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## Can Spiritual Tourism in India be Marketed Properly? Learnings from an Analysis of Twitter

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# Can Spiritual Tourism in India be Marketed Properly? Learnings from an Analysis of Twitter

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The tourism sector is an economic powerhouse for any country and tourism growth improves the quality of people's lives by providing employment of diverse kinds. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has emerged to become a highly influential strategy of modern marketing and a significant medium as harnessed by travel marketers. Sentiments are a representation of human emotions and present a wide spectrum of varying intensity. The objectives of this research paper are to examine what propels a spiritual traveller towards Indian sites of interest, to appreciate the function of beliefs and where does it yield fruits? It also analyses the value of sentiments regarding Indian spiritual destinations. The focus is an exploration of spiritual tourism knowledge including systems of belief and values that motivate a tourist. Rather than criticising any existing ideographic knowledge, the purpose is to yield a dynamic understanding of perceptions and beliefs. Qualitative and descriptive data analysis is used in this research using Twitter sentiments related to Indian spiritual destinations. The results highlight that Indian spiritual destinations are not fully engaged or marketed properly on social media to attract global tourists.

**Key Words:** spiritual tourism, belief, sentiment, Destination Marketing Organisation, travel

## Introduction

Spirituality is derived from 'spiritus', meaning 'breath of life' and a well-accepted definition of spirituality by Clark (1958:22) is

*An inner experience of the individual when he/she senses divinity, especially as evidenced by the effect of this experience on his/her behaviour when s/he actively attempts to harmonize his/her life with this sense of divinity.*

Thomas (2005) discussed three broad approaches for exploring religion and tourism in a modern world - spatial, historical, and cultural. A number of articles have been published on spiritual tourists. In particular, a number of ethnographic studies (Carol, 2013; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) have been conducted in various geographies which focus on spiritual pilgrims, their destinations, and intentions to travel for spiritual tourism. The tangible items of spiritual tourism include churches, mosques, temples, shrines, and other centres and the intangible services of spiritual tourism include organised spiritual events, seminars, festivals and gatherings with spiritual motives.

## Indian Historical Context

Indian history is full of evidence of people acquiring spiritual experiences leading to happiness (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). Various motives are ascribed to spiritual travellers: to attain self-actualisation, to beget personal well-being or any other needs. A marketing angle exists but it is not explored as to whether belief promotes tourism, or a deep conceptualisation of a destination develops from faith, or if it is an eclectic concept that holds value for spiritual quests all round? What happens in times when sentiments are attacked and battered? Do they resurface? Will spiritual quests remain?

Whether they resurface immediately or not, this paper makes the point that spiritual belief (SB) constitutes an integral part of travel, particularly for spiritually minded tourists, who may even seek destinations in search of truth or self-discovery. Hence the statement that spiritual belief is the sum of both perceived belief (PB) and deep belief (DB). It is important to examine the influence of basic beliefs and deep beliefs, their interaction, and the resulting pathway to happiness. A positive spiritual image may bolster perceptual belief to the extent that a

consumer feels more about going to a particular country even when their perception of the associated country is not favourable. To add to this, customer perceptions will change due to the frequency and importance of popular events at destinations. Griffin and Raj (2018) discussed the motivations of a variety of pilgrimage types and Himadri *et al.* (2012) presented an analysis of spiritual tourism with special emphasis on the Uttarakhand state of India, an important location for events.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, community health and hygiene practices assume vital dimensions in the development of destination image, and thus it is important not to disrupt any conceptions and/or cause damage to belief. Standard protocols and procedures are too important to be ignored. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) must focus on these themes for quite some time to make sure such practices are integral to global tourism. As a result of such restrictions and practices, operators will have to examine their brand strategies to augment their value and make tourists visit their particular destination again and again.

In this regard, the main aim of this research is to explore the idea of eWOM marketing of spirituality from an Indian tourism perspectives. A framework is developed for spiritual tourism and qualitative methods are adopted for data collection arising from a detailed analysis of secondary data. Our study took cues from research which identifies factors related to perception, beliefs, experience and satisfaction. The research objectives of this study are:

- (a) to examine what propels a spiritual traveller towards Indian sites of interest? Is it image, belief, or soothsayers?
- (b) to appreciate the function of beliefs and where does it yield fruits?
- (c) to analyse the value of sentiments on Indian spiritual destinations.

