DESTINATION BRANDING & SOCIAL MEDIA: DEVELOPING THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS FOR THE STATE OF JAMMU & KASHMIR

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Abstract: Social media integration is one of the most preferred and famous platform to promote tourism industry on large scale and various destination management organizations (DMOS) have found social media platforms as the most cost effective and efficient way to reach customers and disseminate information. It is with the aid of electrical media that destinations are highly promoted and are successfully marketed as brands in service markets. Social media has made it highly possible and feasible for various tourism agenises to brand destinations through various content sharing portals and information sharing techniques. The present study is an attempt to conceptually highlight as to how social media can be used for destination branding and how the concept can be applied for the destination branding of Jammu and Kashmir by integrating the use of social media in promotion of the state. Arguments in the paper highlights that social media is essential for the development of tourism in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and conceptually confirms the positive interrelationship between the two. Managerial implications are suggested to the decision (policy) makers who can use social media platforms effectively for positioning the state as a brand.

Keywords: Branding, Destination Branding, Social media, Jammu & Kashmir, Tourism

INTRODUCTION

Destination branding has become the very apex activity in tourism industry to establish, promote and differentiate destinations from each other in respect of unique charms, service quality, and ambience and most important the best experiences (Oliveira & Panyik, 2014). Branding of destinations creates unique brand identity and image for them like any other consumer goods through creation of unique selling proportion (Atadil, Sirakaya-Turk & Altintas, 2015). With the change in the information sharing patterns, customers have started to gather more and more information about the place they want to visit, and this has become incredibly possible due to the flooded information on the electronic platform.

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DMO's have realised that the use of social media not only promotes the destinations but helps in creating and maintaining it unique identity. As a result of the increasing number of travellers throughout the globe a shift has been observed from the conventional sources of information to the socialization arena.

Social media in the context of destination branding is a growing area of study and it can be well witnessed by the exponential growth in social networks over recent years where a direct relationship can be observed between the two (Oliveira & Panyik, 2014). A huge shift has been observed in the increase of global internet users and the whole market has turned into one global technological town where the same information is accessible to almost everyone . Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Social media tools provide an easy, little to no cost, way for members of the public to take part in discussions with larger groups of people and draw attention to issues and topics that traditional news media might have overlooked (Picard, 2009).

Destination branding mainly communicate destination branding message to potential outside tourists which can be effectively done using social media to provide information for tourists related to upcoming or ongoing events that has successfully done by France for connecting with travel journalists using Twitter (Sevin, 2013). Beside Twitter, Facebook is a more effective social networking sites for DMO's according to study conducted by Hays, Page, and Buhalis (2013). In context of the current study, an effort is made to study the importance of social media in destination branding and to evaluate its effective use to promote the state of Jammu and Kashmir as a destination brand. Theoretical propositions are developed after going through an extensive review of literature that could be used by policy makers for the promotion of the state using various social media platforms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Destination Branding

McIntosh *et al.* (2000) define destination brand "as a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience". For a destination, a brand bridges the gap between its given assets and the perceptions of potential visitors (Morgan, 2002). Through destination branding a visitor is able to draw a comparison between various places and makes his choice easier. Destination branding can be defined as a way to communicate a destination's

unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors (Morrison & Anderson, 2002).

It was further added by Qu (2011) that destination brands serve two main functions: identification and differentiation. As with singular product brands, a destination brand is also made up of the components of awareness and image. Even though, there is not a generally accepted definition of destination branding, Blain *et al.* (2005) proposed that "Destination branding is the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk".

With the rapid Changes and development of the tourism sector the competition between products and destinations has increased which in turn has increased tourist expectations thus making it very imperative that tourist destinations must be managed strategically (Pike, 2009). With rising number of destinations to prefer from marketers have to work harder than ever in order to maintain their brand with unique appeal to the consumer, requiring careful positioning strategy (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Ekinci, 2003; Pike, 2009; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). It is the image of the destination that can influence future market of the place, because human behaviour is dependent on image rather than objective reality (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007).

