

Social Media Use and Impact during Maldivian Travellers' Holiday Planning

Ali Akram and Ahmed Shahid

Abstract

The objectives of this study were to explore how social media is used in travel planning by Maldivian tourists, and to discern the opportunities social media presents as a marketing medium to the Maldivian tourism industry, especially in the budget hotel and local tourism segment. The research findings showed that social media postings by friends were considered a very important source of information compared to traditional sources of advertising. Online ratings and reviews of hotels also influenced their decisions significantly. Additionally, respondents preferred content posted by consumers rather than by hoteliers. Therefore, social media remains a critical element for tourism marketing to a Maldivian audience, demonstrating the importance for hoteliers and marketers to use this medium to gauge their customers' reactions to the services offered; to modify the services to meet the expectations of their customers; and also to reach a wider customer base cheaply and efficiently. As Maldivian social media users frequently post, and are willing to post photos/videos of their holiday experiences on multiple social networking websites, it gives opportunities for marketers to involve users and influencers to promote visual content on social networking sites. Maldivian travellers rely very little on information provided by hotels in their travel decision making. Hence, further investigation is required on how to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of information provided by budget hotels as well as how this information can be accurately corroborated by users.

Keywords: Social media, local tourism, travel planning, marketing

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1. Introduction: Maldives Travel Market

From the first arrival of 22 Italian tourists, in 1972; tourism in the Maldives had burgeoned to over 1.7 million foreign tourist arrivals annually by 2020. The geographical dispersion, isolation, and small size of the islands together with a robust air and sea transportation system were the driving force behind the success of the tourism sector. Microwave technology; and fibre optic submarine cable networks connect the islands to each other and to the neighbouring countries. In 2018, the GDP per capita was \$11,890, compared to \$200 in 1978 (World Bank, 2020), the main contributor to which was tourism.

As of September 2018, there were 789 operational tourist establishments, out of which 155 were resorts and 500 were guesthouses (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). Opening of guesthouses on inhabited islands in the past ten years has contributed to job creation in diving, water sports, agriculture, fishing, retail and food outlets on inhabited islands. Altogether, tourism sector employs between a third (men) and a quarter (women) of all employment in the Maldives (World Bank, 2020).

According to the Maldives Visitor Survey of September 2017, 65% of the visitors said that the most important source of information for travellers arriving in the Maldives that month was the internet, followed by word-of-mouth at 46% (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). The survey also showed that almost 49% of the visitors booked their holidays through Online Travel Agents (OTA) and 16% of the visitors booked online via the resort or hotel website. Most popular OTA used by international travellers was Booking.com followed by Agoda, cTrip, HolidayCheck and Expedia.

The growth in standard of living, easier connectivity through air and sea transportation, and attractive travel packages offered by local travel agents has meant that local tourism also has begun to flourish (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2014). While 40% of the Maldivian national population of 450,000 live in the capital city, Male', the majority of the residents of Male' travel annually to the "home island" to visit family and friends, choosing to holiday on local islands and resorts. According to Maldivians Travelling Abroad Survey, conducted by the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) during December 2017, 33% of Maldivians who travelled abroad went on vacation. Most of the travellers chose Asian countries. Total spending ranged from \$500 to \$1800 per person, and average length of stay ranged from 9 days to 17 days (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2017).

Maldives is one of the most popular island holiday destinations worldwide. Maldives tourism was branded and marketed successfully as the "sunny side of life" with a logo of "sun, sand, and sea

on a small tropical island of your own” image. However, as people search for exclusivity in their tourist experiences, local tourism can play a key role in defining what an exclusive Maldivian, cultural tourism experience can look like. Urban Maldivians seek enclave, uniquely Maldivian cultural experiences for their local island holidays. Local tourism can also pave the way for Maldivian tourism to evolve to a wider spectrum of society by creating niche markets for those seeking family and friend togetherness, fun and entertainment, and new experiences. Revival of such cultural local tourism can only enrich and diversify the Maldivian tourist experience as Maldives rebrands itself as a culture and sports experience/adventure tourist destination (Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation, 2020). Local tourism can also contribute to maintain tourism related revenues during sluggish periods in international travel.

The geographic isolation of Maldivian communities and their small sizes has meant internet-based social media is very popular with Maldivians for keeping in touch with family and friends as well as to search for relevant, and up to date local information. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are the most frequently used social networking platforms presently used by Maldivians. 340,000 Maldivians can be reached with advertisements on Facebook; 150, 000 on Instagram, and 102,000 on Twitter (Kemp, 2020). Most of the Maldivian resorts, hotels, guest houses and travel agents have social media accounts. Some guesthouses use in-house produced content to engage customers whereas other hotels use third parties to manage social media accounts with user-generated contents. Some of the popular Web 2.0 solutions related to tourism marketing used by Maldivian budget hoteliers include Booking.com, Tripadvisor.com, and Agoda.com.

Despite the growing use of social media in travel marketing, the trend of social media as an engagement and adoption strategy in marketing in the hotel industry is relatively at an early stage in the Maldives. Moreover, the influence of social networks on hotel industry in the Maldives remains largely unexplored. In the context of the Maldives, there is very little evidence of research done on how social media influences the decision making process. There is limited research done on pre-trip/purchase holiday making behaviour and what influence do social media play in the decision making process. As such, there is no clear evidence as to the underlying characteristics of social media that affect consumer decisions, nor any information on which social media are influential when choosing especially an island destination as a holiday option. In order to effectively leverage social media, further research is needed to identify what aspects of social media influence consumers to make better decisions about their vacations.

The main aim of this research was to find out how Maldivian holiday makers use social media during the holiday decision making process, and how does this compare to other mediums of information. It also explored at what stage of decision making, social media was mostly used and what kind of content was influential on the destination decision choice. The study explored the opportunities and weaknesses of social media use as a marketing medium in the hotel

industry, especially in the budget hotel and local tourism segment. The purpose of doing the research was to investigate what kind of content influences consumer decision making, thus enable hotels and guesthouses to create content that is relevant to the target consumer group - Maldivian holiday makers.

