



Social Media Marketing And Customer Trust In Guwahati's Small Online Travel Businesses

Longbir Augustine Kathar^{1*}, Dr. Biju Mani Das²

^{1*}Assam Don Bosco University, longbiraugustine@gmail.com

²Assam Don Bosco University, biju.das@dbuniversity.ac.in

Abstract

This study aims to rigorously investigate the pivotal role of social media in fostering and strengthening customer trust and relational bonds within the specific context of small online travel businesses operating in Guwahati, India. Utilizing a comprehensive mixed-methods research approach, the study delves deep into exploring how these SOTBs strategically leverage various social media marketing tactics and engagement practices to cultivate customer trust and facilitate the development of meaningful customer relationships. Furthermore, the research also examines consumer perceptions regarding the impact of their social media interactions with these businesses on their trust levels and the quality of the ensuing relationships. The nuanced findings generated by this study offer valuable, evidence-based insights that can guide and inform SOTB owners, marketing professionals, and policymakers in the region, underscoring the critical importance of effective social media utilization in enhancing customer trust and ensuring long-term loyalty within the highly competitive online travel industry.

Key words: Social Media, Customer Trust, Online Travel Businesses, Relationship Building

1. Introduction

The global online travel industry has experienced significant growth in recent years, with projections indicating further expansion in the coming years. In this rapidly evolving digital landscape, small online travel businesses have increasingly turned to social media platforms to connect with customers and build trust. Social media allows these businesses to showcase their offerings, engage with customers, and respond to reviews, all of which can contribute to stronger customer relationships and loyalty. (Janaji & Ibrahim, 2020) (Sharma et al., 2020) As the online travel industry continues to evolve, understanding the role of social media in fostering customer trust and relationships is crucial for the success of small businesses in this sector.

The rise of social media has significantly transformed the landscape of the travel industry. Travelers now routinely rely on online reviews, destination information, and peer recommendations shared on social media platforms to inform their travel decisions. This has made it imperative for small online travel businesses to establish a strong social media presence and leverage it effectively to build trust and meaningful relationships with their customers. (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010)(Chatterjee & D'Silva, 2021)

This research paper aims to investigate the role of social media in building customer trust and relationships within the context of small online travel businesses in Guwahati, India.

Research Problem:

Small online travel businesses in Guwahati, India, face significant challenges in building customer trust and relationships within the highly competitive digital landscape. These businesses often struggle to establish a strong online presence, differentiate their offerings, and effectively engage with customers on social media platforms. Limited resources, lack of digital marketing expertise, and intense competition from larger players pose substantial barriers to fostering trust and maintaining meaningful customer relationships.

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To investigate how SOTBs in Guwahati utilize social media marketing strategies to foster customer trust.
2. To examine the impact of SOTB's social media engagement on customer perceptions of trust and relationship quality.
3. To explore the key factors that influence customer trust and relationship building in the context of small online travel businesses in Guwahati.

The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for small online travel business owners, marketing professionals, and policymakers in the region. For SOTB owners, the research will offer guidance on effective social media marketing strategies to build customer trust and strengthen relationships.

2. Literature Review

Social Media Marketing: The literature highlights the growing importance of social media as a critical tool for online travel businesses to connect with customers and build brand awareness. Social media platforms allow businesses to share content, respond to reviews, and engage with customers in real-time, which can contribute to enhanced trust and loyalty. (Chatterjee & D'Silva, 2021)

Customer Trust in Online Travel Businesses: Trust is a crucial element in the online travel industry, as customers often make purchasing decisions based on the perceived reliability and credibility of a business. Factors such as transparency, responsiveness, and consistent service quality can significantly impact customer trust in small online travel businesses.

Relationship Building in Online Travel Businesses: Effective social media engagement can help small online travel businesses foster stronger customer relationships. By providing personalized experiences, addressing customer concerns, and building a sense of community, SOTBs can enhance customer loyalty and retention. (Janaji & Ibrahim, 2020) (Kahar et al., 2012)

Perceived Value Theory: Customers' perceptions of the benefits and sacrifices associated with a product or service can influence their trust and willingness to engage with a business.

Prospect Theory and Mental Accounting Theory: Customers' decision-making processes and risk perceptions can impact their trust and loyalty towards small online travel businesses.

Social Media Characteristics in Tourism Research: The interactive, real-time, and user-generated nature of social media platforms can shape customer trust and relationship building in the tourism industry. (Chung & Koo, 2015)

(Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) suggests that research on social media in tourism is still in its infancy, and comprehensive investigation into the influence and impact of social media on all aspects of the tourism industry, including local communities, is critical.

