

Consumer behavior in outbound tourism: a Bangladeshi perspective

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Abstract: *Outbound Tourism has recently become a huge market in Bangladesh. Many of the regular consumers of this industry travel quite often and show a keen interest in travel related magazines, television shows, blogs and content on social media. It is therefore essential for marketers to understand the behavior pattern of this thriving set of customers and see what particularly affects their travel decisions. This article focuses on determining the various factors, including various digital media sources that influence these Bangladeshi consumers in their decision making and purchase process in the tourism industry. The researchers also tried to identify the preferences of the various types of activities the travelers from Bangladesh are interested in, during their tours. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire through 120 respondents who identify themselves as regular travelers. All of the respondents fall under three distinct consumer categories of different age groups. The paper summarizes the different behavioral dimensions of consumers of outbound tourism in Bangladesh.*

Introduction

Tourism, especially outbound tourism has been on a steady rise in Bangladesh over the past few years (Hussain, 2018). With the rise of internet prevalence throughout the country, vacation seekers can now access and learn about the different advantages and amenities different tourist destinations have to offer. Social media has been globally observed to cater to a useful platform for sharing travel experiences by its vast number of active users (Živković, Gajic, & Brdar, 2014). In Bangladesh, the steadily increasing number of active internet users has a strong presence in the social media platforms; particularly on Facebook, the capital city of Dhaka has been consistently recorded as one of the top five in the world, in terms of the number of Facebook users (Dhaka 2nd among top cities with active Facebook users, 2017).

Background

Tourism can be broadly categorized as a service industry which includes a large number of accompanying products and services, including airline service, travel agencies, social media, online hotel booking services, ride sharing services, couch surfing etc. For marketers focusing on tourism, it is a requirement to understand the paradigm shift of the pattern of how consumers of a certain area view tourism. This includes understanding how consumers choose their preferred travel destinations. Moreover, it is also vital to understand what particular sets of activities the target consumers usually participate in, during their travels.

In a previous research, the majority of Facebook users claimed that their travelling plans were affected by a friend's picture of their trips (Andrew, 2014). As a country of over 90 million active customers of internet (BTRC, 2019) it is essential for marketers to have a thorough

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understanding of the effects of different online platforms, especially social media, on the Bangladeshi consumers of the tourism industry.

Apart from the sources of the consumers' influence and rising influence on tourism, it is also important to understand the different types of activities the tourism consumers of Bangladesh are interested in, during their time at the travel destinations of their choice. Finding these influencing agents as well as digging into the consumers' interests can help marketers to develop and focus on specific innovative strategies to promote the individual product or service in the broad area of tourism.