2. Literature Review: Travel marketing through social media

Social media is a combination of two terms. 'Social' represents interaction between people by sending and receiving information. 'Media' refers to the instruments used to communicate such as the internet, radio, television, books, magazines and newspapers (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). Emergence of the internet-based social media in the mid-1990s, have revolutionised how people communicate and search for information. Social media enables consumers to create and or circulate audio-visual and textual content on personalities, products, services and experiences, termed as user generated content (UGC) (Gretzel, 2006). Some of the popular internet based types of social media are wikis (e.g. wikitravel), blogs (e.g. Travelblog), and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social network sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube), and review sites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Expedia and Google) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

As of 2020, there are about 3.8 billion social network users among 4.5 billion internet users worldwide. On average, people spend one third of their internet time on social media. There are 380,000 internet users in the Maldives and the same number of social media users, indicating that 71% of the population use internet-based social media (Kemp, 2020). Hence, social media provides an excellent opportunity for local tourist destinations to reach potential customers both locally and globally, in the promotion, product distribution, communication, management and research phases of their service provision. Social media also provide opportunities to create interest in different types of travel and tourism experiences. Photos and videos posted on internet-based social media have become the new postcard (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013), giving people status and recognition through their holiday experience, while enabling others to decide on the enjoyment level of the experience, and creating desire to obtain the experience-product.

Social media allow users to connect, collaborate and share content through online communities, facilitating efficient communication between organizations, communities and individuals. This enables for creation of social networks and relations among groups of people or individuals who enjoy similar activities and hobbies, who may have similar backgrounds, experiences, interests and connections beyond their online identities. Hence, social media allows for closer targeting of products and services (Faria & Elliot, 2012).

Internet-based social media has also driven holiday marketers to find innovative ways of marketing using a collaborative process between the seller and the buyer of the holiday experience. Internet based tools, platforms, applications and media are used to make customers not only aware of holiday destinations but also use consumer generated content such as photos, videos, reviews and ratings to add authenticity to the product. At the same time, social media gives consumers the power to challenge the information provided by the seller, through posting, tagging and blogging about their experiences.

There is always a danger that information on social media may not be genuine. Both fake positive and negative reviews can be posted by anonymous sources, paid for by rogue traders, sometimes to increase sales and sometimes to sabotage competition through provision of inaccurate information. Credibility and trustworthiness of information that is available on social media continue to be of concern, especially for those travelling in developing countries and to new destinations (Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008). Travellers rely on user generated content, more than on information provided by or posted by the tourist organisations, travel agents and on mass-media (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012), though this type of information is also considered. Social media posts of friends and family provide incentive to travel to specific destinations, through sharing of travel experiences, photos, reviews and recommendations of where to go, where to stay and what to do while on vacation. Family and friends are the most trusted sources of information (Sigala, Christou & Gretzel., 2012).

2.1 Media Richness Theory and Consumer Decision Making Model

Social media plays an important role in the hospitality industry enabling customers to seek information from multiple sources for their travel planning (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). While people use different tools for making different types of travel planning, social media has a significant influence on holiday planning, especially to new destinations. Social networking platforms and social media have both direct and indirect influence on consumer decision-making process, including recognition of need, evaluating options, purchase and post-purchase experience, as consumers rely on social media to see information on holiday-making (Hutter et al., 2013).

According to consumer decision model by Court et al., (2009) the consumer decision journey contains of four stages. They are: (a) consider; (b) evaluate; (c) buy; and (d) enjoy and advocate and bond (Court, et al., 2009). Social media increasingly becomes relevant in the 'consider' stage where consumers seek information towards deciding their choice of destination. If a friend, colleague or a family member has been on holiday, to a new destination, than this can be a word of mouth incentive to explore the advantages and benefits of holidaying there. In the 'evaluation' stage of decision making, consumers seek sources which will shape their decisions.

For example, some guesthouses ask clients to post property photos as well as destination photos along with photos of activities and services available at the location, on travel review and booking sites. Online ratings and reviews of hotels play an important role in this stage and it represents an opportunity for marketers to carefully craft positive and engaging feedback that are credible, trustworthy and transparent (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Molinilo, 2017; Lu et al., 2016). Since there can be multiple reviews with opposing views, a helpfulness rating is used by most social media platforms, to guide the consumers. Helpfulness ratings depend on textual features such as readability, polarity, subjectivity, entropy and rating of the product over time. Sentiments expressed in user reviews are also used by customers of experience products such as travel and tourism related experiences (Singh, et al, 2017).

In the Maldivian context, some guesthouses and hotels use social media to promote special offers and discounted pricing, however, less emphasis is placed on how customers engage with user-generated content in their decision making process. Consumers rely more on user generated content to evaluate the offering and to decide on the most appropriate choice (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014). In the 'buy' stages of the tourism experience, social media happen to be less explored. However, some business have incorporated booking options directly from popular social media sites such as Facebook pages which can lead to increased booking. Additionally, consumers book directly from dedicated online booking and review sites.

Most companies use social media as a customer relationship management tool. In the 'enjoy, advocate, bond' stage, some hotels and travel agencies promote and encourage previous customers to share holiday experiences on social media and on booking sites in order to keep the bond between customers and as an advocacy strategy. Because of sharing these experiences, other consumers also see activities and experiences, which in turn create additional consumers.

