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Customer Behaviour-Online Travel Industry in India

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Abstract

This paper summarises the arguments and counterarguments within the scientific discussion on the issue of Online Travel Industry in India, its evolution and demand. The main purpose of the research is to study the customers' preferences with respect to the Online travel agents (websites and apps) in India and what makes them stay put. The study of literary sources and approaches for solving the puzzle of consumer behavior in the fast-paced e-commerce scenario indicates that the customers are changing rapidly and that is what they expect from the mediums they are using. The relevance of the decision of this scientific problem is that it will aid the travel industry to understand their respective customers better, helping them stay and make repeat purchases. Investigation of the topic Online travel industry-Customer Behaviour, in the paper, is carried out by shortlisting the top six players in the Online travel category and recognizing the important features affecting the customers, making the customers rank them on a structured questionnaire. An online survey was done using http://www.surveymonkey.com. Weighted Average Scores have been calculated to assign importance to the features. The research spans from May 2017 to July 2018. The object of research is the Online travel industry and its users in India. The paper presents the results of an empirical analysis of customers responses with respect to their preference for the Online travel sites like MakeMyTrip, yatra, trivago, TripAdvisor, ibibo, clear trip and their expectations from them in terms of price sensitivity, variety, post-check-in experience, customized packages, and quality services. The empirical analysis shows that the customers prefer certain factors way more than the others and so the Online travel industry can utilize these findings to focus on the most important ones and maybe decrease the spending on the ones not considered important.

Introduction

E-Commerce in India has been on a roller coaster ride since its inception in the late 1990s. The boom was followed by bust and then several years of muted activity, e-commerce again took shape around 2007. The customers have been subjected to changes that they take time to absorb. The initial problem with e-commerce in India was over-ambitious and novice entrepreneur as well as adamant customers. Customers' 'resistance to change' is one of the highlights of the internet revolution's struggle to make them comfortable with online transactions-retail, career, travel, education and many more. Customer "Stickiness"(Martin, 2017), has been a differentiating factor when it comes to successful e-commerce businesses. Customers' basic demands in terms of quality, low price and timely delivery (Arora, 2017) have remained constant, what has changed is the business's (e-commerce) tools to meet them and the real differentiator has been 'information'. The businesses that recognized the same have used it as the differentiator.

Various segments and models of e-business were introduced in the early phase of e-commerce in India but failed. Online travel is one category which has survived, evolved and thrived throughout these phases. Online travel agents (OTA) are growing stronger over the years. It is a perfect example of how the medium of the internet can be exploited combining it with the changes in the Indian population. Online Travel Agents are online companies whose apps/websites facilitate the consumers in booking various travel related services directly via the Internet. Indian customer today has more disposable income, has to pay lower air ticket pricing, is avid user of social media and smartphones; and is a global tourist. Internet users in India reached 500 million in 2018, an increase from 481 million in 2017, as per reports from IAMAI and Kantar IMRB. The increase in Internet users is an opportunity being cashed in on by the OTAs, and Digital India initiative has been a

propellent in this case. Technology and customer preferences make a perfect breeding ground for the online travel industry to grow. According to Internet and Mobile Association of India(IAMAI)and IMRB study, online travel accounts for 61% of e-commerce transactions in India and has the tendency to grow further.

Online travel is a tough industry to be in since travel plans are not easy to freeze with ample options of destination, hotels, packages, air-tickets and so much more. Online Travel Agents are a unique category which thrives on information about the various destinations, weather, money exchange, places to visit and so much more. Usually, a standard package might not be able to serve the customer and customization requires highly trained staff to deal with the customer demand, which adds cost to the Online Travel Agents and as reported by various studies, (Google-BCG, 2017), attractive prices are the top motivator for the customers. To ease this pattern, Online Travel Agents have been evolving, providing differentiated products to customers. Some Online Travel Agents are specializing in providing comparative pricing, (trivago); economical stays (Oyo rooms), homestays/personalized stays (Air BnB) and so forth. The customers are evolving and so are the Online Travel Agents.

The paper is drafted to help develop a deeper understanding of what makes the online customers in India stick to a particular Online Travel Agents by analyzing what features matter for them and what drives them away. The study is intended to help Online Travel Agents understand Indian customers better and prioritize serving them.