## Literature Review

### *Spiritual Tourism*

Different writers have tried to find the roots of spiritual tourism in different dimensions. Shinde and Rizello (2014) explained the peculiarities, significance, and universality of religious tourism using a comparative analysis of destinations in India (Vrindavan) and Italy (Shrine of Santimissi Medici). Cerutti and Piva (2015)

investigated the role of religious events as a key component of local tourism development in Northern Italy. Studies by Scott and Jafari, (2010), Hamira and Joan (2010) and Raj and Morpeth (2007) have explored religious travel to places and events with a desire to gain knowledge, education or appreciation of religious arts and artefacts. Both beliefs and deep beliefs mingled with knowledge are present in many who travel for religious and spiritual reasons. A study by Rahman (2012) tested a model of tourists' perceptions based on service quality, destination brand image and internet adoption behaviour, while dimensions of service quality are discussed by Badrudin *et al.* (2012). Tourism product suppliers need to closely examine empathy dimension, such as reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and tangibles. Empathy-guided beliefs and attitudes about target destinations affect both cognitive and affective factors, thereby influencing sentiment (Fakaye & Crompton, 1991; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The research by Gnoth *et al.* (2009) opines that spirituality is a perceived belief that confers value which is closely linked to belief in utilitarian and hedonic dimensions. Travellers harbouring doubts about the practices of 'unscrupulous' traders in the spiritual marketplace have been researched by Shaw and Thomson (2013). This darkens the image of spiritual destinations, but is important to consider in the context of developing sentiment.

The next question to ask is whether belief has function and structure? Yes, of course.

### *Function and Structure of Belief*

A spiritual need appears to be a basic tenet of social psychology, as researched by Fluker and Turner (2000). Contemporary research suggests that pilgrimage and religious tourism fundamentally belong to spiritual tourism (Haq & Jackson, 2009; Finney *et al.*, 2009). Literature is replete with spirituality connected to all spheres of life. Religions of different forms (Francesconi, 2009) are embraced by people of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures.

Views about belief are manifold, but the marketing implications of dealing with faith, religion and spirituality are scarce in the literature (Haq & Wong, 2011; Haq & Jackson, 2009). Hence, there is a need in the Indian context to produce data on marketing religious spiritual tourism. The structure of beliefs is composed of words, values, and symbols. However, the field of spirituality is

enormous and heterogeneous, adding to the difficulties in exploring travellers' value perceptions. Upon travelling to a spiritual place, consumers go beyond the realms of their everyday realities and then return to their normal life 'transformed'. The value of experience is an ever-present assemblage of functional values, social values, and epistemic values that such experiences create.

### *Functional, social and epistemic values*

*Functional value* is defined as the 'perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity for functional, utilitarian or physical performance' (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991:160). Functional attributes such as quality of a tour, price of a tour, the tour vehicle employed, tour amenities, refreshments, tour guide commentary, sightseeing, the natural environment and mixing with other tourists during the tour are all found to be key elements of satisfaction (Geva & Goldman 1989). *Social value* seems to originate from an orchestrated cultural script for a 'pilgrimage' to a sacred place. Scott and Jafar (2010) highlighted the role that social and epistemic values play in experiences. *Epistemic value* provides novelty and/or satisfies a desire for knowledge (Jagdish *et al.*, 1991). Epistemic value has emerged (Fakeye & Crompton 1991) from the data as a vital component of spiritual experience as spiritual travellers seek novel and different things in their hedonic experiences. Volunteer spiritual tourists, on the other hand, can be motivated by other factors such as altruism (Chaang *et al.*, 2012).

Hugo Van der Poel (1997) studied the dynamic reorganisation of daily life in the context of modernity. Different series of modules may help the individual in eventually transforming the self with a new meaning that dynamically shapes their lives (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Push factors are lasting features that come with cyclical regularity while pull factors for such reorganisation of one's life are cognitive elements mediated by experiences.

### *e-WOM*

The internet is a global virtual marketplace for value that provides nearly limitless amounts of tourism information with relatively minimal expenditure of effort or money. Digital tours and promotions are the new weapons of marketing strategy. Digital sentiments garnered from online sources about destinations lead to higher levels of credibility. This is widely studied by Lugosi (2016) and Stefan (2018). Recent research by *Flavian (2019)*

