismandconservationsocietyofsikkim/?ref=br_rs
10	Sikkim Tourism, Government of Sikkim	http://sikkimtourism.gov.in/	1119	17	https://web.facebook.com/SikkimTourism.gov.in/?ref=br_rs
11	Sikkim Mountains International Tours & Expedition (SMITE)	Travel Agency http://www.sikkimtravelinfo.com/	561	15	https://web.facebook.com/SMITE-Sikkim-Mountains-International-Tours-Expedition-936793866380336/?ref=br_rs
12	Gnathang-Machong Eco Tourism	Eco Tourism Cooperative Society	540	20	https://web.facebook.com/gmetdcs/
13	Sikkim Tamu Tour and Treks	Travel Agency http://www.sikkimtravel.in/	507	11	https://web.facebook.com/tamutourandtreks/?ref=br_rs
14	Hee Bermiok Tourism Development and Heritage Conservation Society	Community Page about Tourism http://www.dhungayhomestay.com/	285	1	https://web.facebook.com/Hee-Bermiok-Tourism-Development-and-Heritage-Conservation-Society-LTDcom-126820867415549/?ref=br_rs
15	Indian Himalayan Center for Adventure & Ecotourism, Sikkim (IHCAE)	Educational Institute www.ihcaesikkim.org	269	0	https://web.facebook.com/IHCAE-Indian-Himalayan-Center-for-Adventure-Eco-Tourism-Sikkim-624175297656436/?ref=br_rs
16	Kitam Village Tourism & Ecotourism	Village Homestay Service Provider	241	10	https://web.facebook.com/Kitam-Village-Tourism-Ecotourism-1671507363077461/?ref=br_rs
17	Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS)	Non-Governmental Organization www.sikkimhomestay.com	191	2	https://web.facebook.com/Ecotourism-and-Conservation-Society-of-Sikkim-ECOSS-182270725157137/?ref=br_rs
18	Envis centre Sikkim on Ecotourism (Sikkim State Council of Science & Tech.)	http://www.scstsensis.nic.in	191	3	https://web.facebook.com/Envis-centre-Sikkim-on-Ecotourism-1573876189534063/?ref=br_rs
19	Sikkim Eco Tourism	Travel Agency http://www.sikkimecotourism.com	162	5	https://web.facebook.com/Sikkim-Eco-Tourism-1085577568160978/?ref=br_rs
20	ENVIS Ecotourism (ENVIS centre Sikkim)	www.scstsensis.nic.in	141	30	https://web.facebook.com/ENVIS-Ecotourism/?ref=br_rs
21	Sikkim Green Valley Treks & Tours	Travel Agency http://www.sikkimuttareyhimalayan.com	104	7	https://web.facebook.com/Sikkim-Green-Valley-Treks-Tours-244028272471572/?ref=br_rs

Table 8: Facebook Page Related to Tourism/Ecotourism on Sikkim

Sl.	Group Name	Group Type	Total Group Member	Number of Photos	Number of Videos	URL
1	Visit Sikkim	Public	38402	>1000	15	https://web.facebook.com/groups/visitsikkim/
2	Sikkim Tourism Stake Holders	Closed	1583	>1000	1	https://web.facebook.com/groups/158924104272308/?ref=br_rs
3	Visit Darjeeling & Sikkim	Public	1448	>1000	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/510071692444817/?ref=br_rs
4	Sikkim Eco Tourism	Closed	871	39	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/sikkimecotour/?ref=br_rs
5	Sikkim (Travel Group)	Public	679	4	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/Sikkim.Place/?ref=br_rs
6	Sikkim eco-tourism	Public	566	82	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/698305983601969/?ref=br_rs
7	Northeast Frontiers	Public	522	39	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/sikkimtourism/?ref=br_rs
8	Mission: Stand by the Tourism Industry North Bengal and Sikkim	Public	512	37	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/406272369397884/?ref=br_rs
9	Sikkim United Tourism Organization	Closed	485			https://web.facebook.com/groups/info.suto/?ref=br_rs
10	Gangtok	Public	473	10	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/gangtok1/?ref=br_rs
11	Travel and Tourism East Sikkim by Dibyendu	Public	171	2	1	https://web.facebook.com/groups/851220618266603/?ref=br_rs
12	Sikkim Tourism	Public	75	8	0	https://web.facebook.com/groups/224970350868247/?ref=br_rs

Table 9: Official tourism websites related to Ecotourism in Sikkim

Sl.	Name of the Department	Web Page
1	Department of Forest, Environment & Wildlife Management	http://www.sikkimforest.gov.in/Ecotourism.htm
2	ENVIS Centre: Sikkim Status of Environment and Related Issues	http://www.sikenviis.nic.in/
3	Sikkim Tourism Development Corporation	http://www.sikkimstdc.com/Index.aspx
4	Tourism and Civil Aviation Department	http://www.sikkimtourism.gov.in/Webforms/General/Default.aspx
5	Directorate of Ecotourism	https://www.ecotourismsikkim.com/
6	ENVIS Center on Ecotourism	http://scsenviis.nic.in/index.aspx?langid=1
7	Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP)	http://forestsbfm.nic.in/default.aspx

Findings

The "Likes" and "Talking About" numbers on Facebook

"Likes" simply mean someone at some point, clicked the "like" button once. It could be either directly on a Facebook page or somewhere else as well. "Talking About" is the actual number of people who are 'engaged' and are interacting with that Facebook Page. These people actually come back to the page after liking the page. This includes activities such as comments, likes to a post, shares, etc. by visitors to the page. "Talking about" should be ideally 10% if total page likes is less than 100,000 and it should be 5% if total page likes for a page is more than 100,000.

