International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences(IJRESS)
Available online at: http://euroasiapub.org
Vol. 12 Issue 07 July- 2022
ISSN: 2249-7382 | Impact Factor: 8.018|
(An open access scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary, monthly, and fully refereed journal.)

Decision-making of solo travelers visiting India: A study of Online Travel Community

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Abstract

Solo travel is a new tendency among tourists. Solo Tourists have specific desires and tourism demands and seek unique, isolated, and enlightening experiences. Now, user-generated content available in the form of online travel reviews, travel blogs, and Online Travel Communities (OTCs) is used extensively for information gathering. This study aims to explore the profile of Solo travelers visiting India and examine significant issues they face in tour planning and their decision-making. For the study, online travel threads posted in an OTC were analyzed. Content analysis of 1,154 posts was done. The study found that female solo travelers were twice more than males. The solo travelers interact online to get information from experienced travelers concerning their destination preferences, seek assistance in booking transportation and accommodation, hire tourist guides, and get safety measures. The information was provided in suggestions, product descriptions, and personal experiences. In nearly half of the threads, it was found that online communication has helped the original poster in decision making. The study has proposed practical implications for OTCs and solo travel service providers and concludes with limitations and future research.

KEYWORDS: Solo Travel, Online Travel Community, Online Discourse, Travel Planning, India

Introduction

Due to technical advancements and connectivity to the world, the tourists are more informed, and they have ample resources for travel planning, making arrangements, and traveling solo. Solo tourists are more independent and resourceful and have no concern about financial loss and uncertainty (Khan, Chelliah, & Ahmed, 2017). Since the boost in solo travel in 2010, #Solo travel has become the # number one in 2019, and Google search with the keyword 'solo travel' has increased extensively in the last few years (Klook, 2019 and The Wandering RV, 2020). Recent studies have shown that most solo travelers are female (Solo

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Traveler, 2018 and The Wandering RV, 2020) and millennials (The Wandering RV, 2020). According to Solo Travel Trend Report (2018), they intend to book all elements of a trip independently, and 95.3% do travel searches on the internet & 26% also use social media. Favorable reputation and specialization are the significant factors influencing their choice regarding any travel company (Solo Traveler, 2018). The concept 'Me Time' is a significant reason behind solo travel, whereas the 'fear of loneliness is a key factor that hinders their desires, followed by 'safety concerns' (Klook, 2019). The satisfaction of a solo traveler largely depends on personal and human interactions than the destination factors, whereas safety at the destination and unsociable behavior of service providers are significant factors implying dissatisfaction among them (Bianchi, 2016). Khan et al. (2017) proposed that the cognitive and affective image of a destination is positively influenced by female solotravelers' visit intentions and travel motivation, such as seeking knowledge of culture, new places, recreation, leisure, and adventure.

In contrast, they perceive high risks in food safety, personal safety, and fear of an outbreak, terrorism, and political instability. For tourists traveling in India, safety and security have been the significant issue which has received attention from academicians, media, and various organizations (Thomas & Mura, 2018). Crime against women, violence and sexual harassment of female tourists (Thomas & Mura, 2018) are important reasons that have damaged the image of India as a destination among foreign tourists. United Nations World Tourism Organization (2019) reportedthat smaller countries than India, such as Thailand, Macau, and Malaysia are more popular among foreign tourists despite India's diverse culture, heritage, and biodiversity. For female solo travelers, some specific Asian countries, like Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia, are becoming popular destinations (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, &Arcodia, 2018).