Destination brand differentiates from its competitors based on special meaning and attachment given to it by consumers (Beerli & Martin, 2004). The key to successful branding is that consumers must be in a state to perceive a difference among the brands in a product category (i.e., positioning); because a brand perceived distinctive, unique and appealing is hard to be replaced by other brands. It is more critical to understand what associations of a brand are advantageous over competitors (i.e., points of difference). Points of difference associations help consumers positively evaluate the brand and attach to the brand (Keller, 2008).

Researchers have explained destination image concept in different ways but most recognize two interrelated components, being the conceptual or cognitive image based on information about the objective features of a place – the evaluation of the attributes of its resources and attractions (Page, 2009; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999); and the emotional (more commonly referred to as the affective image, which is to do with an individual's feelings or emotions towards a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Aksoy & Kiyci, 2011). It is the combination of these two elements that form the total image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Aksoy & Kiyci, 2011). Others recognize the equal if not greater importance of the emotional make-up of the

tourists themselves or the affective component (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007; Baloglu & McCleary,1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004) and think that more consideration should be given to the personal factors that influence consumer choice of holiday destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) stressing that age, education, marital status, personal values and motivations can be as important an influence as characteristics of the destination itself (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Hughes, 2008; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). Primary image is formed through actual experience of the destination while secondary image is formed through external information or pre-existing associations (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007). The way these factors contribute to the formation of destination image is discussed in Figure 1.
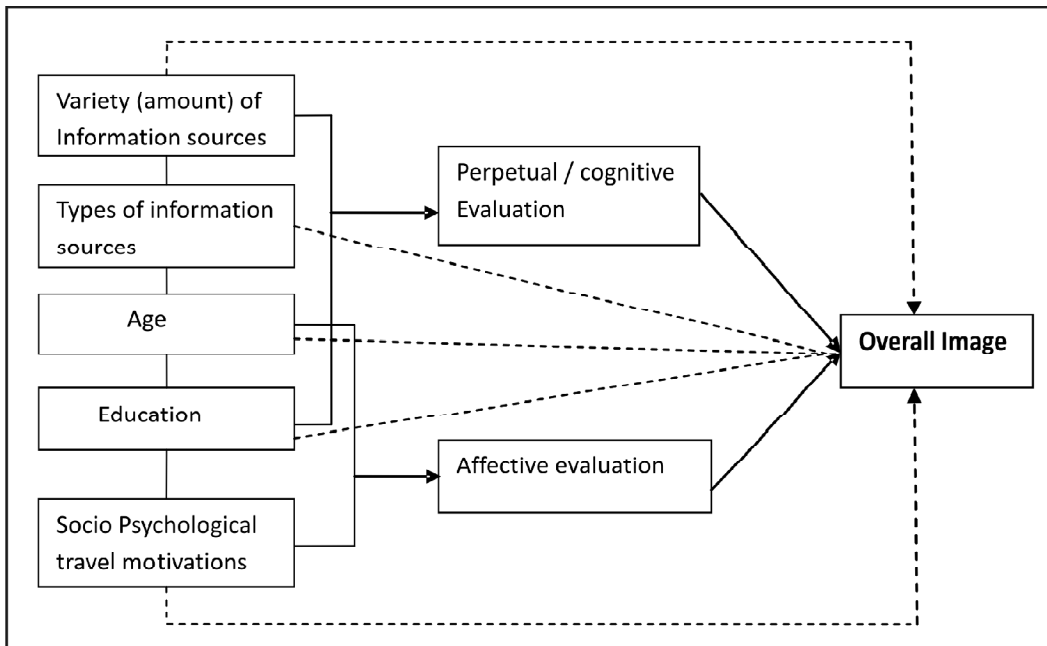

Figure 1: Factors Contributing to Destination Image

Source: Beerli & Martin (2004)

Social Media

Merriam-Webster (2015) define 'social' as "relating or involving activities in which people spend time talking to each other or doing enjoyable things with each other". Being social requires interaction between parties within a community (Merriam-Webster, 2015). Social media is deeply embedded in the lives of their users as they manage a wide range of social activities (Bruns and Bahnisch, 2009). As per Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.