2.2 Media Richness Theory and Social Media

Media Richness refers to "a medium's ability to convey certain types of information and is determined by the medium's capacity for immediate feedback, multiple cues and senses involved, language variety, and personalization" (Brunelle & Lapierre, 2008). Research shows that consumers adopt different behaviours depending on the type of communication channel used (Brunelle & Lapierre, 2008). Some hoteliers use in-house produced content to engage customers whereas other hotels use third parties to manage social media accounts with user-generated contents. Social media influences customers to make better-informed decisions because there are functions of 'immediate feedback' through messaging and comments. As a result, rich social media content in fact can influence decision quality. However, it should be argued that richness of context in user generated content, may be limited to reach a narrower

range of consumer audience, as users limit the circulation of content to close acquaintances and friend circles (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). Whilst traditional media is a passive form of communication, it has the capacity to reach a wider audience and marketers combine both social and mass media to ensure their client base remains dynamic.

In the world of social media, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) concept of marketing has become hugely relevant in the hotel industry as consumers freely share their holiday experiences and intentions. This allows customers to have multiple cues and make their choices much clearer. As social media is a place where information is extensively overloaded with e-WoM or opinions of others, it is perceived to be more relevant than marketer-provided information (O'Connor, 2010). According to Cognizant whitepaper (2015), WoM is the single most important factor in deciding a hotel (Cognizant, 2015). A number of pertinent elements play in shaping the traveller decision making process: (1) immediacy of feedback, (2) trust and emotional connection, (3) multiplicity of information cues, senses and personalisation, (4) e-word of mouth and (5) conformity behaviour. These are described in detail below.

Immediacy of Feedback. Immediacy of feedback refers to the extent to which a medium enables users to give rapid feedback on the communications they receive (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). Social media help users to get instant feedback through comments, reviews, and messaging. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) investigated the degree to which social media appear in search engine results in the context of travel-related searches. Their analysis concluded that social media appeared in search results that led travellers directly to social media sites. Social media sites that rank high in search engines, have a range of contents posted on several social media sites, and has links by users who create content with the intention of educating and informing others about products and services (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). It creates a huge pool of information for information seekers which generates feedback for the queries customers make. Chung & Law (2003) highlighted the importance of relevant and reliable content to convert visitors to possible future customers. Their findings showed that social media provides a great advantage for marketers to gain customers by influencing the decision making process of travellers. Chung & Law's study also revealed that social media have become an important element for marketers that can be exploited to create a competitive advantage by differentiating customer services through social media uses.

Social media also makes the information readily available for travellers, and provide easy access to first hand information that can influence their choices. Recent research in online information search shows that travellers spend considerable time to locate accurate information through different sources, which helps them make better decisions (Inversini & Buhalis, 2009). However, they argue that information search strategy would be influenced by socio economic status, gender, age, and stage of family life cycle.

Trust and emotional connection. Porter & Dhonthu (2008) investigated the efforts in cultivating trust via sponsorship in virtual communities. They found that quality content by sponsors had positive effect on consumer perception of the brand. The influence of tourist information sources depends on how trustworthy they became (Brogan & Smith, 2009). Value creation in traditional media is based on motivated trust, moral insight and aesthetic judgement or based on the generalisation of influence. Social media represents either cognitive specialised influence (by sharing experiences on Facebook, micro blogs) or normatively specialised influence.

Due to the engaging nature of social media, active contribution in online media is called 'trust agents' as they act on building social capital and relationships through networks (Brogan & Smith, 2009). Due to the transparency, and asynchronous nature of social media, social cues such as personal profiles may affect level of perceived trustworthiness of travel advice (Brogan & Smith, 2009). Trust depends on the richness or social cues made available on different types and differs from types of mediums such as social networks, blogs, and review sites. Hudson et al. (2015) showed that social media usage had significant impact on festival engagement such as music tourism. They also revealed that social media can lead to a high level of emotional connection to a particular brand. This also means that brands need good quality emotional content to create a strong brand relationship. This brand relationship also provides the opportunity for differentiation by creating a niche market. However, their study was based on one segment of tourism, i.e. music tourism and might not apply to the whole tourism sector.

Multiplicity of information cues, sensory engagement and personalisation. Multiplicity of information refers to the numbers of ways in which information is communicated, such as text (e.g. spoken or written words), verbal cues (e.g. tone of voice), non-verbal cues (e.g. physical gestures) (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). The internet-based social media offers multiple forms of sensory communication to engage consumers with different likes and interests such as photography, blogs, messaging and video communities. The growth of these communities has also enabled for creation of content by users who comment on the content that is posted, adding to the richness and authenticity of the information given. Additionally, these contents have helped spread the word through social communities between friends, families and often between small communities. This spread of snippets of information is often called word-of-mouth. These multiple cues have helped social media to be considered as a rich medium with multiple forms of information in the hotel industry such as reviews, vlogs, and comments by viewers of these products.

E-word of mouth. The concept of Word of Mouth is a well-known concept in the hospitality industry because it influences consumer purchase decisions (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). The research by Ladhari & Michaud (2015) examines the effect of word of mouth on hotel booking

intentions. Their study on 800 university students confirmed that comments on Facebook influenced their decision making process. Traditionally, the influence of Word of Mouth has been limited to close physical networks between acquaintances. However, the growth of internet has expanded the scope of electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WoM) due to websites and social networks. E-WoM is usually generated by users who have an interest in social interaction, emotional connection, sharing of social activities and as a way of seeking psychological support (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Social networks like Facebook develop social relationships and strengthen weak ties, which likely influences attitudes and decision-making (Luo & Zhongab, 2015). E-WoM affects consumer expectations, influence consumer attitude and preferences and particularly affects the purchasing decisions (Litvin, et al., 2009; Luo & Zhongab, 2015). E-WoM incorporated mediums help users to review, give opinions and recommendations. Comments generated by users are seen as more transparent, reliable and unbiased rather than carefully curated information provided by certain corporates (Wilson, et al., 2012). As a result, user-generated content on social networks like YouTube, TripAdvisor, Facebook and other social networks are more influential and users perceive them as reliable (Litvin, et al., 2009).