It is seen that the emphasis of research in the literature regarding solo travel is on tourists' arrival perspective, and majorly gender has been the center of focus (Bianchi, 2016). Further, it is noted that there is a need for an in-depth understanding of the solo travelers visiting India (Thomas & Mura, 2018), noticing that the country is becoming an attraction for solo travelers. Likewise, it is seen that the decision-making of families, groups, or couples has been explored widely (Kozak, 2010; Oppewal, Huybers, & Crouch, 2015), while the solo travelers' phenomenon is generally ignored (Bianchi, 2016). It becomes significant to investigate travelers' information behavior of solo travelers and their tour plans for visiting India. In order to highlight the efficacy of social media on their travel search and decisions, it is essential to analyze tourists' online interactions with various users, i.e., potential and experienced. This study aims to explore the demographical attributes of solo travelers visiting India and identify noteworthy issues they face in their tour planning for India. It also examines the type of information generated in OTC and explores solo travelers' decision-making.The insights from their travel planning behavior, information search, and decision-making (DM) may offer decisive implications for the service providers and destination management companies to cater to their demands. The study is supported by a literature review defining solo travel, the utility of social media in travel, and conceptualizing

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information search in the Online Travel Community (OTC). The following part is divided into Research Methodology, Results, and Discussions. The study has proposed practical implications for OTCs and solo travel service providers and has provided limitations and scope for future research.

Literature Review

2.1 Solo Travel Trait

Travel motivation is a significant factor influencing solo traveling behavior directly and indirectly (Chung, Baik, & Lee, 2016). Due to some exclusive constraints of personal, socio-cultural, and practical factors, solo travel is considered different from general travel contexts (Shaw, 1994). Perceptions of others, vulnerability, sense of restricted access, and temporal immobility are top listed constants for a female to undertake solo travel (Wilson & Little 2008). The perceptions, opinions & anticipations of the people around us (Chung et al., 2016), and opportunity for learning, personal indulgence, and freedom (Bianchi, 2016) are drives of solo travel tendency. TripAdvisor reported that they are more inclined to explore new destinations without specified itineraries, meet people, explore novel cultures, and are more eager to book transportation followed by doing research, booking accommodation, and other elements of the tour (TripBarometer, 2017/18). They are likely to spend more time on holidays than other tourists (Bond, 2019) and profusely decide on their tours, destinations, itineraries, and activities (Bianchi, 2016).

2.2 Solo Travel Planning and Social Media

The Travel 2.0 applications, such as online travel review sites, blog sites, and online travel communities, have brought changes tothe tourism and hospitality business and have offered a new approach to information search, decision making, and marketing in the industry (Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2015). Social Media (SM) platforms are utilized by service providers and consumers for doing healthy interactions, seeking information, sharing opinions and feedback, along with enabling reciprocated discussions about the products and services (Leung, Law, Van Hoof &Buhalis, 2013; Sigala, Christou&Gretzel, 2016; Sotiriadis, 2017). Brown (2019) reported that the share of solo travelers in global bookings was 18% in 2019 and also revealed that 62% of solo travelers used mobile for transportation and accommodation bookings except for air transport, while 46% did hotel booking via mobile. Another report by TripAdvisor described that TripAdvisor is used as the first choice by 37% in the selection of destination and accommodation, while 47% of people found it helpful in their destination information search (TripBarometer, 2017/18). Tham, Mair, andCroy (2020) described that along with the specific contextconditions, the traveler's decision-making is influenced by social media and stated that SM is less likely to influence destination choice. Dwityas and Briandana (2017) drew some significant findings from the interviews and observations from a backpacker community's travelers regarding social media use in travel decision-making during various phases of travel. The study revealed that during pre-trip, travelers interact online with fellow members

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for information gathering in the form of texts, pictures, and videos and evaluate these to make final choices. During the trip, SM is used to enrich the existing knowledge by adding more relevant information, and post-trip phase, SM is used to evaluate and express personal opinions and experiences.