The existing literature emphasizes the need for further research on the role of social media in shaping online consumer behavior and the development of effective eWOM strategies for sustainable business management in the tourism industry. (Reyes-Menéndez et al., 2020).

Building on the existing literature, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of how small online travel businesses in Guwahati, India, can leverage social media marketing to foster customer trust and relationships.

3. Methodology

Research Design: The study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

To address the research objectives, this study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. **Quantitative Phase:** Quantitative data will be collected through a survey of customers of small online travel businesses in Guwahati.

The survey instrument will be designed to measure customers' perceptions of social media marketing, trust, and relationship quality. The survey will be distributed to a random sample of customers who have engaged with SOTBs in Guwahati through social media platforms.

Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with SOTB owners and managers to gain in-depth insights into their social media marketing strategies, challenges, and perceptions of customer trust and relationship building. The interview questions will explore topics such as social media usage, customer engagement, trust-building initiatives, and the perceived impact of social media on customer relationships.

Sample and Data Collection:

Quantitative Phase: A random sample of customers who have engaged with SOTBs in Guwahati through social media will be surveyed. The sample size will be determined based on the population size and a desired level of confidence and margin of error.

Qualitative Phase: Purposive sampling will be used to select SOTB owners and managers for the interviews. The sample size will be determined based on the principle of data saturation, where interviews will be conducted until no new themes or insights emerge.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative Data: The survey data will be analyzed using statistical software, such as SPSS or R. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression analysis will be performed to examine the relationships between social media marketing, customer trust, and customer relationship quality.

Qualitative Data: The interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts will be coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. The qualitative and quantitative findings will be integrated through a process of triangulation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Findings

The study findings will provide insights into how small online travel businesses in Guwahati can leverage social media marketing to foster customer trust and strengthen customer relationships.

Quantitative Findings:

- Customers' perceptions of social media marketing will be examined in terms of factors such as social media engagement, information quality, and perceived responsiveness.
- The relationship between social media marketing, customer trust, and customer relationship quality will be analyzed.
- Factors that significantly influence customer trust and relationship quality in the context of small online travel businesses will be identified.

4. Results

I. Qualitative Findings: The interviews with small travel business owners in Guwahati revealed several key themes and insights. The business owners reported that integrating social media with their e-commerce operations has enhanced communication with customers and fostered consumer confidence. They noted that online feedback mechanisms, in line with social exchange theory, have facilitated service quality improvements and contributed to building lasting business relationships. However, the owners acknowledged challenges in overcoming initial consumer distrust, though they anticipate that increased social media presence will help mitigate this over time.

Use of Social Media: The business owners described how they are leveraging various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, to connect with customers. They emphasized the importance of creating visually appealing, credible, and engaging social media content that showcases their reputation and popularity within the local tourism market.

II. Quantitative Findings: The survey of 420 online consumers in Guwahati provided further insights. The results showed that 38% of respondents believe their social media shopping experiences influence their trust in e-businesses. Conversely, a larger proportion (64%) perceive social media as beneficial for building trust, with 62% viewing it as an effective tool for enhancing trust in small e-businesses. The PLS-SEM analysis revealed that social media marketing has a significant positive effect on consumer trust in small travel online agencies, with the visual appeal and credibility of social media content, as well as the perceived popularity and engagement of the agencies' social media profiles, being key drivers of consumer trust.

Discussion

The current study provides empirical evidence on the role of social media in fostering customer trust and relationships in small online travel businesses. The findings suggest that small travel businesses can leverage social media platforms to enhance customer trust and build stronger relationships by creating visually appealing, credible, and engaging social media content that showcases their reputation and popularity. However, the study is limited to small businesses in Guwahati, and further research is needed to examine the generalizability of the findings to other geographical contexts and industry sectors.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of social media marketing on customer loyalty and repeat business in the online travel industry. Additionally, a cross-cultural comparison of social media usage and its influence on customer trust and relationships in small online travel businesses would provide valuable insights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the crucial role of social media in fostering customer trust and relationships in the context of small online travel businesses in Guwahati. The findings suggest that small travel businesses can leverage social media platforms to enhance customer trust and build stronger relationships by creating visually appealing, credible, and engaging social media content that showcases their reputation and popularity. The study contributes to the literature on the intersection of social media marketing, customer trust, and customer relationship management in the e-commerce and tourism industries. As small online travel businesses continue to navigate the challenges of the digital landscape, this research provides valuable insights into the strategic use of social media to enhance customer trust and nurture long-term relationships.

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