The theory of negativity effect states that consumers react to negative information more easily than positive information. As a result, negative information can have a stronger influence on consumer purchase intentions and decisions (Park & Lee, 2009). As tourism and hospitality industry is highly volatile and prone to global events, negative information about the property or the destination can have a devastating effect. One such example is the effect on Maldives tourism industry due to the declaration of state of emergency in 2018. It resulted in drop of tourist arrivals and affected tourism properties around the country (Maldives Insider, 2018). Due to the viral nature of social media, negative information can have a devastating effect as the information is passed from person to person in real time.

However, not all WoM are trustworthy. Mack et al. (2008) who studied the influence of travel blogs found that traditional WoM is more trustworthy than blogs, which suggests that sources that have stronger social relationships are more credible than from anonymous sources. They found that blogs that have authoritativeness or identity could prove credible compared to traditional WoM. Yoo et al. (2007) found that UGC is perceived more credible when posted to tourism bureau websites rather than review sites, social networks and travel blogs.

Conformity Behaviour. Conformity behaviour refers to a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behaviour in order to fit in within a group (Jenness, 1932). Deutsch & Gerard (1955) identified two types of conformities. Normative conformity is when people yield to group pressure because they want to fit in to particular group. Informal conformity occurs when people lack knowledge and look to certain groups to seek information. This theory highly

relates to the concept of e-WoM when consumers seek the opinions of others over the internet due to their lack of information. Informal conformity occurs when travellers seek their friends' experiences on social media, which then influences their views, opinions, and decision-making. However, not everyone conforms to social pressure. There are many factors such as culture, which plays a major role in dependence on others' opinions. Bond & Smith (1996) discovered cultural differences in Western and Asian countries affected conformity behaviour. Westerners are more individualistic and like to be seen as different from everyone else. It means they are more self sufficient and independent which make them non-conformitive. In contrast, Asian cultures are more likely to value family beliefs and usually keep relationships closely knit. This collective culture are more likely to conform to group opinions and accept choices offered by trusted others. Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions also sheds light on the differences in collectivism and individualism according to different nations and cultures.

On the basis of this theory and previous research, a model of consumer decision making process through the influence of social media was established to be used as the conceptual framework for this study.

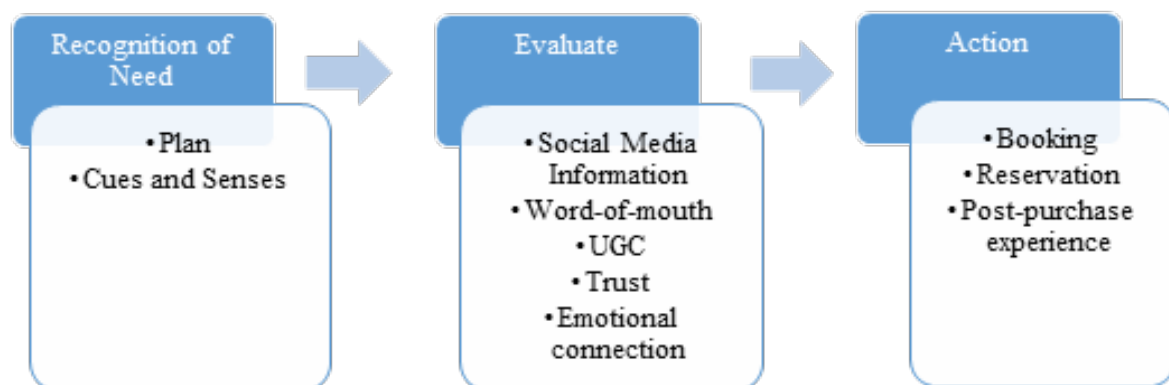


Figure 1: Conceptual framework used for the study

The media richness theory discussed above influences consumer decisions as multiple sources of information such as reviews, UGC, and word-of-mouth helps consumers to narrow down their choices. It also helps to understand the level of trust consumers put to these sources of information as behavioural changes happen due to the influences of social media. As such conformity behaviour influences certain consumer decisions due to the actions of others.

3. Research Methodology

This study was designed to investigate the impact of social media on Maldivian tourist behaviour. Survey method was used with an online questionnaire created using standardised survey formulation software. The research by Filieri & McLeay (2013) which included the elements of media richness theory such as information quality, source credibility, receiver experience,

and user trust was used in questionnaire development. In addition, survey questions were adopted from the research by Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides (2012), to obtain data related to the destination research as well as influence of social media on customer demographics.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts and in the first part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to fill in their socio-demographic data such as gender, age group, income and nationality. In the second part, participants were asked about their pre-trip decision making behaviour such as information search methods, social media use in pre-planning, and its influence on decision making. In the last part, participants were asked about the quality of information in social media to check immediacy of feedback. Additionally, participants were asked about credibility and trust of social media and word-of-mouth behaviour regarding multiplicity and personalisation of information. A 5-point Likert Scale was used to measure the degree of preference by survey respondents for each item on the questionnaire.

The participants were selected using random sampling based on the inclusion criteria that they were Maldivian citizens who used social media to obtain information for travel planning. All of the respondents were approached through social media and personal contacts by sharing on multiple platforms to reach a large target audience. After cleaning the data to remove missing or possibly false data sets, 65 sets of data were used for the analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Demographics

40% of the participants were male and 60% were female. The majority of respondents were aged between 18 and 35, with 61% in the age group of 26-35 years and 33% in the age group of 18-25 years. 43% of the respondents were degree holders, 33% had only secondary school qualifications and 17% had master's degree level qualifications. 41% of the respondents earned more than 15,000 Maldivian Rufiyaa (MVR) and 30% of the respondents earned between MVR 10,000 and 15,000.