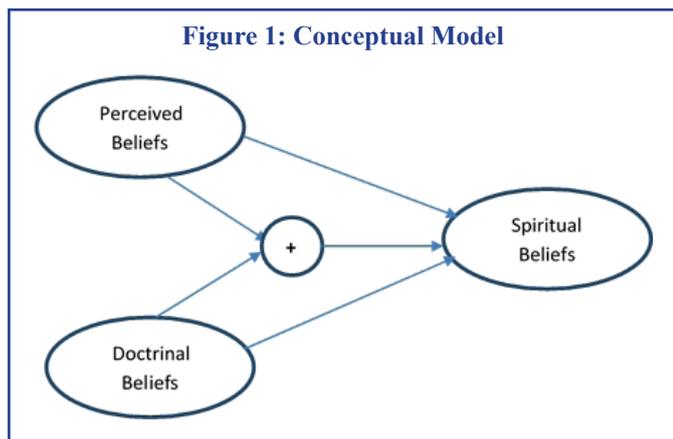
reports on the importance of technological sources and interestingly notes that consumers who use multiple channels purchase more products. eWOM messages affect tourists' destination choice (Reza & Samiei, 2012), make persuasive impacts on decision-making (Sparks & Browning, 2011) and on purchase intention (Gajendra *et al.*, 2012). However, tourists are less interested in extrinsic motivation than intrinsic motivation as discussed by Castaneda and Rodriguez (2013).

e-WOM such as the posting of comments and opinions on Social is evident in many if not all spiritual places. One such tool, Twitter, is an exciting medium which facilitates flexible communications from one-to-one and many-to-many (D'heer & Verdegem 2014). Twitter sentiments are creative, concentrate on attitudes, and create dispositions which unfold in the inner mind. Twitter textual words used in conversations convey sentiments, either in favour or disfavour of a destination. This leaves researchers with an index of public online activity that can be encapsulated in empirical scales, demonstrating the structure, and geographic distribution of information (Yuri Takhteyev *et al.*, 2012, Waters & Jamal 2011). Van Noort (2012) and Cantalops *et al.* (2018) highlight that people with high self-esteem are more likely to share and discuss their experiences online. A study by Evert *et al.* (2018) shows that consumers who switch between channels exhibit a higher conversion rate. Rosenthal (1971) was among the early researchers who demonstrated the importance of message credibility over credibility of source. These are all important issues to consider when exploring Social Media in general and Twitter in particular.

The exchange of tweets influences potential tourists by increasing (or decreasing) the attractiveness of a destination. We found that there is a research gap to analyse and understand the importance of twitter sentiments for spiritual destinations and in specific, there is no sufficient literature support this idea in an Indian context. Therefore, this paper contributes to the understanding of this topic in these areas. .

## **Research Methodology**

The primary motivations for e-WOM identified in the literature are altruism toward other consumers, social value from community interaction, hedonic benefits, impression management and identity formation. In this paper, we used twitter contributions as sentiments to extract, quantify and study the affective and subjective



A key factor in evaluating eWOM is the dynamic nature of perceived values, in Tweets (and other social media posts). These dynamic expressions are loaded with values influenced by both utilitarian and hedonic motives – they creep into dynamic belief systems that support spiritual beliefs. Our research objectives are built on this, and the key point is spiritual beliefs which prompt a traveller to visit a destination, or a repeat visit thereof. Spiritual beliefs will nudge a traveller towards a particular destination which can be near, favourable, convenient or not, but certainly they want an encounter that is both pleasurable and memorable.

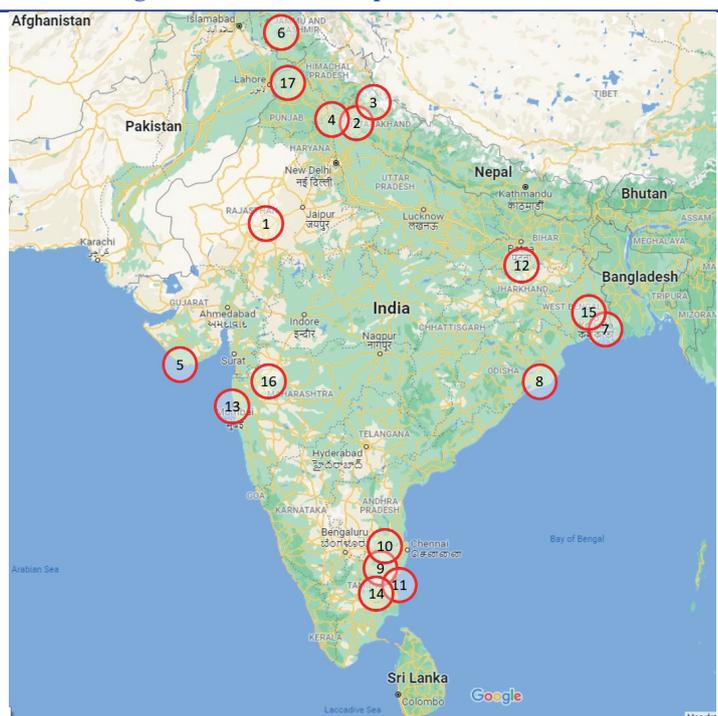
states of tourist information. A basic task of sentiment analysis is to classify the polarity of a given text into positive, negative, or neutral. Influences of e-WOM (Gkritzalim, 2017; Wakefield & Bennett, 2017) are abundant in existing research, but that is not the case in the context of Indian spiritual destinations. Travellers’ can enjoy or can form positive attitude by obtaining a form of escapism, diversion, aesthetic enjoyment, or emotional release. The effectiveness of the built image consequently increases the interest to visit a destination and on the other hand, irritation may deter the potential traveller. Doctrinal beliefs are a strong influence based on tradition, whereas perceived values are temporal, and pivot on the foundation of experience. More often than not, perceived values are the most influential for spiritual beliefs.