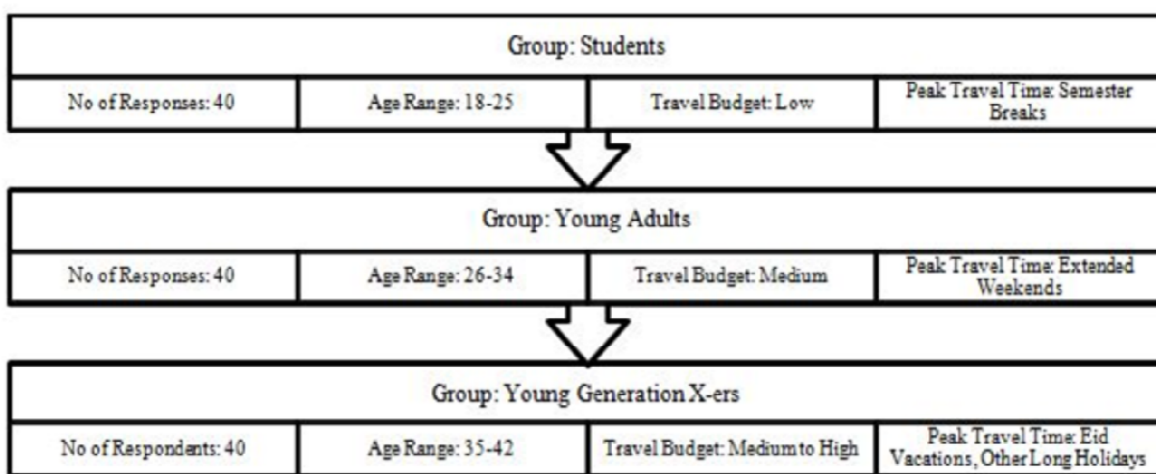
Methodology

In order to get an in depth overview on the factors which influence the consumers in the tourism sector in choosing travel destinations as well as their preference of activities, the researchers have conducted a ranking based survey. All of the respondents were chosen on the basis of their frequency of travelling within a certain year. For the purpose of this research, the opinions of only those respondents who travel at least twice a year on an average are analyzed.

Profile of the respondents

The researchers took one hundred & twenty responses into account, among which, forty respondents were, University students falling in the age range of 18 to 25. These students usually have a lower travel budget. This group of travelers usually goes on their trips with a large circle of friends. Their preferred travel destinations are mostly within Bangladesh. They usually travel to popular local tourist spots such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sylhet Area and Cox's Bazar. Since they are mostly University students, their peak travel time falls during their semester breaks, which usually means two or three times during a year depending of their University's semester / trimester system (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Respondent Profiles



Forty of the respondents were young working professionals (young adults) falling in the age range of 26 to 34. These respondents have a medium travel budget and they are affluent enough to visit neighboring countries such as India, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia etc. during their vacation. (Hussain, 2018). Their travel preferences fall in extended weekends, i.e. whenever a public holiday directly precedes or supersedes a weekend; they utilize this

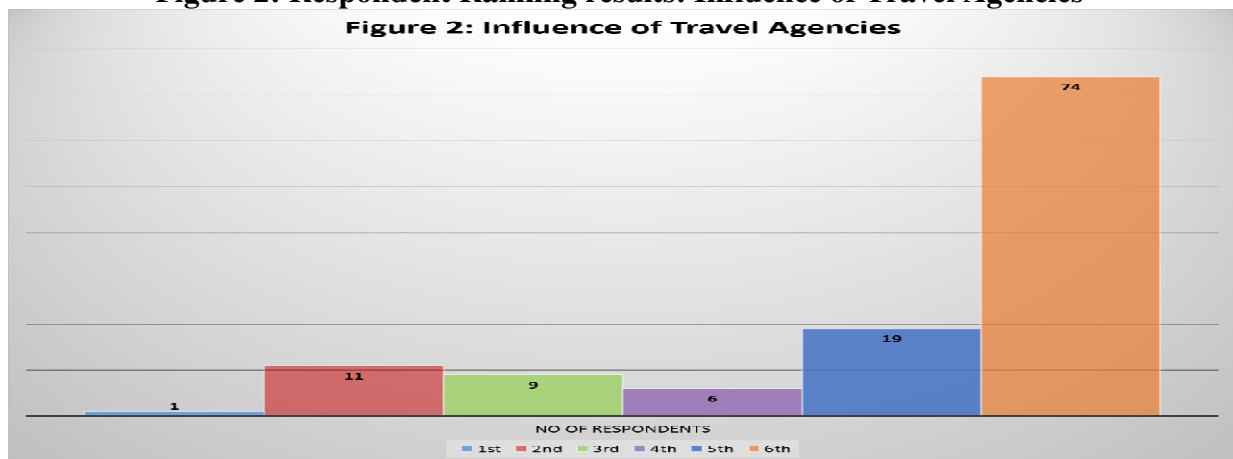
opportunity to go on a quick trip. Studies show that most of the ‘Solo Travelers’ fall within this age range (Waugh & Nesbitt, 2019). Marketers should focus on the different common traits of solo travelers (home sharing, ride sharing, backpacking etc.) when developing strategies for this target group (see Figure 1).

The rest of the forty respondents were middle aged individuals (mostly married) falling in the age range of 35 to 42. This group usually travels with family, which automatically implies that their travels are more planned and the trip includes a wide range of activities for the enjoyment of the husband, the wife and the accompanying children. Their peak travel time is identified to be long holidays, usually following an Eid vacation. This group is the most financially solvent among the three respondent groups. The members who fall within this cluster usually travel to more exotic areas such as European countries, Egypt, UAE etc (see Figure 1).