2.3 Travel Information Search through OTC

Online Travel Communities are an important segment of social media used by experienced tourists, potential tourists, residents, and service providers to interact with each other. OTCs offer options for seeking answers to any person's query, propose answers and solutions to someone's problems, provide suggestions & recommendations over possible alternatives, and service providers use them to represent themselves and tourists to share their experiences. Online communities are defined as "*groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism*" (Ridings, Gefen, &Arinze, 2002, p. 273). Online travel communities offer a platform for tourists to discuss and interact with fellow members regarding various aspects of their travel. They can post queries and answers regarding travel, transport, food, accommodation, destination, and experiences. Twumasi and Adu-Gyamfi (2013) analyzed fifty TripAdvisor threads and found the OTC members' interactions influential in planning, purchasing, and final use of tourism products/ services. Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, &Backman (2010) demonstrated seven organizing themes, i.e., destination information, safety & health, transportation, money, itinerary, food & beverages, and accommodation from the analysis of users' postings in an OTC.Additionally, it was revealed in the study that the residents were influential in tourists' decision-making regarding food & beverages and accommodation, while the experienced travelers were influential in destination information & itinerary planning. Oriade and Robinson (2019) have revealed transportation, destination information, accommodation, retail, general information, itinerary, and food and beverage as basic themes from 97 threads of Trip advisor. Oriade and Robinson (2019) also explained the types of questions concluded from the community threads as Complex, Direct, Casual, Emotional, and Incomplete queries. *Direct queries* were defined as straight questions, Casual queries consist of questions seeking general information, and emotional queries consist of the poignant element, while complex queries combine various types of questions. Gal-Tzur, Bar-Lev, and Shiftan (2020) proposed three types of information regarding transportation discourse in a travel forum, i.e., Direct information, which provideskey details; options that provide an alternative to solve an issue; and Nonformal information type, which offers casual opinions or experiences. The OTCs offer a wide range of information in a single platform, and the regular interactions between the Original Poster (OP), who start a thread by posting any question in the community, and the fellow members who reply to the query; help in information generation and diffusion. The solo travelers' activities in an OTC can offer valuable insights regarding their information search and travel decision-making.

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Research Methodology

The descriptive study attempts to highlight the travel planning of solo travelers visiting India, and for achieving the objectives, the online discourse in the Tripadvisor forum was examined, which is the largest travel platform globally (TripAdvisor, n.d.). The publicly available online conversations in the form of threads posted by community members were collected for the study with the search keywords like 'solo travel, 'solo traveling,' India solo traveler.Two researchers individually examined 1,154 posts in 145 threads written from January 2019 to 2021, and content analysis was done to achieve the objectives. However, for examining the information type, each posting was studied individually. However, the reference for information types was counted only once for entire threads, no matter how many times a particular reference accrued in a thread to understand the variety of information types in the discourse. The codes and themes are explained and represented with frequencies comparison and graph displays (Walters, 2016). Keeping the ethical consideration of observational research (Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, &Diekema, 2013), only publically available data were analyzed, and eliminated the identifiable information from the data such as names, pictures, and quotes.