Each (spiritual) destination has a twitter page where a multitude of updates are aggregated into a single list. In evaluating these contributions, this study used the construct of tourism satisfaction at the core of a comprehensive model. The model that was employed tries to carve out a path between doctrinal beliefs, perceived beliefs, spiritual beliefs and how their interactions lead to tourism satisfaction. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of the proposed research work. The *NIvo* software was used for extractions of tweets from sample destinations, and for polarity analysis. After the removal of duplicate tweets, unique tweets were used in this research. Non-English tweets and tweets with disabled comments were excluded in this research and next section presents the results and findings our research.

**Table 1: Volume of Tweets by Spiritual Destination**

No. on Map	Spiritual Destinations	Volume of Tweets
1	Ajmer	>1000
2	Hairdwar	
3	Kadernath	
4	Rishikesh	
5	Somnath Temple	
6	Vaishno Devi Temple	
7	Belurmth	300-1000
8	Puri	
9	Thiruvannamalai	
10	Tripathi Balaji	
11	Arovellie	<300
12	BodhGaya	
13	Haji Ali Dargah	
14	Kumbakonam	
15	Dahkeineshwar	
16	Shiridi	
17	Amrister Golden Temple	

**Figure 2: Location of Spiritual Destinations**



## Results and Findings

One of the approaches to studying the consistent connectivity of modern travel and social networking services is *attention economics* which explores how destination brands constantly compete for the limited attention of potential tourists. A highly important tool in seeking this 'attention' is Twitter, which is a microblogging service that directly impacts e-WOM communication. Twitter allows people to share to almost anyone else in the world and thus people are connected on a scale that has never before been experienced. The sample of 9318 tweets in this research was collected from 17 Indian spiritual destinations over a one week period. These spiritual destinations were chosen because they are popular for their divinity, heritage, culture, history, beauty, aesthetic, and religion. From the sample of 9318 tweets, 3556 unique messages were extracted and analysed using NVivo software. Table I shows the destination list and the ranges (less than 300, 300 to 1000 and more than >1000) of unique tweets.

Table 2 lists the frequency of key words and terms related to different aspects of Indian spirituality and spiritual destinations. The word '*temple*' is the highest occurring keyword among the sampled sites. India is a highly diversified spiritual country where one can see a great number of religious and sacred sites, and each destination is popular for its own temple. Though nature bestows mountain and river in all the places, Vaishno Devi and Somnath score more points maybe due to religious proclivities (both doctrinal and related to perceived beliefs) and intensity of visits. Vaishno Devi is a mountain trek with a holy Holy Cave while Somnath has an enchanting blue ocean adjoining the famous temple where thousands throng every day.

The various sacred places have a mixture of positive and negative tweets. To investigate the polarity of tweets related to the different spiritual destinations, a sentiment analysis algorithm was applied to 3556 unique tweets and this generated positive, negative, or neutral sentiments. In the experience economy, even after the pandemic, suppliers are in search of new ways to demarcate themselves, vying for the customers' attention. Product and organisation-centric innovations are overtaken by co-creation marketing strategies as a basis for sound value creation, thus resulting in innovation. A sample of twitter postings are provided in Table 3 to demonstrate the dynamic essence of spiritual tourism.