Data Analysis – Direct Factors Influencing Travel Decisions

The respondents were asked to rank six influencing agents, on the basis of the extent to which these influencers affect their travel plans. The individual respondents ranked the most influential agents as first and the least influential agents as sixth according to their own individual perception and experiences.

Figure 2: Respondent Ranking results: Influence of Travel Agencies



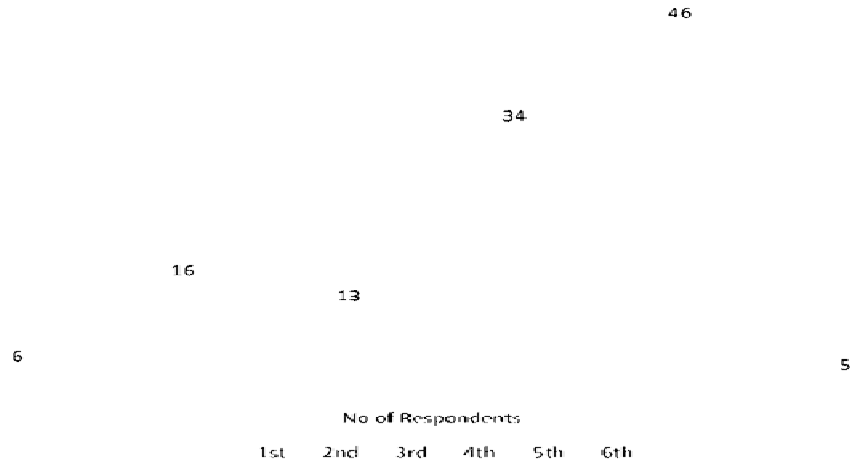
The six chosen influencers were: Travel Agencies, Advertisements, Travel Blogs, Travel Videos of YouTube, Friends’ Travel Photos, and Travel Magazines & Books.

‘Travel Magazines & Books’ came out as the least popular option, as a hundred and one out of the one hundred & twenty respondents ranked this influencing factor in either 4, 5 or 6 (see Figure 7). The reason for this could be the fact that most of the respondents are at an age where under regular pressure from work and/or studies. The little time they have for reading are utilized in the form of newspapers, regular magazines, books and eBooks. The researchers have managed to interview a couple of magazine vendors in Dhaka who claimed to have stopped keeping purely travel related magazines on the shelves due to the lack of demand.

Ninety nine out of one hundred & twenty respondents ranked ‘Travel Agencies’ n between 4, 5 or 6 (see Figure 2). The researchers were not surprised by this outcome because based on observational data, most of the customers of travel agencies do not fall in the same socio economic group nor can they be cited as members of the same educational level compared to the respondents of this research. Some of the respondents claimed that they trust some of the

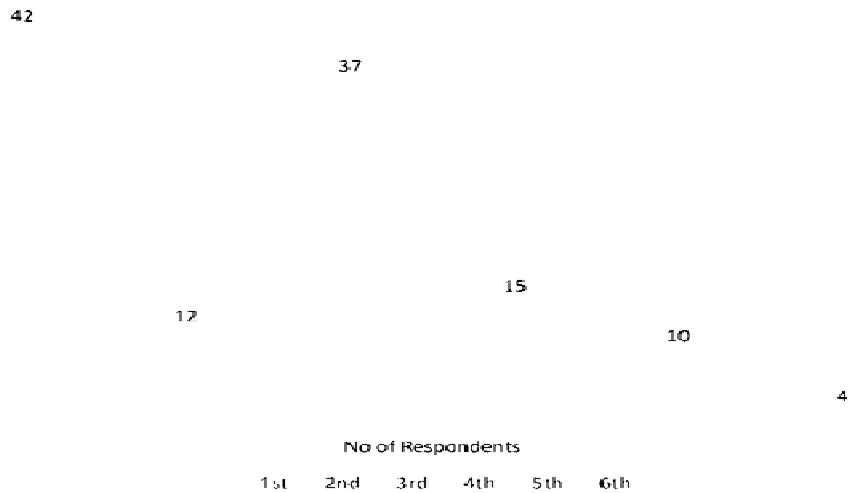
travel agencies for smoothness of the lengthy visa processes but they do not trust them for making entire travel itineraries.