Need of the study

The online travel industry is growing in India and has been a constant since the inception of E-commerce in India. Google-BCG report forecasts the overall travel industry in India would reach $48 bn by 2020 and of this 40-50% shall be online travel share. Also, by 2020, one in three hotel rooms shall be booked online. (BCG, 2017)

The customers are changing as well, and to serve the dynamic customers, it is imperative that there is a deeper understanding of what the customers approve of, what features matter to them and what are the factors, the Online Travel Agents should keep in mind while targeting the customers.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies that have been conducted to understand the customers and have been a part of academic research. The challenge and essence of trying to understand the customers are that they are unpredictable and so need to be studied constantly and consistently. The customers are known to act differently under similar conditions and now that they have been subjected to so many changes that it has become imperative to keep a track of how they are shaping up. The changes in terms of medium-from 'brick and mortar' to 'online'; from websites to apps and from laptops to smartphones, amongst others.

The literature review discusses a few studies focused on customer behavior in general, customer retention in e-commerce and finally a few on Online travel agents in India.

McFadden's paper on "The New Science of Pleasure" is an interesting take on consumer behavior and well being with an emphasis on market studies, psychology and neurology, since the jigsaw of the customer can be resolved after fitting all these pieces together. Unlike the assumption that economics can explain the behavior of the customers, this paper refutes it and explains that the other aspects, especially psychology, biology, and neurology may better explain the customer decisions.

Another very interesting fact is that it is difficult to decipher how the customers would act in any situation according to Dan Ariely's book, "Predictably Irrational-The Hidden Forces that Shape our Decisions". The most rational-seeming decisions of buying are not taken by the customers (like not buying a medicine with the same salt that costs less vs an expensive one) and those that seem impossible ones being taken every day (person on a diet, having desserts). There are more than what meets the eye, which gets people (customers interested).

Arora and Budree (2016), in their paper, "Basket loyalty tussle amongst Indian online retailers" have discussed the curious case of India , where internet usage is high, Government Initiatives are flowing in (Digital India) paving way for online companies to set-up shops in the Indian cyber space but the internet penetration remains

low at around 34%. The gusto with which the online companies indulge in sales in India is discussed in length to explain the online scenario. The paper concludes that Indian e-commerce space is buzzing with options for creating different strategies including delivery options, exclusive deals, private labels and discounted sales.

Martin (2017), in his paper, "E-commerce "Stickiness" for Customer Retention" delves on the pertinent topic of how to make decisions to enable customers to stick to an e-commerce platform. The author defines stickiness in various forms that it has existed, including converting visitors to customers to their retention. It also equates with the high-value terms such as customer loyalty and brand (e-commerce website/app) awareness. The study concludes that stickiness should be the priority making switching expensive for the customers.

Lily (2018), at Forrester Research emphasises that simplicity is the best way to be in terms of website/app maneuverability; since their studies estimate that nearly 50% of the potential sales fail, since the customers are unable to find the desired product without spending too much time and Forrester Research estimate that approximately 50 percent of potential sales are lost because your visitors can't find what they are looking for. Collins et al. (2017), in her Forrester Research report focusses on the impact of loyalty programs and how they are still significant and to retain the customers, it might be the differentiator.

Batra and Dahiya (2016), discuss the travel industry selecting between online and offline mode. The researchers have investigated the future prospects of online retail in the travel industry in India. The competitive strategies of offline travel agents to counter the online insurgency and the stress on "Incredible India" campaign has been analyzed. The study is limited within the geographical boundary of Delhi and NCR. The findings reveal that both the travel agents and customers are inclined towards the online mode due to cost saving and convenience respectively.

Kumar, Amit, and Amrit in their paper, "Analysing Consumer Preference for Online Booking of Tourism and Hospitality in India" have attempted to analyze the drivers of online booking for travel and tourism including the attractive offers, ease of booking, bundle offers, etc. The analysis has been done using structural equation modeling. The conclusion is that discounted pricing, advance booking facility, and time-saving are significant factors promoting online travel bookings.

"Demystifying the Indian Online Traveler", a report by Google India-BCG report while projecting the growth of online travel to 40-50% of the overall Indian travel market of $48 Bn by 2020, attributed it to increase in smartphone and digital payment usage. Travel research, planning and booking online would be more or less dependent on the level of curation and personalization that the Indian travelers are looking for. The study observed that 62% of the customers book the hotel first and transport later. Attractive pricing coupled with good reviews are the topmost deciding factors for the customers. Another interesting finding is the customers tend to go back and forth across multiple online channels since the comprehensive information is not available at one point. There is a potential opportunity for Online Travel Agents players to integrate hotels, transport and on- ground activities.