Recent research on e-WOM indicates the power of e-WOM that has a lot of influence on tour destination image (Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). Figure 3 depicts the positive and negative, twitter sentiments of spiritual destinations. Negative sentiments (18.5%) and Very Negative sentiments (8.0%) on Indian spiritual destinations are slightly higher than the positive and Very Positive (4.0%) sentiments (16.5%). Negatively framed sentiments can be attributed to the reviewers' negative emotional thoughts, however, detailed positive review content helps companies to build a strong online brand (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) detail how negative WOM influences online sales, and Luo (2009) found that negative e-WOM can reduce product sales (in the airline industry).

Figure 4 depicts a word cloud of sentiments in tweets on spiritual destinations and words such as Devi, Haridwar, Vaishno and Ajmer are frequently mentioned. These words are incarnations of God's names or majestic monumental temples of different avatars representing spiritual sentiment.

**Table 2: Frequency distribution of key words of Spiritual Destinations**

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
Temple	658	1.04
Devi	372	0.59
Haridwar	368	0.58
Vaishno	353	0.56
Ajmer	332	0.53
Somnath	306	0.48
Jai	280	0.44
Mata	240	0.38
Shri	205	0.32
Rishikesh	191	0.30
tiruvannamalai	177	0.28
Tourism	122	0.19
kedarnath	105	0.17
Namah	105	0.17
Hindu	99	0.16
Puri	100	0.16
Mahadev	94	0.15
Shrine	94	0.15
Good	88	0.14

**Table 3: Examples of Twitter Sentiments for a Sample of Spiritual destinations*****Dakshineswar***

Dakshineswar. Situated on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River, the presiding deity of the temple is Bhavatarini, an aspect of Kali, who is form of Adi Shakti .🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏

Today went to Dakshineswar temple, Kolkata. Literally I cried there while praying for SSR, everyone was looking at me but I could not resist myself. It feels too personal, dont know how he just took our heart.

***Haridwar***

Recalling my memories of last year in Swami Shivananda Saraswatis Ashram in Haridwar, where I had spent time Blessings of our elders are vital for we derive strength and spiritual solace.

India's great saints, strong column against inequality and untouchability AND guiding disadvantaged communities, master, His Holiness Narayana Guru to salute them

A large number of pilgrims gathered in Haridwars Har-Ki-Pauri area to take a holy dip in the Ganga on the occasion of Pitra...

If you are a vegetarian then it definitely would create a block, appearance wise. Haridwar is an awesome place to live in. Wow!

***Kedarnath***

There is nothing quite as magical as the divine Kedarnath.

If someone asks you about Heaven on earth, Tell Him about The Shree Kedarnath Dham

Kedarnath ... a better place to visit than any foreign country... change my mind if you can 🙏

Kedarnath, a holy destination of lord Shiva in Uttarakhand, India ...

I would love to go Kedarnath and Badrinath. Its my dream to go with my neighbour brother. It will be my first travel. Hope I will go.

***Kumbakonam***

This is the 11th tallest Rajagopuram in India, most of the top10 tallest Rajagopurams are in #TamilNadu

Airavatesvara Temple, Kumbakonam, India built by King Rajaraja Chola II is perhaps the worlds oldest optical illusion set in stone.

This is our history which keeps telling us about the greatness of our ancestors

One of the most beautiful architectural creations of the Chola dynasty in stone is the 12th century Airavatesvara temple

This is the epicenter of Cholas ... And close by Kumbakonam being a Temple town.

this place is Chimbaranathapuram? (From Kumbakonam to towards Anaikkarai) It looks exactly like this, where we had Perumal Temple at the start of the street and I remember those days ... my summer vacation at my aunt House 🏠😊 90s days are awesome!!!!

Yes, but I would give Srivilliputhur a close second and the Rajagopuram of Ranganatha Swamy Temple, Srirangam, a close third. And then it would probably be Ekambareswara

***Rishikesh***

You'll get to enjoy the thrill of rafting on the river of the waves or take yoga on the banks of the Ganga, Rishikesh

Maa Yoga Ashram provides the best affordable Yoga Retreat in India ... stay fit physically as well as mentally.

Yoga is one of the most famous yoga-type people are practising on a daily basis. The #Hatha Yoga consists of two parts first one is eight #limbs of Yoga and other is consists of eight #mudras.



possibility of returning the dissatisfied touristic product. Therefore, this is extremely sensitive in terms of tourism marketing. It is natural that people who participate in a tourism event want to take a city tour on the internet before getting a glimpse of a holy place; one can examine the proximity or distance of places in detail while choosing the destinations. Epistemic value we find is quite prevalent here. Tweets provide an interactive and social value which may also motivate travelers to help others, and as a result create a more positive or negative experience for everyone.