The study also explored the Maldivian travellers travel patterns and their choice of travel destinations by asking for information on the most recent destinations chosen by participants for their latest holiday. It showed that over 41% of the participants chose to spend their holiday in a local, inhabited island and 25% went overseas for their holidays. 18% of the respondents preferred resort holidays while 15% chose a guesthouse stay. Overall, 55% of the participants preferred a local inhabited island and guesthouse experience rather than travel to a foreign destination.

4.2 Decision Making and Motivations

The results below show the motivations of using social media, and the stages of decision making where social media is used.

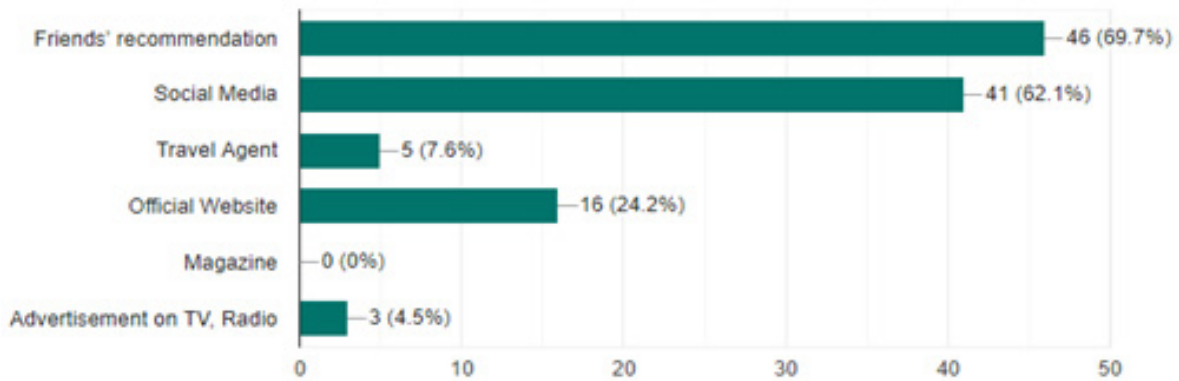


Figure 2: Sources of information used for travel planning

Figure 2 shows the primary sources of information on which Maldivians depend for their travel planning. 70% of the participants considered their friends' recommendations and 62% of the respondents also depended on social media before making a decision on a particular destination, followed by official websites at 24%. These figures also reveal that Maldivians do not use travel magazines for making their choices and rarely use TV and radio advertisements actively as a source of information. Word-of-Mouth and social media were the major influencers on travel destination choices. This finding also agrees with the findings made by Fotis et al. (2012) which also showed that most people depend on advice and recommendations from friends and relatives followed by information provided by visitors on websites and on social media. Research by Hudson & Thal (2013) also found the effect of social media on emotions, brand relationship quality, and word of mouth. The high dependency on social media is due to the diversity of social media sites and different types of platforms it offers for consumers (Baym, 2010).

Figure 3 shows the social media websites the participants of this study used for their information seeking.

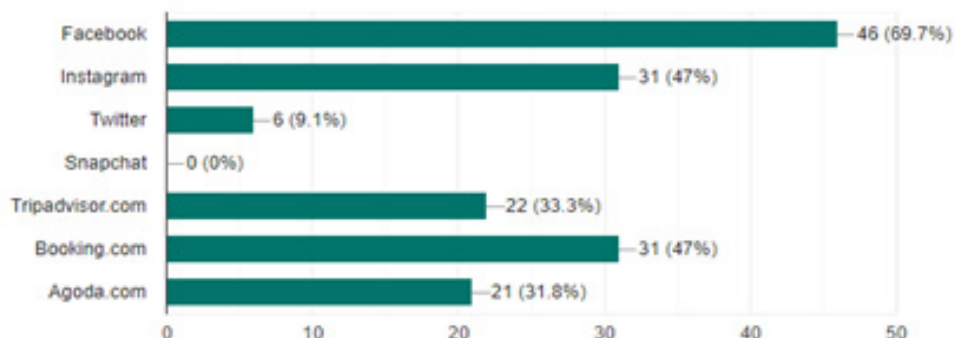


Figure 3: Social Media used by participants

62% of the respondents used social media for information. 70% said that they used Facebook for holiday planning process, while 47% chose Instagram and Booking.com. The reason why sites such as Facebook was used more often, compared to review sites may be because it provided much richer social cues than other platforms like Tripadvisor.com and Booking.com. Additionally, these sites help to maintain social capital and relationships among users (Chang & Chuang, 2011).