With the onset of the web 2.0 era, the website is no longer just a mere informative page, but a dynamic platform which allows users the autonomous generation of content and the possibility of telling their own experiences through sharing of their ideas on a common arena. Social media allows the uninterrupted flow of information signals from to the user and altering the same for the informative consumption. Social media provides a common platform for sharing of ideas, thoughts and experiences from one to the masses. It refers to a platform for communication of ideas or information that in this case relies on the use of internet (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

Social media websites allow consumers to spread share their experiences and expand their interconnectivity through social networks which facilitate positive or negative review about a destination (Hsu *et al.*, 2012; Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). Social media helps to gather valuable information as to how a product, service or brand is perceived in the marketplace and the place it holds. Goodwill and trust is the fundamental base of SNS, hence accountability as well as fool proof of communication in social media that are important to sustain business to-consumer relationship can be secured (Neti, 2011). Both are also especially important for city marketing and branding since they represent high-level stakeholders and policymakers of cities. Tourism is an 'information-intensive industry', whereas social media is information-abundant and therefore both are relevant with each other (Gretzel *et al.*, 2000). Branding of several destinations might already exist, especially with the invention of geographical-tagging (Yan, 2011). Tourism is one of the sectors where a very close relationship has been observed with the new information dissemination and proper use of communication technologies.

Destination Branding & Social Media

From the past decades a huge contribution has been made by the social media in the promotion of goods as well as services. Social media has proved as the biggest contributor in the overall expansion of the tourism industry and a high intensity trend has been observed where social media helps in brand creation of the destination, which can help a traveller to differentiate one destination from the other through the virtual tour (Kastenholz, Eusébio, & Carneiro, 2013).

Social media has enabled users to come together into virtual communities on the basis of several different grounds may it be on the personal acquaintance, on the basis of a common place of residence or on the similarity in professions and matching interests (Grace & O'Cass; 2002). Social media is the consumer-generated and managed media and they represent a diverse source of online information that are created, driven and used by consumers with the intent of informing each other about products, brands, services, as well as problems they have encountered. The various types of sites that are used for sharing content on internet. These are social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Face party), creativity works sharing

sites (YouTube, Flickr, Jamendo.com, Piczo.com, Creative Commons), user-sponsored blogs (The Apple Weblog, Cnet.com), collaborative sites (Wikipedia), virtual worlds (second life), commercial communities (eBay, Amazon.com, Craig's List, iStock photo, Threadless.com) and Business networks (LinkedIn).

Social media has found its application in almost all the walks of the life; through social media destination management organizations are not only able to communicate with their potential consumers, but also to position themselves on a very different scale. Social media has provided a platform where consumers can interact with each other and share their experience (Eraqi, 2006). Information Communication Technology has successfully transformed tourism industry practices worldwide. Factors including development of the Internet, a new wave of web based communities known as Web 2.0 (e.g. Facebook; twitter; instagram; YouTube, trip advisor), have changed market conditions for tourism organisations and destinations and have provided them a base for developing as destination brands (Buhalis *et al.,* 2011).

With more frequent use of technology there is an open technological platform to communicate the tourism potential of the places(eg websites and social media) from to The increasing competition in the worldwide has put hard pressures on tourism destinations that try to promise long-run economic success as well as sustainability (Kastenholz, Eusébio, & Carneiro, 2013). The convolution of the destination branding exercises thus requires appropriate digital strategies to face the advancement of digital technologies. The application of right tools and well planned strategies for destinations is very much required for successful destination branding. Munro and Richards (2011) well stated that an effective digital destination branding strategy should strategically position and set off stories that address the destination negative points. The use of information communication technologies (ICT's) the tourism industry has entered a new Phase, where the customers can evaluate the attractiveness of the destination before actually visiting it. ICT as an effective tool helps to coordinate stakeholders more effectively (Buhalis, 1997), as well as to boost the multiplier effects in the regional economy (Buhalis and Spada, 2000).