Figure 3: Respondent Ranking results: Influence of Advertisements



‘Travel Advertisements’ is a factor which is also ranked quite low among in the minds of this the respondents of this research, with eighty five out one hundred & twenty travelers ranking them between 4 and 6 (see Figure 3). It was clear to the researchers that, with the increasing popularity of user reviews and comparisons, the 21st century consumers rely little on industry generated advertisements. Although the thirty five respondents who did rank this factor higher said that they look for online advertising of package tours at an economical rate. This allows them to travel at a budget.

Figure 4: Respondent Ranking results: Influence of Travel Blogs



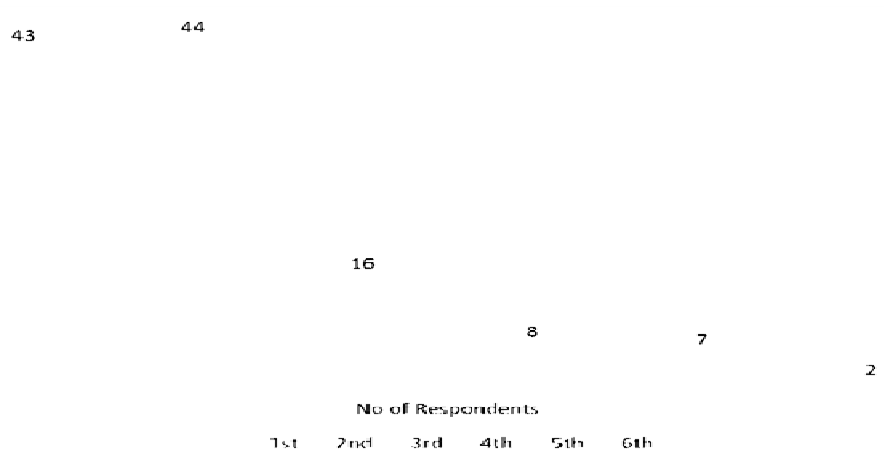
Moving on to the more influential factors, ninety-one out of the one hundred & twenty travel enthusiast respondents ranked ‘Travel Blogs’ between 1 & 3 (see Figure 4). This indicates the increasing popularity among consumers of getting information from independent sources compared to paid sources.

Ninety five out of one hundred & twenty respondents put ‘Travel Videos on YouTube’ in their top three (see Figure 5), which is natural because of the colossal number of visualized travel blogs or ‘vlogs’ have gained popularity over the last five to ten years.

Figure 5: Respondent Ranking results: Influence of Travel Videos on YouTube



Figure 6: Respondent Ranking results: Influence of Friends’ Travel Photos on Social Media



However, the factor which ranks the highest after taking one hundred & twenty responses into account is ‘Friends’ Travel Photos’ (see Figure 6). With the immense popularity of Facebook and Instagram, social media dwellers seem to be greatly influenced by the travel adventures of their friends. According to some of our respondents, one of the reasons for this medium to be a popular source of travel recommendations is the fact that they get first-hand information from a known direct source.

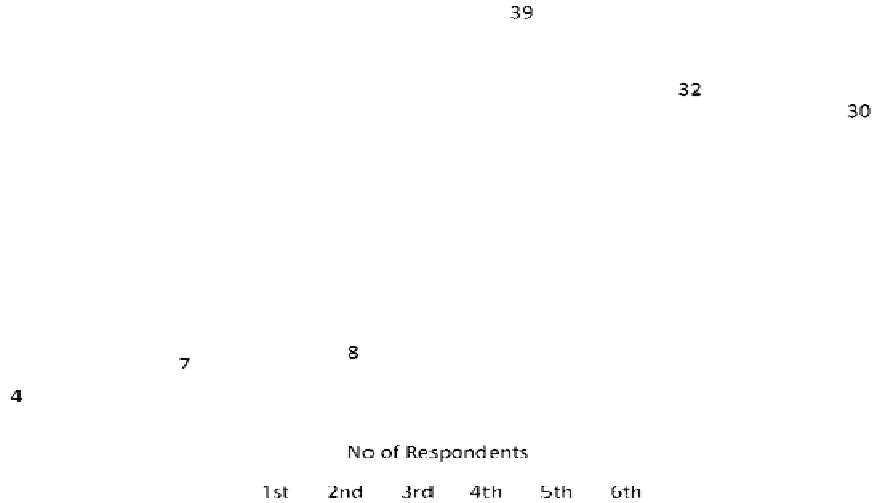
Data Analysis – Preference of Travel Activity Types