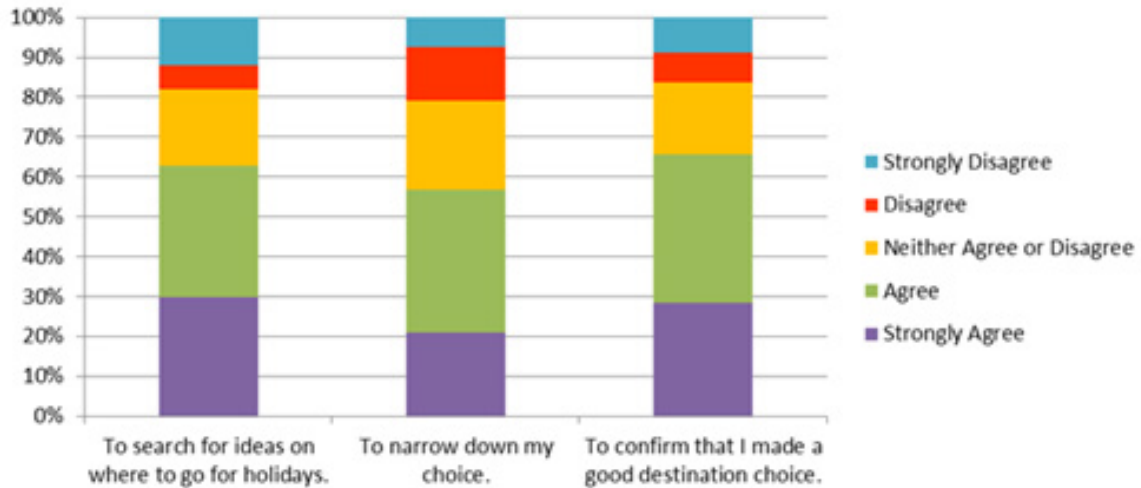


Figure 4: Pre-trip decision making

Figure 4 reveals for what purposes social media was used in pre-trip stage. It showed that most of the respondents used social media in pre-trip stage to search for holiday ideas. 62% of the respondents used social media to search for ideas about a destination. Over 65% of the participants used social media to confirm whether they made a good destination choice. 56% of the respondents used social media to narrow down their choices. This indicates that social media is frequently used in information search. It also shows that social media is an important element in holiday decision making. This finding also agrees with the finding by Litvin et al. (2009) who found that social media enhanced evaluation of choices to make a better informed decision.

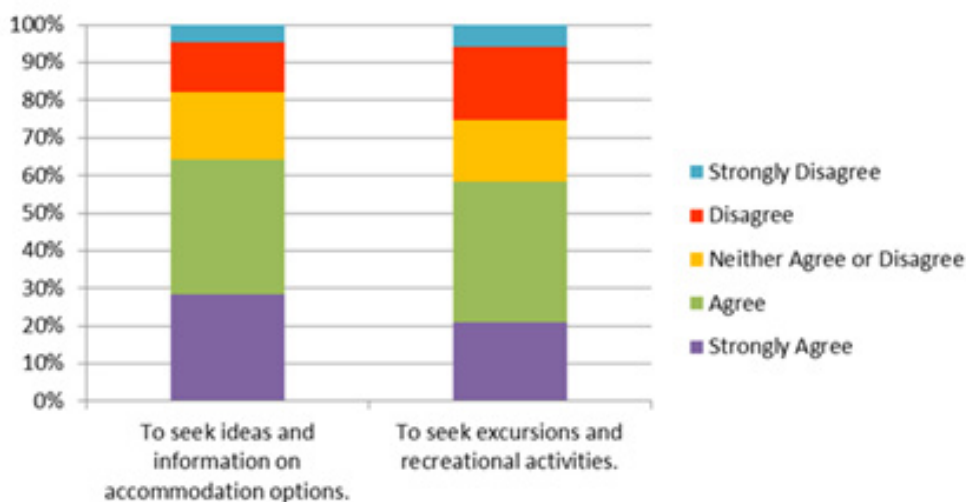


Figure 5: Social media use after a final decision on destination has been made

The above table shows that respondents chose social media to seek excursions and recreation activities after the decision was made for a particular location. 57% of the respondents used social media to search for excursions. 63% used social media to seek accommodation options. The fact that almost all of the Maldivian hoteliers also have active social media accounts means that Maldivian consumers can make better informed decisions by accessing these social media accounts and by comparing the information from different sources.

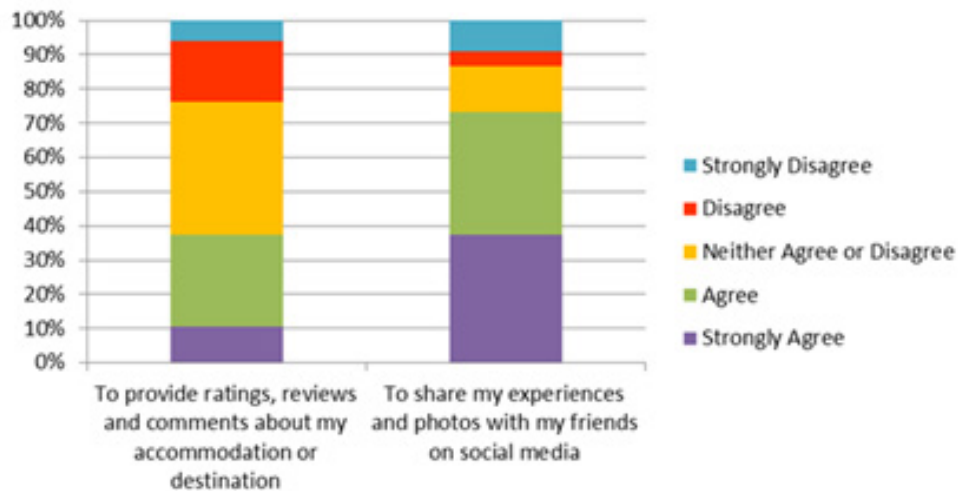


Figure 6: Post-trip Social Media use

The study also revealed that 72% of the respondents used social media during and after their holidays to share experiences with friends, rather than to provide reviews or comments about accommodation which was at 36%. This results in an influx of User-Generated Content (UGC) on social media which allows other users to view experiences by their friends. This finding agrees with the finding by Munar & Jacobsen (2013) which says that UGC is a valuable source of information for consumers as photos and videos have become the new postcard in social media. The popularity of Facebook and Instagram use by participants of this study support this finding as these platforms allow sharing visual content with others.

Participants were also asked whether they will perform certain activities on social media to study how social media can be used in a culturally appropriate way to promote holiday experiences through user generated content. The chart below shows what activities they choose to do on social media.