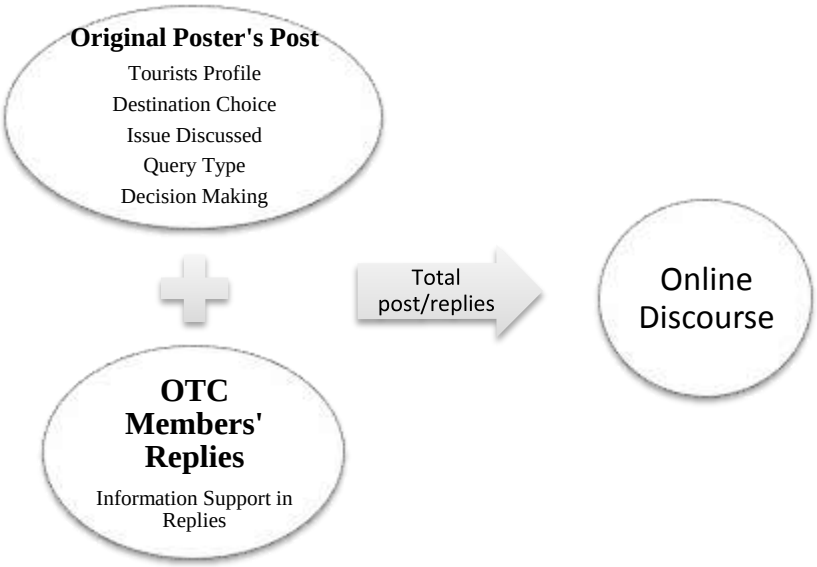

Figure 01Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's own work

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Results

Solo Travelers' Profile

Table 01Demographic Information

N=145

Gender	Male	50
	Female	78
	Unknown	17
Origin of Travelers	N. America	28
	Europe	29
	India	29
	Australia	9
	Asia	14
	S. America	2
	Unknown	34
Duration of Tour (in Days)	7-8	25
	8-14	22
	15-21	8
	22-30	9
	31-60	7
	61-180	3
	Unknown	71

The OTCs enable the members to provide personal details such as name, picture, and place of residence. Other desirable details are provided by members in their posts that can be helpful for fellow members to provide answers. The results found that the majority of solo travelers were female (78), and 50 travelers were male (Table 01), showing a high number of females is consistent with the research of Solo Traveler (2018) and The Wandering RV (2020).Table 01 shows that solo travelers visit India from around the world. North America and Europe, with 57travelers, were the two significant regions generating solo travelers for India. The number of domestic tourists was also equal to those from European countries. Further, 74travelers had informed about the duration of their tours, indicating that India is a destination where tourists can spend from the weekend to half of the year (Table 01). Interestingly, 25 members had planned to visit India for less than one week, while 24 members had planned vacations for three weeks to two months to explore India.

4.2 Destination Choice

The destination choices from the queries revealed that solo travelers were more attracted to North India than South India, as only 67 times the south Indian tourists' places were reported to be their priority. Golden Triangle is the foremost destination choice and was selected 38 times. With Varanasi being a prominent tourist place, Uttar Pradesh was selected 28 times. Further, Goa, Kerala, and Rajasthan were also preferred states by travelers. The results showed that female travelers were more attracted to cultural and historical sites and generally intended to visit the Golden Triangle. For experiencing the natural beauty, they preferred the south Indian states Kerala, Goa, and Karnataka. It was noteworthy that the females also visit India to gain religious and spiritual experiences and tend to visit Varanasi, Rishikesh, and Himachal Pradesh.

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Travel Queries/ Issues

Table 02 Travel Queries

1. **Itinerary: (42)**
   - Destination preferences
   - Budget
   - Attraction
2. **Safety & Security Issue: (32)**
   - Seeking solo travel experiences
   - Safety in the transport segment
   - Safety pertaining to the driver
3. **Solo Tour Bookings: (19)**
   - Solo tour operators
   - Pre-booking/ cancelation
   - Chauffeur & Guide rates
   - Self-planning or seeking service providers
4. **Transport: (20)**
   - Trains
   - Pubic or Pvt. Transport options
   - Airport/flights
5. **Others: (17)**
   - Fellow travelers
   - Phone Sim card
   - Weather
   - COVID-19
6. **General Information (8)**
7. **Accommodation: (7)**
   - Hotel
   - Hostel
   - Room Sharing

Table 02 represents the crucial topics of discussion and issues by the solo travelers categorized intoseven themes. The itinerary was found to be the critical issue that most tourists were conversing about online. To finalize their itineraries, 42 times original posters had questioned about it. Safety and security were another primary concern for solo travelers, and it is noteworthy that out of 32, 28 times, safety concerns were raised only by females. They tend to seek experiences from solo female travelers who have traveled in India.Further, queries were raised regarding travel booking, accommodation, transport services, and general information. They were concerned about selecting the public and private modes of transportation and hiring solo tour operators. Another interesting finding was that 13 times they also posted in OTC to look for fellow travelers for their trips either to share expenses or to have the company of other tourists. Further, due tothe COVID-19 spread, a few queries were also related to the changed travel rules and regulations.

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4.4 Information Type

The information type consists of Query type and Information Support, which are analysed from OPs' postings and other replies.