Bhatia (2014) conducted a research study measuring the perception of Indian inbound tour operators on destination competitiveness between India and Singapore. The research revealed that India is not considered a preferred destination for the Singaporeans whereas Singapore is preferred by Indians. For online or offline Travel agents, the need is to promote India for spiritual tourism, wildlife tourism, medical tourism, rural tourism, adventure tourism and cultural and heritage tourism are prevalent.

Begum (2014) in the case study on the scenario of e-retail in Indian tourism Industry, stated that travel e-retail is the fastest growing sector of India with 12% annual growth rate. The SWOT analysis of the online travel industry in India are general but re-iterate the advantages that the internet provides. Convenience is the biggest strength, being able to offer a lower price is another prominent feature. Opportunities are affordable air tickets, increased FDI in the retail increase in consumer spending and income. The weaknesses identified are the focus on urban population, lack of big investment for expansion, doubts about the online payment methods and its security. Threats being cybersecurity, trained and qualified personnel, high investing and lack of rural coverage.

E-consultancy (2015) report on cross-channel marketing is based on the study of 400 digital marketers and e-commerce professionals to understand their perspective and understanding of various platform integration required by the customers. The understanding is bound to result in reaching and satisfying the customers. The study concludes that only 39% of the e-commerce professionals studied believe that, "they understand the

customer journeys and adapt to the channel mix accordingly". This finding further paves the way for our study to better comprehend the customers for the e-commerce people.

Ernest and Young, 2012, report on Rebirth of E-Commerce in India, discusses various aspects of e-commerce in India and their resurgence including the Online Travel Indiustry(OTA). The report predicted that the diversification of OTAs is the trend and this is still seen in case of Oyo rooms, diversifying into OYO townhouses and now shared work spaces (2019). The report supports OTAs as the biggest Business to customer (B2C) category, and the presence of government railways website, www.irctc.co.in as the game changer in the category. Air-ticketing which was considered a luxury soon became affordable because of the online presence of travel and the airline industry recognising the increase in demand that was to follow.

Gretzel et al. (2008), discuss the potential of Online travel reviews impacting travel-related decisions. The paper discussed the User Generated Content, especially Online reviews, and pictures posted by the travelers in impacting the female users more in making travel-related decisions as compared to men.

Narayan B., Prabhu M. (2014) in the study titled, "An exploratory study on online travel trends and travel behavior of employees working in I.T. organizations in Bengaluru", the focus is that Online travel market is growing at a fast pace, with special reference to the use of technology (i.e. Apps/websites) by IT organization for their online travel needs in Bengaluru. The study concludes that Online travel is mainly used by the respondents for leisure travel; younger population (21-34 years) use online travel and older population (55-60 years) prefer the offline travel provider and also that Social media comments by friends and family were considered important by the respondents.

Octane study of e-Travel Marketing in India in 2015, is an interesting take on the factors affecting the choice of the Online medium of travel and its usage. The findings indicate that the consumers are turning to the internet to take advantage of ease of booking and comparative pricing. 95% of consumers search online before making a travel purchase. The research indicates though ticket booking is done online, the tour packages and hotels are still booked offline. It indicates that there is a gap between the expectations of consumers and actual facilities promised by hotels when booked online. Best package deals are an important motivation for customers to go online. According to our research 36% consumers make unplanned trips if offered a discount, implying the price-sensitive customers. Social media affects purchase decision of 48% consumers but the personal experience of a consumer affects the decision more than the experience of others. According to the research, 41% consumers make a purchase after receiving a promotional/discount offer over email and 25% consumers make a purchase after receiving an offer over SMS. Promotion of Apps in order to promote loyalty.

NASSCOM, PwC report of 2018 discussed that India has the second largest Internet base, with the internet penetration bound to increase to 60% by 2022, thereby implying that the comfort of users in online transactions would increase manifold. Of the 500 million users presently , approximately 70 million people are estimated to have more than three to four years of online experience, which makes them comfortable with engaging in e-commerce. The e-commerce industry is expected to grow into a 100 billion USD market by 2022 and Online travel is expected to be a major chunk of it.