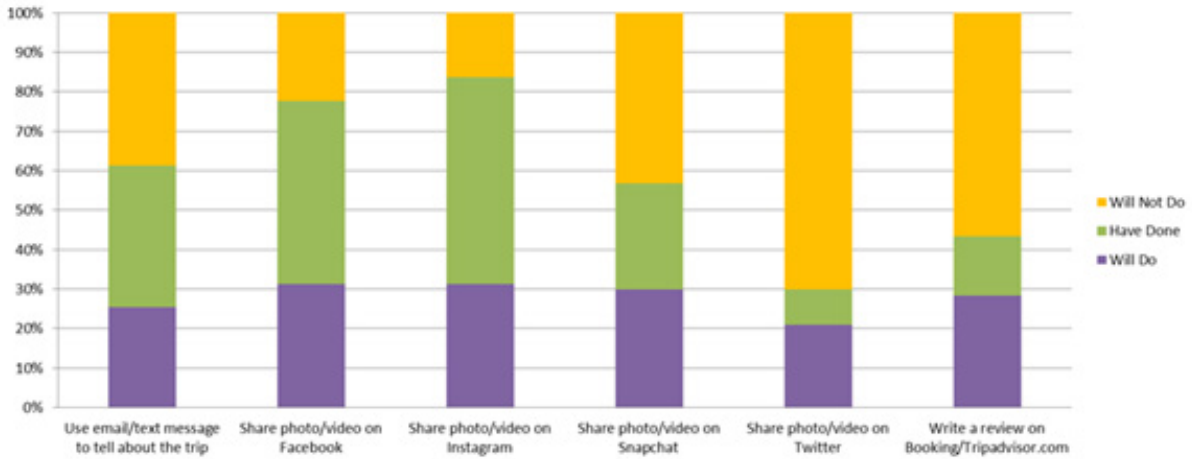


Figure 7: Activities on social media

Participants were asked about their preferences of using different communication tools to tell about the trip, and to share photos and videos. 45% and 51% respondents said that they have shared photos on Facebook or Instagram respectively and 71% of respondents said they will not share photo/video on Twitter. Twitter is the least popular platform for sharing visual personal content. This means that while hotels use Facebook and Instagram for social connection, they can use Twitter to update users on news and information about current events, providing an alternative source of information. The data also revealed that Maldivian travelers preferred to share visual content rather than text-based content. Previous studies have also examined content creators called influencers who are very active on posting visual content on social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

4.3 Factors influencing use of social media

The participants were asked questions about the richness of social media to test the immediacy of feedback according to Media Richness Theory. The questions asked were related to ease of use, information organization, search functions, interaction with others.

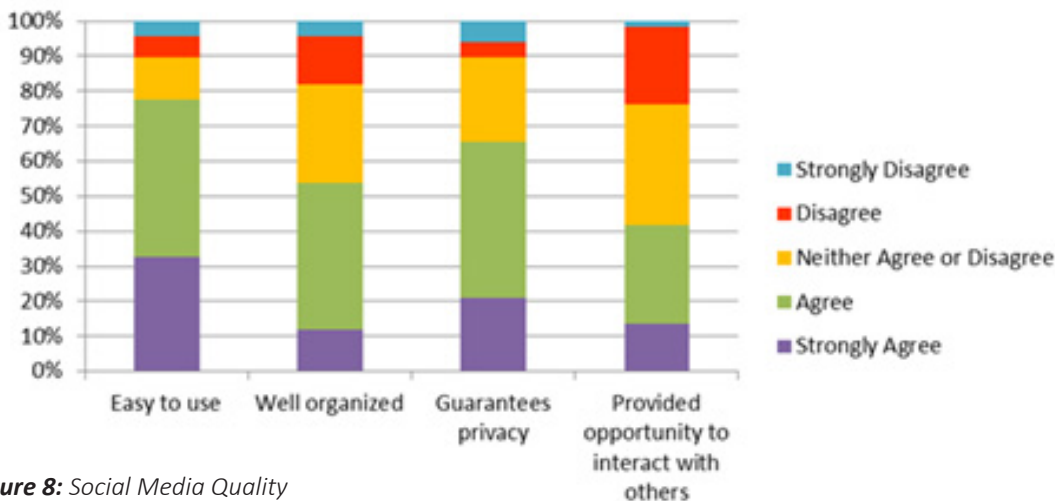


Figure 8: Social Media Quality

78% of the respondents found the social media websites were easy to use, 55% thought they were well organized and 66% said it provided opportunities to interact with others. However, only 65% said that social media guaranteed privacy which means that the other 35% were aware of privacy issues related to sharing information on social media sites.

One of the elements concerned with social media is the sincerity of information provided by hotel properties on social media. Participants were asked about the sincerity and honesty of information provided by hotel properties.

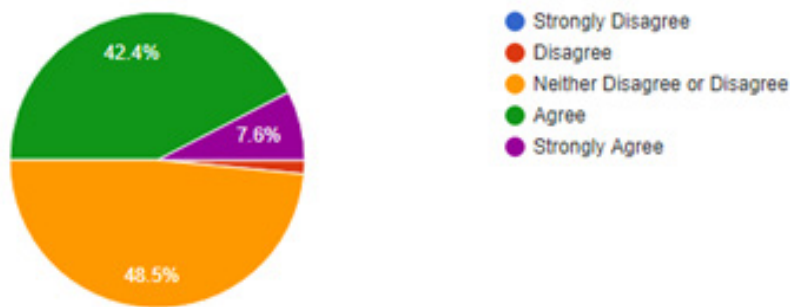


Figure 9: Sincerity and honesty of hotel properties on social media

Data analysis showed that only 50% of the participants agreed that hotel properties gave sincere and honest information on social media, 48.5% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with a small minority strongly disagreeing that hotels gave honest information on social media. It means that half of the research participants were not confident about the credibility of the information given by hotels on social media. This may be due to the fact that fake profiles can be created on social media very easily (Dellarocas, 2003) and that people can be paid to post positive or negative reviews of a tourist destination. It also means that consumers are not confident that hotels provide a true picture of their properties on social media. However, consumers still believed that social media enabled them to make a reliable decision because 77% of the respondents agreed that social media enhanced their decision making and made it easier to make a decision on a particular destination. The respondents also used multiple sources of information as evidence to guide the decision making process.