DMOs need to respond to the news of the moment even if it is not about their specific destination, but about the broader tourism sector. If DMOs are not servicing this aspect of relationship marketing, then travellers will look and go elsewhere. Few hospitality and tourism researchers have recognised the effect of individual cultural values on customers attitudes, sentiments, and consumption behavior. Through training, employees can learn to take guests' unique individual cultural values seriously and behave in such a way that they integrate a range of values like a tight-knit society, eliciting the desired emotional responses leading to positive eWOM intention. Twitter is having a powerful impact on purchase intention and shares unique emotional experiences about destinations. Even in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, DMOs should carefully tackle the negative sentiments and apply appropriate strategies to keep their destinations tourist friendly. After Covid, there will be a positive opportunity for marketing spiritual destinations.

### Implications

In our study, Twitter sentiments on Indian spiritual destinations and marketing aspects are analysed. As an effective tool of social media, Twitter comments are recognised as a credible source of information that influences the choice of spiritual destination. This is under researched in an Indian context and our research findings contribute in this regard. The main managerial implication is that DMOs and tour operators need to change marketing gear; this appears to be more so during COVID-19; they need to adapt their products to create new and adequately novel experiences for all participants.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations we found in this study, First, this exploration is restricted to Indian spiritual destinations. Secondly, the small sample size - seventeen destinations are analysed in this research. A greater number of destinations could be considered for future research. The third limitation is the presence of incentivisation-related tweets which are not considered in this research, but may play a part in developing brand image and influence potential travellers. The next limitation is the role played by neutral sentiments containing mixed information which is not analysed in this research. Finally, listening to just one digital channel - twitter - may lead to erroneous scope and consequences. These limitations may inspire us (and others) to expand our work in future studies in this field.

### Conclusion

Although twitter sentiment related to Indian spiritual destinations is not evidenced in the extant literature, it is analysed in this paper. The various types of tweets by tourists provide different insights on destinations, but leveraging them effectively is really a challenging task. DMOs should regularly analyse what is being posted and then post their own quality tweets on various angles of spiritual sojourns such as accessories, peaceful or reclusive spots in places which cultivate reflective moods, challenging mountainous climbs, serene meditation rooms, group chanting and music meditation opportunities and the like.

The COVID-19 crisis has caused an unprecedented collapse in economic activities and is having a 'deep impact' on the tourism sector. COVID-19 has hit the Indian tourism industry very badly which has resulted in job losses and socio-psychological imbalances. Social distancing, and other safety measures have made people more suspicious, anxiety-ridden and looking for safety. Families too are affected leading to societal tensions. Due to COVID-19, there are major changes in organisations, especially technology-enabled changes - these have significant impacts on job outcomes as discussed by Bariso (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic's financial impact has struck many types of firms, irrespective of their origin or traditions with economists forecasted flip-flop equity returns, market downturns and instability for the foreseeable future. Ozili *et al.* (2020) highlight the significant losses on various industries such as

travel, hospitality, sports, events, fitness, education, entertainment, financial sectors. Post COVID-19, competition will become more and more intense in the tourism industry. Some spiritual (tourist) destinations are already exploring their ability and capability to provide tailor-made products to their customers. In dealing with this crisis situation and preparing for the future, guidelines must be provided by DMOs to help the sites and destinations to put future plans in place.

In the context of social media, employees in tourism need to understand the type of tone and the words which are most appropriate for the target audience – in the case of the focus of this paper, words should be used which will resonate with spiritually inclined persons. Considering the rapid growth of microblogging and the popularity of digital reviews, DMOs should come up with a systematic way to interact with tourists via microblog sites, to influence the destination brand image. The findings of this study will benefit academics, practitioners and tourism researchers. Spiritual information drawn from sources such as e-WOM goes directly into short-term memory for processing. As interaction with material continues, long-term memory processes this information and potential consumers continuously restructure themselves. Elaborative memory and long-term memory contribute to brand recognition and relationship building, and these schemas are attributed to stored experiences, values, key attributes feeling and others. It is these long-term emotional and intellectual developments that result in potential spiritual tourists deciding to visit a particular

destination, and thus a well-developed social media strategy via Twitter and/or other platforms can play a vital role in the development of a spiritual destination.

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