A further analysis was conducted by the researchers to understand the specific types of travel activities the Bangladeshi consumers are drawn to. The respondents in this ranking based

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research were the exact same one hundred & twenty respondents who participated in the initial ranking on factors that influence travel decisions. Since, each individual has a different preference when it comes to the wide range of activities that different popular travel destinations have to offer. Apart from the popularity of specific travel destinations, international marketers working in tourism sector should further have information on the activities their consumers indulge in doing during their travels. Five specific types of activities were identified, by means of a face to face interview and the respondents were asked to rank the activities according to their preferences.

Figure 7: Respondent Ranking results: Influence of Travel Magazines & Books



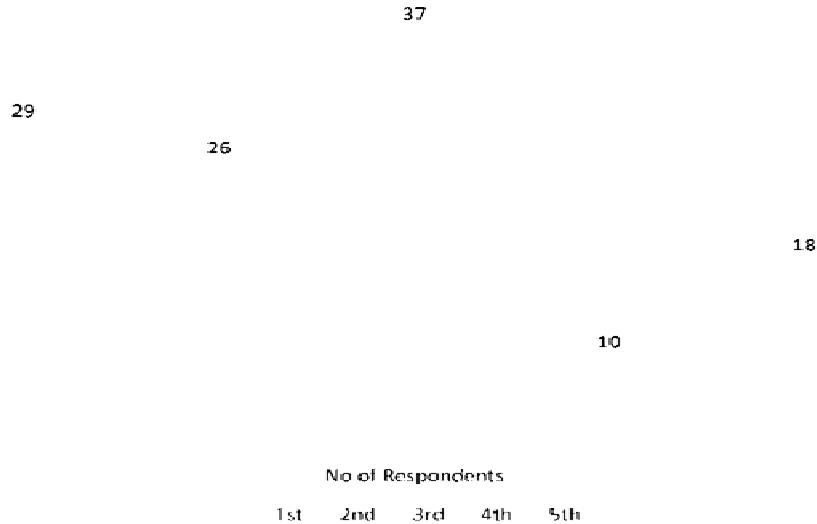
The five chosen travel activity clusters were: Relaxing Activities (which includes beaches, island resorts etc.), Hiking & Camping Activities (which includes traveling to mountainous regions, deserts, forests etc.), Uncovering History (which includes visiting historical destinations, monuments, temples, museums etc.), Shopping Activities (which includes visiting malls and spending a lot of time in urban areas) and Dining (tasting local cuisine that reflect different cultures).

Figure 8: Respondent Ranking results: Travel Activity – Relaxing



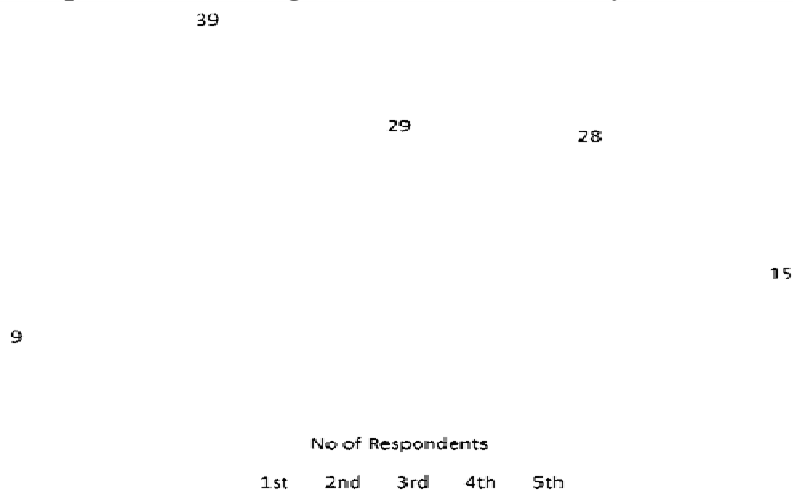
Just like the previous question, the respondents were asked to identify which specific travel activity draws them the most during their travels. The most appealing travel activity was ranked 1st and the least one is ranked 5th by each individual respondent.