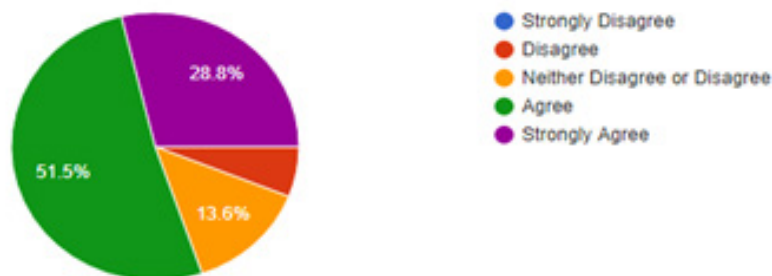


Figure 10: Online reviews, ratings and comments

Figure 10 shows the effectiveness of reviews, ratings and comments in decision making. 80% of the respondents believed that reviews, ratings and comments enhanced the effectiveness of their decision making. This finding agrees with the finding by Sparks & Browning (2011) that customers chose hotels that have included ratings, rather than hotels which do not post ratings.

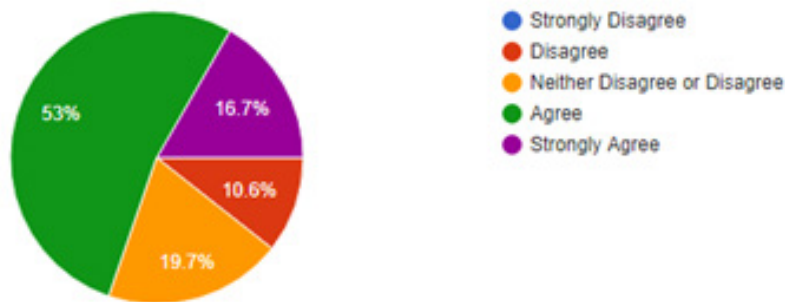


Figure 11: Influence of friends' experience and destination.

This study also revealed that consumers chose particular destinations, after seeing their friends' experiences. 70% of the respondents said that friends' experiences seen on social media influenced selection of a particular destination. This may be due to the fact that social media provides a better platform for people to see the experiences of their friends. This might also happen due to the conformity behavior as some people try to conform to certain social behaviours of their peers to fit in a group (Jenness, 1932). This might happen due to the cultural aspects of the nation as revealed by Hofstede (1983) which changes according to nationality. As Maldives is a highly collectivist culture, it can be assumed that through social media, individuals observe and comply towards the views of their peers and friends to feel a sense of belonging and shared experiences and connection.

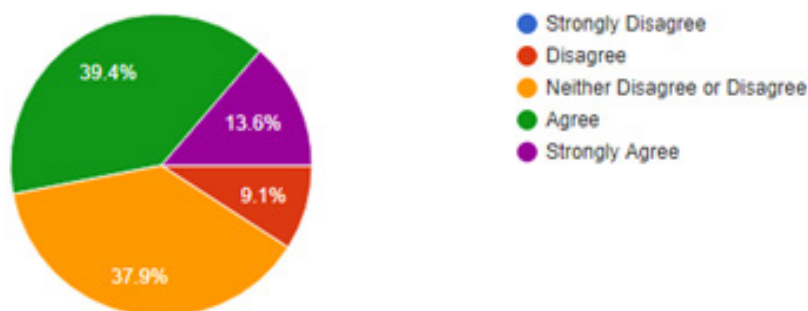


Figure 12: Influence of content posted by hotels on consumer decision making

Another question was asked whether the content posted by certain properties helped the respondents to select their property. As Figure 12 shows, 53% agreed that content posted by hotels have helped to make a certain decision. This means that consumers trust content posted by individuals more than the content posted by the property owners. This is corroborated by findings presented in Figure 11 showing that travellers depended on their friends' experiences in making a decision on where to travel and where to stay. This finding conforms to Mauri & Minazzi (2013) who said that consumers rely more on non-commercial sources of word of mouth to reduce perceived risk and uncertainties which then influences their purchasing intentions.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This study aimed to investigate how Maldivian holiday makers used social media during the holiday decision making process. The results showed that internet-based social media was highly influential on the holiday preferences of Maldivians. It is also a critical source of travel information used during holiday decision making. Social media, especially those that promote social connection, such as Facebook, are used to share holiday experiences after the trip.

The results revealed that Maldivian consumers trusted content posted by individuals more than content posted by hotels. As social media is greatly used in information seeking, it is important that hotels and individuals provide credible, honest and trustworthy information, thus ensuring reliability of the information to match the consumer expectations and their future experience. The data showed that consumers trusted the reviews and ratings posted by other users which influence their decision making. It also showed that consumers preferred visual content rather than text-based content.

Another important objective of this research was to identify the opportunities of social media as a marketing medium in the hotel industry especially in the budget hotel and local tourism segment. This research indicated that social media is an important source of information for Maldivian consumers according to the responses received. Therefore, it proves that marketers can exploit this platform effectively as a marketing medium to promote tourism related products and services. Another important finding is the role of social connections such as friends who play an important role in holiday planning and decision making. According to this study, consumers tend to trust information shared by friends more than any other medium of information.

This research also revealed that Maldivian consumers use social media more than any other mediums of marketing such as magazines, travel agents, radio and TV advertisements. Therefore, social media remains a critical avenue of information for consumers. The findings showed that

consumers use social media in different stages of decision making. Since consumers trust content posted by individuals more than content posted by the hotels themselves, it offers the opportunity to engage influencers to post audiovisual content which can help consumer decision making process. As consumers are willing to post photos/videos of their holiday experiences on multiple social media sites, it gives the opportunity for marketers to involve users to promote audiovisual content. Furthermore, they can be encouraged to post accurate reviews of their experiences on social media sites of the seller, as well as on review and booking websites, enabling the customers to make informed decisions during holiday planning.

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