21 Facebook pages and 12 Facebook groups, which are related to ecotourism in Sikkim, have been organized in Table 7: Facebook Page Related to Tourism/Ecotourism on Sikkim and

Table 8: Facebook Page Related to Tourism/Ecotourism on Sikkim. Out of these 33 groups/pages, a local travel website, "North Bengal & Sikkim Tourism", has maximum number of likes (3676 likes) while a public group "Visit Sikkim" has maximum number of group members (38402 members). It has been noted that 'Visit Sikkim', 'Sikkim Tourism Stake Holders' and 'Visit Darjeeling & Sikkim' had a big range of photos in their groups. By examining the range of videos, it was found that most Facebook groups/pages suffer from the lack of videos despite the great amount of groups and pages related to ecotourism in Sikkim. Many groups/pages were found to have zero photos. For example the Facebook page of 'South Sikkim Maniram Village Tourism' stands at number fifth in terms of number of likes generated for its page (1902 Likes as of June 15, 2016). 65 people (3.5% of total page like) were talking about this at the time of data collection that means this page was also reasonably successful in engaging people, but it has 20 photos and 1 video only to promote the community based ecotourism in Maniram village in Namchi, South Sikkim. That may occur because the creators of the Facebook groups/pages do not promote strongly the official videos for their locality.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examines the brand building elements of tourism destinations, Sikkim in this case, through the social network of Facebook. The result suggests that Sikkim Tourism promotion needs to be aggressive. Though Sikkim is aiming to promote itself as a prime destination of

ecotourism in India and globally but the marketing initiatives lack significantly especially when it comes to online promotion. The official website of "Tourism and Civil Aviation Department of Sikkim" doesn't have link to its official Facebook page (See Table 9: Official tourism websites related to Ecotourism in Sikkim). The findings further reveals negligence since the State tourism department has created two Facebook pages, both claiming to be a official Facebook page having the link of same website (<http://www.sikkimtourism.gov.in/>) but with different posts and activities. The name of first page is "Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Government of Sikkim, Government Organization" and the name of second page is "Sikkim Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim, Travel/Leisure.

A key fact that emerged from this paper is that the 'groups' and 'pages' which had the biggest number of members and likes respectively were from unofficial users, and none of them had been created from professionals marketers. The government agencies didn't provide social networks with such groups. One possible explanation to this is Facebook has not yet been treated in growing tourists market such as India, as a major marketing tool despite of its acceptance in established tourist markets such as European destinations. Another plausible explanation is that social marketing and especially destination branding is still a new term and there are still limited number of success stories to celebrate. The finding of this study also suggests that less number of photos and videos does not automatically imply the less participation by members. It was observed that the participation of members in each group is not solely related to videos and photos, but to other parameters also which attract the attention and participation of the users, such as the topics of discussion and the information available on the tourism destinations.

The study establishes the need of taking urgent steps so that Facebook should be taken more seriously into consideration, as an important marketing tool because of its enormous potential to impact the decision making process of travelers. Social media marketing is a cheap alternative to traditional marketing with high returns (Weiberg, 2009). Active participation in Facebook groups and pages is crucial for the success of any marketing efforts. Furthermore, marketers need to know how to optimize the effectiveness of Facebook to achieve bigger participation from the users. The moderator of the Facebook group/page needs to have a plan based on the target group and specific goals. Social

media marketing facilitates natural discovery of new content, boosts traffic numbers and builds strong relationships (Weiberg, 2009). The present findings suggest that attention should be paid on the video and photo content as they promote specific features of destination brand. Attention should be also given to the topics of discussion on the Facebook, so that marketers could focus on the concrete elements which give a boost to the users' interest. Besides the referred subjects have to be in sync with the unique requirement of the destination in question.

Limitations and Scope of Future Research

The most significant limitation encountered in this study relates to the method of the research. In this case the research was limited only on the geographical area of Sikkim, an Eastern Himalayan State of India. Another limitation is that in order to have access to the groups, a Facebook account is required. The main problem in the data collection was that the number of members, photos and videos was constantly changing. Future research could be possible using a bigger geographical area and emphasis should be more on the elements which motivate users to participate in the Facebook context. Non-observational measurement could be useful to corroborate the results of this study. The paper focuses on the linkage between the Facebook and destination branding. Further studies can focus on ascertaining the effectiveness of social media tools other than Facebook with respect to destination branding. The future study may also look into the tourist preference for different social media platforms in soliciting the opinion about the destination.

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