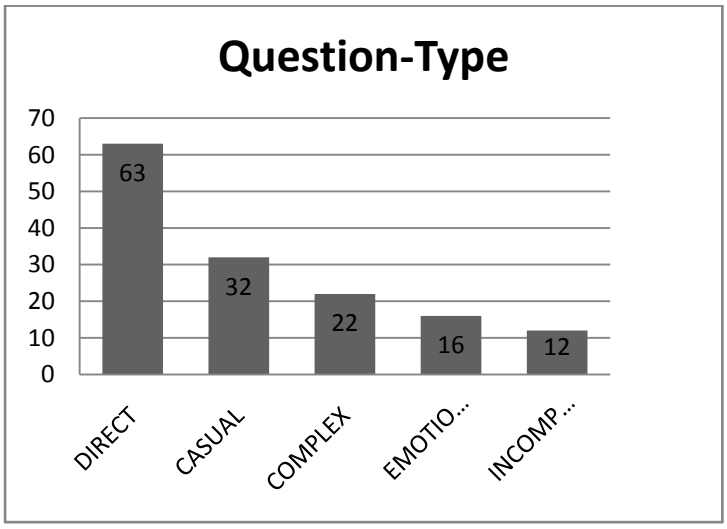

Figure 02 Query Type

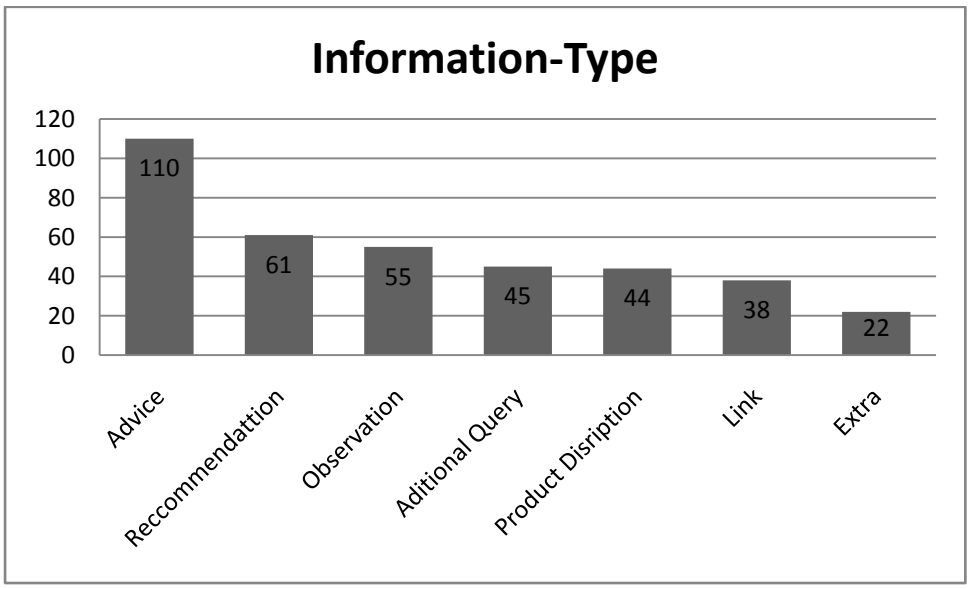

Figure 03Information Support Type

4.4.1 Query type

The type of query explains how the queries were raised in the community. The direct type of query with the highest number of 63 represents that members thoughtfully put their questions and better understand their issues. Further, 32 queries were put casually, and 16 had emotional appeal, highlighting the issue's urgency. The members also tend to post incomplete queries, for which the other members had to raise further questions for clarification.

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4.4.2 Information Support

Information type provided in OTC to solo travelers is categorized into seven types (Figure 03). **The other members in the community who either have knowledge or experience reply to the original poster to facilitate decision-making.** It was found that most of the replies were constructed as advice or suggestions followed by recommendations, in a total of 110 and 61 threads, respectively. Personal experiences were shared in 55 threads categorized as observations. Product descriptions and links help the OP gather detailed information concerning the topic. In 45 threads, the OP and the members had asked more questions about their issues for better understanding and replied accordingly.

