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Exploring Canadians' Social Media-based Advocacy to Inform Domestic Travel Recovery

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Title

Exploring Canadians' social media-based advocacy sentiments in a domestic travel context

Introduction

Prior to the devastating effect of Covid-19, tourism was Canada's largest service export with $105B in revenues in 2019 (Government of Canada, 2021). However, the pandemic caused an estimated $19B decrease in tourism export revenues, driven largely by reduced travel from international markets (Destination Canada, 2021). As the risks associated with travel lessen, travellers are beginning to show interest in visiting destinations, starting with those close to home. This pivot from international to domestic travel calls for new research that focuses on local travel as Canada starts to reopen.

Brouder's et al. (2020) post-Covid-19 tourism landscape emphasizes the importance of local as a key component of the return to travel. Benefits include opportunities to build a more resilient and sustainable local economy, and to enhance relationships with local communities and residents. Often overlooked, a country's residents can play an important role by promoting local travel destinations and desires to others, influencing travel-decision making. Within the social media landscape of posting, liking, sharing, and tagging others, residents often go beyond sharing and become a much more engaged and enthusiastic supporter of the destination, an act referred to as destination advocacy (Lever, Elliot, & Joppe, 2021). Theoretically underpinned by social identity theory which focuses on the intergroup identification of members in determining their sense of belongingness to the group, the purpose of this study is to understand social media advocacy behaviours as Canadians prepare for a return to domestic travel. This research has two broad objectives:

1. To further our understanding of destination advocacy behaviour post Covid-19;
2. To advance theoretical knowledge of destination advocacy in tourism.

Literature

According to sentiment tracking data released by Destination Canada (DC), Canada's national destination marketing organization, 82% of Canadians feel safe to travel to nearby communities, 76% to communities in their own province, and 53% to other Canadian provinces or territories. In contrast, only 24% of Canadians feel safe to travel internationally. This indicates that the domestic market will drive recovery by realizing the pent-up demand, starting with short-haul trips due to a lingering wariness of booking long-haul. Additionally, destinations that develop their tourism for domestic travellers not only help to stimulate economic development, but also reduce their vulnerability to future economic losses (Canh & Thanh, 2020). In their study of domestic travel in Spain, Arbulú et al. (2021) observed that domestic tourism may offer much needed relief for destinations while governments focus on restoring the nation's general mobility.

When residents advocate for their home country as a tourist destination, they offer unsolicited positive promotion of the destination (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020) which can be an important factor to help others overcome concerns of safety as travel reopens. As an emerging

consideration of the role between a tourist and a destination (Lever et al., 2021), destination advocacy within travel-based social media provides users a deeper resonance than traditional marketing messages. Accelerated by advances in digital technology, potential travellers gravitate toward information from virtual networks, perceived as more objective and reliable (Kang & Schuett, 2013).

Method

To understand domestic traveller social media sentiments and advocacy behaviours, this study employed a netnographic method, chosen for its suitability to a virtual setting. Netnography is "a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media" (Kozinets, 2019, p. 14). Netnography adapts ethnographic research to an online setting to better understand online cultures through users' content (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Specifically, Instagram's 'Reels' were examined, which are short user-generated videos that may be shared with a wide audience using a relevant hashtag, in this case #ExploreCanada (which links to DC's official Instagram page). The data collection process focused on Reels posted between June 28th and July 6th, 2021. The videos were then analyzed using a netnographic strategy referred to as intellectual engagement (Kozinets, 2019), whereby particular ideas related to destination advocacy behaviours were questioned and a holistic view of such behaviours was sought. A total of 20 posts were ultimately selected after removing unrelated and non-English content. After this content was counted and collated, the posts were examined for their advocacy-based elements and other important characteristics.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the posts reveal considerable variability in terms of offering a range of visual elements and major landmarks. However, the geographic regions focused predominantly on Western Canada, specifically British Columbia and Alberta, which may be due to the more dramatic mountain and lake views compared to other regions in Canada. The posts also featured women much more frequently than men. Post engagement (i.e., likes and comments) were treated here as a form of advocacy, with the number of likes ranging from 113 to just over 5,000, and the number of comments on each post ranging from 10 to 101. Figure 1 provides a comparison of the number of likes vs. number of comments across all 20 posts to show a range of engagement across the analyzed posts.
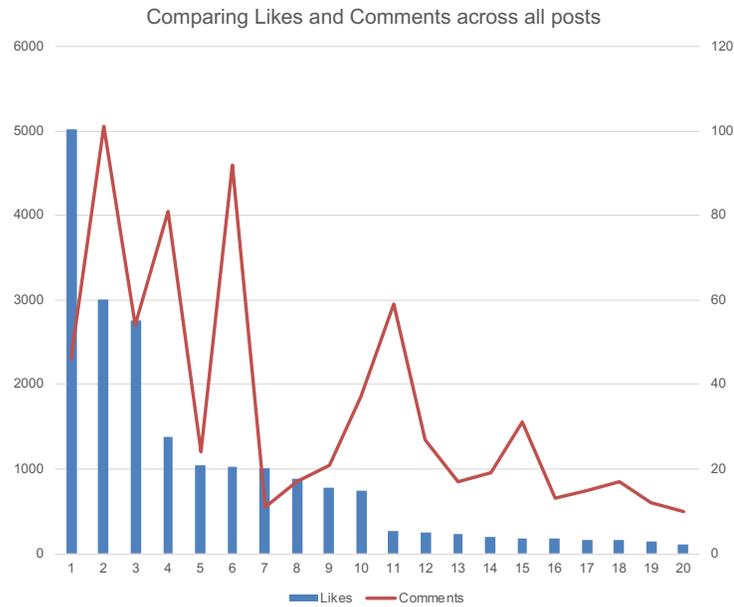
Figure 1 Likes and Comments across posts

In relation to advocacy behaviours, users more frequently expressed sentiment toward the locations being depicted, largely in the form of positive adjectives including beautiful, amazing, awesome, etc. Positive sentiment was also expressed through the heavy use of emojis, primarily clapping hands, fire, and smiling faces with heart-eyes. Beyond sentiment expression, there was a large presence of bucket listing behaviours, in which users express the desire to someday visit the place being featured in the Reel. Finally, tagging others was a common occurrence here as users sought to bring in friends and family from external networks. Unexpectedly, the use of cognitive behavioural elements, such as providing additional information or adding clarifications to the posts, was not as common in this context as it was in a pre-Covid-19 one. A possible explanation for this is that with excess levels of uncertainty around travel, users erred to the side of caution by expressing positive sentiments or indicating their desire to some day visit a place, but without taking the next step of helping others to plan an actual trip.

The netnographic methodology and the knowledge to be gained from understanding residents as advocate further contributes to the field of tourism research. Scholars can benefit from the research insights to virtual community discourse between residents and visitors, and practitioners can benefit from the research support of marketing tactics.

Conclusion

The research is timely and significant to understand destination advocacy, and how Canadians feel about travel as we begin to shift from a pandemic context.

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