The implementation of destination branding strategies requires a strong vision, focus and commitment of time. The right people, resources and changes in policy decision-making, culture and mindset (Balakrishnan, 2009; Balmer, 2001; de Chernatony and Riley, 1998). Therefore, based on the fact that social media are frequently updated and as well as the fact that sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Trip Advisor, etc. allow consumers to share their experiences in different ways by posting their comments, pictures and videos, it is very much important that the tourist destination branding process must not neglect the role and potential of social media (Xiang & Gretze, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STATE OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

The state of Jammu and Kashmir is one of the strongest competitions as tourist destination in the northern part of the India (Jain, 2013). Massive campaign is needed to place it among the most preferred destination brands (). Use of proper platform for the dissemination of the information, so that the fastest reach to the customers is assured. The need of the hour is that the central and the state government take timely actions to promote the state through the proper blend of the web services and use of the social media sites. There is a need to connect, realign or create new business plans which would encourage innovation and create competitive advantage for service delivery. Automated marketing which ultimately enhances customer relationship management and use of appropriate channels for the dissemination of the desired information, so that the fastest and convenient way is chosen to reach the masses. Need of the hour is to create a brand with unique features that differentiate it from the competition as well as management of brand through the right positioning to stimulate and affect consumer's perceptions.

Social media has changed the way people communicate unlike the way it was before. People from all the corners of the world have a common platform where they can share their ideas and put their views. With the change in the dynamics of information sharing, the trend in sharing travel related contents have found new directions, where no longer destinations are hidden treasures just due to the lack of knowledge among the traveller's. Social media platforms are a great tool to promote city tourism both directly and indirectly. The main goal of DMO is to influence users to finally make purchasing decision to travel-related product, and this is achieved by interaction. Good quality content should also have broad marketing strategy that accommodates various stakeholders and policymakers interests.

Integration with other marketing activities is also a necessary condition for an effective use of social media in destination branding. Integration can be varied from online marketing platforms such as other social media or websites, traditional place branding, as well as physical place branding. In order to achieve good integration with other marketing platform, DMO should first guarantee a flexible marketing policy to enable various integration experiments Physical place brand as the subject of social media branding has to first be of a good quality as well based on the above carried work, we suggest that in-depth market analysis should be done in the state, in order to establish a successful Tourism destination brand. Moreover the process should include the proper inputs by the internet tools to increase destinations recognition. The paper further makes it clear that social media is the core player for enhancing the tourism activity and instigating the desire of travel among the travellers, thus the same if blended in the tourism promotion of the state would yield favourable results and will eventually help in creating a unique brand for the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Theoretical Propositions

Tourism industry is one among the most important industries of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The state of Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of tourist arrivals. with the increase in information sharing trend and statistics, it is very much imperative for the tourism industry and DMO's of the state to adhere to the various platforms of the social media not only to disseminate information among the visitors but also to position the state as a brand through the same medium. In context of the same, theoretical propositions has been worked out which can be adhered by various agencies to use social media as an effective tool to help in the promotion of the state.

Proposition 1: The content present in the social media or circulated through the social media should be of good quality for an effective application in destination branding for the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

One of the major objectives of the social media is to have a good content that is easily understood by the customers. The message should be clear with the message it wants to communicate. When a message is clearly delivered to the customers it becomes very easy for them to accept destination as brands (Yan, 2011). In the case of Destination branding, the DMO's should be clear about the message and the image of the destination they want to create through social media platform i.e. the creation of the physical place brand. According to Seisdesos (2006), physical place brand is not limited to historical buildings or architectures, but also culture, events, attraction, etc. Thus with the extended use of the social DMO's are likely to influence the purchasing decisions of the users to travel-related product, and develop trust as well as long-term relationship. The tourism industry of the Jammu and Kashmir should make sure that the information that reaches to the travellers is of good
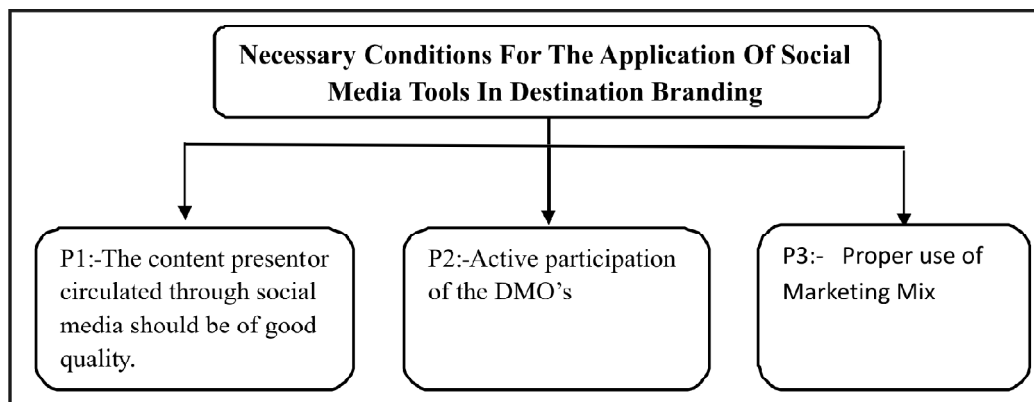