Methodology

Quantitative analysis of around 5000 respondents from India was done, using a structured questionnaire. Convenience sampling was adopted. The questionnaire was administered both online and offline. The respondents ranked the various aspects like their most used and most important factors. The Weighted average score was calculated and amongst the age group within the gender. The findings are presented in order to make the understanding crisp for the user of the paper.

Objectives of the study

The study has been conducted to achieve the following objectives

a. To figure out which Online Travel Agents are leading the pack in India.
b. To analyze the factors considered important by the online customers in order to prioritise them.

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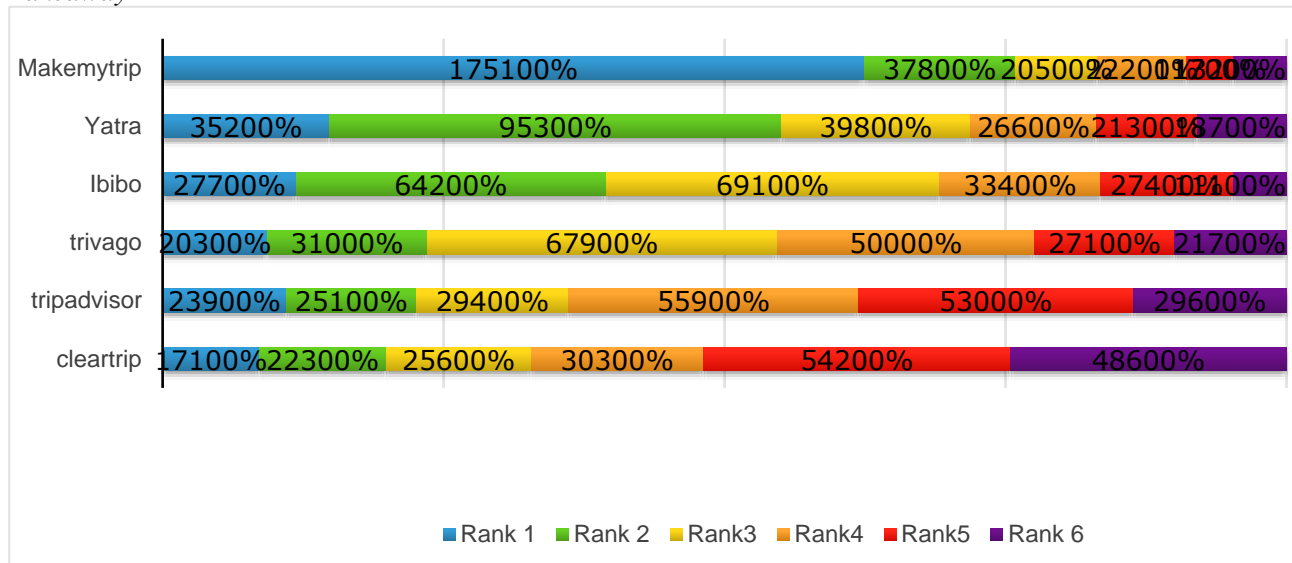*"Thinking ahead"*

Results and conclusion

Takeaway 1

Figure 1. Ranking of Top 6 Online Travel Agents in India

The major Online Travel Agents in India were enlisted and ranked by the online customers. Of the 5000 respondents analyzed, 2713 have been using Online Travel Agents and ranked the following preferences.

As shown in Chart 1, MMT (makemytrip.com) is way ahead in the race, with 59% of respondents, ranking it as their first preference, followed by Yatra, Ibibo and trivago in second, third and fourth rank. Tripadvisor and cleartrip are lagging behind. MMT is the clear winner in the category of OTC. The ranking puts out the preferred list for the leaders to focus on and the laggers to focus on what they can do to beat the competition. The following sections focus on the features that need the focus of the Online Travel Agents.