4.5 Total Reply

The average reply in the studied OTC was eight. Though in the threads where the OP responded to the contributors' posts, the average reply was ten, and OP did no further communication, the average reply was only six. Indians and foreigners had equally contributed in the OTC threads, with an average reply of three. The participation of the Indian members assisted the foreign solo travelers in understanding the destination facilities more precisely, whereas the foreigners' facilitated the potential travelers with their experiences.

4.6 Travel Decision-Making

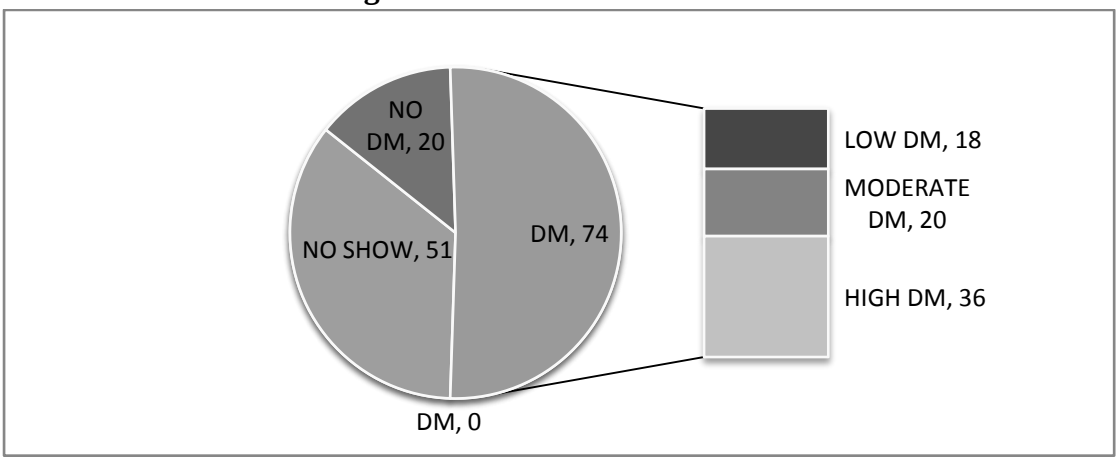

Figure 04Decision-Making of Solo Travelers

Decision-making is the primary concern for any community that offers a platform for millions of tourists to communicate with other tourists and exchange information. After examining the OTC threads, it was observed that the OP's communication with the fellow members was crucial for his/her decision-making. In 51 threads, the OP did not turn up in the threads again after posting a query, although other members kept answering the query. Figure 04 explains that in 74 threads, the OP had come back to post in the thread out of these20 solo travelers did not demonstrate any sign of their decision-making. Also, 18 travelers replied in affirmation, yet their decision-making fell in the 'low DM' category as their responses were not very determinant concerning their final choices. Words like "*ok*," "*Thank You*," and

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"*Noted*" was included in the original posters' statements. In 20 travel threads, the decision-making was categorized in the 'Moderate DM' category, where the OPs had indicated partial information adoption and decision making. Words such as "*Very helpful*" and "*I will amend as suggested by you*" represent this category. The noteworthy finding is that out of 74 solo travelers, 36 indicated the information to be very helpful in their decisions. They had also cited the changes they had planned to incorporate into their tours. For instance, the OP replied to the suggestions and experiences shared by tourists like, "*As per your experience, I will also book a private vehicle than public transport*'; "*Thank you. Now, I have decided to lessen my destinations as I know I cannot cover all places within the limited time*". "*Thank you all for the advice and tips; now I am assured that by following these rules, my India tour is going to be fine*."