Figure 9: Respondent Ranking results: Travel Activity – Hiking & Camping



The least popular option identified through this research was ‘Shopping’ with one hundred & seven respondents ranking it between 3, 4 and 5 (see Figure 11). The reason for this might be the fact that most of the respondents do not see shopping as a primary reason to travel to a different country. During an interview, one of the respondents who ranked travel at a lower tier of importance claimed that most of the Bangladeshis (especially the individuals who fall within SEC B and above) that she knew travel for shopping only preceding a special occasion, for instance a wedding.

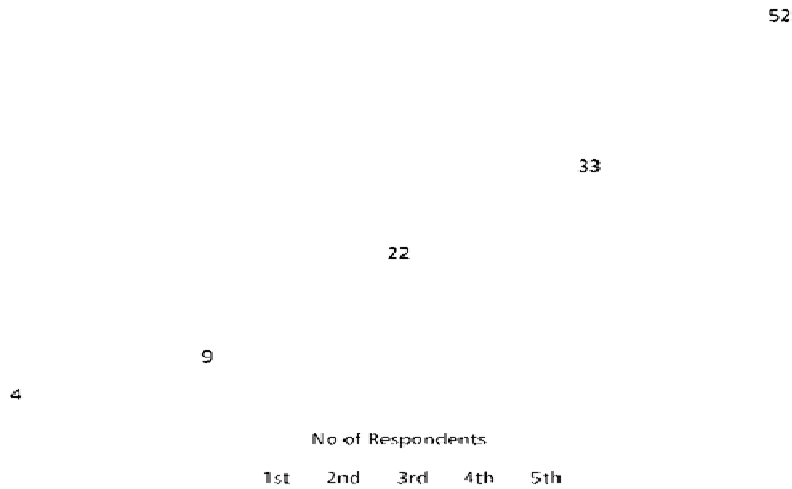
Figure 10: Respondent Ranking results: Travel Activity – Uncovering History



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In fourth place, in terms of ranking, is Dining, with eighty four respondents ranking it between 3, 4 and 5 (see Figure 12). The primary reason for Bangladeshi travelers to rank dining at a lower tier of preference has been identified by the researchers when a respondent said that it is difficult for them to find Halal food in most of the destinations they travel to. This indicates that religion plays a key role in their food habit which, in turn, prevents them for traveling for food, due to the lack of prevalence of Halal certified restaurants in popular travel destinations. Since, the majority of the Bangladeshi consumers are Muslims, dietary restrictions play a key role during their traveling abroad.

Figure 11: Respondent Ranking results: Travel Activity – Shopping



Ninety six out of one hundred & twenty respondents ranked ‘Uncovering History’ between 2, 3 and 4 (see Figure 10) making it the third most popular travel activity cluster in their travel plans. This activity, as mentioned on the survey, includes visiting places of historical significance and museums. This shows that a lot of the travelers in Bangladeshi culture are fascinated to indulge themselves in parts of history of different cultures. However, through a face to face interview with a couple of respondents we identified that, more than learning about history, the travelers seem to be fascinated in the idea of taking photographs in front of historical places to enrich their social media presence.

Figure 12: Respondent Ranking results: Travel Activity - Dining



Hiking and Camping (especially in Forest, Mountains and Desert Areas) came out in second place as a travel activity preference. This category was ranked 1, 2 or 3 by ninety two respondents (see Figure 9). This indicates that a large group of travelers, especially young adults seek for adventures during their vacation. Marketers working in this sector can shift focus of their travel advertising in a tone that highlights the adventurous youth participating in various thrill seeking activities. This, according to the result of the survey, will attract a large group of young travelers to the particular destination.