Takeaway 2

Important features

The customers were required to rank various features that define online travel. Low price, Variety i.e. more option of packages, customized packages, Guarantee of Quality of service and post-check-in support were to be ranked.
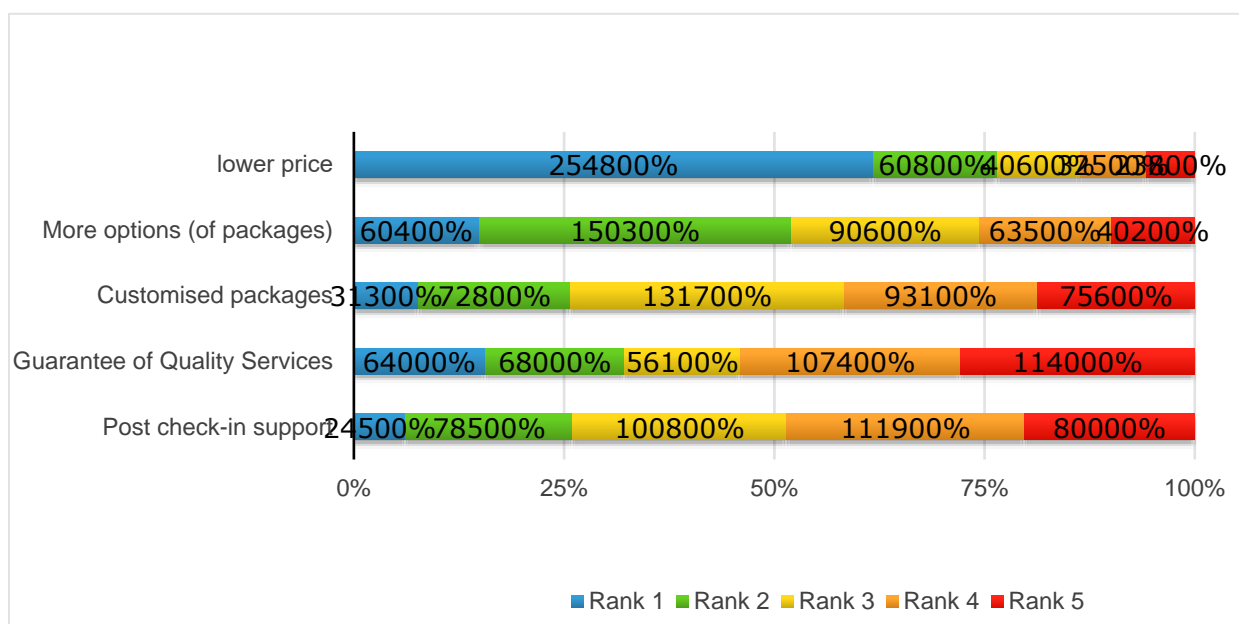

Figure 2. Online Travel Agents Features Ranking

The review of existing literature helped in shortlisting the important factors as enlisted in the chart. The low price (WAS 4.19) is the most sought after feature that customers want from Online Travel Agents and the Online Travel Agents struggle to stay profitable , demand for lower prices is a big challenge. The variety is another important factor, More options (WAS 3.31) in terms of packages by the Online Travel Agents drives the customers to them. The other features have similar WAS, Customized packages (WAS 2.73); Guarantee of Quality Service(WAS 2.66) and Post check-in support (WAS 2.64) and hence should be treated as of equal importance, as shown in chart 2 and 3.
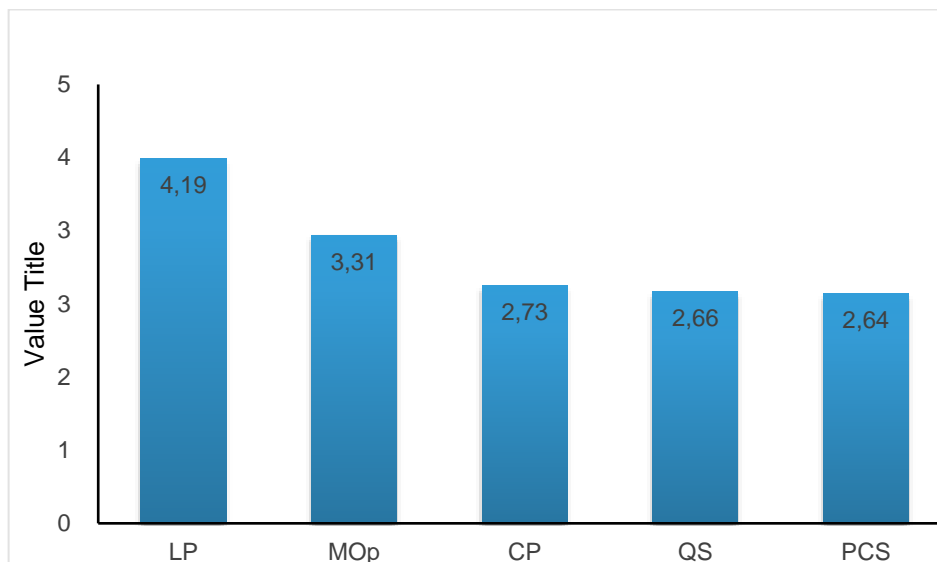
LP-Lower Price; MOp-Multiple options; CP-Customized Packages; QS-Quality of Services; PCS-Post Check-in support)