Discussions

This study investigates the solo travelers' use of the online travel community for travel planning in India. Destination preferences and information-seeking behavior are examined in OTC threads. For the study total, 390 results were collected with the keywords, out of which 245 threads were excluded due to irrelevancy, no reply, and sticky thread. It was noticeable that some threads were left unanswered, and the community also tends to delete some unethical posts from the threads. The online communication between the members offers them an understanding of the matter discussed and can facilitate decisions by more involvement in OTC. It was found that India is becoming a destination of choice among solo travelers from different regions of the world. Solo female travelers seek more solutions over OTC for extensive planning for traveling in India. Travelers are attracted to specific destinations. Cultural, natural, and spiritual sites are their significant choices. OTC offers support in finalizing the destinations and itineraries. The main issues discussed were itineraries, safety, security, travel bookings, transportation, accommodation, and general information. Bianchi (2016) also revealed safety, accommodation, transport, unhelpful service providers, and bad weather to be significant aspects that cause uncertainty and dissatisfaction for solo travelers. Khan et al. (2017) observed the negative perception of female solo travelers about money, destination information, weather, and traffic conditions in India. India needs to invest more in training human resources in the tourism and hospitality sector to impart professional and secure customer services.

In the analysis of 1,154 thread postings, the paper identified types of informational support. Advice, recommendations, and personal observations were key information types offered in postings. OTC offered further descriptions of products and services and links to supporting information sources. Savolainen (2015) also advocated personal opinion, factual information, and advice as major informational support for the community users. The majority of questions were asked directly and casually by members, and the number of complex and incompetent queries was minor. Community engagement is considered an essential factor in the success of OTC. The post replying behavior in the community

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disclosed that the conversation between the OP and the repliers is crucial for any community. It helps establish bonds among members, motivates new members to contribute to the content, and assists in decision-making. The original poster's reply was found to be a crucial element in depicting whether the online information was helpful in travel decision-making and tour planning. The study revealed that OTC was helpful in the decisions of most information seekers who were interactive in the online platform. The study has offered insights regarding the travel behavior of solo travelers visiting India and integrated the role of OTC.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the profile of Solo travelers visiting India and examined significant issues they face in tour planning and their decision-making. It also attempted to analyze the queries and information provided in OTC. The study found that the number of female solo travelers more than males. They interact online to get information from experienced travelers about destinations, transportation, accommodation, tourist guides, and safety measures. The information was offered in suggestions, product descriptions, and personal experiences. In nearly half of the threads, online communication has helped the original poster's decision-making at various levels. The study offers insights into the travel planning of solo travelers visiting India. India needs to establish a positive destination image, and specific sites should be developed and marketed as solo travel destinations. The tourism service providers necessitate introducing innovative and personalized services to accommodate the sector and boost the economy.

Managerial Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

India is becoming a choice destination for solo travelers around the world. They are attracted to its diverse culture, nature, and heritage. They use online platforms to seek solutions and guidance and facilitate their travel planning. In order to reduce uncertainty and interpersonal constraints, destination management companies and service providers should offer inclusive and customized packages. There is a need to promote and market India as a destination for young travelers and backpackers. To cater to their needs, the service providers should bring up innovative strategies. Seeing the use of social media tools, companies can market their products on various social media platforms like Facebook, travel forums, Youtube, and Instagram. The promotion of tangible attributes of India and highlighting the positive cognitive image can be a significant step toward attracting foreign tourists (Khan et al., 2017).

Further, identifying the major markets for solo and female travelers can help establish guidelines to fulfill their needs and offer them memorably experienced (Khan et al., 2017). Lack of communication among members was a significant result of the study. Social media sites and online travel communities need to focus on the members' activities, the style of writing a post, and the reply. The community postings should be focused, interactive,

informative, and helpful. OTCs should offer special incentives in points, grades, and membership up-gradation to enhance the members' interactions. Specific site design can be adapted to provide personalized and interactive services to different tourists. In order to understand the travel planning and issues faced by solo travelers, the study has explored only the online interactions of solo travelers in an OTC. The demographic information is limited to what the travelers had shared online. Future research can investigate the user-generated content on other social media sites, and also, survey instruments can be adopted to gain significant outcomes in the scenario. Further, pre-tour and post-tour experiences can be explored to understand solo travelers' behavior and perceived destination image of India.

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