The first place in terms of the ranking of travel activity preferences was 'Relaxing' with one hundred & five out of one hundred & twenty respondents placing it between 1, 2 and 3 (see Figure 8). This indicates that although there are thrill seeking attitude in many respondents, the majority of the vacationers want to simply relax in a beach resort in order to rejuvenate themselves after a long period of facing pressure at work or classes during the rest of the year.

Marketers can focus on beautiful and serene location with a highlight on different relaxing facilities of a certain travel destination in order to attract this set of travelers.

Conclusion

The marketers can take note from the results of this research to understand the communication sources to tap into, in order to successfully implement their tourism marketing campaign. By reaching out to the top three sources of influence, marketers can promote their services and goods which are related to travel and tourism. Travel bloggers and YouTube travel vloggers can be invited to be a part of any tourism marketing campaign. Consumers should be further encouraged to upload more travel photos and video clips on their social media profiles in order to gain more reach in a given tourism marketing campaign. Moreover, from the results of the ranking of travel activities, marketers can understand which particular activities to focus on their travel destination advertising in order to draw new consumers.

Although these are only some of the suggestions the researchers can derive from this study, there are many opportunities to further this area of research in an in depth fashion, especially on the extent of social media and digital marketing influence on consumer behavior.

Recommendations

Some of the most popular consumer services in the 21st century is observed to be somewhat directly or indirectly related to tourism. The research identifies many influencing factors which regularly motivates consumers of different age groups to travel. Whether the traveling takes place abroad or within their own borders, Bangladeshi millennial and generation X-ers seem to enjoy being a consumer of the tourism sector.

Many of the identified factors, influences and preferred activities can be take into account when designing a marketing plan for a travel destination, an airline or other means of transportation and also in promoting hotels and resorts. Marketers in direct tourism marketing, who are targeting Bangladeshi consumers, can now design their promotional message and visuals based on some of the outcomes of the research conducted above. Marketers working in promoting a specific transportation medium (especially an airline) can include promotional offers and use product bundling to incorporate some of the travel activities with the airplane tickets, offer pre booking for budget travelers etc. Marketing activities of online home sharing services can also be updated based on some of the outcomes of this research, as we can now understand some aspects of the Bangladeshi consumer mindset in this broad service sector.

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Online home sharing is already one of the thriving new business concepts (Jelski, 2019). It can be popularized in Bangladesh through targeted social media marketing. Regular budget travelers would be delighted to learn more about home sharing, especially the houses which are located at convenient locations in their dream travel destinations. Many of the respondents of this survey showed a keen interest to learn about the different cultures, and home sharing is creating a doorway for travelers to learn directly about a different culture from locals and enhance their cross-cultural understanding (Rosenstein, 2019). Marketers of such brands can use the culture sharing angle to promote their services to Bangladeshi travelers.

Specific types of areas, such as beaches, camping locations and hiking trails can be heavily promoted and made more easily accessible to travelers by means of direct pick up and drop services between popular hotels and the specific areas of interest. Marketers should be able to strategize according to the research findings and ensure swift transportation for consumers to all of their preferred location types in a budget plan. Halal food preference should also be more widespread in popular travel locations for Bangladeshi travelers. An increase of the availability of Halal restaurants will only increase the number of tourists visiting from Bangladesh.

Another rising trend in Bangladesh is the increasing popularity of ride sharing services (Palma, 2019). This information can be used along with the findings of the research to promote different localized inexpensive ride sharing services in different countries. It is noticeable that local ride sharing app services, such as 'Grab' have quickly become the market leader, overtaking Uber in South East Asia (Lim, 2018). It is therefore important for marketers working for ride sharing services to develop strategies which can incorporate locals and tourists with attractive package offers, hotel affiliations, and effectual tie-ins with room sharing services etc in order to capitalize on the consumer behaviors and interests identified through this research.

Although a lot of aspects of consumer behavior have been identified through this research, there is still a lot to be done in the field. Since tourism is a thriving sector among Bangladeshi consumers, researchers can explore this broad service market to increase the understanding of the immense potential within the market and within this country as a whole.

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