Figure 3. Criticality of features

"Low Price" topping the list is 'no surprise', this constant has not changed. To provide as many options as possible the Online Travel Agents need to tie up with as many hotel properties as possible, which is a humongous task given the number of hotels there are. Another challenge is the hotels in elite (five stars and more) category, these properties are able to market and promote themselves through their own dedicated websites/apps. Over the years, the number of choices of a good property has gone down across the Online Travel Agents. The specialized category of Online Travel Agents providing luxury holidays, boutique hotels or economical hotels might be able to sort out that challenge.

Hotels, flight timing and everything around travel plans are unique to every customer. Standardized packages served fine in the pre-e-commerce era but now customization is the key. For Online Travel Agents, customization interprets as highly trained staff with relationships across the industry to freeze the unique plans.

Takeaway 3

In both the above sections, Off the list, the respondents were asked to mention whatever they considered important. This section is very important since it is without prompting and it is expected that the customers would mention here holds a lot of significance.

The respondents shared that they do not prefer to go to the Online travel agents when getting the flight tickets booked. They further said that the dedicated airlines' websites were preferred unless that were booking packages for holidays.

Though the section did not ask for the preference for their preference for loyalty programmes, a special mention of "Jet privilege" program is worth a mention implying that Loyalty programmes go a long way in enforcing "customer stickiness".

A whole list of additional service providers (some Online travel agents) was mentioned as being important to the respondents like Irctc, redbus, paytm, Oyo, Airbnb, Expedia, goibibo, ixigo, Skyscanner, were mentioned by the respondents. These special mentions by the respondents imply that the top five Online travel agents have more competition in store than what meets the eye. They have to compete not only with the other Online travel agents but from dedicated airlines, bus, train apps, super specialized apps, and dedicated hotel websites/apps as well.

The analysis of paper around Online Travel Agents (Online Travel Agents) comes out with the findings that MakeMyTrip (MMT) has built up loyalty around it and is the most trusted and used Online Travel Agents app. MMT has evolved with time and with respect to competition around it, introducing railway tickets, home stays(Airbnb), economical stays (Oyo rooms); in addition to already existing plethora of options. The review of literature revealed that unlike our sensibilities might imply, the users take the hotel decisions prior to the air ticket bookings, hence implying that the experience and budget of staying at a place of customers choice are far more important and decision on the destination takes place once the hotel booking is done (Google-BCG report, 2017).

In the preference order, the online customers have rated, low price and variety(more options) as the key determinants in the customer choice. The price sensitivity of the online customer has been a constant in various studies conducted (BCG-Google, Amit). The growth in travel would certainly translate into the growth of online travel. With these features recognized, the Online Travel Agents can focus on these and make the customers stick to them.

Limitations of the study and scope for future research

The data was mainly collected online, so what can be observed face-to-face could not be observed and interpreted. The suggestion for future research is to collect some data offline and observe and tabulate the expressions. The same can lead to further study based on instant feedback.

The study was confined to North India, which can be further expanded to the rest of India.

Convenience sampling has been used, any other form suitable can be adopted based on expanded objectives.

The next part of the study would analyze the same set of data with respect to gender and age-group. The researcher who takes up a similar study later can focus on equal distribution of responses between the genders/age groups.

Another set of questions based on takeaway 3 like having another list of Online travel agents, studying the impact of loyalty programmes being run by dedicated apps or airlines or both, can also be taken up. Online reviews are extremely critical to the decisions made by the customers (Gretzel, 2008), the future research may factor in these also, in terms of improvement in the quality of services by the hotels and airlines in order to garner favorable reviews.

A cross country study can also be taken up to aid Online Travel Agents to take a strategic expansion decision. The same could not be done because of the paucity of time and resources.

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