Figure 2: Theoretical Propositions

quality. The travellers should be given complete and updated information about the destination. This is because of the fact that the information shared through the online media is a source of promoting a destination virtually and the destination that satisfies a traveller virtually would finally be the choice he will take.

Proposition 2: Active Involvement of the DMO is necessary for the application or use of social media platforms in destination branding of Jammu and Kashmir

In the case of destination branding, active involvement from DMO is one of the key demands to create influence and contributes to trust and long-term relationship (Pradiptarini, 2011). All the DMO's should understand what it means to use the technology efficiently and effectively. The DMO's should understand how social media as a tool can help them to promote and create awareness of the destinations. A successful involvement, together with transparency, not only encourage interaction with consumers, but also establish a sense of membership (Yan, 2011). Use of social media by various DMO's need transparency and require them to be extra careful. The tourism industry of the state should be technically well aware as to how they are promoting the destination and should hire professionals that can actually help in the process. It is very much need of the hour that an active participation from various DMO's and stakeholders is observed were they are very much open to experience the revolution social media can bring in the tourism industry and branding of the state.

Proposition 3: Effective and relevant, in addition to traditional, marketing mix is necessary for the application or use of social media platforms in destination branding for the state of Jammu and Kashmir

Social media has transformed the conduct of consumers and has led to the development of the interactive marketing communication (IMC), unexceptionally in case of destination branding. According to Braun, Eshuis and Klijn (2014) Place branding is one of important communication strategy. The integrated use of social media and traditional place brand can be included to IMC. Social media is recognized as the better approach for word of mouth, or e-WOM. It strengthens traditional word of mouth by rectify its shortcomings. Traditional marketing approaches with electronic word of mouth will create a positive impact to an effective place branding communication. Physical place brand includes historical buildings, architectures, events, cultures, and other assets that have tourism potential (Seisdesos, 2006; Braun, Eshuis & Klijn, 2014). As far the tourism industry of the state is concerned besides adhering to the traditional ways of promotion techniques the new techniques should be introduced which can help in the differentiate promotion of the state.

CONCLUSION

The present study suggests how social media can help to position a destination differently and give it an identity having the potential of making the destination a preferred choice for tourists. It is strongly recommended that tourism providers should actively participate in the application and use of social media in order to reach the potential travellers through developing and implementing innovative and interesting content while providing users with adequate information and timely responses to their concerns and enquiries. This approach, if implemented, by the tourism industry of the Jammu and Kashmir state can help to develop new ways of thinking and even new business models to impress today's hard-to-impress customers. Social networks are certainly one of the easiest forms of promotion and marketing that can reach target audience. Main focus of the current paper is to suggest ways for tourism industry of the Jammu and Kashmir through which they can promote the destination to attract maximum number of potential tourist through the proper use and application of social media platform. Policy makers should assure that the content they are making available for travellers is of good quality and sufficient information is transferred to the travellers in respect of the destination they are visiting thus the implication of proposition $_1$ could help the policy makers of the tourism industry to project the state of Jammu and Kashmir through online media supported with the complete information of the destination , so as to it becomes easy for the travellers to be well informed about the place they are visiting. For the successful and easy flow of information it is very much required that the DMO's and various agencies should welcome the new innovations in the technology and should implement them in the development of the destinations, thus through the implication of proposition $_2$ the tourism industry should make sure that there is an active participation from all the stake holder of the state of Jammu and Kashmir which will help in promoting the state as a brand. Any message is incomplete unless it is not mixed with other marketing strategies, thus proposition $_3$ suggest that the tourism industry of Jammu and Kashmir should come up with a proper blend marketing mix so as to the destination can be promoted through best possible avenues and ways, which are both economical and profitable.

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